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# *Les Misérables*

VICTOR HUGO



VOLUME ONE

# LES MISÉRABLES

VOLUME I

Victor Hugo

*Introduction and Notes by*

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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This edition published 1994 by Wordsworth Editions Limited  
 8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ  
 Introduction and Notes added 2002

ISBN 1 85326 085 1

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 Introduction and Notes © Roger Clark 2002

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Typeset in Great Britain by Antony Gray  
 Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

## **LES MISÉRABLES**

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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## HISTORICAL NOTE

Few novels are more historically specific than Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Few deal with a more turbulent period in French (and indeed in European) history. And there is little doubt that Hugo wanted his novel to be read, in considerable part, as an historical novel, as a kind of modern follow-up to the medieval *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). The aim of the following note is to provide some of the information that will help the reader make sense of the historical background to *Les Misérables*. References to Hugo's text are to Part, Book and Chapter and are given thus: I, 1, 1.

The events portrayed in *Les Misérables* span the period between October 1815 (Jean Valjean's arrival in Digne) and the summer of 1833 (the death of Valjean). But, to either side of these dates, there are flashbacks to the French Revolution of 1789 and to the Napoleonic Wars as well as flashforwards to the revolutionary events of 1848 and to the early days of Louis-Napoleon's Second Empire (1852-70). Hugo's belief is that the historical events underpinning his fiction can only be understood in terms of what preceded them; and in turn that subsequent developments, whether realised at the time of writing or projected into the future, are determined by the events represented in the narrative.

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo on 18 June 1815 (the subject of all of II, 1) and his subsequent abdication, the allied powers (chiefly England, Russia and

Prussia) agreed that the discredited Bourbon monarchy should be restored to the French throne. The period 1815–30 in French political history is accordingly known as the (Bourbon) Restoration. Louis XVIII (1755–1824), the grandson of Louis XV and the brother of the guillotined Louis XVI, was the first of two restored Bourbon kings. An elderly sixty when he returned to France from emigration, Louis XVIII was a sickly and physically somewhat grotesque individual; suffering from gout and other bodily unpleasantnesses, he was the butt of many scurrilous caricatures and lampoons. The Restoration (a vain attempt to return to the *status quo ante*) projected a visibly outdated and gerontocratic image (expressed in *Les Misérables* principally through the figure of old Gillenormand, Marius's grandfather), in sharp retrospective contrast with what was remembered, not always accurately, as the energy and youthfulness of Empire (these represented in the novel by recollections of Marius's father). Despite early signs of political realism and an apparent willingness to strike compromises (e.g. his acceptance, albeit reluctant, of a constitutional Charter with the French nation), Louis XVIII moved markedly to the right towards the end of his reign, especially after the assassination in February 1820 of the Duc de Berry, his nephew and the pretender to the French throne. At his death in 1824 he was succeeded by his brother the comte d'Artois (1757–1836), who reigned as Charles X, the last of the Bourbons. Part III, 3, iii provides a telling analysis of the early years of the Restoration and of its ideology.

Charles X, the standard-bearer of the diehard Royalists (known as the *Ultras*), was physically more attractive but considerably more stupid than his brother; he lacked Louis XVIII's political nous and willingness to contemplate the possibility of change. The product of his doctrinaire ultraroyalism, Charles X's already conservative policies, notably on religious and constitutional matters (e.g. the laws that he pushed through on sacrilege and on the indemnification of the *émigrés*), became increasingly reactionary in the late 1820s. Opposition protests at the growing illiberalism of successive government measures prompted the king to dissolve the Chamber of Deputies in May 1830. Charles X refused to accept the unfavourable results of the ensuing elections (July 1830), dissolved the Chamber once more, tinkered with the electoral laws and abolished press freedom (in what are known as the Four Ordinances). These measures triggered widespread protest movements which culminated in the overthrowing of the senior branch of the French royal family in the course of the July Revolution of 1830. Like his brother before him, Charles X was forced to flee France and to seek ignominious refuge abroad, in Edinburgh and Prague. The 'three glorious days' at the end of July 1830 (*les trois glorieuses*), immortalised by Delacroix in his *Liberty Leading the People*, thus effectively brought an end to the Bourbon Restoration. The best literary representation of France in the late 1820s is to be found in Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black* (1830). Hugo for his part provides an overall judgement on the Restoration, its politics and personalities, in IV, i, i.

Charles X was succeeded by his cousin, Louis-Philippe, Duc d'Orléans (1773–1850), the representative of the younger Orléans branch of the French royal family. He was the son of the trouble-making Philippe-Egalité who had voted for the execution of Louis XVI in 1793, an act which however failed to save Philippe-Egalité himself from the guillotine. Determined to mark himself off from his Bourbon predecessors and to cut a resolutely middle-class appearance (he is said to have been fond of walking incognito around Paris carrying an

umbrella), Louis-Philippe, the citizen king, reigned as king of the French (rather than of France, the nuance is important) until February 1848. With his pear-shaped head and with what was seen as his bourgeois caution and philistinism, Louis-Philippe and his entourage provided material for many caustic cartoons in the satirical press of the period (most notably in the magazines of Daumier and Philipon). The period from 1830 to 1848 in France is known as the July Monarchy (from the month of its inception); it is during this time that much of the action of *Les Misérables* takes place.

The July Revolution raised many liberal and republican hopes that were however rapidly disappointed. Although the new monarch accepted his constitutional status (there was no glorious coronation in Rheims, no extravagant royal living) and replaced the white Bourbon flag with the revolutionary tricolour, the revolution that had brought him to power rapidly came to be seen by many as a *révolution escamotée* (a 'squandered revolution'). The feeling of disenchantment that resulted, especially amongst the less well-off and the young, is a major constituent part of the Romantic malaise known as *mal du siècle* (analysed by Hugo in III, 4, i). Opposition to Louis-Philippe's moderation, to his *juste milieu* (middle-of-the-road) policies, was not slow in manifesting itself. The Lyons silk workers rose up in protest against their living and working conditions in November 1831 whilst the funeral of the liberal general Lamarque in June 1832 triggered a violent demonstration and the erection of barricades across the streets of eastern Paris: the barricade stands as a permanent icon of French revolutionary activity, whether it be in 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871 or . . . 1968. The whole of IV, 10 is devoted to a long and highly allusive comparison between different forms of revolutionary activity (revolution, ambushes, insurrection, street fighting, rioting, etc.).

The insurrection around the funeral of General Lamarque and its eventual suppression provides the historical centrepiece of Hugo's novel. Further rumblings continued throughout the 1830s and 1840s as, despite its relative success in matters of foreign policy, dissatisfaction with the bourgeois regime grew. Desperate food shortages together with Louis-Philippe's reluctance to make concessions on electoral reform led the opposition to sponsor a series of liberal banquets (the so-called *campagne des banquets*) during the winter of 1847-8. The banning of one of these gatherings in January 1848 provided the spark that ignited the violent February uprising; this in turn precipitated the resignation of the citizen king. The February Revolution and its immediate aftermath provide part of the subject matter for Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* (1869) in which the novelist brilliantly interweaves his account of a crisis in French history with the story of the sentimental education of his hero, the somewhat limp Frédéric Moreau. Hugo's judgement on the overall significance of the July Monarchy and of Louis Philippe's contribution to French history is given in great detail in IV, 1, ii-v.

These are the historical events that provide the backdrop for the made-up story and invented characters that are to be encountered in *Les Misérables*. In this sense Hugo makes historical reality act as the guarantor of the verisimilitude of his fiction. References to these events, and to the real personalities involved, minor as well as major, are liberally sprinkled throughout the novel. But in addition, thanks to the hindsight and omniscience that are the privilege of the author, there are in *Les Misérables* allusions to events that postdate the closure of

the narrative (1833). Hugo thus provides the reader with references to the February Revolution of 1848 and to the bloody workers uprising in June of the same year (V, 1, i). Furthermore, the Second Empire of Louis-Napoleon (Napoleon's nephew and Hugo's *Napoléon le petit*), when much of *Les Misérables* was written, appears as a ghostly watermark in the texture of Hugo's fiction. In this context Jean Valjean, permanently exiled and permanently striving to right the injustices of society, should be read as a transposition of the figure of the author, writing in exile on Guernsey from a position of unyielding opposition to the régime of Louis-Napoleon. There is in addition little doubt that much of Hugo's representation of the structures of Restoration and July-Monarchy France was intended to stand as a (barely) veiled critique of the organisation of what has come to be known by some as Louis-Napoleon's carnival empire.

## INTRODUCTION

Arguably marking the apex of a writing career that spans over sixty years and of an *oeuvre* that runs to over thirty volumes in the most recent French edition, the one thousand or more pages of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) present a bewildering multitude of stories that solicit a variety of emotional responses. They tell in the first instance of M. Charles-François-Bienvenu Myriel, the Bishop of Digne and the 'upright man', whose story provides the moral and structural entrance into Hugo's monumental fiction. The reader will later be expected to weep when he reads of the fate of the miserable Fantine and of her illegitimate daughter Cosette. He will be required to hiss at the antics of the arch-villains of the piece, the despicable Thénardier ménage, but to feel sympathy for their children, chiefly for Eponine and Gavroche. He will experience a chill of apprehension each time he is confronted by the sinister but conscientious Inspector Javert, a distant forerunner of Simenon's Maigret. He will derive amusement from the adventures of Gavroche, the streetwise urchin of the middle sections of the novel, and feel the full injustice of his brutal death during the fighting on the Parisian barricades. Later still the reader will be asked to join in the celebrations around the marriage of the novel's Romantic protagonists, Cosette and Marius; he will be encouraged to participate in their happiness and to share the hopes for their future that colour the somewhat saccharine final episodes of the novel. And throughout Hugo's fiction the reader, his attitude veering between horror and admiration, will follow the vicissitudes of the career of Jean Valjean.

With its network of interwoven plot strands, not all of which have been mentioned above, its proliferation of characters taken from a wide range of professions and social categories, its exploration of a multiplicity of themes and subjects, Hugo's novel may be seen to function as a metaphor for the modern city. The book becomes in this sense a formal image of Paris, the capital city in which its action principally takes place and to which most of its characters gravitate. The organisations of city and novel reveal parallel complexities and are characterised by similar contrasts. Even before Haussmann's rebuilding, Hugo's Paris had its splendid boulevards but also its dingy and tortuous backwaters; his novel is a mix of high-flown Romanticism, lurid sensationalism,



solemn didacticism and sometimes pedantic erudition. Paris's elegant parks, rectilinear avenues and reassuring monuments lie in close proximity to a maze of dangerous blind alleys and secret passageways; areas of calm and tranquillity about districts dominated by lawlessness and anarchy. Similarly, in the novel, long meditative digressions on a variety of subjects (what Hugo terms 'parentheses') are juxtaposed with a tangle of chapters full of intense and melodramatic action. The seemingly organised structures of both worlds, fictional as well as urban, are under constant subterranean menace: the city from the germs and miasmas lurking in the labyrinthine sewers that lie just beneath the surface of its streets; the novel from the many subplots that threaten to disrupt the texture of the narrative by opening up reading expectations that frequently lead nowhere.

For the modern student the process of familiarisation with *Les Misérables* is an experience that strangely replicates what it must have been like to become acquainted with pre-Haussmannian Paris. The very length of Hugo's novel imposes an essentially ambulatory pattern upon the reader's journey of discovery. This is reinforced, beneath an apparently ordered architecture (thus the highly self-conscious division into Parts, Books and Chapters), by the fragmented nature of the book's narrative structure, by its atomisation into a swirl of generally short chapters. Halts in the reading process have to be made, rests need to be taken, sit-downs in cafés and visits to *vespasiennes* (urinals) become necessary. City and novel, the novel as city, are constructs in which the stroller-reader (the nineteenth-century *flâneur*) and the reader-stroller (the twentieth-century browser) need always to be on their guard. Both are environments from which one must learn to expect the unexpected, where not everything is as it appears, where few things are subject to logical explanation. Both worlds are ruled by chance and coincidence: they are places where the unforeseen (the *imprévu*) and the disquieting (the *insolite*) are constantly lurking, ready to leap out from every page of the narrative and from around every street corner. An equally inchoate vision of the city was being associated at much the same time with a very different but equally fragmenting literary genre (the prose poem) by one of the greatest of Hugo's contemporaries, the poet Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's ideal ('the miracle of a form of poetic prose') is born of a similar urban source to that that inspires *Les Misérables*:

This obsessive ideal springs above all from frequent contacts with enormous cities, from the junction of their innumerable connections.

This vision will later underpin the reading of the modern capital promoted by the Surrealists, most notably by André Breton in *Nadja*, as well as by the critic Walter Benjamin. It will come as no surprise that both Baudelaire and the Hugo of *Les Misérables* feature prominently in Benjamin's jottings for his magisterial *Arcades Project*.

The structures of Hugo's novel and of its urban setting are however unified and bound together by the book's principal plot strand, the story of Jean Valjean. The organisation of Hugo's fiction revolves to a large extent around the figure of the ex-convict, around the sequence of events that befall him and that determine his development. Of all the novel's many characters Valjean is the only one to be present from beginning to end (a pattern that is strongly underlined by Hugo in the early drafts of the book); by contrast Cosette and Marius, Thénardier and Javert are introduced late on and are then allowed to drift in and out of the

narrative. In this sense the story of Jean Valjean provides the novel with a clearly defined structural backbone. It is also Valjean who links together the individual stories of the other characters and bridges their separate dramas. Thus it is through Valjean's intervention, because of the promise he has made to Fantine, that Cosette is delivered out of the hellish world of the Thénardiery; without him Marius would not have fallen in love with and eventually married Cosette; and it is the ex-convict who is also indirectly responsible for the murder of Gavroche and very directly responsible for Javert's suicide.

Equally, in terms of the geography of *Les Misérables*, it is Valjean who connects the various settings, provincial as well as Parisian, in which the novel's action takes place. Valjean alone journeys from Digne to Montreuil, from Montreuil via Toulon to Montfermeil where the Thénardiery have their inn, eventually from Montfermeil to Paris. He is also the only character to have access to all of the novel's many Parisian settings, sewers as well as parks, east and west ends, and to the city's different social milieux: the criminal underworld (the world of thieves, swindlers, prostitutes and convicts), religious institutions (principally through the Petit-Picpus episode and the convent in which Valjean and Cosette temporarily find refuge), the increasingly irrelevant ultraroyalist establishment (chiefly represented by old Luc-Esprit Gillenormand, Marius's grandfather, and his circle of friends), as well as the republican opposition (the group of young Romantic radicals, the various members of the ABC secret society led by Enjolras). In this way Jean Valjean acts as the spider (a favourite Hugolian metaphor) at the heart of the novel's gigantic web of characters, locations and events. In that it tells the story of the fall and rise of an exemplary individual, the basic structure of Hugo's novel remains in essence quite simple. *Les Misérables* is in this sense very different from some other contemporary fictions with which it has been compared, chiefly Eugène Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* and Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (*A Harlot High and Low*). The influence of both is freely acknowledged by Hugo in the course of his novel (p. 669) but where Balzac and especially Sue (as is suggested by the titles of their books) are primarily interested in weaving and then unravelling a complicated storyline, Hugo subordinates the mechanisms of plot to the moral message of his novel.

It is a moral message to which Jean Valjean makes the most central of contributions. The theme of spiritual redemption, more generally of progress in all its forms, lies at the heart of *Les Misérables*; we shall see that the significance of Hugo's title derives to a large extent from this thematic preoccupation. Valjean's story is that of a man who finds himself, who discovers his true identity after discarding a multitude of disguises and false identities. As the account of someone who obtains salvation through the sacrifices he makes on behalf of others, *Les Misérables* tells in the first instance of the cleansing of an individual conscience. The opening episodes of the novel, in a section significantly entitled 'The Fall', the theft of Myriel's candelabra and even more reprehensibly of Petit-Gervais's coin firmly situate the character in a moral quagmire. Both events will haunt Valjean to the end of his life. But, through a series of magnanimous gestures, the character succeeds in raising himself out of the morass of his beginnings. As mayor of Montreuil (known, not by accident, as *le père Madeleine*) he is loved by all and sacrifices his personal well-being to the good of the community; later, in the complicated 'Champfathieu Affair' episode (Book 7 of Part 1), he discloses his true identity and compromises his freedom in order to

save the falsely accused Champmathieu. In subsequent sections of the novel Valjean devotes himself unreservedly to the abandoned Cosette, becoming in effect a proxy father figure: there is much of Hugo's love for his daughter Léopoldine and of his pain at her death in Valjean's feelings towards Cosette. Valjean later immerses himself in good works on behalf of the Parisian down-and-outs, frees Javert and saves Marius's life before carrying him, like Saint Christopher with the boy Jesus on his shoulders or like Christ carrying His Cross, through and out of the sludge of the Parisian sewers. Mud in all its forms, physical as well as moral, is a key motif in the imagery of *Les Misérables*: Valjean's emergence out of the excremental mire of Paris counterpoints the character's moral regeneration and clearly signals the final stage of his rehabilitation.

The titles of the last three books of the novel ('The Last Drop in the Chalice', 'The Twilight Wane', 'Supreme Shadow, Supreme Dawn') have a distinctly Christian and resurrectional ring to them. They are intended to underline the regeneration of Valjean that is ultimately realised through his sacrifice of himself in death to the happiness of Cosette and Marius. The young man is quick to grasp the fullness of the ex-convict's rehabilitation and the sincerity of his conversion:

In short, whatever this Jean Valjean might be, he had incontestably an awakened conscience. There was in him some mysterious regeneration begun; and, according to all appearances, for a long time already the scruple had been master of the man. Such paroxysms of justice and goodness do not belong to vulgar natures. An awakening of conscience is greatness of soul.

[p. 951]

The climax and final part of *Les Misérables* (aptly entitled 'Jean Valjean') accumulates images that direct our reading of the central character as a proletarian Christ figure: 'He also bears his cross' is for instance the title of one of the chapters of Book 3. Valjean's deathbed confession, in the presence of Cosette and Marius (a clear echo here of old Goriot's death in Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*), is that of a man who has made peace with himself and with the world. The ex-convict can now bring himself to forgive those who have sought to harm him, even the odious Thénardiens. His last gesture is to give his blessing to the young couple beside him, to Cosette his adopted daughter but also to Marius who has stolen Cosette from him. Accordingly, and in sharp contrast with his entry into Hugo's novel and its world ('The Fall'), Valjean's exit is marked by a strongly upward movement:

He had fallen backwards, the light from the candlestick fell upon him; his white face looked towards heaven, he let Cosette and Marius cover his hands with kisses; he was dead.

The night was starless and very dark. Without doubt, in the gloom some mighty angel was standing, with outstretched wings, awaiting the soul.

[p. 986]

Few novels are characterised by a greater degree of historical specificity than *Les Misérables*. The wealth of historical allusion that it contains may contribute in some measure to the difficulty that English (and even French) readers may experience in coming to terms with the novel: some familiarity with early

nineteenth-century French history is essential for an understanding of Hugo's text and to this end a brief Historical Note precedes this Introduction. The various constituent parts of *Les Misérables* (the story of Valjean, the romance of Marius and Cosette, the demolition of the Thénardier family, digressions on a whole raft of more or less interesting topics) are inserted into an historical frame that is considerably more ornate and more detailed than those of other similar novels (e.g. the works of Balzac and Sue quoted earlier). The opening sections of Hugo's book thus firmly localise the plot at very precise moments in time: the novel's first words take the reader back to the hinge year 1815 (the year of Waterloo), the opening sentence of Book 2 narrows the chronological focus down to October 1815, Book 3 is entitled 'In the Year 1817' (as is its first chapter) and Book 4 moves us on to the spring of 1818. We are later given an extended and celebrated evocation of the Battle of Waterloo (Book 1 of Part 2, almost forty pages in the present edition) that would appear at first sight to have little to do with the novel's principal preoccupations. There are also long passages analysing the significance of the revolutions of 1789 and 1830. The insurrectional activity of June 1832 (not the July uprising of 1830 as is frequently thought) sparked by the funeral of the liberal General Lamarque provides the background to much of Parts 4 and 5 of the novel. In addition *Les Misérables* is studded with references to a vast range of historical events and figures, both major and minor. What, readers must ask themselves, is the value of these references? Why does Hugo go out of his way to provide his work with this enormously detailed (and perhaps potentially tiresome) historical background?

It is one of the implications of Hugo's title that his novel is not solely about certain individual characters (Valjean, Marius, Cosette, Javert, etc.) and their fictional dramas. The form of his title makes it clear that, beyond the stories of invented individuals, Hugo is also anxious to say something about a collection of beings (*Les Misérables*), about the French nation and, beyond these, about the human community at large. If *Les Misérables* deals with the progress of an exemplary figure (Valjean), it was intended in addition to say something about the progress, past and future, of the French national body. The novel charts the development of the nation from the revolution of 1789, through Napoleon's Empire and the Bourbon Restoration to the July Monarchy of Louis-Philippe and beyond. For Hugo, as omniscient narrator, takes his readers past the chronological boundary of his plot (1833) in order, by implication at least, to pass judgement on the early years of Louis-Napoleon's Second Empire (1852-70). This was precisely the historical context against which the concluding sections of *Les Misérables* were written: an appreciation of the novel's significance cannot accordingly be divorced from the timing of its composition. Hugo worked on his book over two clearly distinct periods. He began writing the novel (first called *Jean Tréjean*, later *Les Misères*) in the autumn of 1845 after gathering material throughout the 1830s. Composition was abruptly interrupted in February 1848 'for revolutionary reasons' and resumed after an interval of twelve years in late 1860. The novel (now with its definitive title) was completed in June 1861, revised and added to during the winter of 1861-2 and published between April and June of 1862. It should be borne in mind that publication of *Les Misérables* was in book form only: although it reflects some of the patterns and formulae of the *roman-feuilleton* (serial novel), Hugo's novel, unlike those of Balzac and Sue, was never intended for serialisation in a newspaper.

Hugo's historical thesis is that the modern France he sees emerging around him was born out of the trauma of the 1789 revolution; and more specifically, given its importance in his novel, out of the French defeat at Waterloo. He argues (correctly) that the restoration of a conservative Bourbon monarchy under Louis XVIII and then Charles X should be seen as a direct consequence of Waterloo; and that it is the conservative policies of successive Restoration and July Monarchy governments that have triggered the revolutionary surges of 1830, 1832 (the latter directly evoked in *Les Misérables*) and 1848. Besides providing a brilliant example of something Hugo knew he was very good at (epic description) and allowing the rather contrived introduction of Thénardier, the evocation of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo becomes a necessary component of Hugo's historical argument in *Les Misérables*. According to this, what Enjolras stands for on the 1832 barricades can only be understood in terms of what happened to Napoleon on the 1815 battlefield. Hence the curiously interrogative chapter heading (curious at least for a Frenchman): 'Must we approve Waterloo?' (p. 237). It is a question that with the benefit of hindsight Hugo cautiously answers in the affirmative:

Waterloo, by cutting short the demolition of European thrones by the sword, has had no other effect than to continue the revolutionary work in another way. The saberers have gone out, the time of the thinkers has come. The age which Waterloo would have checked has marched on and pursued its course. This inauspicious victory has been conquered by liberty. [p. 238]

The argument is reiterated a few paragraphs later in a passage that marvellously encapsulates the mood of Hugo's generation, the group of French Romantic writers and artists born around 1800 who followed Hugo on to the literary barricades:

In presence of and confronting this ancient Europe made over, the lineaments of a new France began to appear. The future, the jest of the emperor, made its appearance. It had on its brow this star, Liberty. The ardent eyes of rising generations turned towards it. Strange to tell, men became enamoured at the same time of this future, Liberty, and of this past, Napoleon. [p. 239]

The notion of progress, whether individual or collective, lies at the heart of Hugo's worldview in *Les Misérables*. We have seen how the book charts Valjean's personal progress from damnation to redemption; it also tells of Cosette's growth from miserable orphan-girl to angelic bride and, in a different register, of Marius's potential for future intellectual development after the end of the novel (pp. 953-4). But *Les Misérables* is also about the progress of the nation towards a more just, less *misérable* society. Hugo looks towards a fairer social system, one of course that was realised neither at the time of the novel's setting nor (and perhaps even less so) at that of its composition. His ideal is one of a society that will seek to banish all forms of injustice, to erode distinctions based on wealth, class and gender. Specifically in the context of *Les Misérables* the writer pleads for a fairer penal system, for the abolition of the death penalty (this a permanent element in Hugo's thinking about the organisation of society), and for the eventual disappearance of all carceral institutions. The author *qua* social thinker thus has no qualms in

interrupting the flow of his story-telling and in intruding into his narrative at one of its most nailbiting moments (the fighting on the barricades) in order to underline the moral point that is central to his novel. The book's medium (a narrative based on action, derring-do and suspense) here unambiguously takes second place to its message:

Progress!

This cry which we often raise is our whole thought; and, at the present point of this drama, the idea that it contains having still more than one ordeal to undergo, it is permitted us perhaps, if not to lift the veil from it, at least to let the light shine clearly through.

The book which the reader has now before his eyes is, from one end to the other, in its whole and in its details, whatever may be the intermissions, the exceptions, or the defaults, the march from evil to good, from injustice to justice, from the false to the true, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from rottenness to life, from brutality to duty, from Hell to Heaven, from nothingness to God. Starting point: matter; goal: the soul. Hydra at the beginning, angel at the end. [p. 845]

In this context, the revolutionary upheavals of 1789 and 1830, the defeat at Waterloo and, centrally in *Les Misérables*, the insurrection on the barricades of June 1832 are to be read as 'convulsive movement[s] towards the ideal'. They are 'tragic epilepsies', interludes on the path to progress (p. 845).

What in conclusion should the reader make of the title of Hugo's novel? Who exactly are the eponymous *Misérables*? The term firstly and most obviously denotes those who are forced to live in physical misery, in ignorance and hunger, the poor and the destitute, those who exist on the fringes of respectability. The *misérables* are in general terms the down-and-outs, the pariahs and outcasts of society. They are those figures, 'the unfortunate and the infamous' (p. 508) who inhabit, both literally and metaphorically, the muddier reaches of the community and the squalid outer limits of the city. Thieves and prostitutes, pickpockets and footpads, they are in the novel those characters who live in the vicinity of the dilapidated Gorbeau hovel, the sinister leaders of the Patron-Minette gang with their strange names (Babet, Gueulemer, Claquesous and Montparnasse) and even stranger appearances, Thénardier's criminal companions. They make up what Hugo calls the subterranean 'third sub-stage of Paris' (p. 482), ectoplasmic spectres who lurk around the disused chalk quarries of Montmartre and Montrouge, creatures of the night who, like the perverse Mademoiselle Bistouri (Miss Scalpel) from Baudelaire's prose poem, haunt the outer boulevards and roam the scruffy suburban peripheries of the capital:

Such men, when, towards midnight, on a lone boulevard, you meet them or catch a glimpse of them, are terrifying. They seem not men, but forms fashioned of the living dark; you would say that they are generally an integral portion of the darkness, that they are not distinct from it, that they have no other soul than the gloom, and that it is only temporarily and to live for a few minutes a monstrous life that they are disaggregated from the night.

[p. 485]

This is a tribe, a distinct species within or rather beneath the overall population of Paris. It has its own language, its own customs and social

organisation. Its members have taken over and made their own certain far-flung districts of the capital, chiefly its peripheral and subterranean sectors that are shunned by the city's more conventional inhabitants. Hugo's lengthy parenthesis on the Parisian argot (the whole of Book 7 in Part 4 of the novel) has a crucial contribution to make, both to his analysis of the capital's underclasses and to the meaning of his novel as a whole. Argot, the private and coded language of the *miserables*, is the pariah medium of a pariah population. In line with the didactic and moralising dimension of the book as well as with its sociological intent, Hugo argues that an understanding of the Parisian vernacular is indispensable if one is to understand the *miserables* who speak it. But, more menacingly, the writer sees the argot of the city as being characterised, like its speakers, by a frightening impenetrability; like them, and like the places they inhabit, it has an earthy energy and a cloacal vitality; all three (language, locations and speakers) are characterised by a virulent spirit of subversiveness. Slang and sewer, *argot* and *faubourg*, medium and locus, are thus permanently linked in the private mythology that underpins *Les Misérables*. Writing about the one, Hugo could equally well be writing about the other:

Certainly, to go into the lowest depths of the social order, where the earth ends and the mire begins, to search in those thick waters, to pursue, to seize and to throw out still throbbing upon the pavement this abject idiom which streams with filth as it is thus drawn to the light, this pustulous vocabulary in which each word seems a huge ring from some monster of the slime and the darkness, is neither an attractive task nor an easy task. Nothing is more mournful than to contemplate thus bare, by the light of thought, the fearful crawl of argot. It seems indeed as if it were a species of horrible beast made for the night, which has just been dragged from its cesspool. [p. 669]

The worlds of sewer and slang have a potential in common that threatens to undermine the etiolated veneer of social and verbal orthodoxies. The popular idiom, by absorbing the linguistic detritus scorned by 'correct' French, was seen to represent a threat that might pollute the integrity of the official register. Hence the endeavours by a variety of academic bodies, with the *Académie française* in the van, to police the language; hence also the shrieks of protest from conservative critics that greeted the publication of *Les Misérables* and of other novels in a similar vein. Most shocking as it carries the reader directly into the world of the sewer, from lexis to cesspit, was Hugo's shameless exploitation of General Cambronne's celebrated excremental expletive ('Merde!'). Hugo's vision of the Parisian cloaca possesses a metaphorical charge no less strong than that of its linguistic counterpart, slang. Underground viscera running just below the 'respectable' surface of the capital's street pattern, the sewers course with the variegated cast-offs of the well-to-do. Complementing the role of their above-ground cousins, the Parisian rag-pickers (the *chiffonnier* is another bugbear of *bien-pensant* society), the sewermen threaten at any moment to disgorge the most intimate secrets of the establishment.

The subterranean menace represented by the underclasses is hinted at, sometimes explicitly stated, throughout Hugo's novel. It is implied for example in the curious heading to the opening chapter of Part 3, Book 7, 'The mines and the miners'; the writer deals here not literally with mines and miners (the subject of another novel, Zola's *Germinal*) but metaphorically with the promise of

subversion that is embedded in working-class realities. Given the iconoclastic quality of their private discourse and the threats that emanate from their mysterious habitats, one should not be surprised if much of Hugo's social vision in *Les Misérables* betrays a distinctly conservative quality. On the other hand the writer's sense of the potential for revitalisation that is contained within popular language and culture, his awareness of their picturesqueness and local colour (both key elements in the aesthetics of Romanticism), and his willingness to draw from them, trigger the self-conscious attempts Hugo makes to renew French literary diction through the incorporation of more popular elements: his boast of having crowned the official dictionary of the French language with the red bonnet of the revolution is well known. There is here a tension between fear and desire, a mixture of fascination and repulsion, that lies at the heart of the ambivalence of Hugo's representation of the Parisian working classes and of all that is associated with them.

But in the final analysis the meaning of Hugo's title should not be seen exclusively in terms of class or social groupings. The novel's focus extends beyond the narrow scope of what sociologists have identified as Paris's labouring and dangerous classes; nor does *Les Misérables* deal merely with the materially impoverished and the socially marginalised. For the French adjective *misérable* carries with it a much more all-embracing force than its English counterpart *miserable*: with its etymological sense (from the Latin *miserabilis*, worthy of pity), it refers to anyone who deserves to be pitied, irrespective of their position in society, of their profession or their financial worth. Accordingly we may all be *misérable* without necessarily being *miserable*: the two adjectives are in this sense what grammarians term 'false friends' (*faux amis*), words that look similar in the two languages but that carry very different meanings.

The full value of Hugo's title and its universalising implications are made very clear early in the novel, in the course of the Petit-Gervais episode; it is probably no coincidence that this occupies Chapter 13 of a Book entitled 'The Fall'. The episode is crucial to an understanding of Valjean's character and of his future career but also to the overall moral significance of Hugo's novel. After robbing the little Savoyard (Petit-Gervais) of his coin, Valjean is left in solitary contemplation in a night-time wilderness; its physical bareness acts as a reflection of the character's moral desperation. In a scene that is loaded with biblical echoes, the ex-convict is represented as being racked with guilt. Eventually Valjean breaks down:

Again he murmured: 'Petit-Gervais!' but with a feeble, and almost inarticulate voice. That was his last effort; his knees suddenly bent under him, as if an invisible power overwhelmed him at a blow, with the weight of his bad conscience; he fell exhausted upon a great stone, his hands clenched in his hair, and his face on his knees, and exclaimed: 'What a wretch I am!'

Then his heart swelled, and he burst into tears. It was the first time he had wept for nineteen years. [p. 76]

In the original French text Valjean's final exclamation ('What a wretch I am!'), the climax of the episode and the catalyst of his moral rebirth, is rendered as 'Je suis un misérable!' Valjean is a *misérable* not just because he is poor, an outsider on the criminal fringes of society. More significantly in terms of the novel's moral message, his feeling of spiritual wretchedness, his guilty conscience and



the consequent quest for redemption demand the label *misérable* and render Valjean worthy of the reader's pity.

Hugo's perception will be extended much later in the novel, in the Petit-Picpus episode. In the course of this long parenthesis on monastic life, author and character draw an extraordinary and sustained parallel (pp. 382-5, the final chapter of Part II) between two 'seats of slavery' (p. 385), between two places of exile both of which are situated outside the boundaries of conventional society, the prison and the convent. The juxtaposition of penitentiary and nunnery is reinforced in Hugo's narrative by the way in which Valjean's escape from prison is followed by his quest for refuge in the Petit-Picpus convent. It is a juxtaposition that is meant in the first instance to illustrate the writer's critique of the monastic way of life, an attitude that is inherited from eighteenth-century rationalism and from certain Enlightenment texts (e.g. Diderot's *The Nun*). Gaol and convent are places of sequestration, both institutions that imprison their inmates. Those who have willingly (if mistakenly according to Hugo) opted for captivity are seen as being in a situation that is little different from that of those who have been condemned to captivity. Yet, within the context of the Christian ethic that colours Hugo's novel, the feelings experienced by both groups are seen to be similar. Both are acutely aware of human fallibility, of the misery of sin, and of the consequent need for expiation:

And, in these two places, so alike and yet so different, these two species of beings so dissimilar were performing the same work of expiation. [p. 385]

The convict and the nun, figures from opposite ends of the moral spectrum, both fit Hugo's understanding of what it is to be a *misérable*. The behaviour of both is determined by an awareness of the misery (*misère*) of the human condition and by a desire to redeem it. The outsider's sense of pity, in the first place that of the writer and reader, is aroused by both: the one on account of the crimes he has committed (Hugo's contention would be that this is usually through no fault of his own); the other on account of the responsibility for the crimes of others that she has accepted to make her own (in sublime if misguided fashion according to Hugo). Somewhere between these two extremes, the rest of Hugo's fictional personnel finds its place: between Valjean the criminal and Mother Crucifixion the saint there is room for the inflexible Javert and the reptilian Thénardier, for the miserable Fantine and the sublime Eponine, for the parasitic Batambois and Enjolras the idealist, for old Gillenormand and young Gavroche, as well as for a host of other *Misérables*. And alongside Hugo's enormous cast of characters there are the readers of his vast fiction, in France and elsewhere: readers and characters alike, it is intended that we should all be seen as *misérables*.