

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

Senior Theses and Projects

Student Scholarship

Spring 2018

“Books Like This Cannot Be Useless”: The Political and Popular Reception of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables in Civil War America

Emily S. Turner

Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut, emily.turner@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Turner, Emily S., "“Books Like This Cannot Be Useless”: The Political and Popular Reception of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables in Civil War America". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2018. Trinity College Digital Repository, <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/711>

TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

“Books Like This Cannot Be Useless”: The Political and Popular Reception of Victor Hugo’s
Les Misérables in Civil War America

submitted by

EMILY TURNER ‘18

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2018

Director: Christopher Hager

Reader: Diana Paulin

Reader: Dan Mrozowski

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Note About Translations.....	iv
Introduction.....	v
Chapter 1: “The Brutalities of Progress Are Called Revolutions”: Hugo’s Philosophy of Revolution.....	1
Chapter 2: “John Brown is Greater than Washington”: Hugo’s Philosophy and the American Political Divide.....	32
Chapter 3: “Lee’s Miserables”: Critical Expectations and Popular Responses to <i>Les</i> <i>Misérables</i>	59
Conclusion.....	82
Bibliography.....	91

Acknowledgements

There are many people who have made this thesis possible to whom I owe a word of thanks. Firstly, I would like to thank the Trinity College English Department, especially Professor Sarah Bilston for advising our thesis colloquium. I am grateful for all the valuable advice she has provided about both the process of writing a thesis and life in general. I would also like to thank my advisor in the English Department, Professor Sheila Fisher, for challenging and encouraging me ever since Guided Studies four years ago.

I am particularly grateful to my thesis advisor, Professor Christopher Hager. This project began in his Civil War Literature class during the spring of 2017, and since then he has taken the time to read all of *Les Misérables* (more quickly than I did, I might add) and all of the nonsense I've written about it over the past year. I could not have finished this project without his help and enthusiasm. Maybe someday we'll figure out who T.W.M. is—it's been a lot of fun trying!

Outside the English department, I would like to thank the Trinity College Library for providing excellent research resources and a conveniently located thesis carrel. This project could not have happened without access to the Watkinson Library, where I first discovered the Confederate edition of *Les Misérables* that inspired my research.

I would also like to thank my professors in the French Department especially Sara Kippur and Karen Humphreys for providing research advice, translation assistance, and moral support.

Lastly, thank you my fellow thesis writers and my thesis carrel neighbors (good luck finishing your own theses!) and, thank you to my friends and family for your continued support!

Note About Translations

Throughout this thesis, I cite quotations from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in the original French. I provide English translations in the footnotes, which are taken from Charles Wilbour's translation. For the purposes of this thesis, Wilbour's translation is close enough to Hugo's original French to serve as an adequate substitute. In the few instances where Wilbour's translation is flawed, I have explained his error in the appropriate footnote. Where other French texts are quoted, a translation is provided and the source of the translation is indicated in the appropriate footnote.

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the muddiness of the streets, and the threatening appearance of the sky, Allyn Hall was crowded with a brilliant audience to listen to the first of Mr. Vandenhoff's readings from 'Les Miserables,' before the Young Men's Institute. He gave the substance of Vol. I, so far as it relates to the history of Jean Val Jean [sic], the hero of this remarkable story. His rendering of the stealthy entrance of the robber into the apartment of the good bishop was exceedingly vivid and powerful, and for several minutes held his audience breathless.¹

On January 7, 1863, this review of British actor George Vandenhoff's reading of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* appeared in *The Hartford Courant*. The review touts the excellence both of Vandenhoff's rendering of the scene and of Hugo's suspenseful plot. On the night following the review's publication, Mr. Vandenhoff read aloud another scene from *Les Misérables*, which according to the *Courant*, was met with even more applause by the city's residents. The recap that appeared on January 8 offers a description of the surprisingly large turnout for this second reading: "The capacity of Allen [sic] Hall was tested to its utmost, last evening, on the occasion of Mr. Vandenhoff's second Reading from 'Les Miserables.' The interest of our citizens in these entertainments was indicated by the dense throng which packed the sidewalk from Trumbull street to the doors of the hall and westward an equal distance, long before the opening."²

¹ "Article 5 -- No Title," *Hartford Daily Courant*, Jan. 7, 1863, 2, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant.

² "Article 3 -- No Title," *Hartford Daily Courant*, Jan. 8, 1863, 2, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant.

This remarkable showing of enthusiasm for Hugo's *Les Misérables* was not unique to the Connecticut capital. The sizeable turnouts for Vandenhoff's readings in Hartford are representative of the novel's overall reception in the United States upon its translation into English in 1862. Although there was little that northerners and southerners could agree about in 1862, which marked the second year of the American Civil War, they seemed to have reached a consensus regarding *Les Misérables*. The novel transcended geographic and political boundaries; everyone was reading it. It could be found in home and public libraries, quoted in newspapers, and even circulating throughout the camps of the Union and Confederate armies. Advertisements for the novel could be found in newspapers printed in cities across the United States in 1862 and the years following. *Les Misérables* enthralled readers from Boston to Atlanta to New Orleans to San Francisco.

By 1862, the Civil War had been ongoing for a year but an end to the fighting was nowhere in sight. In early April, the Battle of Shiloh erased hopes that the war would come to a swift conclusion. Although the Union was able to achieve a victory, Shiloh was the bloodiest battle most Americans had ever witnessed and the bloodiest to have ever occurred in U.S. history at that time. Historian Louis P. Masur writes, "After Shiloh, terror grew. A year into the conflict, Americans were beginning to realize just how bloody a price would be paid, not for glory but for peace."³ Both on and off the battlefield, Americans were divided by debates over slavery and emancipation, federal authority over state governments, involvement in the war, the economy, foreign affairs, leadership, poverty, and the draft, as well more local concerns. The first volume of *Les Misérables* entered this chaotic scene in June 1862. It quickly broke

³ Louis P. Masur, *The Civil War: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 41, ProQuest Ebrary.

sales records and would remain one of the most widely read novels in the nation for years to come.⁴

It is striking that a novel about poverty and popular uprising such as *Les Misérables* was so well received in the United States at this time. Although poverty and uprising were areas of concern in France, they received less attention in the United States where the problems posed by the war demanded priority. Americans, one might assume, had enough to worry about without taking into consideration Hugo's concerns about the oppressive government of the French Second Empire and the persistence of Parisian poverty. Nevertheless, many American readers developed a strong attachment to Hugo's novel. Its almost universal popularity across the war-torn United States raises a question which this thesis endeavors to answer: Why did a novel written by a French author about problems in French society and intended for a French audience resonate so strongly with Americans during the Civil War?

The answer to this question lies in the intersection of several fields of literary study. Firstly, the reception of *Les Misérables* in Civil War America belongs to an ongoing scholarly conversation about the international nature of American literature during the nineteenth century. Nancy Glazener uses the example of British influence on American literature to argue that the term "American literature" itself merits reexamination. She claims, "The category 'American literature' obscures important ways in which forms of U.S. literary nationalism voiced and practiced in the nineteenth century coexisted with the formative influence of British publications and British literary culture in the United States."⁵ That British literature influenced

⁴ Michael H. Hoffheimer, "Copyright, Competition, and the First English-Language Translations of *Les Misérables* (1862)," *Marquette Intellectual Property Law Review* 17, no. 2 (2013): 175.

⁵ Nancy Glazener, *Literature in the Making: A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 49.

American literature is not surprising, given the two nations' shared language and colonial history. The United States may have declared its political independence from Great Britain in 1776, but it would not become independent in terms of literary culture until the end of the following century. In his article "The Transatlantic History of Civil War Literature," Christopher Hanlon attributes this phenomenon to the late arrival of copyright treaties in the U.S. He argues that, "the historiography of nineteenth-century literary culture has shifted because of scholars whose work makes clear the transatlantic character of Anglo-American literary production, consumption, and reception until at least 1891, when the United States ratified its first copyright treaty."⁶ Because the United States did not accept international copyright law until long after the Civil War had ended, works of literature from many powerful European nations were freely published in the U.S. and can therefore be said to fall under the umbrella of "American literature." Scholars like Glazener and Hanlon, who study foreign influences on American literature, often focus on works coming to America from Anglophone countries like the United Kingdom. However, many works of literature from non-English speaking countries, such as *Les Misérables* from France, were also successful in the U.S.

The question of *Les Misérables*' role in the United States is as much a question of the worldwide impact of French literature as it is of the international nature of American literature. Scholars have long recognized French culture as a major influence on the development of Western culture as a whole. As Alison Finch writes, "The body of writing that we call 'French literature' has had a striking impact on the rest of the Western world."⁷ She argues that Western literature should be treated as a single entity, rather than as a collection of individual national

⁶ Christopher Hanlon, "The Transatlantic History of Civil War Literature," in *A History of American Civil War Literature*, ed. Coleman Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 36.

⁷ Alison Finch, *French Literature: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 1.

literatures: “ it is somewhat absurd (and outdated) to break down the history of Western culture, which has thrived on interchange as much as it has been damaged by strife, into the history of separate countries.”⁸ She proposes that Western literature is fundamentally international, but that France as a nation and culture has played a prominent role in its development. She writes, “France has ‘exported’ far more than it has ‘imported,’ and has played a multifaceted role in the world far beyond what might be expected from a relatively small nation.”⁹ The United States, though larger than France geographically, owes much to the French influences that have shaped this Western culture. Evidence of French influence can be found throughout U.S. history. For example, Glazener reminds readers that, “The ideas and even the phrases current in France during the eighteenth century spurred on the American Revolution and contributed to the wording of the American Declaration of Independence (1776).”¹⁰ Additionally, in the twentieth century, the works of French literary theorists and philosophers including Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Derrida, Sartre, and Beauvoir found eager audiences in the United States.¹¹ These moments of French influence in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries both coincide with historical moments when the U.S. has been particularly invested in international politics—the American Revolution and the decades following World War II. However, even when the United States has been preoccupied with domestic conflict, as it was during the Civil War, French culture has had an influence on American literature. French literature exerted an influence over the literary cultures of both halves of the divided United States in the 1860s.

This thesis also contributes to a growing body of literary scholarship that examines slavery and rebellion in what scholars refer to as the “French Atlantic.” In 2015, *J19: The*

⁸ Finch, *French Literature*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Journal of Nineteenth Century Americans published a series of critical essays that address the topic of resistance to French imperialism in the Americas with particular attention devoted to Haiti. In her introduction to the collection, Michelle Burnham writes, “this scholarship repeatedly highlights the French Caribbean—and St. Domingue/Haiti in particular—as the site of especially powerful and sustained acts of resistance to the emergent terms of that [capitalist] system.”¹² Although Burnham acknowledges the importance of this recent scholarship focusing on Haiti, she also advocates for a broader definition of the term French Atlantic. She writes,

While scholars certainly have brought a transatlantic framework to bear on considerations of Haiti, studies of French imperialism in Atlantic context have tended to generate regional models and local histories, often centered in places—like New France, Philadelphia, Louisiana, or the Caribbean—that are seldom considered in terms of their simultaneous ties to hemispheric and transatlantic geographies.¹³

Burnham believes that scholars can gain a better understanding of the impact of French colonialism in the Americas by considering regions not only individually, but also as part of a larger French Atlantic hemisphere. North American territories that were once claimed by the French but which, by the 1860s, had become slaveholding U.S. states (for example, Louisiana) should be included in this broad definition of the French Atlantic Hemisphere. The American Civil War can be understood as part of this larger battle against slavery and colonialism that was taking place in the French Atlantic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹² Michelle Burnham, “FORUM: The Hemispheric French Atlantic: Introduction,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 363.

¹³ Burnham, “Hemispheric French Atlantic,” 364.

Victor Hugo is connected to this conversation about slavery and revolution in the French Atlantic first and foremost through his early novel *Bug-Jargal* (1826). The novel follows a friendship between an enslaved African prince and a French military officer during the Haitian Revolution. In *Bug-Jargal*, Hugo begins to articulate his opposition to slavery, which, by the time he criticizes U.S. slavery in *Les Misérables*, would grow into passionate abolitionism. In his preface to the 1832 edition of *Bug-Jargal*, Hugo refers to the Haitian Revolution as, “la révolte des noirs de Sainte-Domingue en 1791, lutte de géants, trois mondes intéressés dans la question, l’Europe et l’Afrique pour combattants, l’Amérique pour champ de bataille.”¹⁴ Hugo realizes that the impact of the Haitian Revolution extends beyond Haiti; like Burnham, he relies on a broad definition of the French Atlantic. He treats the Haitian Revolution as only one manifestation of growing resistance to French imperialism throughout its Atlantic colonies. As Susan Gillman writes in her article “Victor Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal*, Translationally,” “Hugo’s French Atlantic models a way of reading that extends the reach of Haiti, as the ongoing center of Euro-colonial failure, to a point of departure for a deeper and longer French-Creole-Spanish presence in trans-American literary culture.”¹⁵ The revolt against slavery in Haiti, for Hugo, is part of a larger transatlantic pattern of uprising against the institution of slavery in French and other European territories.¹⁶ Hugo’s opposition to slavery is expressed cautiously in *Bug-Jargal*, but three decades later, in *Les Misérables*, Hugo, having grown into a champion of social progress in all forms, clarifies his adamant stance against

¹⁴ Victor Hugo, *Bug-Jargal* (Chicago: RTFL Electronic Edition, 2009), 3. My Translation: “the revolt of the blacks of Saint-Domingue in 1791, battle of giants, three worlds interested in the question, Europe and Africa for combatants, American for the field of battle.”

¹⁵ Susan Gillman, “Victor Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal*, Translationally,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* 3, no. 2, (Fall 2015): 377.

¹⁶ For more information about French colonialism in the Caribbean, see Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 37.

slavery. He clearly expresses to his readers that “John Brown est plus grand que Washington.”¹⁷

In addition to participating in these existing scholarly discussions, the topic of the reception of *Les Misérables* in the United States has recently garnered enough attention to inspire its own critical conversation. In her 1996 book *Les Misérables: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption*, Hugo scholar Kathryn M. Grossman examines a possible reason why the novel was so popular among Civil War readers, particularly soldiers. She writes, “In a nation torn asunder, soldiers on both sides avidly read Hugo’s novel, perhaps finding in his resolution of Jean Valjean’s moral dilemmas and of civil conflict in France some hope for future concord, if not unity.”¹⁸ In 2013, Michael H. Hoffheimer published a study of the various editions of *Les Misérables* entitled “Copyright, Competition, and the First English-Language Translation of *Les Misérables* (1862).” He argues that the novel’s success in the United States can be attributed to the young nation’s liberal copyright laws and to the numerous editions of *Les Misérables* printed and distributed during the years of the war.¹⁹ In her 2016 study of American reception of *Les Misérables*, Vanessa Steinroetter offers another possible explanation for the novel’s popularity among soldiers. She argues that the reasons for *Les Misérables*’ success in the United States “lie in the novel’s themes of fighting and suffering, potential for empathetic identification with characters and scenes, and its widespread availability in translation.”²⁰

¹⁷ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Éditions Garniers Frères, 1957), 1454. On page 1216 of Wilbour’s translation: “John Brown is greater than Washington.”

¹⁸ Kathryn M. Grossman, *Les Misérables: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 17.

¹⁹ Hoffheimer, “Copyright, Competition, and the First English-Language Translations.”

²⁰ Vanessa Steinroetter, “Soldiers, Readers, and the Reception of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* in Civil War America,” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 8, (2016): 6. It should be noted that Steinroetter’s references to the novel itself are not always accurate. For example, she claims that Jean Valjean “eventually finds peace only to die shortly after being injured in the

Finally, in 2017, David Bellos, a scholar of nineteenth century comparative literature, completed his book entitled *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables*. Bellos devotes a brief section of this comprehensive history of *Les Misérables* to the American reception of the novel, focusing on its appeal to Confederate soldiers who related to the characters' suffering. He observes that Hugo "explicitly overrides the distinction between the destitute, the despicable and the hapless, merging them into a single collective that reconfigures the language of nineteenth century France." He then poses the question, "Why should ragged soldiers be excluded from this new community of the downtrodden?"²¹

For the most part, these studies of the reception of *Les Misérables* in Civil War America focus on the novel's popularity among soldiers. Soldiers, however, were not the only readers of this novel in the 1860s. While soldiers were reading the *Les Misérables* in camps, other Americans were reading it in their homes and offices, some for entertainment, and some in order to write reviews for newspapers and journals. Many political reporters and correspondents allude favorably to *Les Misérables* in their articles in an effort to associate Hugo's views about revolution with their own side of the war. However, not all reviewers had positive feedback to offer. Whereas popular readers like soldiers tended to relate to the characters and events in *Les Misérables* and political readers tried to harness its popularity, literary critics were, on the whole, skeptical of the novel's merit. As Masur writes, "Readers could not help being impressed by the grandeur of the work, but the reviews were mixed."²² More often than not, in their articles and reviews, members of the literary elite express anxiety

barricade fighting of the June Rebellion." Jean Valjean, in fact, receives relatively few injuries in this battle at the barricade and lives on for many years after the skirmish.

²¹ David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2017), 241.

²² Louis P. Masur, "In Camp Reading 'Les Misérables,'" *Opinionator* (blog), *The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2013.

about how everyday readers would interpret *Les Misérables*. They worried that if the uneducated masses were to read this novel about criminals and prostitutes, they might forget the immorality of crime and prostitution. This thesis compares the responses of popular readers to the responses of more educated political correspondents and literary critics. By comparing the interests and anxieties of upper-class readers of *Les Misérables* to the responses of everyday readers, this thesis provides insight into the ways in which social class did or did not impact readership in the United States during the Civil War.

A SUMMARY OF REVOLUTION IN *LES MISÉRABLES*

This thesis relies of a reading of *Les Misérables* that prioritizes the passages in which Hugo develops his philosophy of revolution. He believes that violence must be motivated by a goal of social progress in order for revolution to be considered just. He conveys this philosophy through the transformations of specific characters, through symbols, and through digressions. The following summary outlines this reading of *Les Misérables*. It should be noted, however, that while this summary singles out the most significant passages pertaining to revolution, it excludes many plotlines including Fantine's life before Cosette's birth, the development of Cosette and Marius' relationship, the relationship between Marius and his grandfather, Jean Valjean and Cosette's time living in a Paris convent, the rivalry between Thénardier and Jean Valjean, and Eponine's unrequited love for Marius. These plotlines are not vital to Hugo's development of his philosophy of revolution, but one cannot appreciate the complexity of Hugo's masterpiece without reading the novel in its entirety.

Les Misérables begins in 1815. Bishop Myriel, an aristocrat who gave up his wealth to become a priest during the revolution, is serving as the Bishop of Digne. He strives to improve

his community through acts of charity, and both the rich and the poor view him as a role model. However, Myriel's devotion to charity and non-violence is challenged when he finds himself obligated to visit a dying conventionist who lives on the outskirts of town. The conventionist is notorious for having voted for the execution of Louis XVI during the violent Reign of Terror, so the Bishop visits him only reluctantly. After a tense conversation about their philosophies, the Bishop and the conventionist discover common ground. The Bishop learns from the conventionist that in some cases, violence can be righteous. This is the first instance in which Hugo articulates his belief that during a revolution, violence can serve a just purpose.

While the Bishop is busy learning about revolution, the novel's hero, Jean Valjean, experiences freedom for the first time in nineteen years. Valjean is originally sentenced to five years of hard labor for the theft of a loaf of bread, which he steals to feed his sister's children. However, due to his many attempts to escape prison, Valjean is forced to serve an extended sentence. Upon his release, Valjean walks the countryside seeking work, but is rejected from most towns on account of his convict's passport. In desperation, he finds Bishop Myriel who agrees to take him in for the night. During the night, Jean Valjean discovers and steals the Bishop's collection of silver plates and cutlery. Perpetually unlucky, Valjean is captured by gendarmes who bring him back to the Bishop for judgment. Myriel lies for Valjean, telling the gendarmes that the silver was a gift. He then gives Valjean an additional gift of two silver candlesticks on the condition that he use them to become a better man—one who only uses violence to achieve social progress.

Although he experiences a setback on his road to reform when he steals a coin from a child named Petit Gervais, Jean Valjean eventually makes a home for himself in a city called Montreuil-sur-Mer. Here, he goes by the name of Monsieur Madeleine. He discovers a new

manufacturing method for the glass beads the town is famous for, and by building a factory, transforms the poor town into a rich and prosperous manufacturing hub. Valjean becomes mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, and lives happily without incident for years.

However, Valjean's contentment is brought to an end when a citizen of the town falls under an extremely heavy horse cart. It would take extraordinary strength to lift the weight of the cart in order to save the man, but Valjean, thanks to his years of hard labor, has the necessary strength. He rescues the man, but is punished for his good deed. Because of his strength, the town inspector, Javert, recognizes him as Jean Valjean. Javert accuses him of having robbed Petit Gervais and makes it his mission to return Jean Valjean to prison. Valjean manages to evade Javert's suspicions until he learns that another man who resembles him will be mistakenly sent to prison if he does not confess. Remembering his promise to Bishop Myriel to become an honest man, Jean Valjean turns himself in to Javert.

While all this transpires, another equally important plot line begins in Paris. A young woman named Fantine is cruelly misled by a Parisian student she believes herself in love with. She finds herself in dire straits when the student disappears, leaving her pregnant and alone. Once her child, Cosette, is born, Fantine leaves Paris in search of work in a city where she can pretend to be a widow. Outside Paris, Fantine encounters Madame Thénardier, an innkeeper's wife whose care for her two daughters leads Fantine to trust her. Fantine desperately begs Madame Thénardier to take Cosette in, and agrees to make monthly payments to the Thénardiers in exchange for their raising Cosette. This plan works for many months; Fantine works in Jean Valjean's factory in Montreuil-sur-Mer and is able to send money to the Thénardiers. However, the cruel Thénardiers begin to raise their prices, demanding more and more money from Fantine. When the illegitimacy of her child is discovered by one of her co-

workers, Fantine loses her job. To meet the monetary demands of the Thénardiens, which she has been led to believe are being used to save her daughter from a terrible illness, Fantine sells her hair, her teeth, and her body. It is not until she bites a man who hits her with a snowball on account of her being a prostitute that her suffering is discovered by Madeleine (Jean Valjean), who, learning that she was once a worker in his factory, takes her in and nurses her illness. As Fantine dies of illness and exhaustion, Valjean promises to care for Cosette.

When he turns himself in to Javert, Valjean returns to prison, but he quickly achieves a miraculous escape. Once free, his first order of business is to rescue Cosette from the Thénardiens, who have been abusing her and treating her as a servant. Valjean arrives at the Thénardiens' inn, and offers Monsieur Thénardier a large sum of money, leftover from his industrial success, in exchange for custody of Cosette. He brings the confused but grateful child to the outskirts of Paris, where he establishes a home and raises her as his daughter.

About halfway through the novel, Hugo introduces Marius Pontmercy, the son of a hero in the Napoleonic wars who was raised by his mother's monarchist family. Marius grows up believing in his maternal grandfather's royalist views and thinking that his Bonapartist father never cared for him. Upon his father's death, he learns from a churchwarden that his father did in fact love him, and watched from afar as Marius attended mass with his grandfather every week. Marius, touched by the love of this father whom he never knew, endeavors to learn more about Napoleon, and gradually, becomes a Bonapartist himself. Eventually, after another period of reflection, Marius realizes that his father would also have supported the June Rebellion against the July Monarchy, so Marius breaks away from his grandfather and moves in with a group of young men who belong to a society known as Les Amis de l'ABC. This group, led by Enjolras and Combeferre, is instrumental in planning the June Rebellion of 1832.

Jean Valjean, living in Paris, is almost discovered by Javert on numerous occasions. Therefore, he and Cosette frequently change names and residences. This method of constant relocation works well until Cosette grows old enough to become attached to her surroundings, and, more inconveniently for Valjean, romantically attached to Marius. Valjean resents Marius as a typical father resents his daughter's suitors. He also worries that Marius unknowingly threatens Cosette's safety by giving her reason to resist relocating.

In the final two volumes, Hugo's many plotlines continue to collide. Jean Valjean decides to relocate once more, so Marius and Cosette believe they have lost one another. The June Rebellion breaks out in the streets of Paris, and Marius, believing he will never see Cosette again, enters the battle with no regard for his own life. In the midst of the skirmish, Thénardier's daughter Eponine informs Marius that she has discovered Cosette's whereabouts. Marius sends word to Cosette through Gavroche, a street urchin, who, coincidentally, is Thénardier's son. Gavroche, eager to return to battle, gives Marius' message not to Cosette, but to Valjean, who selflessly decides to join the battle to ensure that the life of the man Cosette loves is protected.

Les Amis de l'ABC capture Valjean's rival Javert, but, in an effort to live honorably as he promised the Bishop, Valjean spares Javert's life rather than killing him. When Marius is wounded in battle later that evening, Valjean carries him through the sewers of Paris to safety. On his way, Javert tries to capture Valjean again, but realizes he must let Valjean go because he owes him his life. Devastated that he must compromise his dedication to law and order, Javert takes his own life. Valjean successfully rescues Marius, and though the fight at the barricade ultimately fails and many characters including Eponine and Gavroche are killed, Cosette and Marius are finally able to marry.

Marius learns from Valjean that he was once a convict, and, although Marius appreciates all Valjean has done for him and Cosette, demands that Jean Valjean gradually remove himself from Cosette's life. He does not yet know that it was Valjean who saved him during the battle at the barricade. Many years after their marriage, when Valjean has all but faded from Cosette and Marius' lives, Thénardier approaches Marius looking for money in exchange for information about Valjean's status as an ex-convict. Marius sends Thénardier away, but not before learning from him that it was in fact Valjean who rescued him during the battle at the barricade. Marius forgives Valjean, and Cosette and Valjean are reunited upon Valjean's deathbed. Jean Valjean dies—happy, reformed, and revolutionary.

This reading of *Les Misérables*, which emphasizes passages that will be revisited throughout the following chapters, is central to the main claim of this thesis: that Hugo's philosophy of revolution is what inspired the diverse responses to *Les Misérables* in Civil War America—the manipulation of the text by political journalists, the skepticism of the literary elite, and its widespread acceptance by popular readers.

Chapter 1 draws on Hugo's original French novel and its English translation by Charles Wilbour, as well as on secondary criticism of *Les Misérables*. It argues that in *Les Misérables*, Hugo advances his idea of revolution, defining it as a righteous form of violence which should be differentiated from purposeless rioting. This definition of revolution serves as the basis for chapters 2 and 3 which focus on the ways American readers in the 1860s responded to Hugo's philosophy of revolution.

Chapter 2 examines political responses to Hugo's philosophy of revolution. It relies on Hugo's text as well as on other primary sources such as articles from newspapers and literary

journals of the 1860s. It argues that both the North and the South looked for evidence in *Les Misérables* that could prove that their violence, as opposed to their opponent's, was righteous. Northern readers engaged with Hugo's admiration for John Brown and his stance against slavery whereas Southern publishers and reviewers attempted to manipulate the book's content to make it fit their vision of the South as revolutionary.

Chapter 3 compares the novel's reception amongst the American literary elite to its popular reception. It demonstrates, through evidence from newspapers and other periodicals, that not all critics responded positively to *Les Misérables* because they worried that its content might corrupt society. The chapter then evaluates the validity of these worries by exploring the actual popular reception of *Les Misérables*—the responses of soldiers and civilians collected from war correspondences, diaries, and memoirs. The chapter concludes that the responses of these readers defied critical expectations. Despite critical anxieties, popular readers gained just as much, if not more, insight from Hugo's philosophy of revolution as their elite counterparts.

CHAPTER 1:

“The Brutalities of Progress are Called Revolutions”: Hugo’s Philosophy of Revolution

“Il y a l’*émeute*, et il y a l’*insurrection*; ce sont deux colères; l’une a tort, l’autre a droite.”¹ Victor Hugo begins his meditation upon the June Rebellion of 1832 with this aphorism, the basic tenet of his philosophy of revolution. Some uprisings are wrong; other uprisings are right. Having grown up in the wake of the numerous revolts that rattled France and the Western hemisphere during the latter half of the eighteenth century, Hugo composed an oeuvre throughout his lifetime that is largely preoccupied with questions of morality in the face of politically motivated violence. In *Les Misérables*, Hugo searches for a way to differentiate between righteous violence, which serves a progressive purpose, and unjustifiable brutality. He arrives at the conclusion: “Dans toutes les questions qui ressortissent à la souveraineté collective, la guerre du tout contre la fraction est *insurrection*, l’attaque de la fraction contre le tout est *émeute*; selon que les Tuileries contiennent le roi ou contiennent la Convention, elle sont justement ou injustement attaquées.”² Violence is justified, according to Hugo, when a majority contests an abuse of power, such as the third estate’s overthrow of Louis XVI, and unjustified when a small fraction rises against a progressive whole, for example, “Israël contre

¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1957), 1240. On page 1035 of Wilbour’s translation: “There is the *émeute*, there is the *insurrection*; they are two angers; one is wrong, the other is right.” “*Émeute*” is a French word that means riot, which Wilbour chooses not to translate into English.

² Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1240. On page 1035 of Wilbour’s translation: “In all questions which spring from the collective sovereignty, the war of the whole against the fraction is *insurrection*; the attack of the fraction against the whole is an *émeute*; according as the Tuileries contain the King or contain the Convention, they are justly or unjustly attacked” (1035).

Moïse, Athènes contre Phocion, Rome contre Scipion.”³ For Hugo, insurrection, an uprising of the masses against an exclusive power, is the only justifiable type of political violence because it always aims towards social progress. As he writes, “Il n’y a d’insurrection qu’en avant.”⁴

Though he draws a clear distinction between insurrection and its immoral counterpart, émeute, Hugo acknowledges that a given uprising can waver between these two poles and can therefore resist clear moral classification. This ambiguity arises from the fact that both types of violence are born from the same emotion—anger. In the case of insurrection, anger finds a moral philosophy to direct its path; in the case of émeute, anger fails to metamorphose into revolution, and instead deteriorates into chaos. Hugo describes the relationship between these two uprisings through the analogy of a river that can either lead to an ocean or get lost in a marsh:

Au commencement l’insurrection est émeute, de même que le fleuve est torrent. Ordinairement elle aboutit à cet océan: révolution. Quelquefois pourtant, venue de ces hautes montagnes qui dominent l’horizon moral, la justice, la sagesse, la raison, le droit, faite de la plus pure neige de l’idéal, après une longue chute de roche en roche, après avoir reflété le ciel dans sa transparence et s’être grossie de cent affluents dans la majestueuse allure du triomphe, l’insurrection se perd tout à coup dans quelque fondrière bourgeoise, comme le Rhin dans un marais.⁵

³ Ibid., 1241. On page 1035 of Wilbour’s translation: “Israel against Moses, Athens against Phocion, Rome against Scipio.”

⁴ Ibid., 1242. On page 1036 of Wilbour’s translation: “There is no insurrection but forward.”

⁵ Ibid., 1246. On page 1039 of Wilbour’s translation: “In the beginning insurrection is an émeute, even as the river is a torrent. Ordinarily it ends in this ocean, revolution. Sometimes, however, coming from those high mountains which rule the moral horizon, justice, wisdom, reason, right, made of the purest snow of the ideal, after a long fall from rock to rock, after having reflected the sky in its transparency and been swollen by a hundred affluents in the

Hugo is an advocate for revolution because it has the potential to transform an oppressive society into one more egalitarian. However, he condemns émeute, which lacks philosophical motivation, because such riots bring about physical harm without achieving social progress. In the same vein, Hugo disapproves of moral philosophy when it stands alone, because tangible progress cannot materialize without violence. Only when the anger of émeute is united with progressive philosophy can insurrection occur, and when insurrection succeeds, it be called revolution.

Throughout the novel, Hugo portrays revolutionary spirit as a type of religious fervor. At times, he refers to uprising against injustice as a religious duty: “De là vient que, si l’insurrection, dans des cas donnés peut être, comme a dit Lafayette, le plus saint des devoirs, l’émeute peut être le plus fatal des attentats.”⁶ Not only is revolution a duty of the pious according to this conception, but also to riot without moral motivation is a sin. Furthermore, Hugo’s primary characters, such as Bishop Myriel, Jean Valjean, and Marius, all undergo moments of transformation that resemble Christian conversions. Blessings repeatedly facilitate the transfer of revolutionary ideals, and references to candles, saints, and angels permeate Hugo’s digressions about revolution. Hugo associates social justice and morality with revolution, and ties all of these concepts together through Christianity. As Kathryn Grossman asserts, “Conversions are spiritual revolutions; revolutions are social conversions.”⁷

majestic path of triumph, insurrection suddenly loses itself in some bourgeois quagmire, like the Rhine in a marsh.”

⁶ Ibid., 1242. On page 1036 of Wilbour’s translation: “Hence it is that, if insurrection, in given cases, may be, as Lafayette said, the most sacred of duties, an émeute may be the most deadly of crimes.”

⁷ Kathryn M. Grossman, *Les Misérables: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption*, (New York: Twayne, 1996), 51.

In *Les Misérables*, Hugo creates character pairs who serve as foils for each other and whose cooperation exemplifies the necessity for violence and philosophy to unite. The charitable Bishop Myriel begins the novel as a champion of social progress through non-violent methods. However, before he is able to transform Jean Valjean from a convict into an upstanding citizen, Myriel himself must transform into a revolutionary. Once he receives the blessing of the dying conventionist, Bishop Myriel realizes that violence can be justified when it achieves social progress. Armed with the knowledge that philosophy and action must work in concert, Myriel inspires Jean Valjean to take up the mantle of revolution by blessing him. Hugo's revolutionary fervor is reiterated again in the character of Marius, whose family bridges the gap between Jean Valjean's generation and the youth of 1832. Finally, Hugo characterizes Enjolras and Combeferre, the two ringleaders of Les Amis de l'ABC, as physical embodiments of his two-part vision of revolution.⁸ Whereas Enjolras embodies "la grandeur de la révolution," Combeferre embodies "la beauté du progrès."⁹ Throughout *Les Misérables*, both Hugo's development of characters and his association of revolutionary spirit with Christianity illustrate his complex but comprehensive philosophy of revolution.

BISHOP MYRIEL AND G.

Hugo opens *Les Misérables* in the year 1815, at which point Bishop Myriel's outlook is based on a socially progressive philosophy. However, the bishop has yet to learn that violence can be justified. Before the action of the plot begins, Hugo introduces revolution as a transformative power that is closely linked to religion by describing Myriel's conversion from

⁸ "Les Amis de l'ABC" is a pun in French. The series of letters "ABC" is pronounced in French the same way as the word "abaissé," which means lowered, put down, or degraded.

⁹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 776. On pages 644-45 of Wilbour's translation: "the grandeur of the revolution" and "the beauty of progress."

indulgent aristocrat into altruistic clergyman. Hugo associates Myriel's conversion to Christianity with the brutality of the Reign of Terror. He writes that prior to 1789, Myriel was "élégant, gracieux, spirituel; toute la première partie de sa vie avait été donné au monde et aux galanteries."¹⁰ The chaos and violence of the revolution threaten Myriel's aristocratic lifestyle, and encourage him to relocate to Italy, where he escapes the physical, but not the philosophical, impact of the revolution. Hugo writes,

L'écroulement de l'ancienne société française, la chute de sa propre famille, les tragiques spectacles de '93, plus effrayants encore peut-être pour les émigrés qui les voyaient de loin avec le grossissement de l'épouvante, firent-ils germer en lui des idées de renoncement et de solitude ? Fut-il au milieu d'une de ces distractions et de ces affections qui occupaient sa vie, subitement atteint d'un de ces coups mystérieux et terribles qui viennent quelquefois renverser, en le frappant au cœur, l'homme que les catastrophes publiques n'ébranleraient pas en le frappant dans son existence et dans sa fortune ? Nul n'aurait pu le dire ; tout ce qu'on savait, c'est que, lorsqu'il revint d'Italie, il était prêtre.¹¹

News of continued violence in France uproots Myriel's interest in ephemeral wealth and pushes him towards the enduring institution of the Church. Through references to the traumatic events of the Reign of Terror, Hugo implies that Myriel's newfound religious fervor is an inevitable

¹⁰ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 8. On page 9 of Wilbour's translation: "elegant and graceful; all the earlier part of his life had been devoted to the world and to its pleasures."

¹¹ Ibid. On page 9 of Wilbour's translation: "The decay of the old French society, the fall of his own family, the tragic sights of '93, still more fearful, perhaps, to the exiles who beheld them from afar, magnified by fright—did these arouse in him ideas of renunciation and of solitude? Was he, in the midst of one of the reveries or emotions which then consumed his life, suddenly attacked by one of those mysterious and terrible blows which sometimes overwhelm, by smiting to the heart, the man whom public disasters could not shake, by aiming at life or fortune? No one could have answered; all that was known was that when he returned from Italy, he was a priest."

effect of his exposure to excessive violence. Thus, Hugo presents religion, and by extension revolution, as an alternative to immoral brutality and violence.

By 1815, Myriel has advanced in the priesthood and serves as the Bishop of Digne, in which position he advocates his philosophy of peaceful social transformation. The bishop's charitable actions set a model for his parishioners, and are the physical manifestation of his belief in improving the world through charity rather than violence. When appointed, Bishop Myriel's first charitable deed is the exchange of his magnificent home for the modest building that houses the hospital. Myriel gifts his home to the sick, explaining to the hospital director, "Vous êtes vingt-six personnes dans cinq ou six petites chambres. Nous sommes trois ici, et nous avons place pour soixante. Il y a erreur, je vous dis. Vous avez mon logis, et j'ai le vôtre. Rendez-moi ma maison. C'est ici chez vous."¹² In addition to sacrificing his comfortable home to benefit the less-fortunate, Myriel divides his entire salary between several carefully selected charities. Although he chooses to live modestly, he accepts donations from wealthy parishioners who wish to alleviate his apparent poverty only to pass these donations on to the hungry. Hugo describes, "L'évêque, en moins d'un an, devint le trésorier de tous les bienfaits et le cassier de toutes les détresses. Des sommes considérables passaient par ses mains ; mais rien ne put faire qu'il changeât quelque chose à son genre de vie et qu'il ajoutât le moindre superflue à son nécessaire."¹³ To combat poverty, Myriel advocates charity. His goal aligns with the one Hugo states in his preface—to put an end to "la dégradation de l'homme par le

¹² Ibid., 12. On page 13 of Wilbour's translation: "There are twenty-six of you in five or six small rooms: there are only three of us, and space for sixty. There is a mistake, I tell you. You have my house and I have yours. Restore mine to me; you are at home."

¹³ Ibid., 15. On page 16 of Wilbour's translation: "Some came to receive alms and others to bestow them, and in less than a year he had become the treasurer of all the benevolent and the dispenser to all the needy. Large sums passed through his hands; nevertheless, he changed in no wise his mode of life, nor added the least luxury to his simple fare."

prolétariat, la déchéance de la femme par la faim, l'atrophie de l'enfant par la nuit.”¹⁴ However, Myriel embodies only the moral ideal behind social transformation, not its practical application. His charitable actions transform his immediate surroundings, but are limited in scope and efficacy whereas violent protest has the potential to combat social inequality on a grand scale. Hugo defines Myriel's charity as progressive, but not yet revolutionary.

Despite his early transformation from earthly aristocrat to Christian humanitarian, Bishop Myriel does not exemplify revolutionary spirit when the novel begins. Instead, Hugo introduces his concept of revolution through the character G., a dying conventionist whose arguments in favor of uprising initiate Myriel's second transformation. Myriel, having been traumatized by the horrors of the French Revolution, is prejudiced against the conventionist. His suspicion is shared by his parishioners, who fear the conventionist's history of violence. Hugo describes G.'s reputation: “On parlait de conventionnel G. dans le petit monde de Digne avec une sorte d'horreur. Un conventionnel, vous figurez-vous cela ? Cela existait du temps qu'on se tutoyait et qu'on disait : citoyen. Cet homme était à peu près un monstre. Il n'avait pas voté la mort du roi, mais presque. C'était un quasi-régicide. Il avait été terrible.”¹⁵ Neither Myriel nor the population of Digne can disassociate G. from his role in the bloody terror of recent history. When news that the conventionist is sick and dying reaches the townsfolk, the bishop is only reluctantly sympathetic. Hugo writes, “un conventionnel lui faisait un peu l'effet

¹⁴ Ibid, 3. On page 3 of Wilbour's translation: “the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 48. On page 42 of Wilbour's translation: “The little circle of D— spoke of the conventionist with a certain sort of horror. A conventionist, think of it; that was in the time when folks thee-and-thoued one another, and said ‘citizen.’ This man came very near being a monster; he had not exactly voted for the execution of the king, but almost; he was half a regicide, and had been a terrible creature all together.”

d'être hors la loi, même hors la loi de charité."¹⁶ Despite his aversion to the conventionist's violence, the bishop visits the dying man in order to fulfill his priestly duties.

Through the bishop's enlightening discussion with the conventionist, Hugo conveys his belief that revolution and charity are different manifestations of the same goal and that both align with Christian morality. Violence can be unjustified when it lacks a moral philosophy, and charity can be ineffective without forceful action, but both seek to make society more just and equal. The bishop, imagining G. as a bloodthirsty anarchist, is surprised to find his own ideas about social progress echoed in the conventionist's speech. G. says, "Je veux dire que l'homme a un tyran, l'ignorance. J'ai voté la fin de ce tyran-là."¹⁷ This statement echoes a sermon that Myriel gives to his parishioners earlier in the novel: "A ceux qui ignorent, enseignez-leur le plus de choses que vous pourrez; la société est coupable de pas donner l'instruction gratis; elle répond de la nuit qu'elle produit. Cette âme est pleine d'ombre, le péché s'y commet. Le coupable n'est pas celui qui y fait le péché, mais celui qui y a fait l'ombre."¹⁸ As Myriel realizes that the conventionist shares his investment in eliminating the suffering caused by society's ignorance, he opens his mind to the conventionist's views. Gradually, he accepts the possibility that violence can be justified when it is used purposefully in order to create a more equal society.

Just as Myriel initially mistakes the conventionist for a violent criminal, G. mistakes Myriel for a corrupt clergyman. Before realizing that the bishop shares his goal of social

¹⁶ Ibid., 51. On page 45 of Wilbour's translation: "a conventionist he looked upon as an outlaw, even to the law of charity."

¹⁷ Ibid., 52. On page 46 of Wilbour's translation: "I mean that man has a tyrant, Ignorance. I voted for the abolition of that tyrant."

¹⁸ Ibid., 21-22. On page 21 of Wilbour's translation: "Teach the ignorant as much as you can; society is culpable in not providing instruction for all and it must answer for the night which it produces. If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness."

equality, G. attacks Myriel for his wealth. He accuses: ““Vous êtes un évêque, c’est-à-dire, un prince de l’église, un de ces hommes dorés, armoriés, rentés, qui ont de grosses prébendes.””¹⁹ Myriel accepts the conventionist’s accusations without argument, despite their inaccuracy. He concedes to the conventionist, stating simply: ““*Vermis sum.*””²⁰ Unsatisfied with this response, G. persists in accusing the Bishop of corruption, stopping only when Myriel retorts, ““expliquez-moi [...] en quoi mon palais et mes laquais prouvent que la pitié n’est pas une vertu, que la clémence n’est pas un devoir, et que 93 n’a pas été inexorable.””²¹ Myriel’s response redirects the conversation away from accusation and towards a discussion of ideals. Instead of defending his own role in the revolution, the conventionist must now explain how he reconciles violence with virtue. He rescinds his accusations against Myriel: ““Vous discutez mes idées, il sied que je me borne à combattre vos raisonnements.””²² By shifting their discussion towards the philosophy that underlies their actions instead of the actions themselves, the Bishop and the conventionist are able to discover a moral common ground.

Once the bishop and the conventionist begin exploring ideas rather than lancing personal attacks, they realize that they share a mission of improving society. They therefore open their minds to each other’s views. The conventionist makes a compelling case for his belief that violence can be justified: ““Je ne me crois pas le droit de tuer un homme; mais je me sens le devoir d’exterminer le mal. J’ai voté la fin du tyran. C’est-à-dire la fin de la prostitution

¹⁹ Ibid., 55-56. On page 48 of Wilbour’s translation: ““You are a bishop, a prince of the church, one of those men who are covered with gold, with insignia, and with wealth, who have fat livings.””

²⁰ Ibid., 56. Latin for: ““I am a worm.””

²¹ Ibid. On page 49 of Wilbour’s translation: ““Explain to me [...] how my palace and my lackeys prove that pity is not a virtue, that kindness is not a duty, and that ’93 was not inexorable?””

²² Ibid. On page 49 of Wilbour’s translation: ““You are discussing my ideas; it is fitting that I confine myself to combating your reasoning.””

pour la femme, la fin d'esclavage pour l'homme, la fin de la nuit pour l'enfant. En votant la république, j'ai voté cela [...] Les écroulements des erreurs et des préjugés font de la lumière."²³ The conventionist, the bishop discovers, does not believe in violence for violence's sake. He does not kill out of malice, but rather, undertakes violence only to achieve social progress. The conventionist has all the same charitable intentions as the bishop, but understands that charity alone cannot “fait tomber le vieux monde, en se renversant sur le genre humain, est devenu une urne de joie.”²⁴

The conventionist's insistence that violence is an unfortunate but unavoidable imperative if society is to progress reveals a flaw in the bishop's non-violent approach. According to the conventionist, charity is only one ingredient in the recipe for societal change. In order to implement change, morality must be combined with action. With his dying words, the revolutionary summarizes Hugo's view towards revolutionary violence: “Oui, les brutalités du progrès s'appellent révolutions. Quand elles sont finies, on reconnaît ceci : que le genre humain a été rudoyé, mais qu'il a marché.”²⁵ Through the conventionist, Hugo clearly defines his conception of revolution. According to this conception, moral ideals and violence must not only coexist, but must also complement one another. Together, they comprise an effective and transformative whole. Progress, the goal of both the bishop and the conventionist, has both a brutal and a positive side. As Grossman argues, the exchange of ideas between the bishop and

²³ Ibid., 53. On page 46 of Wilbour's translation: “I do not believe that I have the right to kill a man, but I feel it a duty to exterminate evil. I voted for the downfall of the tyrant; that is to say, for that abolition of prostitution for woman, of slavery for man, of night for the child. In voting for the republic I voted for that [...] I assisted in casting down prejudices and errors: their downfall brings light!”

²⁴ Ibid. On page 46 of Wilbour's translation: “[cause] the old world to fall; the old world, a vase of misery, reversed, becomes an urn of joy to the human race.”

²⁵ Ibid., 58. On page 50 of Wilbour's translation: “Yes, the brutalities of progress are called revolutions. When they are over, this is recognized; that the human race has been harshly treated, but that it has advanced.”

the conventionist creates “an economics of the sublime, whereby acts and events that appear evil in fact purchase or ‘pay for’ a better future. Immediate loss is the condition of long-term gain.”²⁶ The violence of revolution creates a more equal society, but at a high cost. For Hugo, revolution must occur, whatever the cost, so long as tangible and lasting progress can be made.

In a poignant reversal, when the venerated and charitable Myriel learns from the despised conventionist that violence can in fact be justified, he asks for the conventionist’s blessing. With his final breath, the conventionist inquires, “‘Qu’est-ce que vous venez me demander?’” To which the bishop responds, “‘Vôtre bénédiction.’”²⁷ The bishop kneels before the conventionist as a gesture of acceptance that violence, when it improves society, is righteous. Hugo develops the bishop’s initial non-violent perspective only to challenge it. Through this blessing, the conventionist transfers his faith in revolution to the bishop, thus completing the bishop’s transformation from aristocrat into revolutionary. Although Hugo upholds Christian morality as a basis for the improvement of society, his choice to allow the conventionist to bless the bishop prioritizes revolutionary fervor over Christianity. Revolution, in *Les Misérables*, becomes a type of religion for characters who seek to improve society.

Hugo concludes the chapter with a clever quip that proves that Myriel has taken the conventionist’s words to heart. He writes,

Un jour, une douairière, de la variété impertinente qui se croit spirituelle, lui adressa cette saillie : --Monseigneur, on demande quand Votre Grandeur aura le bonnet rouge. —Oh ! oh ! voilà une grosse couleur, répondit l’évêque.

²⁶ Kathryn M. Grossman, *Figuring Transcendence in Les Misérables: Hugo’s Romantic Sublime* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 12.

²⁷ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 60. On page 52 of Wilbour’s translation: “‘What have you come to ask of me?’ ‘Your benediction.’”

Heureusement que ceux qui la méprisent dans un bonnet la vénèrent dans un chapeau.²⁸

By taking advantage of the uncanny similarity between the red hat of a Catholic bishop and the red bonnet of a revolutionary, Hugo implies that the difference between the ideal of social progress and its physical manifestation should be as negligible as the difference between a bonnet and a hat.

Before his interaction with the revolutionary, the bishop undertakes small scale acts of charity, but once galvanized by the words of the dying conventionist, he is able to initiate a chain of societal improvement through his influence over Jean Valjean. As Isabel Roche notes in her book *Character and Meaning in the Novels of Victor Hugo*, “everything the reader learns about Myriel prior to Jean Valjean’s arrival in Digne is designed to reinforce his goodness and prefigure its continuation in his intersection with Jean Valjean.”²⁹ Myriel’s transformations first from an aristocrat into a peaceful bishop and then from a peaceful bishop into a revolutionary must occur before he meets Jean Valjean, because it is by equipping Jean Valjean with revolutionary fervor that Myriel inspires him to change the world.

JEAN VALJEAN

The transformation of Bishop Myriel from charitable but non-violent philanthropist into advocate of justifiable violence sets a precedent for Jean Valjean’s conversion from convict into moral role model. Upon his entrance into the novel, Jean Valjean embodies only the

²⁸ Ibid., 61. On page 52 of Wilbour’s translation: “One day a dowager, of that impertinent variety who think themselves witty, addressed this sally to him. ‘Monseigneur, people ask when your Grandeur will have the red bonnet.’ ‘Oh! ho! That is a high color,’ replied the bishop. ‘Luckily those who despise it in a bonnet, venerate it in a hat.’”

²⁹ Isabel Roche, *Character and Meaning in the Novels of Victor Hugo* (West Lafayette: Perdue University Press, 2007), 71.

violent and vengeful aspect of revolution. Whereas Myriel originally lacks the violence to become a revolutionary and therefore cannot transform society until he meets conventionist, Valjean lacks the morality of a revolutionary and therefore remains tied to a life of crime and sin until he meets Myriel. Before his transformation, Valjean's entire outlook is governed by hate: "cette haine qui, si elle n'est arrêtée dans son développement par quelque incident providentiel, devient, dans un temps donné, la haine de la société, puis la haine du genre humain, puis la haine de la création, et se traduit par un vague et incessant et brutal désir de nuire, n'importe à qui, à un être vivant quelconque."³⁰ Valjean's destructive hatred and proclivity towards violence lack morality to guide and justify them. He feels compelled to destroy society but does not intend to build an improved society in its place. Whereas those who misunderstand his motivation for violence mistake the conventionist for an anarchist, Jean Valjean is truly anarchical. Valjean serves as a foil for the both for charitable bishop and the righteous conventionist, and it is not until he encounters the transformative power of revolution through a blessing from Bishop Myriel that his destructive energy is redirected towards the improvement of himself and of society.

Hugo uses the silver candlesticks that Myriel gives to Jean Valjean to symbolize the transfer of revolutionary ideals from the bishop to the convict. Instead of holding Valjean accountable for the theft of his silver dinnerware, Bishop Myriel forgives Valjean's theft and gifts him two silver candlesticks on the condition that he use them to begin a new and purposeful life. Myriel utters a transformative blessing over Valjean: "Jean Valjean, mon frère, vous n'appartenez plus au mal, mais au bien. C'est votre âme que je vous achète ; je la retire

³⁰ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 119. On page 100 of Wilbour's translation: "that hatred which, if it cannot be checked in its growth by some providential event, becomes, in a certain time, hatred of society, then hatred of the human race, and then hatred of creation, and reveals itself by a vague and incessant desire to injure some living being, it matters not who."

aux pensées noires et à l'esprit de perdition, et je la donne à Dieu.”³¹ The Bishop’s blessing is more than an act of charity; it is a challenge to convert. He pushes Valjean to leave the misery of his past behind and to recreate himself as a Christian, much in the way a society recreates itself following a revolution. The silver candlesticks represent both charity, given their monetary value, and revolution, given that they can be ignited to bring light into the world. The bishop’s challenge to live an upstanding life strikes Valjean more effectively than any physical blow could have, because it is morality, not a willingness to act violently, that Jean Valjean needs in order to become a Hugolian revolutionary. Hugo writes,

Il sentait indistinctement que le pardon de ce prêtre était le plus grand assaut et la plus formidable attaque dont il eût encore été ébranlé ; que son endurcissement serait définitif s’il résistait à cette clémence ; que, s’il céda, il faudrait renoncer à cette haine dont les actions des autres hommes avaient rempli son âme pendant tant d’années, et qui lui plaisait.³²

Valjean, who has only experienced physical violence during his years in of labor in prison, is poignantly struck by the bishop’s spiritual violence. Myriel’s forgiveness, though an act of charity, has a transformative impact on Jean Valjean. He intends not only to help Valjean live a better life according to a Christian moral standard, but also to convert him into a revolutionary who will work to make society more just. Valjean’s transformation is twofold—he begins a new life filled with both Christian virtue and revolutionary fervor.

³¹ Ibid., 133. On page 112 of Wilbour’s translation: ““Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I gave it to God!””

³² Ibid., 139. On pages 116-17 of Wilbour’s translation: “He felt dimly that the pardon of this priest was the hardest assault, and the most formidable attack which he had yet sustained; that his hardness of heart would be complete, if it resisted this kindness; that if he yielded, he must renounce that hatred with which the acts of other men had for so many years filled his soul, and in which he found satisfaction.”

Jean Valjean accepts the bishop's challenge and devotes the rest of his life to improving society, which he does most conspicuously in his revitalization of Montreuil-sur-Mer. Valjean becomes the mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, and in this role he improves the town by creating a thriving economy. Hugo describes the transformation of the impoverished town into a manufacturing utopia, writing, "Avant l'arrivée du père Madeleine, tout languissait dans le pays; maintenant tout y vivait de la vie saine de travail. Une forte circulation échauffait tout et pénétrait partout. Le chômage et la misère étaient inconnus."³³ Valjean manages to create a society in which the vision Hugo outlines in his preface is realized—poverty and misery are eradicated, and every citizen is able to work to support him or herself. Valjean's charitable actions as mayor mirror those Myriel undertakes as Bishop of Digne. For example, one of Valjean's first acts of philanthropy is an expansion of the local hospital: "L'hôpital était mal doté; il y avait fondé dix lits."³⁴ Jean Valjean echoes Myriel not only in his conversion to Christianity, but also in his newfound ability to transform society and pass the spirit of revolution on to others. As Grossman writes, "Hugo's poetic imagination ceaselessly weaves analogies between Jean Valjean's spiritual progress and humanity's striving toward freedom, harmony, and social justice."³⁵

The bishop's candlesticks follow Jean Valjean throughout the novel, serving as a reminder of the both the physical and philosophical components of Hugolian revolution. When they peer into Jean Valjean's home, the citizens of Montreuil-sur-Mer see nothing noteworthy other than these candlesticks. Hugo writes, "Elles n'y purent rien remarquer que deux

³³ Ibid., 201. On page 164 of Wilbour's translation: "Before the arrival of Father Madeleine, the whole region was languishing; now it was alive with the healthy strength of labor. An active circulation kindled everything and penetrated everywhere. Idleness and misery were unknown."

³⁴ Ibid., 202. On page 164 of Wilbour's translation: "The hospital was poorly endowed, and he made provision for ten additional beds."

³⁵ Grossman, *Les Misérables: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption*, 45.

flambeaux de forme vieille qui étaient sur la cheminée et qui avaient l’air être en argent, ‘car ils étaient contrôlés’. Observation plein de l’esprit des petites villes.”³⁶ The candlesticks’ position of prominence in Valjean’s room is indicative of their significance to his character and to the novel as a whole. The townsfolk acknowledge the monetary value of the candlesticks but remain unaware of their philosophical value. Much like the violence of revolution, the candlesticks have a philosophical meaning that is not immediately apparent to an observer, but which consistently inspires Jean Valjean. The spirit of revolution that the bishop has passed on to Jean Valjean, symbolized by the candlesticks, defines all Valjean’s future actions including his rescue of Fantine, his adoption of Cosette, and his participation in the defense of the barricade during the June Rebellion.

Jean Valjean’s life as an agent of revolutionary transformation culminates in an episode that parallels the death of the conventionist; both Valjean and the conventionist convert others into revolutionaries from their deathbeds. Whereas the conventionist leaves Bishop Myriel with a newfound respect for violence, Jean Valjean leaves his prized candlesticks to Cosette. He explains the physical and philosophical value of the candlesticks to Cosette and her husband Marius: “C’est à elle que je lègue les deux chandeliers qui sont sur la cheminée. Ils sont en argent ; mais pour moi ils sont en or, ils sont en diamant ; ils changent les chandelles qu’on y met en cierges.”³⁷ The candles are made of precious metal, but they are more precious to Jean Valjean for their spiritual value. They have transformed him from a convict into a mayor, a father, and a revolutionary, and they transform each candle that is placed within them into a

³⁶ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 207. On page 169 of Wilbour’s translation: “They could see nothing but two candlesticks of antique form that stood on the mantel, and appeared to be silver, ‘for they were marked,’ a remark full of the spirit of these little towns.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1704. On page 1430 of Wilbour’s translation: “To her I bequeath the two candlesticks which are on the mantel. They are silver; but to me they are gold, they are diamond; they change the candles which are put into them, into consecrated tapers.”

votive flame. From the moment he receives Myriel's blessing to his death, Jean Valjean is a personification of these candlesticks, for he too has been ignited by the religious fervor of revolution. He accompanies his gift of the candlestick with a blessing: "Donnez-moi vos chères têtes bien-aimées, que je mette mes mains dessus."³⁸ Thus, Valjean replicates the blessing he received from Myriel at the beginning of the novel. He passes Hugo's revolutionary doctrine on to the next generation.

MARIUS

Jean Valjean leaves the silver candlesticks to Cosette upon his death, but it is her husband, Marius Pontmercy, through whom Hugo more distinctly forges a link between Valjean's generation and the revolutionaries of 1832. Critics often claim that Marius is the character who most closely resembles Hugo himself. Like Hugo, Marius' father is a hero in Napoleon Bonaparte's army, and like Marius, Hugo was raised by his mother's royalist family. Hugo and Marius both discover their revolutionary philosophies independently, becoming increasingly progressive over time. David Bellos describes Marius as Hugo's self-portrait: "The portrait is affectionate and serious, but it is also an ironical and self-critical one."³⁹ Marius, as he breaks away from his grandfather's influence and discovers the more progressive politics of his father, becomes another voice for Hugo's philosophy of revolution. His role as a bridge between the two generations of Hugolian revolutionaries within the novel is even inscribed in his name. As Victor Brombert observes: "Paternity and the image of spanning are,

³⁸ Ibid., 1706. On page 1431 of Wilbour's translation: "Let me put my hands upon your dear beloved head."

³⁹ David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 124.

as it were, built into the name of Pontmercy.”⁴⁰ Through Marius, Hugo connects the revolutionaries of 1789 with those of 1832 and thereby links the transformation of Jean Valjean with the June Rebellion that serves as the novel’s climax.

Marius’ relationships with his father and grandfather represent the trajectory of French politics in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. France, despite decades of revolutionary progress towards a republican government, reverted after the fall of Napoleon in 1814. The Bourbon monarchy was restored to the throne, and although it was replaced in 1830 by the regime of Louis-Philippe d’Orléans, this shift merely changed an absolute monarchy into a constitutional one. Marius’s grandfather, a pretentious bourgeois named Monsieur Gillenormand, has a stronger voice under the Bourbon regime than he did during Napoleon’s reign, and this political strength has implications for the life of young Marius. Marius’s father, a Bonapartist who loses political power after Napoleon’s fall, finds himself equally powerless to prevent his father-in-law from claiming custody of Marius. Baron Pontmercy is unable to play a role in his son’s life, much in the way the Bonapartists were disenfranchised during the Bourbon Restoration. Hugo writes, “L’enfant, qui s’appelait Marius, savait qu’il avait un père, mais rien de plus.”⁴¹ Marius is therefore raised in the political world of his grandfather and adopts monarchist views unquestioningly. Brombert emphasizes the link between Gillenormand’s custody of Marius and the French monarchy, writing, “Gillenormand, the grandfather, is a typical man of the eighteenth century, shaped by, and faithful to, the mores of the Ancien Régime. His assumption of paternal authority corresponds to the return to power of

⁴⁰ Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 102. “Pont” is French for “bridge.”

⁴¹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 735. On page 610-11 of Wilbour’s translation: “The child, whose name was Marius, knew that he had a father, but nothing more.”

the monarchy in 1815.”⁴² It is not until Marius becomes aware of his father that he comes into contact with the more contemporary and progressive political ideology that he will eventually fight for in the June Rebellion.

Hugo maintains his association of revolution with Christianity by placing Marius’ first positive encounter with progressive philosophy, a transformative moment similar to those of the bishop and Jean Valjean, in a church. He makes the link between revolution and religion explicit in the title of the chapter in which Marius experiences this first moment of conversion: “Utilité D’Aller A La Messe Pour Devenir Révolutionnaire.”⁴³ Through this title, Hugo asserts that the purpose of mass is not only to transform bread into the body of Christ, but also to transform Christians into revolutionaries. After mass, Marius is approached by a churchwarden who claims to have known his father. The man informs him that his father was not separated from him by choice, but was estranged from him due to political differences with his grandfather. Marius’ father, it turns out, sacrificed his happiness by giving his son to M. Gillenormand “pour que son fils fût riche un jour et heureux.”⁴⁴ Knowledge of his father’s love and sacrifice strikes a chord within Marius, who begins to question M. Gillenormand’s authority and resolves to learn more about the politics his father believed in.

Marius’ political conversion, like those of Myriel and Valjean before him, occurs in stages. He quickly discovers the allure of rebellion and uprising but does not immediately realize that moral philosophy must accompany violent action. Like Myriel, Marius is initially skeptical towards the French Revolution because of its violence: “La république, une guillotine

⁴² Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, 104.

⁴³ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 749. On page 622 of Wilbour’s translation: “The Utility of Going to Mass to Become Revolutionary.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 750. On page 623 of Wilbour’s translation: “that his son might someday be rich and happy.”

dans un crépuscule; l'empire, un sabre dans la nuit."⁴⁵ However, once he becomes aware of his father's love, Marius also opens his mind to progressive politics. While researching the revolutionaries of 1789, Marius experiences an epiphany that allows him to see the French Revolution and the subsequent Empire under Napoleon not as dark stains on the history of France but as sources of light. Hugo writes, "Peu à peu, l'étonnement passé, il s'accoutuma à ces rayonnements, il considéra les actions sans vertige, il examina les personnages sans terreur; la révolution et l'empire se mirent lumineusement en perspective devant sa prunelle visionnaire."⁴⁶ Hugo describes Marius' encounter with revolutionary thought through language of clarity and light. This, together with his depiction of the moment as an epiphany, links Marius' moment of conversion to those of Myriel and Valjean. Marius' new perspective, like the silver candlesticks, brings light into his world. However, Marius still has much to learn before he can be considered a true revolutionary by Hugo's definition. As Hugo warns, "Les progrès ne se font pas tous en une étape."⁴⁷

Although he has finally been exposed to the light of progress, Marius does not yet understand the necessity for balance between philosophy and violence. The glory of the Revolution and of Napoleon's battles, in which his father was a hero, quickly fills his mind with a romanticized vision of uprising. Hugo compares Marius' initial enthusiasm to the zeal of a new religious convert, writing, "On le voit, à la façon de tous les nouveaux venus dans une religion, sa conversion l'enivrait, il se précipitait dans l'adhésion et il allait trop

⁴⁵ Ibid., 752. On page 624 of Wilbour's translation: "The republic, a guillotine in a twilight; the empire, a sabre in the night."

⁴⁶ Ibid. On page 624 of Wilbour's translation: "Little by little, the astonishment passed away, he accustomed himself to this radiance; he looked upon acts without dizziness, he examined personages without error; the revolution and the empire set themselves in luminous perspective before his straining eyes." Wilbour's translation here contains an error: "terreur" should be translated as "terror," not as "error."

⁴⁷ Ibid., 753. On page 625 of Wilbour's translation: "Progress is not accomplished at a bound."

loin.”⁴⁸ Overcome by compelling images of battlefields, swords, and heroics, Marius becomes captivated by the appearance of revolution. He associates revolution only with his newfound positivity towards his father, and therefore has not yet adopted the progressive philosophy of a revolutionary. As Hugo recounts, Marius is blinded by enthusiasm: “Le fanatisme pour l’épée le gagnait et compliquait dans son esprit l’enthousiasme pour l’idée. Il ne s’apercevait point qu’avec le génie, et pêle-mêle, il admirait la force, c’est-à-dire qu’il installait dans les deux compartiments de son idolâtrie, d’un côté ce qui est divin, de l’autre ce que est brutal.”⁴⁹

Without realizing his error, Marius idolizes all violence. He does not yet understand that certain violence is justified while other violence is unjustified, so he worships the good and the bad types of violence with equal devotion.

Marius’ transformation into a revolutionary is completed only moments before he enters the battle at the barricade during the June Rebellion. When he arrives at the road where the battle takes place, Hugo informs the reader that “Marius n’avait plus qu’un pas à faire.”⁵⁰ Marius has but one physical step to take before entering the battle, and but one mental step to take before becoming a revolutionary. He must discover the philosophy that underlies justified violence before taking part in the fighting. Marius hesitates to take action because his revolutionary fervor until this point has been based exclusively on his desire to live up to his father’s legacy. His father, however, fought for the glory of France under Napoleon, whereas Marius, if he fights in the rebellion, will be fighting against France. He meditates on this

⁴⁸ Ibid., 756. On page 627 of Wilbour’s translation: “We see, like all new converts to a religion, his conversion intoxicated him, he plunged headlong into adhesion, and he went too far.”

⁴⁹ Ibid. On pages 627-28 of Wilbour’s translation: “Fanaticism for the sword took possession of him, and became complicated in his mind with enthusiasm for the idea. He did not perceive that along with genius, and indiscriminately, he was admiring force, that is to say that he was installing in the two compartments of his idolatry, on one side what is divine, and on the other what is brutal.”

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1326. On page 1105 of Wilbour’s translation: “Marius had but one step more to take.”

dilemma for some time, finally arriving at a conclusion. He reflects, “pourquoi son père s’indignerait-il? est-ce qu’il n’y a point des cas où l’insurrection monte à la dignité de devoir ? qu’y aurait-il donc de diminuant pour le fils de colonel Pontmercy dans le combat qui s’engage?”⁵¹ In order to participate in this revolution, Marius must disassociate his own fight from that of his father. He must give up the ideals of the Empire and trade them in for the ideals of the current progressive movement. As Brombert writes, “Marius’s moral and political apprenticeship is thus determined by a double movement, regressive and progressive, that first reads (leads) [sic] back to the Revolution via the Empire and the Bonapartist adventure, and then proceeds forward to transcend the paternal example.”⁵² Marius takes up the mantle of revolution once he realizes that violence is not justified or unjustified based on who its victim is, but rather, that “la guerre ne se qualifie que par son but.”⁵³ In other words, once he realizes that violence in war is justified or unjustified based on whether or not the war serves a moral purpose, Marius participates in the fight at the barricade. Hugo describes this realization as a second epiphany: “La vision de l’action dans laquelle il se sentait peut-être sur le point d’entrer lui apparut, non plus lamentable, mais superbe. La guerre de la rue se transfigura subitement, par on ne sait quel travail d’âme intérieur, devant l’œil de sa pensée.”⁵⁴ Revolution no longer appears to Marius as an idolized image. It is “transfigured,” just as Marius himself is transfigured into a revolutionary.

⁵¹ Ibid., 1328. On pages 1107-08 of Wilbour’s translation: “why should his father be indignant? are there not cases when insurrection rises to the dignity of duty? what would there be then belittling to the son of Colonel Pontmercy in the impending combat?”

⁵² Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, 104.

⁵³ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1328. On page 1108 of Wilbour’s translation: “War is modified only by its aim.”

⁵⁴ Ibid. On page 1107 of Wilbour’s translation: “The vision of the act upon which he felt himself, perhaps on the point of entering, appeared to him no longer lamentable, but superb. The war of the street was suddenly transfigured by some indescribable interior throes of the soul, before the eye of his mind.”

LES AMIS DE L'ABC

By the beginning of volume three, Bishop Myriel and the conventionist have both passed the torch of revolutionary fervor on to Jean Valjean, Marius, and the members of Les Amis de l'ABC. Les Amis de l'ABC is a group of Parisian students who promote social progress, and, secretly, plan uprisings. As Hugo writes, they are “une société ayant pour but, en apparence, l'éducation des enfants, en réalité le redressement des hommes.”⁵⁵ Although they are of a different generation than the instigators of the French Revolution and have lived through different types of governmental oppression, les Amis de l'ABC are the inheritors of the revolutionary spirit of 1789. Their work to improve society and to put an end to suffering is reminiscent of the French Revolution. Therefore, Hugo asserts that, “A cette époque, indifférente en apparence, un certain frisson révolutionnaire courait vaguement. Des souffles, revenues des profondeurs de 89 et de 92, étaient dans l'air.”⁵⁶ Les Amis de l'ABC embody the Hugolian conception of revolution introduced in the early chapters of the novel, especially the necessity for philosophy and violence to coexist. The relationship between the bishop and the conventionist is paralleled in the friendship between Enjolras and Combeferre, the two leaders of les Amis. Although Enjolras and Combeferre differ, together they effectively lead the group through the June Rebellion of 1832.

Enjolras and Combeferre both possess the morality and the appetite for violence of revolutionaries. Therefore, their differences in character are merely representative of the two parts of Hugo's vision of revolution. Whereas Enjolras represents the violence of revolution

⁵⁵Ibid., 771. On page 640 of Wilbour's translation: “A society having as its aim, in appearance, the education of children; in reality, the elevation of men.”

⁵⁶Ibid., 770. On page 640 of Wilbour's translation: “At that period, apparently indifferent, something of a revolutionary thrill was vaguely felt. Whispers coming from the depths of '89 and '92 were in the air.”

more effectively, Combeferre communicates the ideals that underlie revolution more clearly. Hugo designates the role of each: “Enjolras était un chef, Combeferre était un guide. On eût voulu combattre avec l’un et marcher avec l’autre.”⁵⁷

Although he understands and lives by the moral philosophy that underlies revolution, Enjolras, for Hugo’s purposes, represents the violence of insurrection. Hugo describes Enjolras as both a warrior and a priest: “Il savait tous les petits détails de la grande chose. Nature pontificale et guerrière, étrange dans un adolescent. Il était officiant et militant ; au point de vue immédiat, soldat de la démocratie ; au-dessus du mouvement contemporain, prêtre de l’idéal.”⁵⁸ Enjolras represents the physical manifestation of revolution. At the same time, however, Hugo describes him as a “priest of the ideal.” Just as a priest handles the physical elements of a mass, the bread and the wine, Enjolras handles the physical aspects of revolution and connects them to a greater meaning. He serves as both priest and a warrior and is therefore a crusader for social transformation who spreads his philosophy of social progress by inspiring and participating in uprisings.

Combeferre serves as a perfect foil for Enjolras. He acts violently when necessary, but he is just as inclined to focus on the moral philosophy that underlies revolution as Enjolras is to focus only on revolution’s physical embodiment. Hugo writes, “Ce n’est pas que Combeferre ne fût pas capable de combattre, il ne refusait pas de prendre corps à corps l’obstacle et de

⁵⁷ Ibid., 775. On page 644 of Wilbour’s translation: “Enjolras was a chief; Combeferre was a guide. You would have preferred to fight with the one and march with the other.”

⁵⁸ Ibid., 773. On page 642 of Wilbour’s translation: “He knew all the details of the grand things, a pontifical and warrior nature, strange in a youth. He was officiating and militant; from the immediate point of view, a soldier of democracy; above the movement of the time, a priest of the ideal.”

l'attaquer de vive force et par explosion."⁵⁹ Combeferre's ideals are similar to those of Bishop Myriel prior to his meeting with the conventionist. He maintains that ignorance is the greatest problem for society, and that education should be used to combat ignorance. Hugo outlines Combeferre's views: "Il déclarait que l'avenir est dans la main du maître d'école, et se préoccupait des questions d'éducation. Il voulait que la société travaillât sans relâche à l'élévation du niveau intellectuel et moral."⁶⁰ Combeferre's investment in education does not preclude him from recognizing the necessity for violence. If necessary, he is willing to raise a weapon. However, Combeferre's primary battle is an intellectual one; he seeks to eliminate the ignorance that allows poverty and suffering to persist.

Neither Enjolras nor Combeferre would be as effective in their work to transform society without the efforts of their counterpart. Their reliance on each other symbolizes the codependence of violence and morality that creates a successful Hugolian revolution. Hugo writes, "A côté d'Enjolras qui représentait la logique de la révolution, Combeferre en représentait la philosophie. Entre la logique de la révolution et sa philosophie, il y a cette différence que sa logique peut conclure à la guerre, tandis que sa philosophie ne peut aboutir qu'à la paix. Combeferre complétait et rectifiait Enjolras."⁶¹ Neither of the young revolutionaries could create tangible progress without the other. The philosophy of Combeferre cannot change the world unless it is paired with the physical violence of Enjolras, and Enjolras

⁵⁹ Ibid., 775-76. On page 644 of Wilbour's translation: "Not that Combeferre was not capable of fighting; he did not refuse to close with an obstacle, and to attack it by main strength and explosion."

⁶⁰ Ibid., 775. On page 644 of Wilbour's translation: "He declared the future was in the hand of the schoolmaster, and busied himself with questions of education. He desired that society should work without ceasing at the elevation of the intellectual and moral level."

⁶¹ Ibid., 774. On page 643 of Wilbour's translation: "Beside Enjolras who represented the logic of revolution, Combeferre represented its philosophy. Between the logic of revolution and its philosophy, there is this difference—that its logic could conclude with war, while its philosophy could only end in peace. Combeferre completed and corrected Enjolras."

cannot grow an insurrection into a revolution without Combeferre's morality to guide his efforts. The logic of revolution, the acceptance that violence must transpire, can only lead to war unless it is accompanied by philosophy. A philosophical approach to societal transformation can only lead to peace—without violence, the peace of stasis, but with violence, the peace of an improved world.

Hugo links Enjolras and Combeferre to their predecessors within the novel by associating them with images of light. Just as revolution, for the bishop, Jean Valjean, and Marius, is a source of light in a dark world, light for Enjolras and Combeferre signals progress. Hugo describes the two revolutionaries through an analogy that links each to a distinct source of light. Hugo explicitly associates Combeferre with soft light, and by extension associates Enjolras with harsher more powerful light. He writes, “entre les deux clartés, sa pente était plutôt pour l’illumination que pour l’embrasement. Un incendie peut faire une aurore sans doute, mais pourquoi ne pas attendre le lever du jour ? Un volcan éclaire, mais l’aube éclaire encore mieux.”⁶² Combeferre prefers the gentle, passive light of dawn whereas Enjolras prefers the harsh and active light of a fire. The fire of revolution, symbolized by Myriel's candlesticks, falls somewhere in the middle of these extremes. The two leaders therefore balance out each other's extremes—Enjolras pushes Combeferre towards urgency and action, and Combeferre tempers Enjolras' potential for rash and widespread destruction.

The interdependence of Enjolras and Combeferre is manifested not only in their friendship, but also in their relationships with the other members of les Amis de l'ABC. Hugo frequently describes the other members in terms of Enjolras and Combeferre. For example,

⁶² Ibid., 776. On page 644 of Wilbour's translation: “Of the two lights, his inclination was rather for illumination than for conflagration. A fire would cause a dawn, undoubtably, but why not wait for the break of day? A volcano enlightens, but the morning enlightens still better.”

Jean Prouvaire is “une nuance plus adoucie encore que Combeferre,” yet, “comme Enjolras, il était riche et fils unique.”⁶³ Prouvaire, therefore, falls in Combeferre’s philosophically minded camp but shares a socioeconomic background with Enjolras. Similarly, Courfeyrac is defined by his location between Enjolras and Combeferre on the revolutionary spectrum. Hugo writes, “Enjolras était le chef. Combeferre était le guide, Courfeyrac était le centre. Les autres donnaient plus de lumière, lui il donnait plus de calorique.”⁶⁴ Courfeyrac is a balance between Enjolras and Combeferre. Because he embodies equal amounts of philosophy and violence, Courfeyrac produces not just light but heat. His impact on society is not only observed, but also felt. He represents a perfect balance of Enjolras and Combeferre, and therefore Hugo associates him with the productive type of light that creates warmth.

Hugo further characterizes the duality of Enjolras and Combeferre through comparisons to other revolutionary historical figures. For instance, to define their relative stances towards violence, Hugo writes of Enjolras and Combeferre, “Le premier se rattachait à Robespierre; le second confinait à Condorcet.”⁶⁵ Hugo also draws connections between Enjolras, the French Revolution, and Georges Danton and between Combeferre, the American Revolution, and George Washington. He writes, “Et en effet, si la grandeur de la révolution, c’est de regarder fixement l’éblouissant idéal et d’y voler à travers les foudres, avec du sang et du feu à ses serres, la beauté du progrès, c’est d’être sans tache; et il y a entre Washington qui représente l’un et Danton qui incarne l’autre, la différence qui sépare l’ange aux ailes de cygne de l’ange

⁶³ Ibid., 776-77. On page 645 of Wilbour’s translation: “just a shade more subdued than Combeferre,” “Like Enjolras, he was rich and an only son.”

⁶⁴ Ibid., 779. On page 647 of Wilbour’s translation: “Enjolras was the chief, Combeferre was the guide, Courfeyrac was the center. The others gave more light, he gave more heat.”

⁶⁵ Ibid., 774. On page 643 of Wilbour’s translation: “The first went as far as Robespierre; the second stopped at Condorcet.” Robespierre was known for his violence and use of the guillotine whereas Condorcet was a philosopher who voted against the execution of the king.

aux ailes d'aigle."⁶⁶ Danton, like Robespierre, leads violent uprisings against the French monarchy. Enjolras inherits this violent energy from Danton and Robespierre, and Hugo defines this energy as the grandeur of revolution. On the other hand, Combeferre inherits a spirit of progress that Hugo hesitates to even classify as revolutionary, instead defining it as "the beauty of progress." Hugo identifies this type of progress with George Washington, a leader of the American Revolution. Hugo's attitude towards the American Revolution, however, is different from his attitude towards the French Revolution. According to critic Jean-Claude Morisot, Hugo hesitates to classify the American Revolution as a revolution. Morisot writes, "‘Révolution américain’: cette formule n'appartient pas à la langue de Hugo, qui préfère évoquer la guerre d'Indépendance, ou la naissance de la République. [...] Le formation des Etats-Unis n'a rien à voir avec ce concentré de passion, ambiguë, qu'alimente en lui le souvenir des deux ‘révolutions’, les vraies : celle d'Angleterre, celle de France."⁶⁷ Hugo admires Washington and the American Revolution because it represents the birth of Republican government, of which he is an adamant supporter. However, he does not classify the American Revolution as a true revolution because it lacked a certain intensity, namely, the violence associated with Robespierre, Danton, and Enjolras.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 776. On pages 644-645 of Wilbour's translation: "And, in fact, if it is the grandeur of the revolution to gaze steadily upon the dazzling ideal, and to fly to it through the lightnings, with blood and fire in its talons, it is the beauty of progress to be without a stain; and there is between Washington, who represents the one, and Danton, who incarnates the other, the difference which separates the angel with the wings of a swan, from the angel with the wings of an eagle."

⁶⁷ Jean-Claude Morisot, "Hugo et la Révolution américain," *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 85, no. 4 (1985): 621, JSTOR. My translation: "‘American Revolution’: this word formula does not belong to the language of Hugo, who prefers to evoke the War of Independence, or the Birth of the Republic. [...] The formation of the United States has nothing to do with that concentration of passion, ambiguous, which feeds in him the memory of two ‘revolutions,’ true ones: that of England, that of France."

CONCLUSION

Hugo's classification of various progressive figures and movements clarifies further his concept of revolution. He defines the June Rebellion of 1832, in which his characters participate, as an insurrection, writing "Cette explication donnée, qu'est-ce que pour l'histoire que le mouvement de juin 1832? est-ce une émeute ? est-ce une insurrection ? C'est un insurrection."⁶⁸ Hugo stops short of categorizing the uprising as a revolution, because it failed to affect long term societal change. However, by classifying it as an insurrection, Hugo acknowledges the union of philosophy and violence that facilitated the rebellion. He defines the rebellion itself as insurrection, but the period in which it took place as revolutionary. He writes, "1831 et 1832, les deux années qui se rattachent immédiatement à la Révolution de Juillet, sont un des moments les plus particuliers et les plus frappants de l'histoire. Ces deux années au milieu de celle qui les précèdent et que les suivent sont comme deux montagnes. Elles ont la grandeur révolutionnaire."⁶⁹ The first years of the July Monarchy possessed the grandeur of revolution. Although Louis-Philippe reigned via a constitutional monarchy as he would until 1848, the spirit of revolution was alive and well among the French people. If revolution is a type of religion, as Hugo depicts it, then the June Rebellion was a powerful demonstration of faith by the masses.

In his digressions, Hugo explores other revolutions that have occurred both in France and around the world. In his third volume, he includes a digression about the spirit of Paris,

⁶⁸ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1246. On page 1039 of Wilbour's translation: "This explanation given, what, for history, is the movement of June 1823? is it an émeute? is it an insurrection? It is an insurrection."

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 973. On page 811 of Wilbour's translation: "The years 1831 and 1832, the two years immediately connected with the Revolution of July, constitute one of the most peculiar and most striking periods in history. These two years, among those which precede and those which follow them, are like two mountains. They have the revolutionary grandeur."

which he associates not only with the city where the French Revolution was born, but also with places where revolutions have occurred around the world. He describes Paris:

Il est superbe; il a un prodigieux 14 juillet qui délivre le globe ; il fait faire le serment du Jeu de Pomme à toutes les nations ; sa nuit du 4 août dissout en trois heures mille ans féodalité ; il fait de sa logique le muscle de la volonté unanime ; il se multiplie sous toutes les formes du sublime ; il emplit de sa lueur Washington, Kosciusko, Bolivar, Botzaris, Riego, Bem, Manin, Lopez, John Brown, Garibaldi ; il est partout où l'avenir s'allume, à Boston en 1779, à l'île de Léon en 1820, à Pesth en 1848, à Palerme en 1860.⁷⁰

Hugo associates the city of Paris with a revolutionary spirit that he sees manifested in events and political revolutionaries from all corners of the globe. He claims that it is this spirit that fills not only Paris and the French revolutionaries, but also revolutionaries such as Americans George Washington and John Brown. The spirit fills those it touches with *lueur*, meaning “glow,” “glimmer,” or as Wilbour translates it, “radiance.” This light of revolution radiates around the world, and can be found wherever action and moral philosophy are united in the pursuit of progress. Hugo’s description of this revolutionary spirit as a light is deeply religious; it refers back to Myriel’s candlesticks, and it evokes the Christian image of the Holy Spirit igniting the heads of the apostles at Pentecost. Through this allusion, Hugo equates the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 705-06. On page 588 of Wilbour’s translation: “It is superb; it has a marvelous Fourteenth of July that delivers the globe; it makes all the nations take the oath of the tennis-court; its night of the Fourth of August disperses in three hours a thousand years of feudalism; it makes of its logic the muscle of the unanimous will; it multiplies itself under all the forms of the sublime; it fills with its radiance Washington, Kosciusko, Bolivar, Botzaris, Riego, Bem, Manin, Lopez, John Brown, Garibaldi; it is everywhere, where the future is being enkindled, at Boston in 1799, at the Isle de St. Leon in 1820, at Pesth in 1848, at Palermo in 1860.”

revolutionaries he lists with apostles, and thereby canonizes them as the saints of his religion of revolution.

During a Hugolian revolution, violent method and peaceful philosophy are in opposition, but are simultaneously inseparable. Progress towards equality, which Hugo associates with moral ideals, requires violence to fight its battle, and violence, which Hugo condemns in most instances, requires a progressive guiding philosophy to render it ethical. This paradoxical definition of revolution governs Hugo's politics in *Les Misérables*, and it is this paradox that leaves the novel open to the numerous political interpretations attempted by its readers upon its publication in 1862 and after. As chapter 2 will reveal, some political interpretations from the time of the novel's publication align with Hugo's definition of revolution, but other interpreters, who are aware of Hugo's popularity and political influence, manipulate his definition in an effort to make it seem as though their unjust violence is justified.

CHAPTER 2:

“John Brown is Greater Than Washington”: Hugo’s Philosophy and the American Political Divide

In France, critical opinions about *Les Misérables* were as divided as the political views of its critics. Scholar Max Bach writes, “Le roman était censé avoir une signification politique. Il est donc à prévoir que les journaux libéraux et conservateurs, la presse monarchique et la presse républicaine en jugeront différemment.”¹ As in France, the novel’s reception in the United States was strongly influenced by Hugo’s social and political reputation. Although Americans primarily knew him as the gifted author of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, whereas in France he was regarded as a political exile, Hugo still succeeded in making a name for himself on the American political stage.

Les Misérables first arrived in print in the United States in 1862, just months after its début in France. Highly educated Americans might have read the work in its original French, but the average English-speaking reader would likely have encountered one of two widely circulated English translations. The first single-volume edition to be sold in the U.S. was a reprint of the official British translation by Sir Frederick Charles Lascelles Wraxall.² While translating, Wraxall abridged Hugo’s five-volume novel into three volumes, which New York

¹ Max Bach, “Critique et Politique: La Réception des *Misérables* En 1862,” *PMLA* 77, no. 5 (December 1962): 596, JSTOR. My translation: “The novel was supposed to have a political signification. It was therefore to be predicted that liberal and conservative newspapers, the monarchical press and the republican press, would judge it differently.”

² British and American international copyright laws differed at the time, so only one translation could be printed in the United Kingdom, whereas multiple translations could be printed freely in the United States. For more information about copyright laws, see Hoffheimer’s article “Copyright, Competition, and the First English-Language Translations of *Les Misérables* (1862).”

publisher W.I. Pooley and Company published first as three individual volumes before condensing them into a sizable single volume. This version was available to readers as early as November 1862.³ Pooley's choice to abridge *Les Misérables* backfired financially. As Hoffheimer writes, "In squeezing five parts into three volumes, either Wraxall or his editors deleted titles that provide important content, destroyed Hugo's organizational plan, and conflated distinct narrative lines."⁴ Because Pooley's was not the only company eager to capitalize on the popularity of this sensational French novel, his mistake was costly for business.

American readers were quick to notice the deficiencies of Pooley's Wraxall translation because they had already encountered the early segments of an alternate, superior translation. This competing version, translated by American Charles Wilbour, was published in five separate volumes that appeared chronologically throughout 1862. Although the final volume was not printed until December, a month after the release of the one-volume Wraxall edition, the Wilbour translation greatly outsold Wraxall's. According to Hoffheimer, "Sales mounted into the hundreds of thousands. One retail order for 25,000 copies was reported to be the largest such order ever placed."⁵ The Wilbour edition's high rate of sale can be attributed to the superior quality of his translation. Although he expresses discontent with the Wilbour translation, scholar Olin H. Moore confirms that Wilbour outshines Wraxall: "When he comes to the numerous plays on words or idiomatic passages in *Les Misérables*, Wraxall is a most untrustworthy guide. He is in fact generally much inferior to Wilbour, who in turn leaves much

³ Olin H. Moore, "Some Translations of *Les Misérables*," *Modern Language Notes* 74, no. 3 (March 1959): 240, JSTOR.

⁴ Michael H. Hoffheimer, "Copyright, Competition, and the First English-Language Translations of *Les Misérables* (1862)," *Marquette Intellectual Property Law Review* 17, no. 2 (2013): 175.

⁵ Hoffheimer, "Copyright, Competition," 174.

to be desired.”⁶ Dissatisfied with both the Wraxall and Wilbour translations, Moore recommends a third and lesser-known edition to his readers, which he refers to as “the Richmond translation.”⁷

The “Richmond translation” that Moore generously applauds appeared in early 1863 and circulated almost exclusively in the American South. Printed in Richmond, Virginia, by publishing company West & Johnston, this edition is largely pirated from Wilbour’s translation. However, as its Editor’s Preface reveals, the first 49 pages were subjected to intense editing by a translator named Alexander Dimitry. The preface reads:

The translation which has been adopted as the basis of the present reprint, although in the main faithful and spirited, is disfigured by numerous errors and misapprehensions of peculiar French idioms, some of them even of a ludicrous nature. The work of revising it and correcting for republication was commenced by that accomplished scholar, Professor A. Dimitry; but the pressure of other engagements having compelled that gentleman to give up the undertaking after he had progressed so far as page 49 of this edition, the task of revision was entrusted by the publishers to the present editor, who has endeavored to carry out their views in a manner that will, he hopes, prove satisfactory to the reading public.⁸

Like the editors at West & Johnston, Moore celebrates the superiority of Dimitry’s work. He claims, “Whatever defects it may have, the first volume of the Richmond translation is

⁶ Moore, “Some Translations of *Les Misérables*,” 240-41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁸ A.F., “Editor’s Preface” in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (Richmond: West & Johnston, 1863), iv. According to Connie G. Griffith’s, “Collections in the Manuscript Sections of Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University,” Alexander Dimitry served as the United States Minister to Costa Rica before becoming a member of the Confederate cabinet.

distinctly superior to Wilbour's rendering so far as the handling of 'peculiar French idioms' is concerned."⁹

Although Dimitry's talent as a translator is widely agreed upon, the West & Johnston *Les Misérables* is far from flawless. While revising Wilbour's text, either Dimitry, his successor A.F., or another editor at West & Johnston chose to expurgate passages in which Hugo advocates for the abolition of slavery in the United States, sentences such as this outpouring of admiration for John Brown: "Pour nous, qui préférons le martyre au succès, John Brown est plus grand que Washington."¹⁰ This sentence and those with similar abolitionist content are nowhere to be found in the Richmond translation thanks to Dimitry and A.F. A.F. defends his choice to continue the removal of anti-slavery passages throughout the portion of the novel for which he was responsible, arguing, "the absence of a few anti-slavery paragraphs will hardly be complained of by Southern readers."¹¹ The Richmond translation, though skillfully crafted, is marred by the political intentions of its editors. Despite A.F.'s confidence that his and Dimitry's changes would be well received, their subtle censorship was controversial, even amongst southerners who supported slavery. T.W.M., a frequent writer for *The Southern Literary Messenger*, argues, "the publishers have omitted occasional passages; which is deplorable. To emendate Victor Hugo, is like painting white the lily."¹² Although provocative, efforts such as West & Johnston's to politicize *Les Misérables* in an American context were far from uncommon.

⁹ Moore, "Some Translations of *Les Misérables*," 245. Moore here quotes the Editor's Preface to the West & Johnston edition of *Les Misérables*.

¹⁰ Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1957), 1454. On page 1216 of Wilbour's translation: "For ourselves who prefer martyrdom to success, John Brown is greater than Washington."

¹¹ A.F., "Editor's Preface," iv.

¹² T.W.M., "Les Misérables- Fantine," *Southern Literary Messenger* 37, no. 7 (July 1863): 446.

This chapter examines how politically charged publishers, critics, and journalists in both the Union and the Confederacy sought to identify their own political agendas with Hugo's philosophy of revolution in order to make their sides' respective acts of violence appear righteous. In both the North and the South, writers and translators attempted to transform the public's perception of *Les Misérables* so that they might claim the novel and use it to their advantage politically. The chapter begins with an exploration of the reception of *Les Misérables* in the North and shows why northern politicians were able to use Hugo's novel to prove that the fight for abolition was moral and justified, despite the violence it entailed. The second half of the chapter is devoted to southern readers, who, like their northern counterparts, sought to claim Hugo's ideas as moral justification for their own acts of rebellion and violence.

NORTHERN POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Two years before the publication of *Les Misérables*, Hugo made a name for himself in American politics by vocalizing his admiration for abolitionist John Brown. On October 16, 1859, Brown led an ambush at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, that has gone down in history as a catalyst for the Civil War. Two weeks later, in Charles Town, Virginia, Brown was condemned to death. The day of his execution, Victor Hugo composed a letter in protest, a translation of which was printed in newspapers throughout Europe and the United States. Hugo warns the United States, "si l'échafaud se dressait le 16 décembre, désormais, devant l'histoire incorruptible, l'auguste fédération du nouveau monde ajouterait à toutes ses solidarités saintes une solidarité sanglante; et le faisceau radieux de cette république splendide aurait pour lien le

nœud coulant du gibet de John Brown.”¹³ Hugo, as an advocate of republican government, held the United States in high regard. However, his philosophy of revolution, which he outlines in *Les Misérables*, did not allow him to overlook the injustice of Brown’s execution. By Hugo’s standards, Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry stands out as an example of righteous violence, for Brown combined his passion for the idea of social progress through the abolition of slavery with physical action. According to Hugo, by allowing Brown to be executed, the United States was betraying one of its fundamental values; it stood aside as oppression murdered liberty and justice. On these grounds, Hugo concludes his letter, “Oui, que l’Amérique le sache et y songe, il y a quelque chose de plus effrayant que Caïn tuant Abel, c’est Washington tuant Spartacus.”¹⁴

Hugo’s letter, which was only the first of his many published references to John Brown, was taken to heart by abolitionists in the North. Those who agreed with Hugo’s criticism of the South republished the letter often as possible in order to convey Hugo’s accusation of injustice to a wider audience. In the minutes of the 1860 New England Anti-Slavery Convention, Hugo’s letter is cited as one of the texts that the organization had prepared “to be carried to the people” to persuade them to support the abolitionist cause.¹⁵ However, just as not all northerners supported abolition at the outset of the war, not all northerners approved of Hugo’s letter.

¹³ Hugo, Victor, “John Brown,” in *John Brown par Victor Hugo*, ed. E. Dentu and Dusacq et al. (Paris: J. Claye, 1861), 5-6. Translation printed in *The New York Herald* on December 23, 1859: “if the scaffold should be erected on the 16th of December, the incorruptible voice of history would from thenceforward testify that the august confederation of the New World had added to its ties of holy brotherhood—a brotherhood of blood, and the *fasces* of that splendid republic would be bound together with the running noose that hung from the gibbet of Brown.”

¹⁴ Hugo, “John Brown,” 6. From the translation printed in *The New York Herald* on December 23, 1859: “For—yes, let America know it and ponder it well—there is something more terrible than Cain slaying Abel—it is Washington slaying Spartacus.”

¹⁵ John T. Sargent. “New England Anti-Slavery Convention.” *The Liberator*, June 8, 1860, 90.

General C.F. Henningson of Connecticut responds to Hugo's concluding statement through a letter published in *The New York Herald*:

To you it may appear flippant and frivolous, yet it embraces a whole theory on which tens of thousands not only contentiously justify the course which you pursue and you condemn, but hold themselves in duty bound to follow it. It is simply this: 'The Sparticus [sic] struggled to free white men, not negroes.'¹⁶

Henningson's derision of Hugo stems from racism. He cannot understand American slavery as unjust, because he is blinded by bigotry. Unfortunately, Henningson's response to Hugo's letter was not the only one of this nature. In a piece published in the *Omaha Nebraskian* on February 4, 1860, Mrs. Anna S. Stephens implores Hugo to understand that John Brown's raid was immoral. She argues, "It requires something more than an outburst of fine poetry to turn crime into patriotism—something more than impetuous denunciations to check the solemn footsteps of justice."¹⁷ Despite these negative responses to his intervention in the American conflict over slavery, Hugo continued to address the issue of slavery in his written work. His condemnation of slaveholders and his idolization of John Brown would resurface as recurring motifs in his subsequent full-length publication—*Les Misérables*.

Anna Stephens, in her response to Hugo's letter, attempts to link George Washington to the South by reminding Hugo: "Washington himself was born in a slave-holding State—lived and died the master of slaves."¹⁸ Hugo, however, continues to insist that John Brown, and not the slaveholding South, is the inheritor of Washington's revolutionary spirit. Throughout *Les*

¹⁶ C.F. Henningson, "The John Brown Dreamers in Europe," *The New York Herald*, January 7, 1860, 4, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.

¹⁷ Anna S. Stephens, "Mrs. Anna S. Stephens vs. Victor Hugo," *The Omaha Nebraskian*, February 4, 1860, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.

¹⁸ Stephens, "Mrs. Anna Stephens vs. Victor Hugo."

Misérables, Hugo associates his philosophy of revolution with certain historical figures and with specific cities in which revolutions have occurred. As noted in Chapter 1, Hugo identifies Paris as the birthplace of revolutionary spirit, and argues that this spirit, which emanates from Paris, incites revolutions around the world. He writes, “il emplît de sa lueur Washington, Kosciusko, Bolivar, Botzaris, Riego, Bem, Manin, Lopez, John Brown, Garibaldi; il est partout où l’avenir s’allume, à Boston en 1779, à l’île de Léon en 1820, à Pesth en 1848, à Palerme en 1860; il chuchote le puissant mot d’ordre: *Liberté*, à l’oreille des abolitionnistes américains groupés au bac de Harper’s Ferry...”¹⁹ Hugo links each of these revolutionaries with the philosophy of revolution that he presents in *Les Misérables*. Each, he argues, embodies both an ideology of social progress and a willingness to fight to make tangible progress transpire. Hugo argues that the revolutionary spirit, “construit dans tous les esprits l’idée de progrès; les dogmes libérateurs qu’il forge sont pour les générations des épées de chevet.”²⁰ Among his list of revolutionaries and revolutions, the American names and events stand out: Washington, John Brown, Boston during the American Revolution, and John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry. By associating these names and events with each other, Hugo solidifies his belief that Washington, who fought to found a republican government, and John Brown, who fought to end slavery in the United States, are of one revolutionary genealogy. Like Bishop Myriel and Jean Valjean, these two men share the same revolutionary spirit. Although southern writers like Stephens

¹⁹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 705-06. On page 588 of Wilbour’s translation: “it fills with its radiance, Washington, Kosciusko, Bolivar, Botzaris, Riego, Bam, Manin, Lopez, John Brown, Garibaldi; it is everywhere, where the future is being enkindled at Boston in 1779, at the Isle de St. Leon in 1820, at Pesth in 1848, at Palermo in 1860; it whispers the mighty watchword *Liberty* in the ears of the American Abolitionists grouped together in the boat at Harper’s Ferry...” It should be noted that there was no boat involved in John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry. Hugo’s use of the word “bac,” which translates as “ferry,” suggests that he may have confused the name of the town with the presence of ferry boats.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 706. On page 588 of Wilbour’s translation: “builds up in every mind the idea of progress; the liberating dogmas which it forges are swords by the pillows of the generations.”

claim that the seceded southern states were fighting a continuation of the American Revolution, for Hugo, it was really Brown who inherited the baton of revolution and who followed in the progressive footsteps of Washington.

In *Les Misérables*, Hugo not only idolizes John Brown, but also openly criticizes the morality of the southern United States. In one political digression, he compares France in a moment of moral regression to the American South. He writes, “La France a ses rechutes de matérialisme, et, à de certains instants, les idées qui obstruent ce cerveau sublime n’ont plus rien qui rappelle la grandeur française et sont de la dimension d’un Missouri ou d’une Caroline du Sud. Qu’y faire? La géante joue la naine; l’immense France a ses fantaisies de petitesse. Voilà tout.”²¹ In moments when France reverts to its pre-Revolutionary materialism, Hugo sees it as taking on a smaller, less grand form. He identifies this regressive form as the norm for slave holding states in the U.S., in particular Missouri and South Carolina. He associates both France, when it is in a materialist mood, and the American South with childishness, but whereas he views France as capable of greatness, he never gives the South such credit. Until slavery is abolished and justice is established, the South, for Hugo, will always be equated with an immoral child whose greed prevents it from achieving greatness.

In the final chapter of *Les Misérables*, Hugo chooses a fate for his antagonist that conveys the extent of his disdain for American slaveholders. Thénardier, the abusive guardian of Cosette and a persistent criminal, breaks the pattern of redemption that Hugo establishes through the Bishop, Jean Valjean, and Marius. Whereas Valjean and Marius become revolutionaries and work to improve society once they receive the gift of silver candlesticks,

²¹ Ibid., 1458. On page 1219 of Wilbour’s translation: “France has her relapses of materialism, and, at certain moments, the ideas which obstruct that sublime brain lose all that recalls French greatness, and are the dimensions of a Missouri or of a South Carolina. What is to be done? The giantess is playing the dwarf; immense France has her childish whims. That is all.”

Thénardier makes poor use of his own gift of silver. In the final chapters of the novel, Marius offers Thénardier charity in the form of money. Whereas candlesticks are made of silver and therefore have monetary value as well as a symbolic value, money lacks this symbolic aspect. Therefore, Thénardier uses his gift of silver to transform, but not for the better. Hugo writes, “La misère morale de Thénardier, ce bourgeois manqué, était irrémédiable; il fut en Amérique ce qu’il était en Europe. Le contact d’un méchant homme suffit quelquefois pour pourrir une bonne action et pour en faire sortir une chose mauvaise. Avec l’argent de Marius, Thénardier se fit négrier.”²² Fittingly, Hugo’s villain transforms not into an agent of social progress but into an agent of oppression. Thénardier becomes a slave-trader, which, for Hugo, is the polar opposite of a revolutionary. By defining Thénardier as the worst character in the novel and then sending him to America to work in the slave trade, Hugo makes his position towards slavery absolutely clear. Nobody with a moral conscience or sense of justice could own slaves—such an atrocity is left to the heartless Thénardier.

American abolitionists found no shortage of passages in *Les Misérables* that gave voice to their cause, yet not all abolitionist readers praised Hugo. At times, anti-slavery journalists critiqued Hugo’s novel as a means to segue into criticism of their political opponents, such as northerners who opposed the war effort. On March 25, 1863 an opinion piece was published in *The New York Times*, cheekily headlined “What If Your Uncle Had Been Your Aunt?” The author of this piece harshly criticizes the chapter in which Hugo describes Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. In the passage in question, Hugo devotes numerous pages to the question of how the outcome of Waterloo might have been different had certain moments unfolded in a way other

²² Ibid., 1694. On page 1421 of Wilbour’s translation: “Thénardier, the moral misery of Thénardier, the broken-down bourgeois, was irremediable; he was in America what he had been in Europe. The touch of a wicked man is often enough to corrupt a good deed and to make an evil result spring from it. With Marius’ money, Thénardier became a slaver.”

than they had. For example, he ponders, “S’il n’avait pas plu dans la nuit du 17 au 18 juin 1815, l’avenir de l’Europe était changé. Quelques gouttes d’eau de plus ou de moins ont fait pencher Napoléon.”²³ Perhaps if it had not rained, Napoleon may have been able to win at Waterloo. However, the fact remains that rain fell, and Napoleon was defeated. Hugo may know that he engages in tenuous speculation when he poses counterfactual questions such as this, but he justifies his counterfactual musings by clearly defining his purpose. He warns the reader that this type of question is not productive for scholars of history, but is a mere topic of personal interest. He defends this thinking: “Quant à nous, nous laissons les historiens aux prises, nous ne sommes qu’un témoin à distance, un passant dans la plaine, un chercheur penché sur cette terre pétrie de chair humaine, prenant peut-être des apparences pour des réalités.”²⁴ By acknowledging his role as a mere observer, Hugo avoids stepping on the toes of historians. Rather than appropriating their task of analyzing facts, Hugo takes an observational and meditative approach when discussing the battle, and is careful to differentiate his approach from that of the historian.

Despite Hugo’s methodological caveat, he receives harsh criticism from this *Times* journalist, who declares that the counterfactual method of analysis is impractical and unproductive. The journalist censures Hugo: “The splendid chapter in *Les Misérables* which describes the battle of Waterloo, is marred in several places by the author’s absurd speculations upon what might have happened, if certain things had not happened; if the peasant who guided the Prussian column had lost his way, if NAPOLEON had not a pain in his stomach, or if it had

²³ Ibid., 374. On page 312 of Wilbour’s translation: “Had it not rained on the night of the 17th of June, 1815, the future of Europe would have been changed. A few drops of water more or less prostrated Napoleon.”

²⁴ Ibid., 376-77. On page 314 of Wilbour’s translation: “As for us, we leave the two historians to their contest; we are only a witness at a distance, a passer in the plain, a seeker bending over this ground kneaded with human flesh, taking perhaps appearances for realities.”

not rained.”²⁵ This critic diminishes the value of Hugo’s meditation on Waterloo by emphasizing the futility of counterfactual questioning. According to the journalist’s logic, it is useless to ask whether or not Waterloo could have ended differently, simply because the results cannot be changed. Despite Hugo’s humble acknowledgement of the flaws of the counterfactual method, this journalist insists upon drawing attention to these flaws.

The reasons for this journalist’s extensive censure are illuminated in the second half of his article, where he links the counterfactual approach to the anti-war Democrats’ tendency to pose impractical questions and scenarios instead of taking action. The journalist, it becomes clear, critiques Hugo’s process not with a primary intention of attacking Hugo, but in order to set a precedent by which to critique these “Copperheads.” He voices his frustration with the anti-war Democrat logic:

The philosophers of the Copperhead persuasion have taken to this species of distraction, in default of something more exciting. We receive from them every day a long list of things that might have happened, if somebody had done something a year ago, which he did not do, or had left undone something which he did do, accompanied by another list of things which might possibly come to pass, if certain other things did not come to pass.²⁶

The journalist, a supporter of the war, believes that the violence that is taking place is justified by its goal—the abolition of slavery. His views therefore correspond with Hugo’s philosophy of revolution, because in the fight against slavery, social progress and physical uprising are united. Although he agrees with Hugo’s politics, the journalist chooses to use Hugo

²⁵ “What if Your Uncle Had Been Your Aunt?” *New York Times*, March 25, 1863, New York Times Historical Archive, 4.

²⁶ “What if Your Uncle,” 4.

antagonistically. He crafts a comparison between anti-war Democrats and Victor Hugo's counterfactual musings in order to articulate his problem with Copperhead logic more clearly. In both cases, questions about alternative realities do nothing to change the current reality. The reviewer concludes with a frustrated rant intended to inspire those who have opposed the war to stop asking questions and to take action: "We care not any longer for what *he* said, or what *you* said, or what *we* said, or what would have happened if we none of us had said anything or had said something else."²⁷

Despite his criticism of Hugo's counterfactual thinking, this *Times* journalist is careful to give Hugo credit for his novel as a whole. He suggests that counterfactual writing is not characteristic of Hugo, and ponders why a man of Hugo's talent would stoop to such a middlebrow activity. He acknowledges the oddity of his associating a renowned novelist with charlatan intellectuals, writing, "There must be a good deal that is fascinating about this sort of intellectual diversion, or a man of Hugo's resources would certainly not be tempted to indulge in it; and we know as a matter of fact, that for the mass of twaddling moralists, and cheap philosophers and metaphysicians, it has irresistible attractions."²⁸ Hugo was well-regarded by readers and widely deemed a literary genius, so to associate him with "twaddling moralists" and "cheap philosophers" is a bold claim on behalf of this *Times* journalist. For this reason, the journalist is careful to define the Waterloo chapter as "splendid" despite its being "marred." He throws Hugo a few words of praise in order to offset the audaciousness of his criticism. In the end, the journalist, like Hugo, believes that violence used to combat the institution of slavery is justified. Therefore, when Hugo engages in a type of thinking that the journalist associates with lesser intellects such as his political opponents, the journalist becomes frustrated. He strives to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

disassociate the counterfactual practice from the genius of Hugo, because he wants to distance his own thinking from the counterfactual without distancing his political stance from Hugo's abolitionism.

Beyond the realm of the political, this journalist might also have taken care to moderate his criticism of Hugo in order to maintain his credibility as a literary critic. At the time of his writing *Les Misérables*, Hugo was such a well-established and highly praised author that to criticize him carelessly could call into question one's literary taste. Most criticisms of Hugo focuses only on minor aspects of his work, and critics consistently acknowledge Hugo's overall genius as a writer. As a member of the Académie Française, by the time *Les Misérables* was published, Hugo would have belonged not only to the French literary canon, but also to what Nancy Glazener defines as the international supercanon. She writes, "The international supercanon that developed alongside national literary canons [...] was transcendent, although writers and works of the supercanon were also assimilated within particular national traditions. The international supercanon guaranteed that literature itself was a stable and universal value operating across nationals and cultures."²⁹ Often compared to Dickens and Tolstoy, Hugo was an international literary icon. Therefore, criticism of Hugo's work, especially that which centered on his methods rather than on his morality or politics, had to be composed with caution.

Les Misérables was also political to northerners in more subtle ways. For example, when translating the novel, Wilbour chose to keep several key terms in their original French rather than translating them. Often, these terms, such as *émeute* (riot) and *gamin* (urchin), are used to describe the social unrest that plagued France in the mid-nineteenth century. Perhaps, in

²⁹ Nancy Glazener, *Literature in the Making: A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 49.

choosing not to translate these words, Wilbour sought to maintain a distance between France, where these issues were causing problems, and his own American society by making it seem as though these words have no English equivalents. His translation technique can be classified as foreignizing, meaning that rather than making the translation as accessible to the American reader as possible, he keeps the translation as close to the original French as possible. This method of translation was articulated in the early nineteenth century by German Friedrich Schleiermacher in his 1813 essay *On the Different Methods of Translation*, and was the dominant translation theory for most of the century.³⁰ Whether or not Wilbour was aware of this trend in translation theory, his translation of *Les Misérables* seems to define certain social problems as exclusive to France despite their happening in the United States.

Wilbour is not the only writer to have adopted this foreignizing technique when discussing problems that he does not wish to recognize as American. Throughout the United States, journalists were adopting foreign words such as *émeute* to describe situations they were witnessing, and to suggest that these situations were happening in the U.S., but were not characteristic of the nation. When draft riots broke out for three days in New York City during July 1863, many newspapers defined the event as *émeute*. For example, on July 17, 1863, the day after the rioting was put to an end, a journalist for *The New York Herald* reports, “Lumber workers, coal wagoners, street laborers and dumpers were all at work and busy thereat, as if the city had not been for three days a prey to a dangerous popular émeute...”³¹ This and other uses of terms such as *émeute* and *gamin* suggest that Americans were eager to make it seem as

³⁰ Efrain Kristal, “Philosophical/Theoretical Approaches to Translation,” in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (Somerset: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 31-32.

³¹ “Twentieth Ward,” *The New York Herald*, July 17, 1863, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.

though their war-divided society was, at the very least, not facing the social problems of poverty and uprising to the same degree as France.

Whereas many journalists tried to differentiate the poverty and violence of France from American social dilemmas, others tried to use Hugo's treatment of these topics to emphasize the similarity between American and French societal problems. In an article appearing in the *New York Times* on May 18, 1865, an insightful author compares the street urchins of New York City to Gavroche of Hugo's Paris. Hugo's Gavroche is an archetypal *gamin*, or vagabond orphan. Hugo describes children of this type, writing, "Le gamin de Paris est respectueux, ironique et insolent. Il a de vilaines dents parce qu'il est mal nourri et que son estomac souffre, et de beaux yeux parce qu'il a de l'esprit."³² Hugo depicts the *gamin* as a youngster who suffers from poverty, but more importantly, possesses a renegade spirit and street smarts. The *gamin*, according to Hugo, lives in poverty, but has a spirit of liberty. Hugo describes Gavroche as one of many *gamins* that populate the streets of Paris. By choosing not to translate the word *gamin*, Wilbour and other writers subtly imply that this type of child is exclusive to Paris and does not exist in American cities. However, this New York journalist, although he uses the word *gamin*, challenges the idea that the *gamin* is an exclusively French phenomenon. He refers to Gavroche as, "the prototype of a very large class that exists on this side of the Atlantic, especially in our own city."³³ Although he uses a French term which creates a degree of distance between the social problems New York and of Paris, the journalist draws a connection between these two cities and the children living on the streets of each. He appeals to American sympathies for Gavroche so that Americans might then turn their sympathy towards their own cities. Although

³² Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 699. On page 584 of Wilbour's translation: "The Paris *gamin* is respectful, ironical, and insolent. He has bad teeth because he is poorly fed, and his stomach suffers, and fine eyes because he has genius."

³³ "The Gamin of New York," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1865.

less overtly political than responses to Hugo's stance on abolition, these choices by translators and journalists played a key part in the political impact of *Les Misérables* in the United States.

Through translations, *Les Misérables* became the product not only of Hugo and the French publishing industry, but also of his American translators and publishers. These translators and publishers in addition to editors, journalists, and critics, brought with them political agendas. They sought to claim the advantageous aspects of the philosophy of revolution and social progress that Hugo advances in the novel as support for their own political agendas. In Northern literary circles, competition for the rights to associate with Hugo were high, but there was another playing field with on which these players were simultaneously competing and on which the stakes were even higher. Just as Northern political groups tried to claim Hugo's ideas for themselves, Southern political writers were working to snatch Hugo's views out of the hands of the North so that they might use his philosophy of revolution to justify their own political agendas.

SOUTHERN POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The Richmond translation of *Les Misérables* is one of the most obvious examples of an attempt by southerners to claim that Hugo's ideas about revolution and justified violence supported the Confederate, rather than the Union, cause. Its publication in May 1863 can be identified as part of a larger goal pursued by Southern writers and publishers leading up to and during the Civil War to create a Confederate national literature. This effort to develop a distinct literary culture was an important facet of the South's pursuit of nationhood. As scholar Michael T. Bernath writes, "So long as the South depended on the North for its higher culture, it would forever remain a province of the United States regardless of its military victories or nominal

political status.”³⁴ To create literature that was uniquely Southern was no easy task because few novels were published during the years of the Civil War, and even fewer in the Southern states. To fill in this gap, Southern publishers would have had to turn to books printed by non-Southern authors. Because they would have wanted to avoid printing books that contained northern sympathies, Confederate publishers like West & Johnston often resorted to books written by non-American authors such as Hugo.

In his 2012 book *Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America*, Coleman Hutchison discusses the Confederate effort to differentiate southern literature from that of the northern states by publishing foreign instead of American novels. He writes, “While Confederate fiction did little to add to a distinctively southern literature per se, it was distinguished by its increasingly transatlantic interests.”³⁵ Although publishers would have avoided printing Northern books like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, they found no shortage of printable novels written by European authors. West & Johnston, in addition to printing *Les Misérables*, published *The Romance of a Poor Young Man* by French author Octave Feuillet, *Aurora Floyd* by British writer Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and *Jomini’s Practice of War*, written by a French military officer.³⁶ Vanessa Steinroetter cites other popular foreign novels that circulated throughout the South during the war, including Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the works of Walter Scott, Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, and George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*, to name a few.³⁷

³⁴ Michael T. Bernath, *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 14, ProQuest Ebrary.

³⁵ Coleman Hutchison, *Apples & Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 69.

³⁶ “New Publications,” in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (Richmond: West & Johnston, 1863), 178.

³⁷ Vanessa Steinroetter, “Soldiers, Readers, and the Reception of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* in Civil War America,” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 8, (2016), 7-8.

Scholars of Confederate literature have recently devoted particular attention to the West & Johnston edition of *Les Misérables* because of the strategic abridgements made to it by A.F. and Alexander Dimitry. Hutchison reads these cuts as evidence that the South may have been trying to identify itself with Hugo's concept of revolution. He writes, "These cuts may [...] have made Hugo's depiction of republican revolt more universal and thus more relevant to Confederate readers, many of whom believed that the American Civil War would determine the future of 'Republican Liberty.'"³⁸ The passages pertaining to John Brown and abolition examined above were all removed from the West & Johnston *Les Misérables*, and Hutchison is just in his assertion that the removal of these passages would have made the novel more palatable to Southern readers. Although exclusions of whole chapters and lengthy passages were relatively conspicuous changes, A.F. and Dimitry also made more subtle changes to the text, changes that reinforced their idea that the South's revolt should be considered a Hugolian revolution.

As described in chapter 1, Hugo uses the character G—, the dying conventionist, to convey the idea that violent revolution can be considered righteous only when it achieves a moral end. This approach to violence would have resonated with American readers, both northern and southern, who had witnessed the bloodshed of the Civil War and grappled with how to justify such brutality. In Hugo's original French and in Wilbour's translation, the conventionist's words align with the abolitionist cause. Wilbour's translates the passage in which the conventionist outlines his agenda of social progress:

I voted for the downfall of the tyrant; that is to say, for the abolition of prostitution for women, of slavery for men, of night for the child. In voting for the

³⁸ Hutchison, *Apples and Ashes*, 68

republic I voted for that: I voted for fraternity, for harmony, for light. I assisted in casting down prejudices and errors: their downfall brings light! We caused the old world to fall; the old world, a vase of misery, reversed, becomes an urn of joy to the human race.³⁹

In French, Hugo uses the phrase “la fin de l’esclavage pour l’homme” which Wilbour translates relatively accurately as “the abolition [...] of slavery for men.”⁴⁰ Although the literal translation of “fin” is “end” rather than “abolition,” Wilbour’s choice of the latter does not fundamentally change Hugo’s meaning. By taking this liberty in his translation, Wilbour makes it seem as though the conventionist actively supports the case for the abolition of slavery in America. Wilbour does not change Hugo’s overall meaning, but rather, chooses language that will make readers think of a specific context. Wilbour takes advantage of the fact that Hugo’s values of freedom and acceptance, as opposed to slavery and prejudice, align with those of the American abolitionist cause.

In the Richmond translation, the conventionist’s words are subtly altered to make them seem more supportive of the Southern war effort. The translation is very similar to Wilbour’s, but careful changes have been made, most notably, the removal of the word “slavery.” This edition reads,

I voted for the annihilation of a tyrant; that is to say, for the abolition of prostitution for women, of degeneracy for men, and of night for the child. In voting for the republic I voted for that: I voted for fraternity, for harmony, for light. I assisted in rooting out prejudices and errors: their downfall, like the sweep

³⁹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Charles Wilbour (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1909), 46.

⁴⁰ Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1957), 53.

of lightning's light. We, of those days, toppled down the old world: and the old world, in a vase of wretchedness, outpoured upon mankind, has been converted into an urn of joys.⁴¹

The editors of this edition translate the French word “esclavage” whose literal meaning is “slavery” as “degeneracy.” This deviation from Wilbour’s more accurate translation might have served to prevent Southern readers from connecting the conventionist with the fight for abolition that was taking place in the United States. They also remove the term “human race,” instead using the term “mankind,” in order to distract readers from the racial conflict that was dividing the United States at the time. Furthermore, the editors change the time period to which the conventionist refers. Whereas in the Wilbour translation the conventionist defines himself and his compatriots as “we,” in the southern version he refers to “we, of those days.” In the southern edition, the “we” refers to a group of revolutionaries from the past, perhaps revolutionaries whose concept of liberty and social progress would align more closely with the ideals of the Confederacy than with the more contemporary views of the abolitionists. This change encourages readers to think about the American and French Revolutions and to see the Civil War as a conflict in which the South carries on the fight for liberty begun during these earlier revolutions. The Northern edition, on the other hand, urges readers to think about current social revolutions such as the fight for abolition, because it was this fight for universal freedom that could truly bring about a shift from the old world into a new and righteous one.

Although many southern readers would have either been unaware of or would have appreciated the changes made by West & Johnston, not all members of Southern literary circles were open to this type of censorship. As previously noted, T.W.M., a critic for the *Southern*

⁴¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Edited by A.F. and Alexander Dimitry (Richmond: West & Johnston, 1863), 38.

Literary Messenger, was strongly opposed to West & Johnston's removal of anti-slavery passages. He expresses confidence in the abilities of the everyday reader to understand that from the southern viewpoint, Hugo is wrong about slavery. He writes, "There is no abolitionism of Victor Hugo's worse than that reprinted daily in our journals, from Northern and English newspapers; and, as a sincere man, a short residence at the South would soon transform M. Hugo into a potent advocate of our institutions and African civilization."⁴²

T.W.M. attempts to portray Hugo not as an opponent of slavery, but merely as ignorant about it. He argues that if Hugo were more familiar with the South, he too would support the Confederate cause. Therefore, he finds the removal of Hugo's passages pertaining to slavery unnecessary and even dishonest.

For T.W.M., Hugo's abolitionism in no way diminishes his talent as a writer. T.W.M. conspicuously praises Hugo's prose, comparing the work to that of master French painters. He writes, "We have stated that *Fantine* had not the plot of an ordinary novel; but dramatic situations instead. Let us add, that the work is composed of a series of brilliant pictures, boldly touched off by a master hand, as in the case of the great works of Niccola Pouissin and Claude Loraine."⁴³ T.W.M. applauds Hugo's detail and descriptive language, as well as his ability to craft a novel that defied standards of the time. He deems the novel in its entirety "a splendid work of genius."⁴⁴ Like the *Times* editor who uses *Les Misérables* to critique the Copperheads, T.W.M. is careful to offer negative commentary only on specific aspects of *Les Misérables*. Although he does not agree with Hugo's stance towards slavery, he understands the implications that come with critiquing Hugo, and therefore offers a largely positive review of

⁴² T.W.M., "Les Misérables- *Fantine*," 446. By "African civilization," T.W.M refers not to "the civilizations of Africa" but rather to "the process of taking Africans and civilizing them."

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 435.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 434.

Les Misérables. He strives to distance Hugo's work from Hugo's stance towards slavery, writing, "In fact, as mind and body differ, so may the private acts and the literary productions of an author."⁴⁵

T.W.M., although he criticizes West & Johnston's censorship, engages in similar political manipulation of the text in his review by emphasizing the importance of certain passages while downplaying the importance of others. Where West & Johnston carefully edit the passage in which G. converts Bishop Myriel to the religion of revolution for social progress, T.W.M. describes this passage as being of minimal relevance to the novel as a whole. He argues, "This is the place to remark, however, that Senator and Conventioneer, are simply machinery whereby lessons upon life, history, and morality are promulged; as with many of the seemingly non-essential characters in Goethe's *Faust*."⁴⁶ T.W.M. relegates the moment that the Bishop becomes a revolutionary, an essential episode in which Hugo elucidates his philosophy of revolution, to the level of sub-plot. Instead of placing emphasis on passages like these in which Hugo advocates for revolution and large-scale societal change, T.W.M. praises at great length the plot lines in which Hugo advocates only compassion and charity. He summarizes the content of *Fantine*, focusing on the Bishop's charity towards Jean Valjean and Valjean's subsequent charity towards Fantine, and then claims, "to us it is a protest of genius against universal crimes—the plea of one who advocates, in the face of obloquy and contumely, the cause of the Life-Wretched."⁴⁷ Recognizing that Hugo's protest against poverty and injustice can be construed as universal when the emphasis on the abolition is removed, T.W.M. portrays Hugo as a man of moral authority. Hugo's philosophy of revolution rests on two aspects—the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 436.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 443.

social ideal and physical action. T.W.M. claims that his charitable views align with Hugo's when in reality they align only with Hugo's stance towards poverty, and even then, only with one facet of Hugo's broad agenda.

In addition to placing selective emphases on certain aspects of Hugo's revolutionary agenda, T.W.M. tries to associate the crimes Hugo protests with the North. He devotes several pages to a story about a situation that supposedly took place in Richmond, Massachusetts, that resembles the injustice faced by Jean Valjean. He writes, "*He* stole a loaf of bread and was sent to the galleys; certain females took a piece of ham in that Richmond and *they* were sent to the penitentiary! *He* was induced to take the load by the starvation of his sister's children; some of these females had suffering children also, and *they* were incited to riot by men of dark designs."⁴⁸ T.W.M. relates this story about women imprisoned for theft in Massachusetts in an effort to associate the North with injustice and poverty. By extension, he associates the South with charity and generosity. By focusing on injustices unrelated to the Civil War itself, T.W.M. distracts his readers from the issue of slavery. Because he presents the South in such a positive, charitable light and the North as such a cruel one, T.W.M. sets his readers up to ignore the issue of slavery and support the Southern effort to break away from the oppression of the North. He emphasizes the difference between North and South, "such things could not occur in the virtuous capitol where the *Messenger* is published."⁴⁹ T.W.M. draws a parallel between Richmond, Massachusetts and Richmond, Virginia in order to make his point all the more convincing. According to his argument, one Richmond is cruel, and the other kind. By

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 444. It is worth noting that a similar event took place in Richmond, VA in March, 1863. Due to a food shortage to which Jefferson Davis failed to respond, many women of Richmond took to the street, looting stores and markets for food. Therefore, T.W.M.'s assertion that this type of event could not occur in Richmond, VA is misleading.

emphasizing charity instead of abolition, T.W.M. tries to portray the southern Richmond as the more moral of the two.

In the subsequent volume of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, printed in August 1863, T.W.M. continues his analysis of *Les Misérables*, this time focusing on Hugo's second volume, *Cosette*. Like the *Times* writer who critiques the Copperheads, T.W.M. focuses on Hugo's depiction of the Battle of Waterloo. He praises the work: "like *Fantine*, in aesthetic beauty, dramatic power, psychological insight of the human heart, brilliant dialogue, and intellectual development, *Cosette* is among the literary *chef d'ouvres* of the nineteenth century; and that among the marvels of splendid composition [...] the 'Waterloo.'"⁵⁰ Having paid due homage to Hugo's artistry, T.W.M. attempts to relate Hugo's description of Waterloo to the Confederate political agenda. Specifically, he connects Waterloo to the Confederate effort to find allies among the nations of Europe. He compares Ireland, the home of Wellington, to France, the home of Napoleon, and argues that since the two countries share histories of revolutionary activity, they should coordinate their fights for liberty against political oppressors. He writes, "The ambition of both is, to overthrow the despotism of political wrongs and abuses; but instead of acting in common, they are ever quarreling and caviling, and allowing the golden opportunities of Union and Redemption to pass."⁵¹ Although never explicitly stated, T.W.M. creates a link not only between Ireland and France, but also between these two nations and the Confederacy. The Confederacy believed itself to be fighting to "overthrow the despotism of political wrongs and abuses" and therefore, they felt entitled to support from places like Ireland and France, where similar fights were taking place. Rebels in Ireland and France pursued goals

⁵⁰ T.W.M., "Les Misérables- Cosette," *Southern Literary Messenger* 37, no. 8 (August 1863), 510.

⁵¹ T.W.M., "Les Misérables- Cosette," 509.

that align with Hugo's philosophy of revolution—they envision a more equal society and are willing to fight for it. T.W.M. tries to link the Confederacy with this same idea of political revolution. Although his argument is well articulated, his and the Confederacy's failure to acknowledge slavery as a form of oppression ultimately prevents their efforts from aligning with Hugo's, despite their best efforts.

CONCLUSION

In *The Novel of the Century*, David Bellos articulates the problem with the effort to link the Confederate political agenda with Hugo's. He writes, "This 'localization' of Hugo's novel to the views and sensitivities of slave-owning states is a travesty of the author's position and of some of the meanings of his work. What is left if you suppress Hugo's firm opposition to capital punishment, to racial prejudice, and to slavery?"⁵² To answer Bellos' question, one must turn to the West & Johnston *Les Misérables*. In this volume, an edition of Hugo's work that is in fact void of Hugo's protests against slavery and racism, what is left is a barebones version of the plot. Jean Valjean still steals bread, still reforms his life, and still rescues Cosette before joining the June Rebellion. However, the spirit of revolution that makes this transformation possible in Hugo's original novel is absent. The Richmond translation reduces a political manifesto into a much simpler tale of poverty, charity, and reform. T.W.M. is not far off base when he deems the censorship of West & Johnston "painting white the lily." Without Hugo's complete conception of revolution, the novel loses its power and flavor. Although it retains many of the same ingredients, its overall effect is destroyed.

⁵² David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 240.

Although manipulation of *Les Misérables* had the power to reduce the political epic into a simple morality tale, critics and journalists who politicized *Les Misérables* strongly encouraged the masses to read the novel. Northern publishers wanted readers to discover abolitionism through Hugo. By reading *Les Misérables*, Americans might discover the revolutionary spirit of the conventionist, Myriel, Valjean, and even John Brown. *Les Misérables*, politicians hoped, might transform simple northern soldiers into revolutionaries. Southern publishers advocated the opposite. Readers who encountered their version of *Les Misérables* could identify the southern rebellion with the June Rebellion, and could thereby be inspired to fight for states' rights to allow slavery. At the very least, readers of the West & Johnston *Les Misérables* would be inspired to act charitably in order to put an end to poverty in the South. With less poverty, the South might be able to appear more just than the North to those who could overlook the atrocity of slavery. Writers on each side of the war sought to acquire more supporters by using *Les Misérables* to portray their side as having the moral upper hand. However, despite these efforts by political writers, not all Americans were invested in political debate to the same degree. Some critics, who were less concerned with the justification of a side in the war, expressed different concerns about *Les Misérables*, such as a worry that exposure to Hugo's novel could bring the social unrest of France to the already divided and turbulent United States. According to these critics, whose writings will be examined more closely in Chapter 3, the novel should not have been distributed to the masses, but rather, should have been reserved for the educated elite.

CHAPTER 3:

“Lee’s *Miserables*”: Critical Expectations and Popular Responses to *Les Misérables*

Due to its enormous scope, *Les Misérables*’ arrival in the United States sparked more than just political debate. The work’s length and content were subjects of discussion among American readers, as was its structure. In writing *Les Misérables*, Hugo created a work that strikes a balance between plot and digressive material. Length and digression were not unknown to the American reader; as Bellos explains, *Les Misérables* “has in common with other novels of the period—*War and Peace* appeared between 1863 and 1868, *Moby Dick* in 1851—the fact that its main story could have been told in a much, much shorter book.”¹ Bellos also gives Hugo credit for the ambition of his work. Hugo tried to combine into one novel the achievements of many of his contemporaries: “Like Tolstoy, he includes essays on the meaning of historical events [...], like Dostoevsky, he shares with us the drama of the soul; like Dickens, he wants to show us all of what it meant to be poor. The summary of the story of *Les Misérables* is like a path through a forest—but the forest is as much the subject of the novel as the path.”² This forest, the digressions that account for more than one thousand pages of the novel, certainly contribute to the complexity of the novel, and in 1862, this complexity was a subject of debate for many American critics.

The first chapter of this thesis demonstrates that Hugo defines his philosophy of revolution both in the plot of the novel, through revolutionary characters and the symbol of the candlesticks, and in his digressive material where he differentiates between émeute,

¹ David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), xxi.

² Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, xxi.

insurrection, and revolution. The second chapter provides evidence that politically motivated readers and reviewers noticed the implications of Hugo's philosophy of revolution and claimed that this philosophy supported their own agendas, some relying more heavily on Hugo's plot and some on his digressions. A select few of these politically motivated critics, such as T.W.M., even draw evidence from both Hugo's plot and his digressions. Overall, this dichotomy of plot and digression did not inhibit Hugo from conveying his philosophy of revolution to his readers, nor did it inhibit Americans from interpreting the novel according to their political beliefs. However, as this chapter argues, this structure did prevent Hugo from attaining the praise of certain literary critics who were concerned about the novel's potential impact on public morality.

Not all American reviews of *Les Misérables* sought to link the novel to a side in the Civil War. Some simply focused on the novel's literary value. Among those who held that Hugo's work was more important than his politics, some loved *Les Misérables* and others had nothing but criticism to offer. On June 30, 1862, a critic for *New York Times* called the novel a "great production of unquestioned and exalted genius, which is destined to mark a new era—a revival—in the higher social literature not of France alone but of all nations, in our time."³ Yet, on October 27 of that same year, another *Times* critic offers the opposite perspective, writing, "The chief trouble we find with Hugo is, that when he intends to be philosophical or sentimental, he is simply mad. And his madness makes itself manifest in wordiness. He is a prosy madman."⁴ Hugo's politics were certainly debatable in Civil War America, but the

³ "New Publications," *New York Times*, June 30, 1862, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

⁴ "New Publications," *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

quality of his epic novel was no less controversial and inspired just as many divisive reviews. The length of *Les Misérables*, its wordiness, and Hugo's tendency to dwell on tangential subject matter all encouraged some bold critics to call Hugo's reputation for being a literary genius into question.

Regardless of whether or not they believed that *Les Misérables* has literary merit, the majority of critics who wrote about Hugo's rhetorical choices demonstrate either enthusiasm or worry about how the everyday reader would receive the novel. Whereas politically-minded critics encouraged the masses to pick up *Les Misérables*, critics who analyzed its literary value were on the whole more reluctant to recommend Hugo's work to everyday readers. These critics occupied themselves with questions about what might happen if the masses were to read *Les Misérables*. Would readers who had not received high levels of education understand Hugo's complex digressions? Would Hugo's sympathetic depictions of thieves and prostitutes inadvertently encourage American readers to engage in immoral behaviors? Could Hugo's philosophy of revolution and glorification of the June Rebellion of 1832 incite similar riots in the already war-stricken United States? Although high brow critics spend much time speculating about the novel's popular reception, their predictions rarely come close to describing the actual responses of average American readers. The typical response of common readers defied critical expectations, both political and literary. The unexpected response to *Les Misérables* on behalf of popular American readers shows that, neither for the first nor the last time in American history, the political and intellectual elite were out of touch with the interests and values of the average American.

CRITICAL CONCERNS

In his article “The Realists’ Civil War,” Ian Finseth outlines the shift from romanticism to realism that took place in the United States during the years leading up to and following the Civil War. Finseth argues that one effect of the Civil War on American literature was an increased interest in finding a way to accurately capture in writing what was happening to Americans both on the battlefield and at home. He writes, “we should look for the paradigmatic origins of Civil War realism in the brutal violence that was experienced by soldiers and, to a lesser extent, by civilians.”⁵ Although soldiers and civilians were eager to find a new type of writing that would allow them to express their traumatic experiences, the shift from romanticism to realism did not occur overnight. Therefore, the years immediately preceding and following the Civil War were years of literary transition. Although the seeds of realism were planted, it would take decades for realism to develop into the phenomenon it would become by the end of the century. As Finseth writes,

American literary realism, which found guidance in the work of such European writers as Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy, would not come into its own until the 1880s and 1890s, a full generation after the war [...] But the roots of realism arguably can be traced to the 1850s, in antislavery and other reform literature dedicated to exposing the hard realities of life, and in this sense the Civil War accelerated and helped give shape to a process of literary development that was already underway.⁶

Les Misérables, then, is evidence that during the Civil War, realism was already germinating. Hugo’s novel, though still romantic in many aspects, did, as its title suggests, “expose the hard

⁵ Ian Finseth, “The Realists’ Civil War,” in *A History of American Civil War Literature*, ed. Coleman Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 63.

⁶ Finseth, “The Realists’ Civil War,” 63.

realities of life.” If the Civil War was, as Finseth argues, a force that propelled the growth of realism, it is no wonder that a socially conscious and exceptionally detailed novel like *Les Misérables* piqued the interests of American readers. Like later realist literature, *Les Misérables* focuses on the struggles of those frequently overlooked by society, and it is Hugo’s interest in the downtrodden and outcasts that allowed *Les Misérables* to stir up both political and literary debate.

Critics who focused on the literary value of *Les Misérables* were largely divided over whether or not they approved of Hugo’s tendency towards realism. Because he was known as an icon of French romanticism until the publication of *Les Misérables* in 1862, the realist aspects of *Les Misérables* came as a surprise to many readers, both French and American. Although Hugo had written about slaves, convicts, and social outcasts in his previous novels, he had not yet depicted the most unfortunate members of Parisian society in as much detail as he would in *Les Misérables*. By the time he wrote *Les Misérables*, Hugo would leave few subjects untouched. For example, in this novel, readers were, for the first time, brought on a tour of the Paris sewer. Hugo describes the job of the sewer man in repulsive detail:

Il fallait une haute paye pour décider un maçon à disparaître dans cette sape fétide ; l’échelle du puisatier hésitait à s’y plonger ; on disait proverbialement : *descendre dans l’égout, c’est entrer dans la fosse* ; et toutes sortes de légendes hideuses, nous l’avons dit, couvraient d’épouvante ce colossal évier ; sentine redoutée qui a la trace des révolutions du globe comme des révolutions des

hommes, et où l'on trouve des vestiges de tous les cataclysmes depuis le coquillage du déluge jusqu'au haillon de Marat.⁷

Disgusting passages like this are not uncommon in *Les Misérables*. Hugo leaves little to the imagination, choosing instead to capture the dark reality of everyday life for the least fortunate members of French society. Whereas some readers were excited to read about these aspects of society that authors of Hugo's renown rarely addressed, other readers would have preferred never to have read about such uncomfortable characters and settings.

It would have been impossible for Hugo's contemporaries to identify the transition from romanticism to realism as it was happening, let alone to identify Hugo as a transitional figure, but many later critics have commented on the role of *Les Misérables* in literary history. In an essay originally published as an introduction to a twentieth century British reprint of the Wilbour translation, critic S.R. John writes, "Hugo stood on the boundary between two epochs in European thought, stretching a hand to each and uniting in himself the chief characteristics of both."⁸ Similarly, Matthew Josephson, a biographer of Hugo, writes, "Despite its romantic method of organization and its simplified and weak character-portraiture—only the minor characters, like Gavroche, are profoundly drawn—it had the effect of advancing the tendency towards social realism in the novel."⁹ The high degree of interest in *Les Misérables*

⁷ Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Éditions Garniers Frères, 1957), 1497-98. On page 1252 in Wilbour's translation: "It required high wages to persuade a mason to disappear into that fetid ooze; the well-digger's ladder hesitated to plunge into it; it was said proverbially: *to descend into the sewer is to enter the grave*; and all manner of hideous legends, as we have said, covered this colossal drain with dismay; awful stink, which bears the traces of the revolutions of the globe as well as of the revolutions of men, and in which we find vestiges of all the cataclysmes from the shellfish of the deluge down to the rag of Marat."

⁸ S.R. John, "Introduction," in *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo, trans. Charles Wilbour (London: J.M Dent & Sons, 1913), vii.

⁹ Matthew Josephson, *Victor Hugo: A Realistic Biography of the Great Romantic* (Garden City: Country Life Press, 1942), 446.

demonstrated by political and literary critics and by everyday readers proves that the novel incited responses from all types of audiences. Whether they were drawn to the romantic aspects and repulsed by the realist ones or vice versa, readers recognized that Hugo was using this novel to try something new and different.

Reviews by critics who opposed Hugo's realism frequently express anxiety about the common reader's ability to react to *Les Misérables* in a way that was in accordance with commonly accepted morals. They worry that instead of discovering sympathy for downtrodden characters like Fantine, as Hugo intends for his audience to do, everyday readers would find in the novel justification for crimes like theft and prostitution. Critiques of this nature were often printed in northern literary periodicals, such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Continental Monthly*. In the July 1863 edition of the former, a critic condemns the vulgarity found in *Les Misérables*, claiming that the topics Hugo addresses as well as his language set a poor example of proper behavior for members of the lower classes. This critic writes, "Its tendency is to weaken the abhorrence of crime which is the great shield of most of the virtue which society possesses, and it does this by attempting to prove that society itself is responsible for crimes it cannot prevent, but only punish."¹⁰ This critic refers to and calls into question Hugo's belief that those who commit crimes should not necessarily be held accountable. Hugo first articulates this aspect of his social philosophy through Bishop Myriel, who preaches, "Les fautes des femmes, des enfants, des serviteurs, des faibles, des indigents, et des ignorants sont la faute des maris, des pères, des maîtres, des forts, des riches et des savants."¹¹ This message from the

¹⁰ "Reviews and Literary Notices," *Atlantic Monthly* 10, no. 57 (July 1862): 125, 19th Century Masterfile.

¹¹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 21. On page 21 of Wilbour's translation: "The faults of women, children, and servants, of the feeble, the indigent and the ignorant, are the faults of their husbands, fathers, and masters, of the strong, the rich, and the wise."

Bishop can be read as an attempt to excuse criminals rather than to hold them accountable for their actions, and for this reason, this *Atlantic Monthly* critic worries that the novel could be detrimental to society's morality. However, this interpretation is not consistent with Hugo's meaning. Rather than excusing all crimes and leaving criminals to run free, Hugo wants to hold the powerful just as accountable as the weak for the problems faced by society. He does not oppose just punishment for criminal activity, but rather, the abuse of power by the upper classes. He fights against unjust imprisonment and condemnation.¹² The anxiety expressed by this *Atlantic Monthly* critic is echoed in the words of a writer for the *Continental Monthly* just months later, in January 1863. The *Continental* critic writes, "Vulgarity is the open doorway to vice, and philosophize as we may, sketches of thieves and vagabonds, *gamins*, prostitutes and liars are vulgar and unfit reading for youthful minds, if not for any minds whatever."¹³ Critics consistently express concern that uneducated readers will not recognize Hugo's realism for what it is, and might therefore try to imitate the behavior of the "misérables"—such as Fantine, Jean Valjean (before his conversion), and Thénardier—rather than Hugo's moral role model characters—such as the reformed Valjean, Bishop Myriel, the conventionist, Enjolras, and Combeferre.

These two northern critics were neither the only ones to oppose Hugo's realist tendencies nor were they the most conservative critics of *Les Misérables*. Many critics took harsher stances towards Hugo's supposedly immoral novel, including the notable Mrs. C.R. Corson of Philadelphia. Corson, writing for the *New Englander and Yale Review*, clearly

¹² Hugo was an adamant opponent of the death penalty. His novel *Le Dernier Jour D'un Condamné* (1831) advocates for the abolition of capital punishment, "la peine de mort" in France.

¹³ "Literary Notices," *Continental Monthly* 3, no.1 (January 1863): 125, 19th Century Masterfile.

articulates her frustration with the changes she has been observing in both European and American literary circles through a critique of *Les Misérables*. Her opposition to Hugo's novel stems in part from her opposition to the culture of mid-nineteenth century France, whose social liberalism she worries will infect the United States. She writes, "'Literature is the expression of society,' said M. de Bonald, in the good old times of conservatism. If this be true, we trust that the present expression of society in France is not at its best, and that in all its better moments it bears a more sober aspect than that which the romantic school of the day is pleased to give it."¹⁴ Corson is not impressed with the changes taking place in French society, and her stance towards French literature is no different. She begins her analysis of the nineteenth century with a reflection on the past, which she admires: "The monarchical and religious school, which numbered among its chiefs Chateaubriand, Bonald, de Maistre, Lemmenais, etc., adhered steadfastly to the rigorous laws of the classic, whilst the new school, headed by Madame de Staël, reveled against the narrow limits prescribed to genius, and boldly declared itself independent."¹⁵ Corson aligns herself with outdated literary names and monarchist sentiments which are in clear opposition to Hugo's adamant republicanism. However, she recognizes the merit of literary innovation, and admits that Madame de Staël's early romanticism is also admirable. However, Corson stops short of validating the activities of the younger generation of romantic writers whose work verges on realism. For her, the move towards realism is comparable to a revolution gone too far. She writes,

But, as in all revolutions, literary or political, there are fiery partisans that carry things too far, the younger disciples of the new republic, also, like the athletes of

¹⁴ C.R. Corson, "Article II. Victor Hugo and *Les Misérables*," *New Englander and Yale Review* 23, no. 3 (July 1864): 454.

¹⁵ Corson, "Victor Hugo and *Les Misérables*," 454.

ancient Greece, who threw their javelins beyond the mark, overstepped all limits, and defeated the object of the first founders. Madame de Staël, though the first to unfurl the banner of liberty in the domain of art, still respected its former etiquette and subscribed to its laws; but her followers, young and ardent enthusiasts, declared themselves independent of Greece and Rome, and founded a code of their own.¹⁶

According to Corson, some innovative artists have completed excellent literary work, but others have taken innovation too far and erred. By her definition, literature must adhere to certain established rules and conventions, and few novels coming out of France in the mid-nineteenth century respected these conventions. Corson carefully paints a backdrop of her interpretation of the nineteenth-century literary stage before introducing her main target of criticism—Hugo. She scornfully transitions, “It was in the midst of this fever of innovation that Victor Marie Hugo entered first the arena of letters.”¹⁷ Hugo’s contribution to literary history is not one that Corson approves of.

Corson praises Hugo’s early romantic work as a poet and playwright, but laments that later in his life he has given up such high-quality work in favor of socially progressive novels. She praises the poetry of Hugo’s youth: “Never had language been handled with so much daring, and been made to produce such effective results. It seemed, under his magic pen, a palette charged with luminous colors, with which he delighted to glorify the idea. Verse had never flown with so much force and melody, prose had never been so impressive.”¹⁸ Hugo’s early work, for Corson, can be equated with that of Madame de Staël—it is innovative, but not

¹⁶ Ibid., 454-55.

¹⁷ Ibid., 455.

¹⁸ Ibid.

in a harmful way, for it still adheres to classical standards and expectations. His early poetry is beautiful and non-controversial. By the time he wrote *Les Misérables*, Hugo had undergone an artistic shift for which Corson could not forgive him. In her review of *Les Misérables*, she expresses her disgust with Hugo's newfound interests: "Gross realism succeeded the ideal; local colors, and costumers more or less historical, or more or less singular, were deemed sufficient in the production of any work of art. It was the reign of the Ugly, and the middle age, with all its deformities, became the leading subject. [...] Literary liberty had thus its revolutionary era—its 93."¹⁹ When romanticism begins to merge with realism, Corson imagines herself in the midst of a literary Reign of Terror. Hugo contributes to this terror, because he, like many of his peers, carelessly forfeits convention in favor of the new and untested. Corson not only disapproves of realism; she also fears it in the same way a French king might fear the guillotine.

When she arrives at the topic of *Les Misérables* itself, Corson offers two concrete criticisms. She disagrees with Hugo's belief that society should be held responsible for criminal activity, and she notices that Hugo has begun to use the tricks of less talented writers to add tasteless flourish to his novels. She addresses the first concern several times in her lengthy review, but states her opinion most clearly when she writes, "Society cannot be made wholly responsible for all the ill-sorted marriages, the crimes perpetrated for want of work, the untimely deaths of children sickening in factories. The assassin must needs be imprisoned, or otherwise restrained."²⁰ Corson's insistence that individuals rather than society must be held accountable for their own actions speaks to one of her greatest concerns about *Les Misérables*. She worries that if criminals are not held accountable for crimes, the rate of criminality in

¹⁹ Ibid., 455-56.

²⁰ Ibid., 458.

society will increase. She, like Hugo, would like to see an end to poverty and suffering. However, she cannot buy into Hugo's idea of holding society responsible for crime because it poses a threat to law and order. Corson's second point of criticism targets Hugo's writing style. She argues that his constantly shifting plotlines, scenes, and digressions are "well known tricks of the flashy feuilleton-writer, who, in order to keep the public attention awake for the next day's paper, is obliged to resort to all sorts of charlatanisms."²¹ Corson disagrees with Hugo's social liberalism and believes him capable of better writing. She holds that his choice to cater to the interests of his popular audiences only hurts his credibility as a writer. American critics who were members of the upper, more educated classes and of whom Mrs. Corson is representative expressed anxiety about how *Les Misérables* would be interpreted by the less-educated American readers who greatly outnumbered them. They saw the novel as a potential threat to their efforts to preserve the high status of traditional literature.

POPULAR RESPONSES

In spite of critical anxieties, *Les Misérables* was an instant favorite among everyday American readers. These readers, who were oftentimes less educated than critics who belonged to higher social classes, paid less attention to political digressions or literary techniques, and instead focused on the compelling characters and the tragic and heartwarming events that make up the novel's plot. Because they read for leisure rather than to criticize, these readers loved *Les Misérables* simply as a source of entertainment. They found in the novel both a way to distract themselves from and a new way to engage with the violence and brutality of war that they witnessed everyday.

²¹ Ibid., 463.

One reviewer, writing for the audience of *The Cleveland Morning Leader* in October 1862, writes, “We deem that next to a Frenchman, an American will appreciate the novel, and to anyone who desires an exciting week’s reading we recommend this last of *Les Misérables*.”²² This reviewer, a local newspaper critic, writes about the desires of common readers. He does not specify that these readers must be well-educated or of a certain political leaning. Rather, he argues that as long as a given reader is French or American, they will find something to admire in *Les Misérables*. “Anyone who desires an exciting week’s reading” has a right to read *Les Misérables*. Whereas the critics described above doubt the ability of common readers to understand the philosophical complexity of *Les Misérables*, this writer for the *Leader* gives his readership more credit. He even assumes that readers of *Les Misérables* will have read Hugo’s earlier novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, and therefore bases his review on a comparison the two. He writes, “We compared the ‘Miserables’—as far as we may—with the ‘Notre Dame;’ such comparisons are always unsafe and unfair; yet we can hardly err in saying that the latest work of the author gives us a much larger conception of his force and thought, while the earlier one will always be most coveted of readers.”²³ The critic warns readers that *Les Misérables* is not entertaining in the same way as *Notre-Dame*, but he realizes that this will dissuade few readers from seeking out *Les Misérables*. *Les Misérables* will be less entertaining, he cautions, but certainly more educational.

This critic places even more faith in the intellectual capabilities of his audience in the following sentence, in which he compares the two novels to Raphael paintings. He writes, “The Madonna Della Sedia is perhaps the gem of Raphael (if it be not the Dresden one); but neither

²² “Les Miserables. Part V. Jean Valjean,” *Cleveland Morning Leader*, October 17, 1862, Library of Congress: Chronicling America.

²³ “Les Miserables. Part V. Jean Valjean.”

of them give anything like that conception of his abounding grace and fertility which impresses one who lingers hour after hour by his frescoes of the Vatican.”²⁴ In order to understand this analogy, a reader would have to understand the difference between the two paintings the critic refers to. In one sense, this comparison can be read as a way of deterring the least educated readers of the newspaper from picking up *Les Misérables*. Perhaps if they could not understand the review of the novel, they would shy away from the novel itself. However, because this critic advertises *Les Misérables* to “anyone,” it is far more likely that he simply trusts his readership to either understand his analogy to Raphael paintings or to accept that some parts of the novel, like some parts of this review, might be inaccessible. He argues that the novel is worth reading despite these moments of potential inaccessibility.

This review in the *Leader* was one of the first to question how *Les Misérables* was able to become such a popular novel in the United States. The critic identifies several possible explanations of why *Les Misérables* might have become a favorite among Civil War Americans, citing Hugo’s ability to write “with the careless freedom of an American journalist” and his interests in “political revolutions,” “a weary and tempestuous journey of life,” and being “despised, persecuted, scarred, and wounded.”²⁵ Although early to the game, this critic certainly was not the last to question the reasons for the novel’s outstanding success among American popular readers. Contemporary scholars have been returning to this question with increasing frequency. In his 2013 article, “In Camp, Reading ‘Les Misérables,’” historian Louis P. Masur notes that, “Whatever Hugo thought of the battle raging in the United States, the novel was popular in America and received widespread attention in newspapers and

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

journals.”²⁶ In 2016, Vanessa Steinroetter completed one of the most comprehensive studies to date of the novel’s popular reception. She focuses on the reasons that *Les Misérables* appealed to the masses, and more particularly, to soldiers in both the Union and Confederate armies. The American reception of *Les Misérables* witnessed an additional increase in scholarly attention upon the release of David Bellos’ book *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables* in March 2017. Captivated by Bellos’ treatment of this topic, critic Nina Martyris responds,

Once can imagine the hungry men reading installments by campfire light and relating to the hard-as-stone bread that Fantine, Eponine, and Valjean ate. The Confederate soldiers as they chewed on the Johnnycakes—griddle cakes made of corn meal, salt and boiling water—and the Union soldiers as they gnawed on hard tack (made from wheat flour, salt, water), jeeringly nicknamed jawbreakers and worm castles.²⁷

These scholars all express a curiosity about the ways in which *Les Misérables* appealed to everyday Americans and pose possible explanations. Yet, none of these scholars compares the expectations of literary critics to the response of the masses. The discrepancy between the response to *Les Misérables* that American critics anticipated and the actual response to the novel renders the popular reception of *Les Misérables* in Civil War America all the more fascinating. Popular readers not only liked *Les Misérables* more, but were also picking up on something within its pages that highly trained critics were not.

²⁶ Louis P. Masur, “In Camp, Reading ‘Les Miserables,’” *Opinionator* (blog), *The New York Times*, February 9, 2013.

²⁷ Nina Martyris, “Let Them Eat Bread: The Theft that Helped Inspire ‘Les Miserables,’” *The Salt* (blog), *NPR*, March 20, 2017.

Within the plot of *Les Misérables*, Americans in the 1860s found examples of suffering, poverty, and warfare which they were able to compare to their own experiences either on the battlefield or in their war-torn hometowns. Evidence that readers were making such connections can be found in newspapers and diaries from geographically diverse areas and from writers of varying social and political backgrounds. Steinroetter describes the way soldiers frequently responded to the novel: “Whether through comparison of actual combat to fictional battle scenes, or by likening their own perceived hardships and feelings of despair to the tragic fates of characters from Hugo’s novel, many soldiers drew on the scenes, characters, and cultural symbolism of *Les Misérables* to articulate experiences that might otherwise have defied description.”²⁸ Although Steinroetter does not focus on civilians, they too found comfort in *Les Misérables* as they read from home. Examples of popular reception, whether written by soldiers, journalists, or civilians, tend to focus on the plot of *Les Misérables*, on specific characters and episodes, rather than on the political and digressive material that the political and literary elite debated. This trend is consistent across geographic and political boundaries. It therefore defies the expectations of political critics, who hoped that the masses would interpret *Les Misérables* politically. Furthermore, the worry among literary critics that the everyday readers would not be able to understand Hugo’s digressions proved to be beside the point—whether or not they understood Hugo’s digressions, readers in both the north and the south were more interested in the characters and the main plot than in the historical and philosophical passages of the novel.

Both northern and southern readers wrote more about Hugo’s characters and the difficulties these characters face than they did about Hugo’s politics. In fact, excluding those

²⁸ Vanessa Steinroetter, “Soldiers, Readers, and the Reception of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* in Civil War America,” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 8, (2016), 6.

who read the West & Johnston edition, readers would likely have only known about Hugo's stance towards slavery if they had paid careful attention to his digressions. Instead of politicizing *Les Misérables*, members of the popular classes used Hugo's characters and the traumatic experiences they face in the novel to help them cope with the trauma that was occurring in their own lives. Although they do not rely heavily on Hugo's digressive material, they still rely on his philosophy of revolution, which they would have discovered through Hugo's revolutionary characters. By relating their own experiences to those of Jean Valjean, Marius, Enjolras, Cosette, and others, readers were able to think about the justification of violence not only in the context of the novel, but also in the context of the brutalities they were witnessing firsthand.

In addition to Hugo's depiction of violence, popular readers were interested in the ways in which Hugo's characters endure suffering. In *The Chicago Tribune* on October 7, 1862, the newspaper's war correspondent in Tennessee adopts Hugo's depiction of crying in order to describe the melancholy mood and dreary weather that the Union soldiers were facing in camps in Tennessee. He writes, "For the past day or two the sky has done nothing but weep [sic] great drops of tears, reminding one forcibly of the 'two great tears' the various characters in Victor Hugo's late romance 'Les Misérables' weep [sic] whenever they, in the progress of the work, fall into the tender, feminine mood. But the drops the Tennessee clouds weep [sic] are more than two."²⁹ The correspondent admits that his own words are inadequate when it comes to describing his experiences on the battlefield in a way readers in Chicago could understand. He confesses, "I have not words strong enough with which to do justice to the subject."³⁰ When his own words fail, the correspondent turns to the words of other writers, searching for terms he

²⁹ "LETTER FROM MEMPHIS," *The Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1862.

³⁰ "LETTER FROM MEMPHIS."

can borrow. It is no coincidence that he chooses the words of Hugo; given the popularity of *Les Misérables*, the correspondent could be fairly certain that most readers would have understood his reference to tears in the novel. Hugo is therefore doubly useful to this writer; in *Les Misérables*, the writer finds a situation comparable to his own which helps him wrap his mind around his experiences, and he also finds the words to communicate his emotions to his own readers.

A careful reader would have realized that in this article, the Tennessee correspondent cites several passages in *Les Misérables* in which characters burst into tears. The first such passage is that of Jean Valjean's tearful vigil on Bishop Myriel's doorstep after Myriel has blessed him and given him the candlesticks. Valjean spends the night kneeling on the doorstep in grateful prayer. Hugo writes, "Jean Valjean pleura longtemps. Il pleura à chaudes larmes, il pleura à sanglots, avec plus de faiblesse qu'une femme, avec plus d'effroi qu'un enfant."³¹ Another such passage is Hugo's description of Marius' father watching his son grow up from afar. Hugo writes, "Cet homme qui avait si bien l'air d'un homme et qui pleurait comme une femme avait frappé le marguillier."³² The Tennessee correspondent strengthens his depiction of the rain by personifying it; he equates the rain with both a convict grateful for a new chance at life and with a tragic war hero brought to womanly tears by intense love for his son. Both of these moments in *Les Misérables* are extremely poignant, and capture an emotion that is difficult to articulate in everyday language. Instead of attempting to describe this feeling in his own words, the correspondent leaves the work of description to Hugo's capable pen.

³¹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 142. On page 119 in Wilbour's translation: "Jean Valjean wept long. He shed hot tears, he wept bitterly, with more weakness than a woman, with more terror than a child."

³² *Ibid.*, 735. On page 611 in Wilbour's translation: "This man, who had so really the appearance of a man, and who wept like a woman, had attracted the warden's attention."

Similarly, the diary of James Park Caldwell, a Confederate soldier held captive by the Union, epitomizes the way common readers used *Les Misérables* in their letters and diaries. Caldwell makes frequent reference to *Les Misérables* in his diary, which suggests that the novel was a popular piece of reading material even for prisoners of war. Caldwell's entries demonstrate the degree to which Hugo's novel captivated common readers who were searching for a way to understand the horrors and suffering of the war. In an entry dated January 15, 1864, Caldwell refers to his roommate by the nickname "Gavroche." He writes, "Gavroche is still four games ahead of me at chess."³³ Through this comparison, Caldwell evokes Hugo's depiction of the Paris gamin as a youngster used to suffering but with a resilient and rebellious spirit. Hugo writes, "Ce pâle enfant des faubourgs de Paris vit et se développe, se noue et 'se dénoue' dans la souffrance, en présence des réalités sociales et des choses humaines, témoin pensif. Il se croit lui-même insouciant ; il ne l'est pas. Il regarde, prêt à rire ; prêt à autre chose aussi."³⁴ Although the nickname Gavroche seems at first diminutive for a fully grown male soldier, it can also be understood in this context as an inspirational and motivational title. Hugo describes Gavroche as capable of rising above many of the most difficult struggles faced by human beings. He writes, "Qui que vous soyez qui vous nommez Préjugé, Abus, Ignominie, Oppression, Iniquité, Despotisme, Injustice, Fanatisme, Tyrannie, prenez garde au gamin béant. Ce petit grandira."³⁵ By naming his roommate Gavroche, Caldwell expresses a faith that his

³³ James Parks Caldwell, *A Northern Confederate at Johnson's Island Prison: the Civil War Diaries of James Parks Caldwell*, ed. George H. Jones (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 76.

³⁴ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 689. On page 576 in Wilbour's translation: "This pale child of the Paris suburbs lives, develops, and gets into and out of 'scrapes,' amid suffering, a thoughtful witness of our social realities and our human problems. He thinks himself careless, but he is not. He looks on, ready to laugh; ready, also, for something else."

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 689. On page 576 of Wilbour's translation: "Whoever ye are who call yourselves Prejudice, Abuse, Ignominy, Oppression, Iniquity, Despotism, Injustice, Fanaticism, Tyranny, beware of the gaping *gamin*. This little fellow will grow."

roommate can live up to his “petit” namesake and overcome all the suffering they will face before the end of the war.

In addition to nicknaming his roommate Gavroche, Caldwell compares his own experience of suffering to that of the novel’s other distinctive child character—Cosette. He laments the chores that are required of him in the Union prison, writing, “Water carrying is a great bore, and has procured me the Soubriquet of Cosette.”³⁶ Caldwell evokes Hugo’s description of Cosette’s traumatic experience being forced to carry water alone in the dark for the Thénardiens. This scene in *Les Misérables* reads,

Elle marchait penchée en avant, la tête baissée, comme une vieille ; le poids du seau tendait et roidissait ses bras maigres ; l’anse de fer achevait d’engourdir et de geler ses petites mains mouillées ; de temps en temps elle était forcée de s’arrêter, et chaque fois qu’elle s’arrêtait l’eau froide qui débordait du seau tombait sur ses jambes nues. Cela se passait au fond d’un bois, la nuit, en hiver, loin de tout regard humain ; c’était un enfant de huit ans.³⁷

The nickname of Cosette is even less flattering for Caldwell than his roommate’s nickname of Gavroche is for him. “Cosette” implies weakness rather than resilience. Therefore, one might interpret the nickname as tongue-in-cheek. Nevertheless, Caldwell’s comparison of his own suffering to Cosette’s demonstrates the extent of his misery. He, like other everyday readers, reads and internalizes *Les Misérables* to a degree that he sees ways to reference it in his

³⁶ Caldwell, *A Northern Confederate at Johnson’s Island*, 76.

³⁷ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 470. On page 390 of Wilbour’s translation: “She walked bending forward, her head down, like an old woman: the weight of the bucket strained and stiffened her thin arms. The iron handle was numbing and freezing her little wet hands; from time to time she had to stop, and every time she stopped, the cold water that splashed from the bucket fell upon her naked knees. This took place in the depth of a wood, at night, in the winter, far from all human sight; it was a child of eight years.”

everyday life. He uses the novel to articulate his experiences, which shows that *Les Misérables* came to function not only as a novel, but also as a register of language for suffering which everyday Americans could use to relate their experiences to one another's. Caldwell, as a Confederate, was likely reading the West & Johnston edition of *Les Misérables*. However, if he were reading a northern translation, he felt no need to comment on Hugo's abolitionism. This debate over the political content of *Les Misérables*, which was so prominent for publishers, translators, and reviewers, did not garner the same degree of importance at the level of popular reception.

Even Americans who had only a limited knowledge of the story of *Les Misérables* would have been able to understand some of the allusions to the novel that they might have encountered. A reader in the south needed only to know the novel's title in order to understand why members of the Confederate army took to calling to themselves "Lee's Miserables." In his memoirs of the war entitled *Mohun: or, the Last Days of Lee and His Paladins*, soldier John Esten Cooke recalls the origins of this nickname. He writes,

That history of "The Wretched," was the pabulum of the South in 1864, and as the French title had been retained on the backs of the pamphlets, the soldiers, little familiar with the Gallic pronunciation, called the book "Lee's Miserables!" Then another step was taken. It was no longer the book, but themselves whom they referred to by that name. The old veterans of the army thenceforth laughed at their miseries, and dubbed themselves grimly "Lee's Miserables!"³⁸

³⁸ John Esten Cooke, *Mohun: or, The Last Days of Lee and His Paladins* (New York: F.J. Huntington and Co, 1869), 325.

Cooke acknowledges both the humor and the astuteness of this manipulation of Hugo's title. He laughingly asks his audience, "That was a grim piece of humor, was it not, reader?"³⁹ The Confederate soldiers' source of entertainment was a novel in which they found not an escape from their suffering, but rather, a replication of it. They adopted the novel's title as a nickname because it accurately captured their feelings towards their situation. Lee's soldiers really were miserable. Cooke reflects, "The soubriquet was gloomy, and there was something tragic in the employment of it; but it was applicable. Like most popular terms, it expressed the exact thought in the mind of every one—coined the situation into an exact phrase."⁴⁰ The title of *Les Misérables* is perhaps one of the most realist aspects of the novel. The term "misérables" has no exact equivalent in English (though it is often translated as "The Wretched"), but it gives voice to a feeling that was common to many soldiers and civilians. They were not just miserable humans, they were humans defined by their misery—"misérables." Critics worried that everyday readers might misinterpret Hugo's *Les Misérables*, and in a sense, they were not wrong. Deliberate misinterpretations such as these, however, show that everyday readers understood and internalized the philosophy presented in *Les Misérables* more than critics could have imagined.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated above, reviews of and responses to the novel written by middle and lower class readers focus on the characters and the main events of the plot. Although popular readers did not overtly participate in the political debates of the upper classes, their reactions can still be interpreted politically. Their preoccupations with Jean Valjean, Cosette, and

³⁹ Cooke, *Mohun*, 325.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Fantine's suffering does not mean that their responses were apolitical. Instead, their disinterest in the dominant political conversation of the time was in itself a political statement. Rather than a depoliticization of *Les Misérables*, it was a repoliticization. Popular readers chose not to use the novel to argue about slavery and secession, but rather, to express their discontent about the war itself. The American reception of *Les Misérables* embodies the idea of the Civil War as "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight." It is therefore neither the North nor the South that should be identified as the inheritor of Hugo's philosophy of revolution, and the literary critics of the 1860s have no exclusive understanding of the novel's philosophical implications. Rather, the people of the lower classes—slaves, servants, soldiers, families, poor northerners, poor southerners, and all who were subjected to suffering—the American *misérables*, had a unique type of connection with the novel. *Les Misérables*, a novel written in France by a French writer addressing French problems, found itself in the right place at the right time in Civil War America. It was able to make an impact on American readers in a way other novels of time, for various reasons, could not.

CONCLUSION:

On October 4, 2017, over a century and a half after Mr. Vandenhoff's reading of *Les Misérables* at Allyn Hall in Hartford, Connecticut, *The Hartford Courant* published another review of Hugo's *Les Misérables*. This time, *Courant* reporter Christopher Arnott is not urging the city's residents to attend a reading of the novel, but rather, to purchase tickets for the new national tour of the novel's celebrated musical theater adaptation, which was playing at the Bushnell Center for Performing Arts during the months of September and October. Arnott praises the production's "soaring harmonies, astonishing death scenes, tender love duets" and deems the overall effect an "overpowering sensation."¹ In his account of the production, Arnott pays homage to the ambition of the man behind the original story. He informs readers, "It takes nearly 70 hours to listen to an audiobook version of Victor Hugo's original 'Les Misérables' novel. This musical [...] condenses the story down to a swift three hours."² Although Arnott is aware of the original novel's length, he does not mention that the idea to adapt *Les Misérables* for the stage can also be credited to Hugo.

Hugo himself was the first to express an interest in creating a theatrical production out of *Les Misérables*, but he left the writing of the script to his son Charles, who aspired to follow in his father's literary footsteps. Charles Hugo's "Les Misérables. Drame" was performed in Brussels as early as January, 1863. The staged production made Hugo's tale of redemption and uprising accessible to even uneducated and illiterate audiences. Though it never achieved the popularity that Victor and Charles imagined, Charles Hugo's adaptation set many precedents

¹ Christopher Arnott, "Strong Voices in Freer, Newly Staged 'Les Miserables' at the Bushnell," *The Hartford Courant*, Oct. 4, 2017.

² Arnott, "'Les Miserables' at the Bushnell."

for playwrights and screenwriters who would adapt *Les Misérables* in the years to come.³

Bellos recounts that thanks to Charles Hugo's decisions about what to cut from his father's novel,

The dramatic tradition of *Les Misérables* characteristically omits: (1) the history of Myriel before meeting Valjean; (2) the story of Fantine before she entrusts Cosette to the Thénardiens; (3) the Battle of Waterloo; (4) Valjean's second imprisonment and his dramatic escape from the *Orion*; (5) almost all of the Petit-Picpus episode, including Valjean's escape in a coffin; (6) all of the story of Marius before he meets the 'Friends of the ABC.'⁴

The musical that contemporary audiences refer to as *Les Mis* was written in 1980. It still adheres to the traditions of adaptation established by Charles Hugo over a century ago.

Therefore, certain key moments from the novel that contribute to Hugo's philosophy of revolution are absent from the musical. Viewers of this production never learn about Myriel's initial transformation from aristocrat to priest, and they do not have the opportunity to trace Marius' political development first from a monarchist into a Bonapartist and then from a Bonapartist into a republican. Charles' cuts simplify his father's idea of revolution. Although this simplification comes at the expense of the nuances of Victor Hugo's philosophy, it renders the theme of revolution palatable to entertainment-seeking audiences.

For Victor Hugo, the June Rebellion of 1832 was the only revolution that could have served as the main action of the plot; for Charles Hugo, it was important only that *Les Misérables* was about a revolution. In Charles' rendition of *Les Misérables*, Hugo's choice of a

³ David Bellos, *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 244-47.

⁴ Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 245-46.

single exemplary revolution is erased by anachronistic details such as references to the French Revolution and to the formation a Republic, which was not the outcome of the 1832 June Rebellion. Viewers today may find themselves asking, as Bellos does, “Is this 1789, 1792 or 1848?”⁵

The modern musical score, composed by Charles-Michel Schönberg in 1980, is accompanied in France by the lyrics of Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel. Their lyrics were translated into English by Herbert Krezmer and James Fenton when the musical arrived in London in 1985. In 1987, *Les Mis* once again made it to America; since its début on Broadway, it has toured the United States four times, breaking records and earning its creators numerous awards and accolades, just as the original novel did for Hugo in 1862.

Despite the decades that have passed and the changes that have been made by Charles Hugo and countless other playwrights and directors, the musical performed today remains relatively true to the philosophy of revolution that Hugo first advocated in 1862, if not to Hugo’s historical context. Both “revolution” and “righteousness,” key terms that underlie Hugo’s concept of political morality, are prominently featured in Arnott’s review. He enthusiastically describes the production as “a stirring, thumping, heart-throbbing return of a pop opera whose themes of revolution and righteousness seem particularly well suited to our current turbulent times.”⁶ As this thesis has revealed, the turbulent times of the current day are not the first period in history during which *Les Misérables* found an eager audience in America; the turbulence of the Civil War era created a readership for the novel that was just as, if not more, receptive to Hugo’s philosophy of revolution than audiences today. The story of *Les*

⁵ Ibid., 246.

⁶ Arnott, “‘Les Misérables’ at the Bushnell.”

Misérables, whether in the form of a novel, a play, or a musical, has helped Americans come to terms with violence and uprising during the most turbulent times in the nation's history.

Revolution and righteousness are essential components of Hugo's political philosophy. He spends a significant portion of *Les Misérables* meditating upon the relationship between the two, asking questions such as: How can we define revolution? Is revolution moral? Is it righteous? Which historical events can be considered revolutions? What characteristics define a revolutionary? How can one justify the violence that accompanies revolution? Can violence ever be righteous? By the end of the novel, he proposes answers to all of these questions.

His answers, as this thesis has illustrated, can be found in his dynamic characters such as the Bishop, Jean Valjean, and Marius, in his symbols such the silver candlesticks, and in his historical and philosophical digressions about topics ranging from Christianity to Waterloo. This conclusion argues that there is one additional place where Hugo's answers to these questions can be found—in the novel's legacy. Due to its success as a novel and to the subsequent successes of its theatrical adaptations, *Les Misérables*, for the contemporary reader or viewer, has become synonymous with revolution, righteous violence, and social progress. Although Victor did not approve, Charles' choice to blend the stories of various revolutions may have been the key to establishing *Les Misérables*' celebrated legacy. As Bellos claims, "Confusing [the June Rebellion] with other revolutions by appropriating their icons and keywords irritates scholarly guardians of the past, but at bottom it only extends Hugo's own transformation of history into myth."⁷

⁷ Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 247.

The first chapter of this thesis evaluated Hugo's claim that "les brutalités du progrès s'appellent révolutions."⁸ It traced Hugo's argument that violence, although usually unethical, is justified when it achieves a greater good. Progress comes at a price, and Hugo believes that this price, however steep or painful, must be paid. Hugo's conventionist, the earliest occurring voice for his philosophy in the novel, describes the impact of revolutions: "Quand elles sont finies, on reconnaît ceci: que le genre humain a été rudoyé, mais qu'il a marché."⁹

Throughout *Les Misérables*, Hugo shows that this philosophy of revolution can be used to evaluate the morality of violent historical events. He believes, for example, that the American Revolution was justified because it replaced a monarchy with a republican government. He approves, too, of the French Revolution, to the extent that it put an end to the Bourbon monarchy and installed the French First Republic. However, he cannot condone the brutality of the Reign of Terror, because those who participated in this violence lost track of the moral ideal of social progress. Revolution, per Hugo's definition, must only be as violent as is necessary to create lasting positive change.

In the June Rebellion of 1832, which makes up the latter half of *Les Misérables*, Hugo sees hints of revolution. The insurrection never succeeded in overcoming the oppression of Louis-Philippe's monarchy, but for Hugo it was justified by the noble ambitions of those who fought. He writes, "Même incomplètes, même abâtardies et mâtinées, et réduites à l'état de révolution cadette, comme la révolution de 1830, il leur reste presque toujours assez de lucidité

⁸ Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1957) 58. On page 50 of Wilbour's translation: "The brutalities of progress are called revolutions."

⁹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 58. On page 50 of Wilbour's translation: "When they are over, this is recognized; that the human race has been harshly treated, but that it has advanced."

providentielle pour qu'elles ne puissent mal tomber.”¹⁰ Although the more transformative the revolution the better, Hugo that claims any historical moments when a willingness to fight and a moral ideal are united can be considered examples of righteous revolution.

Through his references to John Brown as a martyr and his digressions about the evils of slavery, Hugo situates the American fight for abolition within this category of righteous violence. Though he could not have imagined the scale of the Civil War that would break out in the United States as he was putting the finishing touches on *Les Misérables*, Hugo certainly would have included the Union soldiers who fought on behalf of the enslaved on his list of revolutionaries. Through *Les Misérables*, he sent them, and still sends all those who fight for justice around the globe, his message of encouragement—“Levez-vous, soit, mais pour grandir.”¹¹

As the second chapter of this thesis has demonstrated, political groups across the United States tried to use Hugo’s philosophy of revolution to justify the brutalities they facilitated by supporting the war. Both the North and the South claimed to be fighting for progress—the North for the end of slavery and the South for freedom from the supposedly unjust federal government. American readers of *Les Misérables* the 1860s were aware that their times were, as Arnott would call them, “turbulent.” Both sides of the war recognized that Hugo’s novel was relevant to their respective cause, and therefore tried to politicize it.

Arnott, though he writes in a contemporary and unique political climate, also politicizes *Les Misérables*. His views towards progress, it seems, are in line with Hugo’s. He applauds the revolutionaries depicted on stage: “Solo expressions of despair and longing give way to grand

¹⁰ Ibid., 983. On page 819 of Wilbour’s translation: “Even when incomplete, even degenerate and abused, and reduced to the condition of revolution junior, like the Revolution of 1830, they almost always retain enough of the light of providence to prevent fatal fall.”

¹¹ Ibid., 1242. On page 1036 of Wilbour’s translation: “Rise, if you will, but to grow.”

protests, with flags and bullets flying. A bunch of courageous people are shown following their consciences and trying to do the right things for each other.”¹² Like the reviewers of the 1860s, Arnott aligns his own stance toward revolution with Hugo’s; he praises Hugo’s revolutionaries as brave and righteous in order to show that he too believes in the social progress they fight for. However, Arnott also takes liberties with Hugo’s story, politicizing it in more subtle ways that Hugo himself may not have approved of. For example, Arnott praises the fact that the musical offers many important roles for women. He asks the reader, “Is there another musical besides ‘Les Misérables’ that has as many strong roles for women as it does for men?”¹³ Because he is concerned with gender equality but enjoys *Les Misérables*, Arnott tries to portray the story as one in which women and men have equal roles. He describes the outstanding performances by the two female leads: “Melissa Mitchell imbues the ill-fated Fantine with grace and grit. Phoenix Best stands out as Eponine, whose unrequited love for Marius makes her one of the most tragic victims of ‘Les Mis’'s many soul-searching struggles.”¹⁴ Mitchell and Best may portray Fantine and Eponine with poise and talent. However, their roles in the musical can hardly be said to defy gender stereotypes. Neither in the musical nor in Hugo’s novel are female characters given the same priority as their male counterparts. Although Hugo advocates for an end to general injustice, gender equality was not, as Arnott would have his readers believe, among Hugo’s primary concerns. Arnott’s review is evidence that to this day, *Les Misérables* is being interpreted politically with varying degrees of loyalty to Hugo’s actual political beliefs. Some reviewers agree with Hugo, some disagree, some manipulate his story to make it match their own agendas, and some, like Arnott, engage a mix of these strategies.

¹² Arnott, “‘Les Misérables’ at the Bushnell.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Although political readers in the North and the South as well as in the current day U.S. have interpreted *Les Misérables* as an articulation of a specific agenda, the primary interest of most audiences, both in the 1860s and today, lies elsewhere. As Chapter 3 of this thesis has revealed, everyday readers in the 1860s used *Les Misérables* not as a political tool per se, but rather as an aid to help them cope with the brutalities they witnessed during the war. Whereas politicians used *Les Misérables* to justify violence and literary critics worried that the novel might encourage violence, everyday readers demonstrated a tendency to find in *Les Misérables* an explanation for how the horrible violence they were witnessing could be construed as positive. Hugo reminds these readers that revolutionary violence does not seek to destroy the world, but rather, to eradicate injustice. Violence, in the case of revolution, is worthwhile, because it will eventually create permanent peace. In *Les Misérables* soldiers and civilians on both sides of the Civil War found a source of consolation. Readers who found similarities between their own lives and those of Marius, Jean Valjean, Gavroche, and others of Hugo's characters took comfort in the notion that like Hugo's revolutionaries, they were fighting for their definition a better world. This type of response to *Les Misérables* is perhaps most similar to Arnott's reaction. When he suggests that the story is "well suited to our current turbulent times," he means not only to connect the plot to contemporary politics, but also to offer *Les Misérables* to audiences as a source of consolation in an unjust world. Readers and theatergoers who are fighting injustice on a daily basis, he suggests, can find in *Les Misérables* a story of characters whose struggles and tribulations parallel their own.

In his book that was released last March, David Bellos names *Les Misérables* "the novel of the century." This epithet, though attractive, is misleading. This thesis has verified that the novel had an enormous impact on the 19th century, but that *Les Misérables'* relevance did not

end in the year 1900, nor even in the year 2000. Today, readers are still turning to Hugo's novel, audiences are still watching its theatrical adaptations, and critics are still pondering its political implications. As Hugo himself tells us in his preface, he writes not to achieve literary fame, but to put an end to ignorance and misery. He writes, "Tant qu'il y aura sur la terre ignorance et misère, des livres de la nature de celui-ci pourront ne pas être inutiles."¹⁵ We can only hope that someday, revolution will successfully create a world without ignorance and misery. Hugo dares us to dream of this day—the day when books like his will, in fact, be useless.

¹⁵ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 3. On page 3 of Wilbour's translation: "So long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless."

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

- Arnott, Christopher. "Strong Voices in Freer, Newly Staged 'Les Miserables' at the Bushnell." *Hartford Courant*, Oct. 4, 2017. <http://www.courant.com/entertainment/arts-theater/hc-review-les-miserables-bushnell-20171004-story.html>.
- Caldwell, James Parks. *A Northern Confederate at Johnson's Island Prison: The Civil War Diaries of James Parks Caldwell*, edited by George H. Jones. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010.
- Cooke, John Esten. *Mohun: or, The Last Days of Lee and His Paladins*. New York: F.J. Huntington and Co., 1869. Google Play Books.
- Corson, C.R. "Article II. Victor Hugo and Les Miserables." *New Englander and Yale Review* 23, no. 3 (July 1864): 454-81. 19th Century Masterfile.
- "The Gamin of New York." *The New York Times*, May 18, 1865. New York Times Historical Archive.
- Henningson, C.F. "The John Brown Dreamers in Europe." *The New York Herald*, Jan. 7, 1860. 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.
- Hugo, Victor, and the London News. "Victor Hugo on John Brown." *The New York Herald*, Dec., 23, 1859. 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.
- Hugo, Victor. *Bug-Jargal*. Chicago: RTFL Electronic Edition, 2009.
- Hugo, Victor. "John Brown." In *John Brown par Victor Hugo*, edited by E. Dentu and Duscaq., 2-6. Paris: J Claye, 1861. Google Play Books.
- Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Edited by A.F. and Alexander Dimitry. Richmond: West & Johnston, 1863.

Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1957.

Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Translated by Charles Wilbour. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1909.

“LETTER FROM MEMPHIS.” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 7, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Chicago Tribune.

“Les Miserables. Part V. Jean Valjean.” *Cleveland Morning Leader*, Oct. 17, 1862. Chronicling America.

“Literary Notices.” *Continental Monthly* 3, no. 1 (Jan. 1863): 125. 19th Century Masterfile.

“Mr. Vandenhoff, Last Night.” *Hartford Daily Courant*, Jan. 8, 1863. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant

“Mr. Vandenhoff’s Readings.” *Hartford Daily Courant*, Jan. 7, 1863. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant.

“New Publications.” *New York Times*, June 30, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

“New Publications.” *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1862. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

“Reviews and Literary Notices.” *Atlantic Monthly* 10, no. 57 (July 1862): 124-25. 19th Century Masterfile.

Sargent, John T. “New England Anti-Slavery Convention.” *The Liberator*. June 8, 1860. 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.

Stephens, Anna S. “Mrs. Anna Stephens vs. Victor Hugo.” *The Omaha Nebraskian*. Feb. 4, 1860. 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.

“Twentieth Ward.” *The New York Herald*, July 17, 1863. 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.

T.W.M. "Les Misérables—Cosette." *Southern Literary Messenger* 27, no. 8 (Aug. 1863): 493-510. Making of America.

T.W.M. "Les Misérables—Fantine." *Southern Literary Messenger* 37, no. 7 (July 1863): 434-446. Making of America.

"What If Your Uncle Had Been Your Aunt?" *New York Times*, March 25, 1863. New York Times Historical Archive.

Secondary Sources:

Bach, Max. "Critique et Politique: La Réception des *Misérables* en 1862." *PMLA* 77, no. 5 (Dec. 1962): 595-608. JSTOR.

Bellos, David. *The Novel of the Century: The Extraordinary Adventure of Les Misérables*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2017.

Bernath, Michael T. *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebrary.

Brombert, Victor. *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Burnham, Michelle. "FORUM: The Hemispheric French Atlantic: Introduction." *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 363-67.

Finch, Alison. *French Literature: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.

Finseth, Ian. "The Realists' Civil War." in *A History of American Civil War Literature*, edited by Coleman Hutchison. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

- Gillman, Susan. "Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal*, Translationally." *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* 3, no. 2, (Fall 2015): 376-84.
- Glazener, Nancy. *Literature in the Making: A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Griffith, Connie G. "Collections in the Manuscript Sections of Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1960): 320-27. JSTOR.
- Grossman, Kathryn M. *Figuring Transcendence in Les Misérables: Hugo's Romantic Sublime*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994.
- Grossman, Kathryn M. *Les Misérables: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption*. New York: Twayne, 1996.
- Hoffheimer, Michael H., "Copyright, Competition, and the First English-Language Translations of *Les Misérables* (1862)." *Marquette Intellectual Property Law Review* 17, no. 2, (2013): 163-90. <http://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/iplr/vol17/iss2/1>.
- Hutchison, Coleman. *Apples & Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.
- John, S.R. "Introduction." in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, translated by Charles Wilbour. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1913.
- Josephson, Matthew. *Victor Hugo: A Realistic Biography of the Great Romantic*. Garden City: Country Life Press, 1942.
- Kristal, Efrain. "Philosophical/Theoretical Approaches to Translation." in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, edited by Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter, 28-40. Somerset: John Wiley and Sons, 2014. ProQuest Ebrary.

Martyris, “Let Them Eat Bread: The Theft That Helped Inspire ‘Les Misérables.’” *The Salt* (blog). *NPR*, March 20, 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/03/20/520459332/let-them-eat-bread-the-theft-that-helped-inspire-les-miserables>.

Masur, Louis P. “In Camp Reading ‘Les Misérables.’” *Opinionator* (blog). *The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2013. https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/in-camp-reading-les-miserables/?_r=0.

Masur, Louis P. *The Civil War: A Concise History*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. ProQuest Ebrary.

Miller, Christopher. *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Moore, Olin H. “Some Translations of *Les Misérables*.” *Modern Language Notes* 74, no. 3 (March 1959): 240-246. JSTOR.

Morisot, Jean-Claude. “Hugo et la Révolution américain.” *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 85, no. 4 (1985): 621-636. JSTOR.

Roche, Isabel. *Character and Meaning in the Novels of Victor Hugo*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007.

Steinroetter, Vanessa. “Soldiers, Readers, and the Reception of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* in Civil War America.” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 8. (2016): 5-28.

Project MUSE. <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/article/622009>