Victor Hugo, Theopoet: Investigating a Phenomenology of Divinity in Selected Exile-Period Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis argues that there is a theological poetics within Victor Hugo’s exile-period poetry worth developing. While decades of scholarship have compiled criticism on Hugo’s religious thought during his exile from France (1851-1870), most have tended towards historical and biographical or sociological explanatory frameworks that do not interface with either theology or philosophy of religion as theoretical disciplines. A major exception has been Jean-Pierre Jossua’s 1980 study, entitled “Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo,” which identified a specific poetics displaying both positive and negative representations of divinity in his poetry. Beginning from Jossua’s study, we propose to re-examine these polarities through close readings of excerpts taken from several major works: *Les Contemplations*, *Dieu*, *La Fin de Satan,* and *La Légende des siècles.*

In doing so, the primary contention of this thesis is that a phenomenological reading of each text offers the capacity to elaborate on Hugo’s theological poetics. Through studies of key passages that concern the intersection of God, nature, and humanity, we argue that Hugo presents a phenomenology of divinity that is ultimately grounded in a theological understanding of the modern subject. Our foundational research question is the following: how does Hugo represent the modern subject as participating in religious experience? We argue that each of these religious experiences that Hugo represents are best understood as threshold experiences, wherein the human and the divine merge. Our hypothesis for each reading is founded on this paradoxical but central phenomenality of divinity across his exile-period poetry.

In the first section, “The Self and the Absolute”, we focus on the lyrical subject as positioned in *Les Contemplations*, interrogating how the writing of various ‘object-selves’ reflects the modern subject in contemplation of the infinite, focusing on features of expansion and contraction. In the second section, “The Other and the Absolute”, we turn to representations of alterity in the poem *Dieu,* asking in what ways the modern subject’s quest to visualise God depicts experiences of transcendence that parallel the tradition of the *via negativa* in Judeo-Christian theology. The third and final section, “Politics of the Divinised Modern Subject”, pivots from Hugo’s lyrical work to epic narrative in *La Fin de Satan* and *La Légende des siècles*, following the actions of a divinised modern subject as they assimilate apocalyptic and messianic motifs into historical time and enact the ideology of infinite progress.

Declaration

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This is to certify that:

1. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
2. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used,
3. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed: Patrick James Kennedy

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# Introduction

*‘To try one’s hand at theology requires no other justification than the extreme pleasure of writing.’*

*—* Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte.* Translated by Thomas A. Carlson, University of Chicago Press, 2012, p.1.

## Outline of Field

Exploring how literature engages with theological terrain is an area of inquiry in many ways both ancient and nascent. From Plato and Aristotle to Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, ventures in analysing the theological-cultural heritage embedded in imaginative works have been undertaken with various justifications, whether that be in support of certain philosophical premises, as demonstrative affirmation of religious doctrine, as sociological observation, or as exposition of a particular intellectual genealogy. Much, of course, hinges on the inquirer’s working definition of such terms as “literature”, “theology”, and “religion”. One can start by posing some basic questions: how much of a culture’s literary output is to be given the classification “literature” and what are its distinguishing features? What kind of theology are we speaking of? Under which of its many elusive definitions is the word “religion” to be understood? Exploring further the last question, often the category of“religious”poetry is poorly inadequate, encompassing works written under a confessional register while missing poems that mine much more deeply instances of transcendence, immanence, alienation, hope, longing – in short, phenomenological descriptors that may apply as equally to religious experience as non-religious experience.[[1]](#footnote-1) Similarly, the “theological” contained in a work of imaginative art may vary from that of overtly systematic and cosmological representation, such as in Dante’s *Divine Comedy,* to as broad a concern as musings over the name “God” or meditations on finitude and infinity. As we shall see, the qualifier “theological” readily goes beyond simply referring to the systematic study of divinity. Nevertheless, one needs to not only specify the parameters of such potential theological terrain, but also consider the degree to which it adheres to the literary material at hand.

Insofar as there is a detectable theological substrate to nineteenth-century European Romantic literature, the notion of the infinite and its aesthetic counterpart in the Kantian sublime must be included in the discussion. Without wishing to recite the history of the manifold transformations of Judeo-Christian theology from the Reformation onwards, it is nonetheless important to recognise that Immanuel Kant’s transcendental idealism assumed large swathes of Martin Luther’s turn towards the subject and his radically revised conditions for personal theological reflection.[[2]](#footnote-2) As Richard J. Lane has identified, Kant’s observance of the infinite proportions of nature, combined with the destabilising subjective vertigo contained in such an experience of the sublime, is an evident co-mingling of the theological concept of the eternal erupting into the temporal. Yet, decisively, the fact that it has been internalised through consciousness makes it amenable to rational explanation.[[3]](#footnote-3) This re-examination of religious experience as henceforth rationally decodable culminated in an investment of spiritual authority granted to various revolutionary writers in Eighteenth Century France.[[4]](#footnote-4) Shortly thereafter, we find the young royalist Victor Hugo patronised by the Restoration monarchy in need of a renewed *mythos*, whose poetry will go on to react against the institutional Catholicism of his youth, yet remain nourished by the existentially-rich intersections between the aesthetic sublime and the biblical tradition of divine transcendence that came to characterise newer forms of post-Kantian theology practiced during his century.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of course, it remains questionable whether the designation of “theological” is suitable when analysing Hugo’s poetic material. For one might state the position that speaking about God is simply speaking about ourselves, and hence Hugo’s poetry is as much anthropological as theological. Such is the central claim of a growing sub-discipline in theology known as *Theopoetics*,[[6]](#footnote-6) where the dominance of the rationalising *logos* of theo-logy is explicitly displaced and priority given to the act of *poiesis* that, proponents argue, is needed to create God in the first instance. In brief, the theoretical impetus for this approach began with Alfred North Whitehead and his application of process thought to theology in the late nineteen-twenties,[[7]](#footnote-7) then expanded in several multi-disciplinary directions since the fifties by thinkers such as Stanley Hopper, Amos Wilder and Rubem Alves, and is now practiced as a form of postmodern theology by figures such as Heather Walton, Richard Kearney and John Caputo, amongst others.[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, by calling Hugo a “theopoet” we do not necessarily need to commit to the principles of *Theopoetics*, which rely on a largely Deleuzian philosophical framework allergic to monistic unification, are insistent on non-reductive ontological multiplicity and are sensitive to any power-politics lying behind traditional monotheistic thought.[[9]](#footnote-9) We can instead employ it as an abbreviation for a “theological poet”, meaning that the poet’s representations of divinity remain in accordance with the classical Aristotelian understanding of *logos,* while also allowing space for investigating how God is “created” or represented in the writer’s texts. Indeed, it is under this latter designation that Jean-Pierre Jossua first noticed a theological layering to Hugo’s epic-poem *Dieu* back in 1969, later developed in an essay entitled “Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Jossua’s pioneering studies of Hugo’s theological poetics offer a foundation for this thesis, delineating as he does a particularly fertile ground in Hugo’s exile-period poetry that complicates the anthropological/theological binary. Specifically, Jossua has identified a ‘language of thresholds [langage du seuil]’[[11]](#footnote-11) that, he argues, holds open a tension between both positive and negative representations of divinity in certain poems. This careful use of language, Jossua argues, reflects an attentiveness to the problem of transcendence versus immanence that lies at the heart of theological study and knowledge claims made about God in relation to humanity. Hugo’s ‘langage du seuil’, moreover, is most notably a language of paradox, characterised by the sharing of attributes between the human and the divine. It bypasses, on the one hand, the shortcomings of an overly-intellectualised Scholastic theology, one more concerned with the congruence of abstract attributes essential to God than their manifestation in creation and reality, and, on the other, the excesses of an exclusive and anthropocentric humanism, one that leaves no space for divine transcendence.

There are two primary reasons for proceeding with Jossua’s *theological poetics* over a more novel *Theopoetic* reading of Hugo’s texts. Firstly, as we shall see with previous critical attempts at extracting a definitive summary of Hugo’s personal theology, it has been a common error to amalgamate Hugo’s “religious” views with his artistic productions. Not only does this conflate three distinct domains of knowledge (biographical, artistic, theological) into one, but it also runs against Romantic thought’s overt resistance to systematisation.[[12]](#footnote-12) Secondly, keeping in mind the intellectual climate in which Hugo lived, it would be anachronistic to render a fully *Theopoetic* reading of his poetry. Whilst one can easily admit a ready aptitude in Hugo to synthesise various intellectual trends with a competent knowledge of Christianity and biblical tradition,[[13]](#footnote-13) the theoretical framing of *Theopoetics* is nevertheless tied too closely to a post-Nietzschean ‘Death of God’ moment in mid-20th Century Anglophone thought, one that is anachronous to Hugo’s era.[[14]](#footnote-14) Ultimately, while it is possible to retrospectively identify what we might call a “proto-*Theopoetics*” in Hugo’s writings*,* it is more apt to look at Hugo’s Romanticism in its precursory role to the emergence of this new discipline.

There are nonetheless certain connections between Romanticism and current schools of postmodern theology that warrant further explanation. One essential point of contact seems to be between, on one hand, the zealous Romantic attribution of symbolic meaning to everything capable of entering consciousness and, on the other, postmodernism’s epistemological insistence on ultimate ambivalence. Paul Hamilton writes in *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory* that ‘[whereas] the romantic trope of sublimity recasts failures of understanding as the successful symbolic expression of something greater than understanding...postmodernism rereads this success as indicating only the indeterminacy of meaning.’[[15]](#footnote-15) In other words, the separation between each hermeneutic lies more in the conclusion drawn than in the process itself; that is, in the poet’s view of language as either an endless house of mirrors or as a ladder of being capable of enlarging conscious perception. Granted, one major point of difference lies in the fact that, while literary European Romanticism was cultivated under the auspices of a burgeoning technological means of production that led to an over-exerted reverence for the author-figure, postmodern literature is hyper-sensitive to these modes of production and reception and consequently often antagonistic to them. As we shall see, however, we are still in the realm of a reductive dichotomy, brushing aside as it were the fascinating convergences between Hugo’s maxim *quid obscurum quid divinum* (‘that which is obscure is divine’) and a form of negative theology[[16]](#footnote-16) that has been lately reprised by the postmodern thinker Jacques Derrida.[[17]](#footnote-17) Indeed, there exists a genuinely intriguing genealogy between Romantic and postmodern thought in this regard, one that passes through the hefty reactions of a hermetic Mallarméan Symbolism and the depth psychology of Bretonian Surrealism, and has not yet received sufficient attention from the literary critic *qua* theologian.[[18]](#footnote-18) It is one goal of this thesis to point out at certain stages the surprising parallel concerns shared between Hugo’s exile-period corpus and those of prominent postmodern thinkers who have inflected the phenomenological tradition with a notable theological dimension, including Jacques Derrida and his former student Jean-Luc Marion, amongst others.

## Literature Review: Hugo the Huguenot?

There has been a long history of studying Hugo’s “religion” as discernible in his poetry and prose. Jordi Brahamcha-Marin has neatly summarised the critical discourse from 1913 to 1942, dividing criticism between Hugo’s pre-exile period writing that heavily scrutinised his trajectory from nominal Catholicism to an anti-clerical, pro-republican deism[[19]](#footnote-19) and a body of exile-period criticism, led by Denis Saurat, Paul Berret, and Marcel Raymond,[[20]](#footnote-20) that Brahamcha-Marin qualifies as desiring to establish a privileged connection between poetic expression and ‘une doctrine métaphysique en bonne et due forme.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Encumbered by *ad hominem* attacks, the former group of writers reflect a commonly-held thesis at the time that drew on oppositional comparisons in order to target Hugo’s increasingly political and religious protest throughout this period. As for the latter group, much of their criticism is directed towards the same key poems grouped around 1854-1862 that this thesis has chosen for its corpus; namely, the sixth and last section of *Les Contemplations, Dieu, La Fin de Satan,* and the first series of *La Légende des siècles*.

However, there are two essential points of divergence between how these poems were read by these critics and our proposed reading. Firstly, there is the question of how much importance should be attached to the *séances* of 1853-1855 at Marine Terrace, Jersey - a particularly thorny topic that has divided scholars over each manuscript’s textual status. Secondly, the envisaged goal of these critics in discerning a coherent theological-metaphysical system is problematic. Though Hugo’s writings from this period clearly contain influences of both the mystical and the esoteric - be it Spiritism, Kabbalism, Magnetism, or otherwise - it is just as clear that any cohesion across these various sources of inspiration is better explained by the genre of Romantic lyrical and epic poetry in which they were written rather than by taking these poetic texts as individual parts of a greater treatise on the divine.

By contrast, Pierre Albouy’s *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo*[[22]](#footnote-22) and Jean Gaudon’s *Le Temps de la contemplation*[[23]](#footnote-23) continued exploring the same corpus of poems, while beginning to leave aside the polemical working hypothesis of Hugo’s syncretic “religion” in favour of formal poetic analysis. Scholarly focus was thus shifted from the various attempts at defining touchstones of spirituality in Hugo’s poetry to his idiosyncratic process of generating suggestions of mystical knowledge. According to Gaudon, the ‘dynamisme propre de la rêverie verbale’ needed further inquiry, whilst ‘la doctrine des mages’[[24]](#footnote-24) as an ideological underpinning behind the works was to be sidelined as an *idée reçue*. Most importantly, Albouy’s analysis of Hugo’s mythological imagination established the beginnings of an appreciation of a phenomenology of divinity, writing that:

'Il [Hugo] veut nous faire constater, comme *de visu,* l'infini en acte, nous en donner le spectacle. Il ne traite pas abstraitement de l'idée d’infini ; il part de l'infini concret, il l'étale sous nos yeux, ou plutôt il nous y plonge, nous y noie, nous en opprime. Aussi procède-t-il de manière quantitative, si l'on peut dire, en accumulant les phénomènes, les mondes, les espaces.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Over the next two decades, however, Albouy and Gaudon’s commencement of a phenomenological appreciation of Hugo’s work was overtaken by another abstracting turn to the study of his exile-period corpus, initiated by Charles de Villiers’ *L’Univers métaphysique de Victor Hugo*[[26]](#footnote-26) and Henri Peyre’s gleaning of ‘philosophical ideas with a poetic form,’[[27]](#footnote-27) further developed by Jean Maurel’s landmark study *Victor Hugo, philosophe*[[28]](#footnote-28)in the mid-1980sand ultimately consummated by Paul Bénichou’s *Les Mages romantiques* and his declaration in the avant-propos of a ‘poésie pensante’, where the champions of Romantic poetry ‘ont fait de la poésie une méditation et une pensée’[[29]](#footnote-29) legitimate in itself.Though a preferable stance to the partisan assertions of the early twentieth century, Bénichou and other’s validation of a productive relationship between philosophy and poetry was but a side-step away from re-validating the notion of Hugo’s “religion”, this time in the form of a theological impressionism or a poetised theology; it is simply left to the reader to put together what Bénichou, for example, presents as Hugo’s syncretic combination of Christian theology (Hell and Heaven, sin, expiation, *Deus absconditus*) with his more Neo-Platonic leanings (metempsychosis, the Chain of Being, imperfectly-created matter). The doctrinal statements were tessellated and fragmented, but asserted to still be there, present in the poetry.

Just before the turn of the century, Claude Rétat’s doctoral dissertation, published in1999 as *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l’exil*,[[30]](#footnote-30)revisited this by now well-churned topic in Hugolian studies, albeit with a significantly different approach. Her aim was not to piece together a check-list of words and phrases in the poems that referred either directly or indirectly to a religious or metaphysical concept, but to perceive the divine as an immanent ambition to which the poems were directed: ‘Mon objet est l’extension de Dieu, Dieu perçu dans son épanchement.’[[31]](#footnote-31) Without desiring to overly subscribe authorial intention, Rétat’s primary thesis was that, as indicative of the Romantic mindset, Hugo’s poetry from the beginning of exile right up to his death was aimed at breaking away from received religious and political idols through an invocation of the indeterminate, infinite (X) across his writings, resulting in greater emphasis placed on dreaming, on utopian justice, and on the philosophical notion of the “possible” as a dynamic force of expansion with divine import. Returning to the approach of Gaudon and Albouy, Rétat’s manner of proceeding was closely aligned to identifying patterns of dilation and contraction in Hugo’s poetry that merit phenomenological attention,[[32]](#footnote-32) of which she clearly laid out a roadmap in her introductory comments:

Le divin n'est pas seulement répandu, mais il se répand en acte, il est une énergie expansive. Le divin n'est partout que dans la mesure où il va partout, où il se définit par un mouvement, une avancée, une conquête : il existe en occupant et dévorant l'espace.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Though admirable in many ways, one limitation with Rétat’s method was that she continued to layer a predominantly conceptual reading over the poems, rather than one focused first on describing these recurrent phenomenological traits before analysing them. Excerpts from Hugo’s epic poems such as *La Fin de Satan* and *Dieu* are short and often provided without context, stretching Rétat’s own methodological criteria: 'Le Dieu et la foi de Hugo sont assurément engagés dans ce travail, mais pour autant qu'ils sont avec la poésie et indissociables d'elle, qu'ils sont en poésie, impensables hors d'elle.’[[34]](#footnote-34) The previous issue of discerning coherent religious doctrine in Hugo’s exile-period poetry was shelved for the most part, but how exactly this newly appreciated phenomenology of divinity was to be analysed remained largely unresolved.

# Thesis Position

This thesis approaches the problem of Hugo’s “religious” poetry by making two fundamental changes in objective. Firstly, following Claude Rétat, there will be little to no focus on the successful or unsuccessful coherence of any religious doctrine in Hugo’s poetry, requiring a departure from any speculative, systematic, or apologetic discourse that seeks to totalise his thought. Instead, the first objective of our close readings will be to show how each poem represents subjective religious experiences through the concrete use of poetic devices and imagery. We will then be asking what kind of *human* subject is implicated in this phenomenology of divinity, rather than assuming God or the divine as a pre-given category outside the text. In other words, we will be investigating a subject whose consciousness is represented as mediating the divine, and this will be shown to be a specifically *modern* subject*.* We understand the term “modern subject” foremostly as a self-constituting subject, referring to a long philosophical tradition that obviously surpasses the bounds of this thesis.[[35]](#footnote-35) Our inclusion of this term, however, is not so much to expose the metaphysical grounds of the modern subject in Hugo’s work (what would constitute a kind of “egology”[[36]](#footnote-36)), but rather to argue that, for Hugo, divinity and subjective experience had become fundamentally linked by this period of time in his work. Furthermore, we will argue that this linkage of subjectivity and divinity, constitutive of the modern subject, is not exclusive to either modernity or Romanticism as such, but continues into late modernity and thus contains an ongoing relevance for contemporary religious sensibilities. Nonetheless, our central research question will be the following: how does Hugo represent different Romantic versions of the modern subject as participating in religious experience?

Secondly, our elaboration of Hugo’s theological poetics intends to stretch the definition of the “theological” across a wider hermeneutical domain, one that will better recognise important interactions as we go along between the modern subject experiencing the divine and a wider field of theological tradition. Given the initial insight of Jean-Pierre Jossua, that ‘une vraie poétique théologique, on le sait, n'est jamais une doctrine qui se fait poème, mais bien une création de formes offrant une approche du divin à la fois puissamment suggestive et rigoureuse par son exigence même d'écriture’[[37]](#footnote-37), Hugo’s way of writing religious experience demands this sensitive attention towards these mostly implicit interactions between literature and theology. This position bears the promise of avoiding both narrower, confessionally-based theological apologetics as well as a *Theopoetics* bereft of any historical grounding in nineteenth-century French thought. Moreover, it offers the possibility of opening up Hugo’s texts to a wider, multidisciplinary interpretative approach that, as has been shown in the preceding literature review of these works, has hitherto been lacking.

Aligning with these aims, one might look at two recent examples of how Hugo’s exile-period novels have been re-examined. Kathryn Grossman’s *The Later Novels of Victor Hugo: Variations on the Politics and Poetics of Transcendence* takes as reference point Paul Ricoeur’s ‘discordant concordances’ to help explain the aesthetic experiences of transcendence created by Hugo’s network of verbal constructs in the novels, insisting that this style matured from his earlier ‘poetics of harmony’ and evinces an extensively depicted *topos* of sublimity.[[38]](#footnote-38) Though not explicitly stated, Grossman’s focus on certain passages of Hugo’s prose is highly phenomenological. From a different angle, Didier Philippot’s *Victor Hugo et* *la vaste ouverture du possible : essai sur l’ontologie romantique* readily adopts Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘la texture imaginaire du réel’[[39]](#footnote-39) in order to set out a Romantic ontology that allows for the possibility of transcendence in a fully immanentised plane of existence. Explaining in essay format how Hugo ties divinity to the philosophical notion of the Possible, he then analyses passages in *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (1866)as excerpts that portray most openly this lens, most notably Gilliatt’s toil on the open sea and the narrator’s meditation on the sea-squid’simprobableexistence.[[40]](#footnote-40) What can be drawn for support from these two studies is an indication of growing interest in utilising phenomenological theories to better explain complicated markers of religious experience in Hugo’s literary works, such as transcendence and the sublime, and applying these theories to close readings of the texts.

Serving as forerunners in this regard, the poetry corpus chosen for this research will attempt to adopt this balance of text-theory, respecting the complexities of the former while circumscribing the latter to a rigorous phenomenological framework. Indeed, we have chosen to confine our corpus to a small selection of exile-period poetry, making only incidental reference to Hugo’s exile-period novels and pre-exile writings, in order to better serve close readings of each text. Of course, novels such as *Les Misérables* (1862)and *L’Homme qui rit* (1869)offer highly-developed instances of descriptive phenomenologies of divinity. Just as importantly, Hugo’s earlier, pre-exile poetic collections beginning from *Les Feuilles d’automne* (1831) and running through to *Les Rayons et les ombres* (1840) display preoccupations with spiritual intuition and interiority that would be amenable to theopoetical analysis. However, our particular period of study will be from 1852-1862, which begins with the first years of Hugo’s exile and ends just before the reprisal of what was then entitled *Les Misères*, with several minor exceptions of additions made to works post-exile. By following this particular time-frame in a chronological order, we will be able to offer a series of close readings that track themes and patterns in Hugo’s poetic variations on the relationship between God and humanity in lesser-known works, while still allowing space for noting thematic developments that stretch from pre- to post-exile works.

## Key Research Questions

There are three sub-research questions that will inform our readings of each poem. Firstly, we will be asking what formal literary features of the lyrical and/or epic genres of Hugo’s poetry assist in creating a theological poetics that directly engages the divine. For example, in the first chapter we will be focusing on enunciative address to help position the Romantic lyrical subject, one who seeks to transcend their own identity and speak as an amorphous, all-knowing *ego* (‘*Ah! Insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi!*[[41]](#footnote-41)). Secondly, we will consider the ways in which this theological poetics creates a *phenomenology of divinity* more broadly, asking how these literary features are presented to readers, the underlying conditions of their appearance, as well as different affective responses incited by them. As we shall see, the Romantic lyrical subject is quite evidently grounded theologically, in that they are animated by a specific phenomenology of a personal God (‘le moi de l’infini’). Thirdly, we will be distinguishing between a phenomenological reception of these features by readers and the process of *uncovering* the modern subject as divine that forms a phenomenological approach to divinity in the poems. Words associated with sight, vision and comprehension (“l’œil”, “l’apparaître”, “révéler”, “connu”/ “inconnu”, “clair” / “obscur”, “dévoilé / “caché”) will serve as helpful markers in identifying this distinctly *visual* ambition that is present across both the external (cosmological) and the internal (egological) manifestations of divinity in Hugo’s poetry.

## Hypothesis

After isolating how a textual feature is construed theologically in each poem, we will then consider how the reader is presented with different images of a fleeting representationof divinity and how it is framed within the overall poetic structure. This importantly brackets the ontotheologically-minded[[42]](#footnote-42) problematic of whether Hugo’s intertextual *metaphysical* system equates to conventional understandings of theology at the time, in that it prioritises the reader’s ability to reconstruct an imaginative sequence over the decomposition of the text into discursive analysis.[[43]](#footnote-43) The third research question then addresses the greater thesis position; our proposed hypothesis to which is, that Hugo’s exile-period theological poetics amounts to a *phenomenology of divinity* that reveals the modern subject as much as it does God. Expressed otherwise, our wager is that, for Hugo’s Romanticised representations of the modern subject and God, both are equally inexhaustible and ultimately come to share the same attributes. This hypothesis carries an important presupposition. Given that God by definition transcends representation, we assume that Hugo’s religious poetry, wherein a central preoccupation of the poem is with tying subjectivity (particularly intuition and sentiment) with God, will be necessarily frustrated by a *paradoxical phenomenality of absence,* meaning that Hugo’s alignment of the modern subject with divinity will result in phenomena that are discernible in the text but that also necessarily exceed it. This unique phenomenality is heightened by the phenomenological “tone”[[44]](#footnote-44) of each poem; that is, by the affective layers of joy and suffering, of desire and fear, amongst others, that presuppose a relation between the absence of God and the speakers and figures present in each text. Evidently, this hypothesis requires turning back to the first question of identifying the formal features that support this phenomenology, which implies performing a hermeneutical cycle on each poem. To manage this cycle, a minimal interpretative method will be employed, one that interfaces well with the phenomenological axiom of permitting “the things themselves” to appear and be described rather than being discounted as fictions or non-entities.[[45]](#footnote-45)

# Methods

## Minimal Interpretation

To aid in this endeavour, our primary method of interpretation will be following the model of close reading advocated by Derek Attridge and Henry Staten in their co-authored book *The Craft of Poetry: Dialogues on Minimal Interpretation.*[[46]](#footnote-46) Their background engagement in this area comes predominantly from two different theoretical angles: the former (Attridge) specialises in English meter and has looked into the responsibility owed to the text by professional and non-professional readers in his work *The Singularity of Literature.*[[47]](#footnote-47) The latter (Staten) attributes to syntax a central role in the overall *techne* ( the “craft” or “art”) of a poem and has developed this notion further in his book *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art.*[[48]](#footnote-48) Both share an underlying concern for a close reading of poetry that is hospitable to a phenomenological methodology; namely, new interpretations that only take into account certain imagery of a poem at the expense of others are seen, in the eyes of these authors, as ‘forced or false to the work,’[[49]](#footnote-49) especially when they involve a ‘significant degree of arbitrariness...associative leaps, inferences drawn, symbolic meanings perceived, that might be more or less plausible, but the justification of which we are left to figure out for ourselves if we can.’[[50]](#footnote-50) In comparable terms, their method proposes to break down that which appears in the poems in order to test if the applied interpretation is consistent in explaining each manifestation. They thus appeal fundamentally to a method of reading that is dialogical, detailed in its phenomenological astuteness to the text, and minimal in the sense that it seeks to avoid extraneous interpretations.

Dealing briefly with each of these categories, we can start with the necessity of dialogically-based exegesis. For Attridge and Staten, any reading of a poem must ultimately be aimed at achieving “general agreement”[[51]](#footnote-51) with not just other readers but, arguably, with the majority of the body of previously-conducted criticism. This is neither to foreclose the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations, nor to bar the use of certain critical theories that search for yet undisclosed meaning behind the text, but in order to return the text to ‘interpretation that is an attempt to articulate a strong (and I would say necessarily singular) response that can be put to the test of general agreement.’[[52]](#footnote-52) A paradox of sorts, in which the universality of a poem is measured by the degree to which it elicits intensely personal responses, but ones that are also grounded in the possibility of the poem’s various components being both clearly identifiable and consistent in their effect. One could take this axiom further and connect it to recent reader-response theories and text-affect studies, but this study will confine itself to a dialogical reading of poetry that requires a thorough, close reading of the text that accounts for personal resonances while also engaging with contrasting readings that force a wider evaluation of these resonances before being admitted. Of course, a generic, unsituated reading of any text is simply not possible, and this admission brings with it the responsibility of acknowledging and unpacking the presuppositions inherent in a personal reading, which in turn will form part of the wider dialogical process that this thesis seeks to employ.

The second requirement of minimal interpretation is it must remain focused on understanding the formal features of a poem in relation to its functional purpose within the poem’s entirety. Where some lyric and epic poems in this thesis are quite lengthy, the method will be adapted to allow for commentary on isolated sections while still tying back to the poem’s overall structure and content, shifting between a micro and macro-study of each text. Without having to endorse an attitude similar to the New Critic’s towards the metaphysical “wholeness” of a poem, Attridge and Staten contend that a poem can simply constitute an aesthetic whole by merit of the poet’s intended craftsmanship:

We treat well-constructed poems of the more or less traditional type not as "organic" but as *artifactual* wholes, with beginnings, middles, and ends, driven from the first line to the last by a continuous impetus (although rarely without hiccups along the way). The critic's job is to identify the major inflections and turns of this continuous movement on the way to closure, and the force, considered in terms of this entire movement, of the closure itself.[[53]](#footnote-53)

By contrast, Staten implies that a “poorly-constructed poem” cannot maintain its technical impetus from start to finish, petering out through a lack of sustained inventiveness. Though the axiomatic conceptualising of this definition is problematic, it does help to debunk the Romantic myth of spontaneous and organic poetic production that allegedly emerges from sheer authorial willpower. By viewing each poem as an artifactual whole, we will not only be able to avoid becoming susceptible to this proposition, but we can also highlight instances where Hugo constructs these myths in and how they are closely aligned to a theological framework of creation.

The third criteria for this method of reading lies in its minimality itself; that is, the stripping away of interpretations that do not cohere to the poem when considered as an artifactual whole. Rather than extracting convenient fragments of verse that are then construed to adhere to pre-supposed ideologies or a specific hermeneutic, emphasis on minimalinterpretation engages the prior two categories of ongoing, interdependent interpretation and recognition of the *techne* inherent in poetry so as to avoid superimposing a theoretical approach to the text. Attridge imagines the ideal minimal reading as ‘the basis for, but not the sum total of, singular readings, which would bring to the poem different accumulations of memories, habits of thought, preferences, psychological tendencies, and so on.’[[54]](#footnote-54) Efforts are still made to encourage a systematic understanding of the text - a skeleton key of sorts that recognises cohesion and consistency in a poem while still allowing for singular interpretations to proliferate. Its most vital function is to challenge two counteracting approaches: one that entices through a totalising, “definitive” reading of the text, the other which treats the text as endless, open symbolism.

## Historical and Biographical Criticism

In addition to minimal interpretation, this thesis will also include historical and biographical criticism. This is not to detract from close reading, but to allay two principal hazards inherent in the adopted method. Firstly, as Stephen Ahern remarks in his introduction to *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice,* it is paramount for a literary critic to be equipped with a ‘historically aware perspective’ of the text, even in regards to ‘conceptions of affective agency,’ lest they risk ‘read[ing] back into earlier periods a *mentalité* that was not in place at the time.’[[55]](#footnote-55) Thus, research into the phenomenological tone of Hugo’s theological poetics with his contemporary readership could quickly stray into XXIst Century hermeneutical territory without first firmly establishing some historic and cultural context. Secondly, it is not just affective agency at stake in these close readings but the connotations of words, phrases, and concepts in circulation amongst the intellectual climate of mid-nineteenth century French culture. One quick example would be the significance of the resoundingly simple line ‘pas d’enfer éternel’[[56]](#footnote-56) in “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre”, negating as it does the orthodox doctrine that would have elicited stronger emotional and intellectual reactions to contemporaneous readers than it most likely would today. Similarly, being aware of contemporary literature such as Jean Reynaud’s *Terre et Ciel* (1854)to Hugo’s outlook will provide critical background information when discussing the relevance of concepts such as palingenesis that can be gleaned from the latter’s poetry.

In terms of biographical criticism, each chapter of the thesis will open by situating the reader into the period of time spent by Hugo in writing the poems under inquiry. For some poems this was a much longer period than others, but the corpus will be primarily dealing with writings that stretch from 1852-1862. Given the extensive scholarship that has gone into tracing the genesis and publication history of many of Hugo’s works, the initial section of each chapter will not dwell in details but merely set the scene for close readings that take into account Victor Hugo as what is generally known as a *situated subject* in history.[[57]](#footnote-57) Furthermore, the introductory biographical remarks will not be used as a guise for causality or on an explanatory basis; information relating specifically to the author will rather help inform the readings while remaining secondary to the thesis’s primary aim of elucidating a theological poetics within the chosen corpus.

## For a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry

The theoretical sources to which this thesis is circumscribed stretch further than that of informed close-reading and historical-biographical criticism. Fundamental to observing a *phenomenology of divinity* in the chosen poems are the insights provided by Kevin Hart in his appeal for a ‘phenomenology of religious poetry,’[[58]](#footnote-58) understood broadly in the sense of the application of a Husserlian philosophical lens to literary criticism.[[59]](#footnote-59) In doing so we recognise from the outset that the phenomenological tradition across the XXth Century is best understood as a trajectory of ideas and thoughts reacting against and/or in support of Husserl’s foundational work rather than as a uniform methodology.[[60]](#footnote-60) Nevertheless, we will briefly review three defining methodological boundaries consistently applied in the phenomenological tradition: namely, the phenomenological reduction, the concept of intentionality, and affective tone. We will be particularly interested in exploring their relation to the prominence of image and metaphor as related to a phenomenologically-minded literary analysis.

Kevin Hart’s application of phenomenological principles to poetic criticism stems from a desire, similar to Attridge and Staten’s, to reduce bias, conscious or unconscious, from the interpretation of poetry, religious or otherwise. Hart advocates for renewed attention towards how the poet directs the reader’s gaze within visual configurations of external realities. This is particularly pertinent in the realm of ‘“religious” poetry, where the adjective “religious” is too often understood as synonymous to creedal commitments, rather than being understood in its Latin etymological base-root as either “*religare*”*,* a“tying back”, or “*relegere*”*,* a “reading through again”. Even without this nuance, Hart asserts that Husserl’s founding method of performing the phenomenological reduction offers fruitful parallels to poetic production:

All poets, religious or not, perform, to some extent, the phenomenological reduction: they are led back to a consciousness whose intentional rapport with the world renders meaningful those events that might otherwise be dismissed or overlooked. Yet, at the same time, poetry frustrates the phenomenological reduction. The act of writing introduces differences and deferrals that prevent consciousness from closing on itself. A partial or frustrated reduction admits traces of transcendence: we pass from sign to meaning. In the case of religious poetry, where we are concerned with the transcendence of God, there will be effects of counter-experience but little or no appeal to the supernatural attitude construed as a thesis.[[61]](#footnote-61)

A phenomenological approach to analysing “religious” experience in poetry would therefore consist firstly in bracketing both the ‘supernatural attitude’ (propositional belief in God’s existence) along with what Husserl calls the “natural attitude” (our common-sense perception of objects in the world). After having done this, one can then refocus on how the poem’s string of language creates and sustains a phenomenological horizon that is neither direct, unmediated experience of the divine nor devoid of personal resonance with this preoccupation. Indeed, for Hart, from a poem’s inception ‘no phenomenon is fully received by a pure consciousness for a poet; it is always caught in the sticky web of language,’[[62]](#footnote-62) and this applies equally to readers of poetry and the verbal interpretations they come to form thereby.

In this regard, the main methodological imperative to be adopted from Hart is therefore that of finding a due balance for perceiving a phenomenology of divinity in literature or other forms of art more generally. Namely, one must neither over-ascribe nor under-value the literary manifestations which, after performing the phenomenological reduction, can always be said to transcendtheir literary medium. Ultimately, this prescription also helps us address the difficult question of whether or not there can even be a phenomenality of God (or of experiences of divine “transcendence”) at all in poetry. Following Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of ‘counter-experience’, wherein the incommensurability of our experiences and concepts of God nonetheless constitutes a kind of negatively-geared experience of our own (im)possibilities,[[63]](#footnote-63) Hart similarly insists that his phenomenological method for literary criticism helps to safeguard the intelligibility of written experiences of transcendence over and against their obviously inadequate correspondences to reality. Indeed, they will be *necessarily* inadequate when speaking of a God who is Wholly Other. Yet, that does not foreclose the possibility of identifying these ‘counter-experiences’ of transcendence, for as is especially clear in Victor Hugo’s Romanticised representations of religious experience, it is precisely this *excess* of intuition and sentiment that characterise the most evident use of a theological poetics.

It is also important to recognise that, for critics and general readers alike, the kind of phenomenology employed in reading a text need not align with or be identical to that experienced by the writers themselves; rather, it is what Chris Hackett calls a ‘second phenomenology,’[[64]](#footnote-64) one that comes after the poet’s own processing of their experiences and thus re-enacted through a certain rationality by their reader that approaches the shared object in a different way.[[65]](#footnote-65) Hence it is all the more vital to be sensitive to what the text draws repeated attention towards, so as to avoid substituting one’s own image of the object to that of the poet’s and occluding in turn the poetic qualities attached to it.

The role of image is, of course, central to this phenomenological approach of divinity, for without the ability to imagine, configure, and re-present objects in the form of images to the reader, the poet is unable to provoke the mental visualisation of an absent object. For the philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, the ontological status of the image is assured through phenomenology, as ‘phenomenology teaches us that image is rich because it stands between representation and presence, revelation and disappearance.’[[66]](#footnote-66) Image, then, when dealing with religious poetry, is absolutely fundamental; it is the *sine qua non* condition of analogical expression and is also closely tied to the literary devices of metaphor and simile that allow for analogous representations of the divine. However, there is also a paradox to the ontological status of images, due to the fact that they must be constantly traded-off with other images through the resources of the imagination in order to be incorporated into a poem. Primordial images considered ‘epiphanies’[[67]](#footnote-67) of the sacred, readily found in mythology and religions, must similarly form part of a wider, profane imaginary when found in poetry in order to understand the symbolic nexus from which they were taken.

In the phenomenological tradition, imagination is much more than just a cognitive faculty that registers sense-impressions and stores them as memory reserves. Richard Kearney describes Husserl’s conception of the imagination as ‘a *sui generis* activity of our intentional relation to the world,’ where external objects are grasped ‘not only in their actuality but also in their possibility,[[68]](#footnote-68) preserved as it were in their reduced image (their *eidos,* ‘essence’) before being blended into variations that set the limits of our intentional horizons. Assuming this indispensable relation between intentionality and imagination, we will adopt this second methodological criteria from Kearney’s articulations of Husserlian intentionality, tying in as it does to what Didier Philippot calls Hugo’s ‘ontologie romantique’[[69]](#footnote-69) and his valorisation of the imaginative faculty in visualising objects in distinct manners and fashions*.* Referring specifically to poetry, Arezou Zalipour describes the work of the intentional imaginative process as follows:

According to the theory of intentionality, when consciousness is directed toward an object, that is to say, when we become conscious of an object, an image is made. This image has its specific and direct meaning with regard to its maker/creator and experience of the imagining act. When this image (with its direct meaning) is put in the context of the poem by the poet, it is directed toward another image in the poem, and in such a context the image acquires another meaning (moving to a new semantic field) through the second act of intentionality.[[70]](#footnote-70)

To reiterate, our guiding parameters for phenomenological poetic analysis will be set on certain imagery as they are presented in each poem and their intelligible arrangement by the poet. In a tight balance between self-reflexivity and formal textual analysis, our task will be to follow the trail of images back to an initial perceptive moment, a kind of empirical “scene-form” that instigated the phenomenological reduction performed by Hugo and the visual “world-making” of his poetry.

Furthermore, we will want to explore not just the ontology of each poem, but also how they are experienced, studying for instance what reactions and emotions are elicited from the given imaginative sequence. The third methodological axiom we will follow is therefore that of analysing affective tone, ensuring that the emotional valences provoked by specific formal devices are appropriately analysed and discussed, beyond just stating that X is presented as a strong image and therefore must evoke a feeling of Y or Z. Indeed, affect studies in the phenomenological tradition that this thesis will be following takes the impact of evocative textual elements much further. According to Donald Wehrs, we need to delve deeper into ‘how texts represent, reflect on, enact, and elicit affect, and in how affect/text dynamics bear on emotions, cognition, aesthetics, and culture’s relation to ethics and politics.’[[71]](#footnote-71) This is, of course, particularly important to the study of Romantic poetry, where there is often frequent appeal to *pathos* made by the speaking subject, most typically expressed through a series of lyrico-authorial strategies, a large number of which are examined in Nicholas Manning’s *Rhétorique de la sincérité. La poésie moderne en quête d’un langage vrai.*[[72]](#footnote-72) Evidently, the lyric and epic genre elements in this corpus selection will need comprehensive explanation consisting of not just the phenomenological treatment of the visual, but also of the various kinds of *pathos* evoked and how they work across the breadth of the text.

# Argumentation

## Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised around three main sections, each exploring different facets of how Hugo constructs his versions of the modern subject and the divine. The first section, “The Self and the Absolute”, deals with the genre of lyrical poetry that visualises and engages with divinity from a subjective point of view, based around the problematic of the self as both an object (“le moi”) that is fleeting and unstable and as a unifying presence behind the text. The second section, “The Other and the Absolute”, completes this pairing of “self/other” by focussing on how manifestations of alterity become instances of transcendence for the modern subject. The third section, “Politics of the Divinised Subject”, pivots away from lyrical preoccupations of individual subjectivity towards epic poetry that relates collective action as conveyed through mythical narratives and figures. These categories are of course not perfectly distinct, for two reasons. Firstly, because there is much crossover in the phenomenological processes that we identify, especially when it comes to Hugo’s Romantic tendency to dissolve the objectified self into a universal group. Secondly, because some poems portray blended literary genres (*Dieu,* for example, can be read both as a lengthy lyric and as an epic poem written from a first-person standpoint). Emphasis is made, however, on the gradual progression of the thesis moving diachronically across a small selection of poems in an attempt to observe commonalities in their phenomenological approach to the divine and in their theological poetics, hence certain overlaps of these kinds are to be expected.

The first two chapters analyse five poems in *Les Contemplations,* the majority of which are to be found in the sixth book, “Au bord de l’infini”, with the exception of “Magnitudo Parvi”, which was arranged as the final poem in the third book “Les luttes et les rêves.” The selections are both obvious decisions and potentially overly-conventional ones, given that poems such as “Les Mages”, “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre”, and “Magnitudo Parvi” are classics in Hugolian scholarship and have already been well-studied. Nonetheless, this profusion of critical attention benefits the method of minimal reading at the core of this thesis, offering plentiful instances of general agreement that establish the basis for a phenomenological analysis that intentionally bypasses metaphysical speculation beyond that of the reader’s immediate reception of the text.

More specifically, we explore the enunciative structure of the *je* speaker in each poem in its illustration of the self-conscious mind, to be understood through Husserl’s principle of the ‘active transcendental *ego.*’[[73]](#footnote-73) Within this framework, we are then able to analyse how various written “object-selves” in the poems are specific manifestations of these proffered experiences of contemplation. Beginning with “Ibo”, where Hugo as the biographical subject will be distinguished from the Romantic lyrical subject, we move to “Magnitudo Parvi'' and its cosmic presentation of the “Moi de l’infini” as a touchstone definition of the divine for Hugo. In “Pleurs dans la nuit”, this definition is driven to higher stakes through the speaker’s questioning of inert matter and the finality of death, eliciting the affective response of melancholy to a potentially vacuous universe. “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre” intrigues in its configuration of the spectre or “impersonal self” as conveyer of religious revelation, and, finally, “Les Mages” is famous for its theological substrate, owing in large part to Paul Bénichou’s study and the sacerdotal poet-figure that accompanies thespeaker in this poem. Nevertheless, our interpretation of the lyrical subject as performing contemplation, to the point that they implicate the theological notion of divinisation (*theosis*), differs markedly from Bénichou’s conclusion as well as to others, in that we will not be viewing Hugo’s engagement in this particular theological issue from a sociological standpoint (that is, as a challenge, or indeed a substitute, to the authority of institutionalised religion and the concept of Revelation), but simply as a poet whose primary task is to represent such religious experiences.

The second section turns to the fragmented epic poem *Dieu,* remarkable in its combination of lyrical voicing and its purview of religious thought. Chapters 3 and 4 continue our investigation of several phenomenological constituents of a Romantic lyrical subjectivity in their concrete forms. However, in this epic poem the active speaking subject becomes *passive,* confronted by a series of idolatrous presentations that progress in a relatively systematic order. Unlike the poems in *Les Contemplations,* the narrative element is therefore central, plotting the movement of the subject both towards and away from God as the Absolute Other in a way that attempts to capture qualitative experiences of transcendence.

After reviewing the compositional history of *Dieu* and offering some relevant socio-cultural comments on the changing nature of religious experience innineteenth-century France, we begin by working backwards to the established arrangement of the text, following in diachronic order the creatures that appear in the second part of *Dieu,* entitled “L’océan d’en haut”. Importantly, the monologues delivered by each of these creatures (loosely held to symbolise pre-Axial and Axial religions such as polytheism, Manichaeism, Judaism, and Christianity) resonate with the twin theological discourses of cataphaticism and apophaticism, which work together to conceptualise God’s transcendence in relation to the human mind. We then look at the first section of the poem, “Le seuil du gouffre”, which consists of a series of voices issuing from the figure of ‘l’Esprit humain’ that try to dissuade the subject from persisting in their desire to know about and to visualise God. Uniting both sections is an extensive deployment of antithesis and paradox that informs Hugo’s theological and phenomenological poetics, particularly pertinent to the series of apparitions as limited visual and conceptual idols of the divine.

In the third section of the thesis, Hugo’s phenomenological exploration of consciousness and divinity changes from the site of the lyrical subject to the broader cultural imaginary of French society during the mid-1850s. In both *La Fin de Satan* and the poems selected from *La Légende des siècles,* canonical biblical and mythological episodes are re-configured alongside Hugo’s imaginative insertions and variations.

The fifth chapter commences this mythical slant by commenting on several excerpts from *La Fin de Satan* that encapsulate how a divinised modern subject augments well-known figures and scenes in the Bible and Greco-Roman mythology, using personification as a major device to give voice to contemporary cultural concerns of the time. Foremost in import for Hugo was his concern over how violence propels history, and thus the actions and the speeches of his characters revolve around questions of free-will and ritualised violence, engrossed as they are in what René Girard calls the subjective crises of “mimetic rivalry”.[[74]](#footnote-74) In “Hors de la terre I”, as Hugo describes Satan falling from the heavens, we show how this mimetic rivalry is conditioned by the modern subject against God, observed through the lens of a phenomenological analysis that focuses on his affective states and finitude, which continue into the narrative of Nimrod in “Le Glaive”. The sixth chapter transitions to “Le Gibet”, where Christ’s Passion is amplified by scenes added to the Gospel narratives, including a monologue by Barabbas after he is released and an exchange between Jesus and a sibyl predicting his suffering. These additions are important because they actively interrupt the received versions of the Gospel narratives recognisable by Hugo’s contemporary audience and introduce an expansion to the socio-mythic imaginary of its readers. There is also an intensely existential element to these scenes that elicit emotions of horror and anger which have gone unexamined in previous interpretations of these passages. The final sub-section concludes the implications of the narrative arch with “Hors de la terre III”, where Satan is visited by Hugo’s allegorical figure ‘l’Ange liberté’. Here personification and allegory are made manifest for the evident purpose of ending the mythological narrative of redemption, but we also compare each character’s allegorical purposes in the final scenes to their significance in a theological discourse on free-will and evil and evaluate further implications stemming from this additional hermeneutical layer.

Chapter 7 takes seven poems from *La Légende des siècles*, spread across three series, and looks at them as problematising the relationship between the modern subject and divinity across time. Whereas *La Fin de Satan* employed a more classical (albeit fragmented) epic genre form, the ‘petites épopées’ of this collection can be isolated individually as well as read across their arrangement in each publication series as representative of the dynamic interactions between secularity and eternity (or timelessness). Beginning with “L’épopée du ver” and “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir,” we look at how the observable impermanence of the material presented, as attested by the destruction of the past, is heightened through Hugo’s apocalyptic poetics to promote a vague vision of humanity’s future outside of time.

“La vision de Dante” and “La vision d’où est sorti ce livre” are next treated together for their preoccupation with visualising this sharp disruption, wherein the past is relegated to eternal repetition and the future guaranteed by an understanding of God as Absolute Possibility. This sublime rupture is then repeated in the final poem “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel,” enacted by metaphors of travel and the unshackling of humanity from gravitational pull of the earth. The horizon in which this diptych poem is set also aligns with the contradiction of the title in *La Légende des siècles*: that is, the endurance of “the Legend” (i.e., humanity) across time, while erstwhile conditioning time and remaining, in a sense, outside of it. Indeed, as the inscription of an event (the word “legend” denoting etymologically something “to be read”) Hugo’s hymn to humanity’s potentially infinite progress ends fittingly with an advent of messianic proportions, reflecting in a theological sense the crossing of an ecclesial community from mundane time (*Chronos*, *Saecula*) to divine eternity (*Kairos*).

Section I: The Self and the Absolute

# Chapter 1: Eternal Ambitions: Writing the Exiled Self in *Les Contemplations*

*‘Il songeait à la grandeur et à la présence de Dieu ; à l'éternité future, étrange mystère ; à l'éternité passée, mystère plus étrange encore ; à tous les infinis qui s'enfonçaient sous ses yeux dans tous les sens ; et, sans chercher à comprendre l'incompréhensible, il le regardait. Il n'étudiait pas Dieu ; il s'en éblouissait. Il considérait ces magnifiques rencontres des atomes qui donnent des aspects à la matière, révèlent les forces en les constatant, créent les individualités dans l'unité, les proportions dans l'étendue, l'innombrable dans l'infini, et par la lumière produisent la beauté. Ces rencontres se nouent et se dénouent sans cesse ; de là la vie et la mort.’ —* *Les Misérables*. Edited by Maurice Allem, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951, p. 59.

As this extraordinary passage describing the character Bishop Myriel's attitude towards God in *Les Misérables* attests, Victor Hugo was keenly attentive to the way in which things appear. He moreover demonstrated himself a true phenomenologist through assimilating the external with the internal; that is, by treating the cosmological process of creation and decay as coterminous with the egological import of life and death. In articulating what it means to be an exiled self in *Les Contemplations*, Hugo does not just turn inwards, but projects his concerns outwards through the lyrical approach of call and response. In this chapter, we will be exploring how Hugo represents the modern subject as enacting a religious experience of contemplation through the central enunciative figure of Romantic lyricism (the speaking “*je”* subject) understood as various constructions of an object-self (a “moi” or *cogito*) in the poems under study. Our guiding question for this and the following chapter will be: in what ways does Hugo portray the self as either aspiring to or being divine? Critical to this study of “religious” contemplation in the set of poems is Hugo’s anticipation of a cosmos that *looks back* and *responds* to the speaker as much as the speaker calls out and animates their environment, conveying a critical “re-reading” (*re-legere*) and therefore “religious” aspect to the subject’s position in contemplative experience.

After reviewing the historical-biographical context of each poem’s composition as well as precursory information on potential theological connections between exile and contemplation, we will begin with a reading of “Ibo” that questions the role of identity, focussing on what is predicated of the speaking subject in its “je” and “moi” forms. After this, we will move to analysing the phenomenality of each written self - i.e., how do they appear and under what structural conditions - across the remaining poems that, like the act of contemplation, stretch the mimetic call/response of the poet to the boundaries of the perceivable infinite in nature. More than mimetic, in fact, the contrast between the omniscient *je* speaker and its refraction as differing *moi* appearances – what we will be calling a *Romantic Self*, a *Self of the Infinite*,[[75]](#footnote-75) an *Empty Self*, an *Impersonal Self*, and an *Interpersonal Self* - exhibits clear aspirations towards divinisation (*theosis*)[[76]](#footnote-76) that pertain to identifiable theological contexts. Considered together, we shall see how these envisioned selves serve ultimately as phenomenological descriptions of the interior state of the modern subject in contemplation, dissolving the boundaries between the external/internal and constituting a broader thematic in Hugo’s refashioning of place and self in his early exile-period poetry.

## Compositional Context: Productive Turmoil and Spiritism

On the 5th of August 1852, Victor Hugo arrived in Jersey. Passing from his first eight months of refuge in Brussels to the channel island, it is here that Hugo’s second exile begins. This chapter will focus on the period spanning from the spring of 1854 to that of 1855; a year of composition that produced not only first drafts for the Book VI poems of *Les Contemplations*, but also significantly-sized sections of *Dieu* (“Solitudines Coeli”) and *La Fin de Satan* (“Et Nox facta est”, Nimrod's narrative). After finishing work on *Les Châtiments* in the autumn of 1853, Hugo had worked up such a furious pace that he had produced more than two hundred poems before the spring of 1855, not counting his starts on the aforementioned epics.[[77]](#footnote-77) Within this body of produced work is contained two-thirds of the poems for *Les Contemplations,* which makes up the majority of its second volume, entitled “Aujourd’hui.”

Important biographical borders that help frame this period of time are Hugo’s successful publication of *Les Châtiments* in November 1853 through the publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel, distributed both in Belgium and in France, and his eventual expulsion from Jersey on the 31st of October 1855. With the former, a sold-out first run emboldened Hugo to propose to Hetzel another contract on the 26th of March 1854, this time for ‘deux volumes de poésie contenant chacun la matière de *Feuilles d’automne,*’[[78]](#footnote-78) in other words a lyrical work, intended to counterpoise the heavily satirical and didactic weight of *Les Châtiments.* Hetzel accepted, and contracts defining the right of sale for two years were signed by the end of July. However, Hugo’s abrupt departure from Jersey later that year only added to publishing delays for *Les Contemplations,* which eventually reached the French public on the 23rd of April 1856, after Hugo had relocated to Guernsey.

Another key biographical consideration for this period is the concurrent running of table-turning *séances* by the Hugo household, beginning with the arrival of Madame Delphine de Girardin to Marine Terrace on the 11th of September 1853 and continuing regularly up until the last recorded session on the 8th of October 1855. While the question of the relevance of this regular activity to Hugo’s poetry will be deferred until a discussion of the poem “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre” later in the chapter,[[79]](#footnote-79) suffice to say at the moment that the almost two-year span of table-turning forms an important backdrop to poems written across this period.[[80]](#footnote-80) It would nevertheless be somewhat myopic to over-determine this particular instantiation of Hugo’s personal life against his pre-exile excursions into the fantastic and the occult, most notably in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). As Emmanuel Godo reminds us, ‘si l’exil apparaît comme le hiatus majeur du combat politique et de l'interrogation spirituelle, il ne faudrait pas qu'il oblitère, comme c'est trop souvent le cas dans la critique, la perception des deux décennies qui le précèdent.’[[81]](#footnote-81) The question is therefore less about the extent to which the *séances* had a lasting influence on Hugo than about performative iterations that unlocked through the supposedly “neutral” medium of the table his pre-existing beliefs and literary idols.

In this regard, one can see a connection between Hugo’s preoccupation with spiritism and his self-conception of the poet and its messianic and cathartic role in society. From his early poem “Le Poète dans les Révolutions” in *Odes et poésies diverses* (1822), where we read ‘Le poète sur la terre / Console, exilé volontaire, / Les tristes humains dans leurs fers,’[[82]](#footnote-82) through to “Fonction du poète” in *Les* *Rayons et les ombres* (1840) and its appeal for secular authority (‘Peuples ! Écoutez le poète / Ecoutez le rêveur sacré ! / Dans votre nuit, sans lui complète, / Lui seul a le front éclairé !’[[83]](#footnote-83)), there is a manifest pretention of the poet as possessing a distinguished social position through their supernatural communicative abilities. This is clearly reinforced during the period of turning-table sessions, where Hugo’s idols of deceased literary geniuses (Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, etc.), recurrently emphasise the prophetic roles of genius and poet in public life.

Consequently, texts such as Adèle Hugo’s *Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie* (1863)*,* though a fascinating and useful source for biographical information,must be taken with due consideration of its auxiliary function: that being, of perpetuating how Hugo wished to conceive of his public role and image. Similarly, the autobiographical portrayals in poems from *Les Contemplations* must also be studied with scrutiny. Though the collection has been lauded as one of the most well-curated of French lyrical poetry, it is equally true that the use of fictive compositional dates and places has fallen under heavy examination.[[84]](#footnote-84) Often a change is made to support dramatic effect (“Ce que c’est que la mort” is dated to coincide with the 2nd of November, the Day of the Dead) or else to simply fit a chronology of events (“Mon bras pressait ta taille frêle” is symbolically dated 1830, the year of the July Revolution in France, instead of the manuscript dating of 1834). While transformations of this type can, of course, be artistically justified, readers should nonetheless be wary of taking these textual elements at face value.

## Ce que c’est que l’exil

In a preface to his compilation of public addresses in *Actes et Paroles II: pendant l’exil,* Hugo reflects on his (self-)imposed exile under the Second Empire. *Ce que c’est que l’exil* (1875) stresses early on that, above all else, the notion of exile should be understood both politically and ethically; it is ‘la nudité du droit’[[85]](#footnote-85) and ‘une chose morale.’[[86]](#footnote-86) In keeping with his pro-Republican, avowedly dissident views of Louis-Napoléon’s reign, Hugo goes on to explain that legitimate power lies only with the French people, that usurpation of this power is a tyrannical act, and that imposing exile on a fellow citizen not only casts a moral blight upon the pronouncer, but also, conversely, exposes grievances made against the exiled person’s inalienable rights, as declared by the Revolution of 1789. Hugo reminds the reader, furthermore, that the destined outcome of such an abuse of power was the disastrous Battle of Sedan in 1870, the bloody consequences of which Hugo endured on full display while finally returning to Paris by train. Across the nineteen years of remaining installed outside of France, even after Adèle and the rest of his family had decided to return, Hugo’s political protest of not living under the Second Empire undoubtedly characterised what it meant to be in exile.

An ironic analogy, however, can also be made between Hugo’s exile and the banishment of Napoleon Bonaparte on Saint Helena from 1815-1821. Where once a youthful Hugo wrote of Bonaparte’s exile in unflattering terms (‘on jeta ce captif suprême / Sur un rocher, débris lui-même / De quelque ancien monde englouti ![[87]](#footnote-87)), the beginning of his break with the Bourbon monarchy in 1827, centering around the shunning of four ex-marshals of the First French Empire during a reception at the Austrian ambassador’s residence, resulted in the poem “Ode à la colonne de la place Vendôme” (‘De quel droit viennent-ils découronner nos gloires ?’[[88]](#footnote-88)) and a change of attitude towards the almost mythical *proscrit*. Almost thirty years later, it is Bonaparte’s nephew who officially exiled Hugo, who was ready to suffer the charge for life. While Louis-Napoleon’s reputation was indelibly tarnished for Hugo, his uncle remained a conflictual figure within the latter’s political canon of *grands hommes*, having shared the same fate of bearing a harsh exile.

In a more literary vein, Hugo drew inspiration from figures such as Juvenal, Ovid, Dante, and Rousseau to help sustain his productive literary output during exile. In place of longing for Rome or Florence, Hugo’s expulsion from Paris led him to intensify his poetical voice through aligning it with a strong history of political and artistic protest. Jean-Michel Maulpoix formulates it thus: ‘Qu’apporte de ce point de vue l’épreuve de l’exil ? Une expérience de la séparation, mais aussi la création d’une insularité propice à l’amplification d’une voix.’[[89]](#footnote-89) And just as Dante’s castigations of hypocritical lay and clerical authorities became interwoven with Italian cultural history and early-Renaissance art, so too Hugo’s early exile compositions (*Napoléon-le-petit, Les Châtiments*) can be considered landmarks in the historical representations of mid nineteenth-century French history.[[90]](#footnote-90) Mixing a message of democracy and liberation with a strong poetic arsenal and a mastery of satire, echoes of these dissident writers move across these satirical works before making way for the lyrical in *Les Contemplations.*

It is, however, the notion of a spiritual exile cultivated by Hugo that will most directly inform our readings in this chapter. Indeed, the stories of Adam and Eve chased from Eden, Moses in the desert, Joseph in Egypt, the Israelites in Babylonian captivity, or John exiled in Patmos were re-visited by Hugo at this time, with Jean-Marc Hovasse informing us that Hugo’s ‘fréquentation de la Bible n’était pas nouvelle, mais elle avait été, comme celle de Dante avec laquelle elle semblait finir par se fondre, approfondie par l’exil.’[[91]](#footnote-91) Similar in this regard is an affinity to his literary idol François-René de Chateaubriand, whose renewed aesthetic of detached longing for God (*Sehnsucht*) and a melancholic disposition, as expressed in *Le Génie du christianisme* (1802),resonates widely across *Les Contemplations.*

Understood in this broad sense, one of the major areas of concern for the Romantic believer becomes the inaccessibility of a fully transcendent *Deus absconditus* (“Hidden God”), which in turn creates the conditions for a certain spiritualised conceptualisation of exile.[[92]](#footnote-92) Over the doorway to the dining room in Hauteville House, Hugo tersely summarised this imperfect state by etching: *Exilium vita est* (“life is exile/exile is life”), connotative as it is of the pilgrim’s journey that is reprised throughout much of his exile-period poetry and that borrows heavily from Montaigne’s imagery of the ‘caveau’ of earthly ignorance and from Pascal’s ‘cachot.’[[93]](#footnote-93) Unable to directly access God, for Hugo it is the act of contemplation that best consoles the believer, by relating the flux of nature to the impermanent state of our mortal condition.

## La Vita Contemplativa

Both Greek *θεωρία* (“theoria”) and Latin *contemplatio* first signified not just looking at things, whether with the eyes or with the mind, but marvelling at the way things are, applying equally to both the world around us and to its imaginative reconstruction through memory. Aristotle’s famous defence of “theoria” as leading to the greatest sense of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (~340BC), by virtue of its being able to be practiced without the necessary requirement of others,[[94]](#footnote-94) is not only foundational to Western classical philosophy, but also to an understanding of solitude in its salutary benefits for the well-being of one’s interior life. This fulfillment paradoxically occurs when the individual steps outside of their “inner self” and becomes immersed in their external surroundings. Hence for Hugo, writing what he considered to be his personal memoirs while in the relative solitude of exile, a connection can be drawn between this classical definition of contemplation and Hugo’s own process of self-reflection, captured in his poetry, that centres largely around the newfound contingency of his situation in Jersey and Guernsey.[[95]](#footnote-95)

Important to recognise as well is the historical enculturation of a specifically Christian inflection of the meaning of contemplation within *Les Contemplations*. Redirecting the gaze of Greek philosophy from the cosmos towards a deeper introspection of the individual, works such as Augustine’s *Confessions* (397-400AD) redefined contemplation as an interior witness to God’s presence and action in the furthest recesses of the self (Augustine’s *interior intimo meo*, “more intimate to me than I am to myself”) conceived as a countering gaze that in turn ennobles the individual.[[96]](#footnote-96) Undoubtedly, echoes of the tradition of delving into the “*mystikos*” of Christianity can be heard in Book VI of Hugo’s *Contemplations,* although there is great complexity to the term “mystic”[[97]](#footnote-97) that is barely breached therein and that would make one reluctant to label it a “mystical” work.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Many critics have of course noted the semantic proximity between Hugo’s title and Lamartine’s earlier *Méditations poétiques* (1820), clearly signalling both the influence and a homage to the fellow poet and life-long friend. Another possible inspiration is Rousseau’s *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782), less in the title itself than in an intellectual heritage: a Romanticised form of contemplation, where the dichotomies of self/society and nature/civility are amplified when pursuing one’s true authentic self.

As artistical renderings of this quest, Lamartine and Hugo’s collections differ, for the most part, in scope. The *Méditations*, when first published, contained only twenty-four poems, mostly elegiac, of relatively short length. Hugo’s *Contemplations,* on the other hand, contains one hundred and fifty-eight poems of mixed genres and lengths, displaying a much more ambitious attempt at exhausting the portrayal of an authentic lyrical subject. The exposition he gave to his daughter Adèle upon finishing the last few poems clearly articulates this process of expansion:

Voici comment je vois *Les Contemplations.* D'abord des choses légères, joyeuses, lumineuses ; je mettrai, vous savez, ces vers sur cette petite fille, puis de la critique, puis de la moquerie, puis de la gaieté. Le livre s'assombrira ; je mettrai la mort de ma fille, puis l'exil, puis je sortirai du monde et j'entrerai dans la vie extra humaine. Le livre commencera par l'enfantillage et s'élargira jusqu'à Dieu.[[99]](#footnote-99)

Put otherwise, Hugo is describing the process of contemplation as consisting of a dilation or expansion from the subject’s experiences of their life-events towards stepping outside of oneself (‘la vie extra humaine’) and ultimately achieving an expanded state of consciousness that Hugo calls ‘Dieu’.[[100]](#footnote-100) Later that year, it would become more obvious that this revelation can only be reached upon death, noting to Jules Janin: ‘C’est surtout dans la tombe qu’on voit Dieu.’[[101]](#footnote-101) What makes the chosen poems from Book VI so interesting in *Les Contemplations* is precisely this willingness to confront death and the existential anguish produced therein by contemplating an ersatz form of divinity in oneself. All of which is facilitated by the medium of writing, capable of portraying a written self (an “object self”) on paper that tempted Hugo, as the consummate Romantic writer, by its prospect of immortality and divinisation.

# Lyricism and the Romantic Self: “Ibo”

Contrary to the date given by Hugo at the bottom of the poem, manuscript dating for “Ibo” is set as the 24th of July 1854, a full year later than January 1853. This can best be explained as serving curatorial purposes, seeing as it was placed as the second poem in the sixth book “Au bord de l’infini” of *Les Contemplations,* after “Le Pont”, which is dated December 1852, one year after the *coup d’État* of Napoleon the Third. Fittingly, “Le Pont” describes a white ghostlike figure that approaches the speaker and takes up his volition to ‘bâtir un pont géant sur des millions d’arches,’[[102]](#footnote-102) later revealed to be the personification of prayer, then to be performed by the speaker in the poem “Ibo.”

The title of the poem is Latin for “I will go” and is reiterated seven times in the form of the French simple future first person singular ‘j’irai’ across the poem’s thirty-three stanzas of four crossing-rhyme lines that alternate between eight and four syllables. Where is the speaker going? The poem is less explicit than its later counterpart “L’âme à la poursuite du vrai” in *L’Art d’être grand-père* (1877)but is equally relentless as a profession of faith that dares to scrutinise all worldly forms against the plight of death and to plot one’s way towards an absent addressee, who is as protean as they are.

A fine example of Hugo’s lyricism, “Ibo” offers an excellent starting-point in which to begin an analysis of the use of enunciative address in forming the Romantic lyrical subject. Alongside Jean-Michel Maulpoix, we will break down the poem according to three guiding criteria, identified as ‘un triple principe d’amplification, de conversion et d’unification, soutenus par cette machine à produire des métamorphoses qu’est l’imaginaire qui crée ou recrée verbalement le monde à sa guise, comme Dieu, mais à coups de métaphores.’[[103]](#footnote-103) Working backwards through Maulpoix’s schema, we will start with his last point, unification, as it denotes the underlying stability of the *je* speaker as the Romantic lyrical subject. We will then look at conversion, understood as a form of triangulated address that both turns between the speaker, the addressee, and the reader and seeks to spiritually convert the latter, finishing with the principle of amplification, understood as superlative speech. Each principle, in turn, will contribute to a theological poetics of the *Romantic self* that extends beyond that of Hugo as autobiographical subject and creates a phenomenology of divinity focused on the hiddenness of God that the speaker seeks to reveal.

## The Unified Subject of the *Erlebnislyrik*[[104]](#footnote-104)

A helpful way to approach the poem is by dividing it into three sections. The first section begins from the incipit ‘Dites, pourquoi, dans l’insondable’ (v.1), and runs until the start of the eighteenth stanza ‘L’homme, en cette époque agitée’ (v.69), and focuses on the first-person speaker establishing a relationship by way of imperative address to an unknown ‘vous’ recipient, who is progressively layered with various identities until the enunciative address is shifted instead towards the third person (‘l’homme’). The third person singular then subsumes the speaker until they reappear triumphantly in the line ‘Je suis l’esprit’ (v.96), transforming into a wider range of figures, from ‘le poète farouche’ (v.101) to ‘Mage effaré’ (v.116) and finally back into the initial winged lion towards the end of the first section. Syntactically, these metaphors of bestial transformation often stretch across stanzas, forming verbal structures that span up to sixteen lines in the third section, producing in turn a flowing effect that ends abruptly with the final lines ‘Et, si vous aboyez, tonnerres, / Je rugirai’ (v.132). From this ending, it is clear that the speaker’s griffon persona provides the best figurative grounds for formal unity to the poem.

However, Maulpoix’s lyrical principle of unification allows us to go further. He states : ‘le lyrisme serait, par excellence, le contraire de l’imitation, dans la mesure où son souci primordial est d’exalter, voire de diviniser le singulier,’[[105]](#footnote-105) a statement that applies very well to the speaker in “Ibo.” The proposition is also entirely in line with the German Idealists in their Romantic theorising of the lyrical, wherein the lyric poet’s subjectivity tends towards internalising the external world to the point of converting *mimesis* into their own uniquely reconceived representation.[[106]](#footnote-106) In other words, it is the speaker’s self-consciousness, not nature, that becomes the privileged site of knowledge.

As previously stated, however, this conception of a historically-grounded, unifying presence behind the lyrical speaker needs to be nuanced. In *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler claims that the translation of Käte Hamburger’s *The Logic of Literature* into French in 1986 offered a counterpoise to the “death of the author” motif then in vogue amongst French literary theorists, turning attention instead towards how the speaker’s linguistic function preserves an essential connection to the historical world, without which it would be difficult to adequately interpret the text.[[107]](#footnote-107) Commenting directly on Hugo’s application of the *Romantic self*, Ludmila Charles-Wurtz makes a similar observation, conceding that Hugo himself is not to be immediately associated with the speaker but that ‘le “je” accueille donc plusieurs consciences, dont l’interaction est la condition même de l’unité du discours.[[108]](#footnote-108) Or, in the words of Paul Bénichou, who retains the historical subject as primary but accounts for a doubling of identity with the written *Romantic self*:

C’est affirmer l'existence, dans le poète, d'un être de communication qui double son être intime et privé, d'un personnage en somme, toujours *moi* quoi qu'il en dise, mais *moi* second, transcendant le premier et en qui réside son ministère. Le poète agit, il enseigne le public par la vertu de cette figure idéale attachée à lui, substitut laïque de la divinité inspiratrice qui, dans l'écrivain sacré, le prophète ou Jésus, est censée doubler la personne terrestre.[[109]](#footnote-109)

This is typical not just of Hugo’s lyricism but of several other Romantic French poets, including Lamartine and Alfred de Vigny. Nonetheless, it is Hugo’s preface to *Les Contemplations* that mostfamously claims this capaciousness of Romantic lyricism to resound with other individuals.[[110]](#footnote-110) From start to finish, “Ibo” is a reiteration of this belief, wagering on its ability to not just speak to other individuals but also to the otherwise inanimate in nature and, ultimately, to its creator.

To perceive this in the poem, we will need to set aside the autobiographical status of the speaker and focus on the manner in which they are presented. Although the first-person singular pronoun (“je”) is only used for the first time in line eleven (‘vous savez bien que j’ai des ailes’), the lyrical subject has already been established as a questioner from the exact start of the poem, where the word ‘pourquoi’ is anaphorically repeated three times before the “je” is formally announced and used twice directly after. Even the speaker’s first possessive statement ‘j’ai des ailes’ is repeated twice more in the first section, carrying across an intensifying series of “je” statements that construct a represented “moi” first as a bird, then as the winged lion of St Mark:

Je suis oiseau comme cet être

Qu’Amos rêvait,

Que saint Marc voyait apparaître

A son chevet,[[111]](#footnote-111)

These first figurations of the Romantic lyrical self, determined by metaphors of flight and ascension, are repeated towards the ending of the poem and constitute the central motif of ambition. Yet it is important to insist that this is only a metaphorical figuration of the envisioned “moi” and thus just one manifestation of the lyrical subject which then changes in the second section as it interacts with the third person singular. Only from line ninety-six (‘Je suis l’esprit) does the sovereignty of the first-person speaker return in a string of metaphors that depict Hugo’s preferred lyrical figures:

Je suis le poëte farouche,

L’homme devoir,

Le souffle des douleurs, la bouche

Du clairon noir ;

Le rêveur qui sur ses registres

Met les vivants,

Qui mêle des strophes sinistres

Aux quatre vents ;

Le songeur ailé, l’âpre athlète

Au bras nerveux,

Et je traînerais la comète

Par les cheveux.[[112]](#footnote-112)

Overtly masculine, these iterations of the speaker’s identity as fulfilling a dignified and sombre social office come at the expense of a diminishment of the speaker’s ‘vous’ counterpart, who is first personalised (‘Pourquoi vous cachez-vous’) but then relegated to various forms of natural elements (‘Dans vos flammes et dans vos ondes’, ‘tonnerres’). From this shift we see that the Romantic lyrical self in “Ibo” is better defined by optative expressions; that is, they receive their identity from the recurring volition to become expansive and all-encompassing, to absorb the addressee into their own conception as a dilated self. As the speaker becomes increasingly omnipresent, so too does the identity of the ‘vous’ recipient begin to assimilate to their own self-consciousness.

## Conversion Towards the Third Person and Indirect Address

In the second section of “Ibo”, apostrophic address turns away from the ‘vous’ addressee and instead speaks to ‘‘L’homme, en cette époque agitée’ (v.69), later named ‘le peuple’ (v.85) and ‘le grand martyr’ (v.87). This turning towards the third person forms a conversion in its etymological sense (“a turn towards”) as well as a conversion of substance, attempting to address ‘l’homme’ as both a singular and a plural entity:

L’homme, en cette époque agitée,

Sombre océan,

Doit faire comme Prométhée

Et comme Adam.

Il doit ravir au ciel austère

L’éternel feu ;

Conquérir son propre mystère,

Et voler Dieu.[[113]](#footnote-113)

The common interpretation of this passage has been that of a prophet proclaiming to their people. Structurally, however, we can also look at it as an intentional triangulation between the speaker, the object of their utterance and readers of the poem, implicated as forming part of the addressee ‘l’homme.’ This procedure is similar to a dramatic monologue, where the speaker is indirectly addressing the audience while ostensibly speaking to themselves. Nevertheless, the bourgeois readers of the Second Empire would have interpreted this passage differently to how a contemporary reader might, not just in terms of the Greek and biblical allusions within it but also in what it means to ‘conquérir son propre mystère / Et voler Dieu.’ A radical instruction at the time no doubt, but also consistent with the Greek myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods and the biblical account of the Fall. What we can conclude from this passage is that the change of enunciative structure permits the speaker to provoke readers into a spiritual conversion, alluding to these mythological transgressions as examples of personally assuming one’s own search for God.

That the speaker would be seeking to encourage and inspire their new addressee in this passage is no surprise. Indeed, fourteen lines into the poem the speaker is already adjoining ‘l’homme sombre’ to the first person plural pronoun ‘nous’, in ‘Pourquoi vous cachez-vous dans l’ombre / Qui nous confond ? /’ (v.13-14). But, with the apostrophic address in the second section directed towards a group instead of a deity, the question of the possibility of what Nicholas Manning calls ‘l’union intersubjective’[[114]](#footnote-114) arises. For Manning, Romantic poetry is characterised by a certain credibility afforded to writers such as Hugo or Goethe that successfully connect their social *ethos* to an authorial voice, resulting in readers automatically entrusting sincerity to the speakers in the poems. Since the crisis of modern lyricism, however, this authority has been challenged by writers and has forced a re-evaluation of the lyrical subject, as mentioned above. Consequently, we can read the following passage as presenting readers with two options when they identify with ‘l’homme’ in the following lines:

L’homme a besoin, dans sa chaumière,

Des vents battu,

D’une loi qui soit sa lumière

Et sa vertu.[[115]](#footnote-115)

Either one posits Hugo as the speaker and interprets these lines positively or negatively, depending on their reaction to the biographical poet, or they distrust the sincerity of the lyrical subject and wish to avoid being indirectly addressed as ‘l’homme’ altogether. Avid readers of Hugo’s era would probably fall into the first instance (as Mallarmé’s half-lamenting comment seems to attest), while Manning would contend that sceptical readers would fall into the second instance.

## Amplified Address

The third principle of Hugo’s lyricism that informs the Romantic self in “Ibo” is the use of amplified address. Specifically, superlative terms are often used when describing the speaker’s commitment to pursuing the divine, resulting in a stretched tension between a literal and symbolic interpretation of the language employed. In the following passage we can understand it as a lyrical device that overstates in order to convey an excessive ambition with no end-point:

J’irai lire la grande bible ;

J’entrerai nu

Jusqu’au tabernacle terrible

De l’inconnu,[[116]](#footnote-116)

Here the speaker has left addressing the ‘vous’ of the first section and has begun to amplify the semantic implication of “threshold” metaphors, with the next line continuing ‘Jusqu’au seuil de l’ombre et du vide’ (v.125). The ‘grande bible’ and ‘tabernacle terrible’ are of course religious references that signify revelation and ritual respectively, adjoined by the purificatory divestment of the self - ‘j’entrerai nu’ - in order to move from one to the other. Together, the indeterminate end-point described here, taken in tandem with the religious vocabulary, illustrates Georges Gusdorf’s primary characterisation of ‘l’exigence romantique’, which demands the transcendence of meaning in relation to expression.[[117]](#footnote-117) Phrased otherwise, the semantic clash between the metaphors of movement (moving towards something) and knowledge (revealing the unknown) forces a moment where the reader must evaluate a potentially nonsensical utterance from the speaker and glean a more symbolic sense. Similar to the rhetorical function of hyperbole in public address, where the orator is given license to prioritise dramatic effect over reality, semblance over veracity, the use of amplification by the speaker in “Ibo” is focused on promoting an enthusiasm for breaking away from received sensibilities, relying in the process on the symbolic connotations of a religious vocabulary to carry this conviction.

Neither is this an isolated incident in “Ibo”, for the intersection between amplification and the sublime is notably close in Hugo’s poetry.[[118]](#footnote-118) It is the site where the finite meets the infinite, or rather, in this case, where the lyrical subject claims to be constituted in oxymoronic binaries.[[119]](#footnote-119) Towards the end of the poem, the full extension of their volition is pronounced:

Je suis celui que rien n’arrête,

Celui qui va,

Celui dont l’âme est toujours prête

A Jéhovah ;[[120]](#footnote-120)

At first glance, it seems that the speaker’s identification with the omnipotence of the Hebrew God crosses over from hyperbole to hubris, however the rhyming link (‘va’ / ‘Jéhovah’) is justified when one considers the importance of the act of enunciation in Judeo-Christian theology and the creation of matter *ex nihilo* through speech. Since the days of *Hernani* and his coming-to-fame,[[121]](#footnote-121) this elevation of the verb to a divine level has had major implications for Hugo and how he conceives of the Romantic self as a demiurgic force: ‘Dire moi est un attribut de souveraineté...Les philosophes qui ont rêvé un Dieu, principe et force aveugle, n’ayant pas conscience de lui-même, ont placé Dieu beaucoup au-dessous de l’homme... Dieu dit : *je.* Point immense qui détruit tout le panthéisme.’[[122]](#footnote-122) When the lyrical poet speaks, he argues, they are always speaking hyperbolically, because they are re-enacting this transcendental authority over the text and addressing themselves towards God. Yet, one must account for an encumbrance: the speaker’s *persona* or written object-self as a “moi” can only ever be constituted in the finite terms of language and is thus never capable of achieving the equivalence of transcendental omniscience. Nevertheless, Hugo’s statement of the divine as a personal force compels the Romantic lyrical self to become as much like the “moi de l’infini” as possible, surpassing the biographical and historical subject entirely.

# Le Moi de l’infini : “Magnitudo Parvi”

Placed as the last poem in the volume “Autrefois”, “Magnitudo Parvi” (“The Greatness of the Small”) occupies a critical juncture in *Les Contemplations,* none the least because it features the appearance of a young girl who can be identified biographically as Léopoldine before her death in 1843. The first seventy lines of the poem can be traced back to 1839,[[123]](#footnote-123) while the remaining seven hundred or so were written in the winter of 1855. Once again, we can see how Hugo back-dates a poem to fit it in the overall narrative of the collection.

The original beginning of the poem, however, does initiate its format as consisting of six-line stanzas in the first section (12-12-6-12-12-6 syllables), followed by a start at the second section of alternations between twelve-line octosyllabic stanzas and seven-line alexandrines, which were later expanded upon. The third demarcated section in the poem (III) then changes to one hundred and sixteen quatrains describing the shepherd’s experience of communion with nature before eleven six-line stanzas of his becoming a ‘mage’ figure, finishing finally with the fourth section’s six stanzas of the speaker concluding to the young girl that the gift given to the shepherd is no less than the power of contemplation and prayer.

Despite its length, “Magnitudo Parvi” has been considered a fine example of what John Frey calls ‘sustained allegory’[[124]](#footnote-124) while also illustrating the Romantic lyricism identified in “Ibo”. Most notably, we will be investigating the concretisation of a “moi de l’infini” by first focusing on the connotative and referential functions of the *je* speaker in the poem, then moving on to the use of prosopopoeia to aid the 'sustained allegory' of the poem in its relation to the sublime of Nature, before finishing with a brief discussion on the theological parallels of the vatic utterances pronounced on behalf of the shepherd figure as an example of the “moi de l’infini”. We will be following a sketch of this written object-self as identified by Baudelaire, reviewing as he does the most distinguishable elements of Hugo’s lyricism in *Les Contemplations* while taking a cautionary distance against the risk of treating the speaker as a sage:

Entre les mains d’un autre poète que Victor Hugo, de pareils thèmes et de pareils sujets auraient pu trop facilement adopter la forme didactique, qui est la plus grande ennemie de la véritable poésie... En décrivant ce qui est, le poète se dégrade et descend au rang de professeur ; en racontant le possible, il reste fidèle à sa fonction ; il est une âme collectivequi interroge, qui pleure, qui espère, et qui devinequelquefois.[[125]](#footnote-125)

Of course, Baudelaire’s aversion to didactic verse is largely influenced by Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Poetic Principle* (1850) and its redefining of the impact of poetry in terms of succinctness, as well as illustration over demonstration. There are three components in this passage that accord with our broader reading of the text. Firstly, what Baudelaire calls ‘une âme collective’ can be understood as the “moi de ‘l’infini” in that, as we shall see, the latter operates as a kind of aggregate capable of speaking on behalf of all. This is in turn accomplished by being able to ‘racont[er] le possible’, setting new phenomenological horizons under which reality can be both subverted and perceived. Thirdly, when considered together, the resulting figure assimilated to the “moi de l’infini” is that of a prophet, ‘qui pleure, qui espère, et qui devine quelquefois.’

## Divine Identification

We have seen already in “Ibo” how the speaker’s self-representation is fluid and uncontainable, driven in no small measure by their confident optative assertions and their willingness to speak on behalf of others, as well as a doubling of the historical person with their ministerial persona. In “Magnitudo Parvi”, this doubling is visually enacted by the transformation of the shepherd towards the end of the third section:

Il sent plus que l’homme en lui naître ;

Il sent, jusque dans ses sommeils,

Lueur à lueur, dans son être,

L’infiltration des soleils.[[126]](#footnote-126)

Now as a ‘mage’ - that is, as an embodiment of expanded consciousness - this figure promotes the efficacy of contemplation and the asceticism of solitude that Hugo naturally associated with exile, by internalising the observable infinity of nature into its psychic counterpart (‘L’infiltration des soleils’).

Though the singular figure depicted in the poem is but one example of this process, the idea behind the transformation that is inadvertently expressed by the speaker reflects the ‘âme collective’ that Baudelaire identified and that forms the basis of the “moi de l’infini.” The name comes from *Les Misérables,* where the dying revolutionary member of the National Convention exclaims to the Catholic bishop Myriel that God is infinite self-consciousness.[[127]](#footnote-127) Yet even before writing this important section of the novel, Hugo’s depiction of the mage-figure as one that straddles self-consciousness and self-transcendence in “Magnitudo Parvi” captures what Jacques Seebacher calls the ‘bipolarité’ of the “moi de l’infini.”[[128]](#footnote-128) Not that the speaker can ever fully realise the same level of infinity as perceived in natural processes, but they are inspired nonetheless by the absorbing nature of consciousness, to the point that the dispossession of any fixed self is evidence of their desire to fully occupy the position of a *pure*, unsituated subject.[[129]](#footnote-129)

Interestingly, Hugo’s poetics of a transcendent lyrical subject aligns closely to what in process theology is a key conception of the relation between creature and creator. Guy Rosa comments that ‘ [l’expression] Moi de l’infini’...n’a guère de sens si elle doit qualifier un être existant et stable...Il n’y a donc pas à proprement parler de Dieu, du moins pas de Dieu distinct de l’humanité, sinon comme anticipation du terme de son progrès. Moins objet de foi que d’action, le Dieu de Hugo est un Dieu à faire.’[[130]](#footnote-130) Rosa’s comments highlight the cross-over between God’s contingency in certain theologies such as process theology[[131]](#footnote-131) and the lyrical subject in “Magnitudo Parvi,” centring as it does around the connotative function of the speaker’s utterances. Instead of narrative action in the poem, what the reader is given is the speaker’s desire for action; instead of resolution, we are held in a state of conditional anticipation from the very start (‘Si nous pouvions…’, ‘Tu verrais !’[[132]](#footnote-132)). Consequently, there is a kind of symbiosis between the speaker of the poem and the divine personhood they observe in nature, understood as concomitant with their own experience of self-consciousness. Claude Rétat defines this overlap as Hugo’s exile-period discovery of a ‘lieu de réciprocités des forces’[[133]](#footnote-133) with God, a space recognised as the disjunct between natural phenomena and the mind. For Hugo, both realities (the external world and the internal self) are vital in shaping the phenomenological horizons in which we are to live.

## Animating the Universe with Consciousness

Once granted that the lyricism under study contains this insistence of the self as enmeshed in the world, and consequently of divinity as also contained within worldly phenomena, we can then see how the sublime features in “Magnitudo Parvi.” In fact, the term ‘Le moi de l’infini’ is also a contraction of the expression ‘le moi latent de l’infini patent’ that Hugo used in his essay *William Shakespeare* (1864)to describe both the infinite in nature and its hidden personalism. What results from the equation of the irreducibility of the self to God is the opening up of nature’s multifariousness to human knowledge (the possible) and, with it, the potential vertigo and failure of assimilating a new phenomenological experience to one’s sense of self (the sublime).

A historical reading of the second and third sections of the poem would recognise the philosophical influence of Jean Reynaud and Pierre Leroux, concentrated first in the idea of a multiverse - novel at the time - then on the concept of metempsychosis that are evidently at the forefront of the cosmic descriptions. While Hugo was certainly familiar with Reynaud’s *Terre et Ciel* (1854) and Leroux’s *De l’Humanité* (1840), wherein the utopian ideals of a new religious consciousness are espoused, it would be an associative leap to say that they are simply rendered poetical in “Magnitudo Parvi.”[[134]](#footnote-134) Going back as far as Aristotle’s *Poetics,* one could say that it would be violating the principle that poetry does not state the truth discursively, but explores its possibilities in visual terms. Nonetheless, we can at least link the following lines back to these theosophist writers of Hugo’s time:

Tous ces êtres, comme nous-même

S’en vont en pâles tourbillons ;

La création mêle et sème

Leur cendre à de nouveaux sillons ;

Un vient, un autre le remplace,

Et passe sans laisser de trace ;

Le souffle les crée et les chasse ;

Le gouffre en proie aux quatre vents,

Comme la mer aux vastes lames,

Mêle éternellement ses flammes

A ce sombre écroulement d’âmes

De fantômes et de vivants ![[135]](#footnote-135)

The pacing of this stanza reinforces a hurried exchange and the melded imagery of cosmic forces that the present indicative verbs suggest; creation itself is personified as working (‘mêle et sème / Leur cendre à de nouveaux sillons’) and the ‘souffle’ that both creates and destroys shares obvious parallels to the Genesis account of the Spirit of God moving across the waters.[[136]](#footnote-136) The high register of lyricism also leads to a verticalisation of the cosmic scale on display, building in intensity before dissolving in front of the reader’s eyes. Yvon Le Scanff relates this use of the sublime back to its lyrical function and specifically to the divinisation of the *je* speaker as a demiurgic creator: ‘la profération poétique y est prolifération cosmique : l'exclamation [du poète] est le signe d’une vectorisation hallucinée de la proposition comme imminence du Possible ; la nominalisation indéfinie est présentation du mot-chose à l’état naissant.’[[137]](#footnote-137) In other words, for the Romantic poet, speech in its very utterance and naming of objects in the world is a privileged site of verbal creation, an ideal supported by the observable world and its fluctuations between the apparition of phenomena and their disappearance (‘un vient, un autre le remplace, / Et passe sans laisser de trace’), replicating the movement of speech between noise and silence.

Reinforcing this animation of the cosmos by speech and self-consciousness is Hugo’s use of prosopopoeia in the lines ‘La terre s’écriant : J’existe ! / Le soleil répliquant : Je suis !’ (v. 660-661). Such is the extent to which nature is enlivened by the speaker that it begins to mimic the existential declarations of the speaker! Earlier on, when they are advising their daughter with the maxim that ‘contempler les choses, / C’est finir par ne plus les voir’ (v. 576-7), it is made clear that the individualisation of the subject (being able to pronounce “I”) is made at the expense of denying the various phenomena of nature their appearance, and that, conversely, the act of contemplating an object in its relation to one’s self begins to dissolve the barrier between subject/object, speaker/addressee, viewer/viewed.[[138]](#footnote-138) This epistemological provocation by Hugo, advocating for an increase of the ‘possible’ through the sublime and its turbulence, is similarly deployed by means of personifying nature across the entire poem. Even when speech is not indicated, the communion of conscious-endowed nature is achieved by means of vision instead of sound, as the child is told in the fourth-final stanza:

Enfant, ce feu de pâtre à une âme mêlé,

Et cet astre, splendeur du plafond constellé

Que l’éclair et la foudre gardent,

Ces deux phares du gouffre où l’être flotte et fuit,

Ces deux clartés du deuil, ces deux yeux de la nuit,

Dans l’immensité se regardent.[[139]](#footnote-139)

Here the conviction of the speaker is that the mind is absorbed within the visible effects of nature (‘ce feu de pâtre à une âme mêlé'), and that the invisible interlocutor behind nature is none other than a creator God who constantly animates the universe in an infinitely pluralistic way. Rephrased, we could say that the immensity of nature is reciprocated by the immensity of the interior self, resulting in the visual personification of ‘ces deux yeux de la nuit’ that look upon the phenomena of nature in the same way that one ends up by looking within during the act of contemplation. Just as the ‘moi de l’infini’ serves as both Hugo’s definition of God and as a fundamental enunciative principle in his lyricism, so too the allegorical duality between the shepherd’s fire and the star are re-figurations of the forms of phenomena that appeal to an interminable depth behind their appearance.

## ‘Une théologie du moi’

If it is tempting to conclude, alongside Anne Ubersfeld, that Hugo’s exile-period religious and philosophical positions amount to ‘une théologie du moi,’[[140]](#footnote-140), then that is probably owing to the all-enveloping first-person enunciative structure in Hugo’s lyrical poetry. Indeed, such is the overarching eagerness of the speaker to associate themselves with the divine that we are given statements towards the end of the shepherd’s transformation that resonate with a kind of theomorphism:

Il boit, hors de l’inabordable,

Du surhumain, du sidéral,

Les délices du formidable,

L’âpre ivresse de l’idéal ;

Son être, dont rien ne surnage,

S’engloutit dans le gouffre bleu ;

Il fait ce sublime naufrage ;

Et, murmurant sans cesse : - Dieu, -

Parmi les feuillages farouches,

Il songe, l’âme et l’œil là-haut,

A l’imbécilité des bouches

Qui prononcent un autre mot ![[141]](#footnote-141)

Disdainful of those who prevent themselves from recognising their own internal divinity, the metaphorical consciousness-raising of the shepherd demonstrates what Romain Vignest-Amar calls ‘le caractère christique’[[142]](#footnote-142) of the mage figure that is later developed by Hugo into the concept of genius in *William Shakespeare*. The nexus of semantic resonance between mages and shepherds, of course, denotes strong biblical associations to the Nativity of Christ and his rule as the “good shepherd”, in contrast to the Old Testament kings and rulers who were castigated by various prophets for failing to tend to their people.[[143]](#footnote-143) On an acoustic level, the difficult pronunciation of the line ‘l’âpre ivresse de l’idéal’ reinforces a sense of frenzied ecstasy that is typical of Hugo’s broader sonic instantiations of the sublime.[[144]](#footnote-144) Furthermore, the word ‘Dieu’ in this passage signifies the name that is given to the process of searching for shared intersubjectivity between the speaker and addressee, in which the ‘Moi de l’infini’ would find its mutual fulfillment with the collective, self-conscious strivings of humankind.[[145]](#footnote-145) Hugo’s portrayal of the spiritual conversion of a shepherd is thus utopic revelry as well as layered allegory of his own idiosyncratic rendering of what it means to ‘[faire] ce sublime naufrage’ within oneself and be open to visions of the future.

Moreover, just as the God of the Hebrew Scriptures declared his own aseity (“I am that I am”), establishing perpetual transcendence beyond the immanent in nature, Hugo’s theological poetics of embedding divinity in self-consciousness means that, not only is the divine immanentised, but also that any phenomenon in the text must be considered in relation to the speaker’s own self-conscious ipseity. Ludmila Charles-Wurtz phrases it thus: ‘Dieu, pour se faire entendre, ne parle pas, mais donne à voir, dans un constant effort de traduction du discours en spectacle... Dieu se définit comme une parole en puissance, comme une voix contenue.’[[146]](#footnote-146) Fully immanentised, classical metaphysical questions around the proofs of God’s existence become irrelevant for Hugo, exchanged for his poetic method of articulating how God is given to consciousness and, indeed, lies behind it. In Husserlian terms, ‘Dieu est l’idée de l’infini en moi, il est la subjectivité idéalisant infiniment elle-même.’[[147]](#footnote-147) Set upon the cosmological stage of “Magnitudo Parvi”, Hugo’s ‘théologie du moi’ is no less than a manifestation of this constant internalisation of the force of subjectivity, visualised through the act of contemplation in its making of the invisible visible. We should nevertheless be wary of concluding that the speaker’s subjectivity is *fully* transparent to itself and revealed in nature, for unlike God, there is an existential account to settle when the object-self is too readily bound to nature’s fluctuations and must go through the ritual passage of decay and death.

# Chapter 2: Uncovering Finitude: Writing the Exiled Self in *Les Contemplations* (Continued)

# Negating the Self: “Pleurs dans la nuit”

So far, the written selves that we have uncovered in “Ibo” and “Magnitudo Parvi” reveal projections of the modern subject that are vast and all-encompassing, reflecting acts of contemplation that fill the external surrounds described in the poems with visions of the conscious *ego* striving for autonomy. In this second chapter, however, we will also analyse the opposite of this expansion: a corresponding shrinking of self-presence, due to the uncovering of individual finitude and mortality. On a phenomenological level, this process of uncovering is frustrated by visual metaphors of obscurity and darkness and accompanied by affects of melancholy and anxiety. Only in the last poem of the chapter, “Les Mages”, will we return full circle to Hugo’s writing of the self that is not conditioned by death, but rather by the need for interpersonal communion on a universal level.

Similar in length to “Magnitudo Parvi”, “Pleurs dans la nuit” functions in a way as its existential counterpart. While the former sits nostalgically on the brink of the first half of *Les Contemplations,* the latter is to be found in the last book, between “Croire; mais pas en nous”, an exhortation to humility, and “Un jour, le morne esprit”, a short vignette on St John the Evangelist. The same six-line stanza form of four alexandrines broken by two hexasyllabic lines is again deployed in the meter, this time running continuously through the one-hundred and thirteen stanzas, resulting in a swelling rhythm that prolongs the speaker’s meditations on the question of the finality of death.

Yet, whereas “Magnitudo Parvi” moves concentrically towards an expansion of consciousness that breaches out into the cosmos, “Pleurs dans la nuit” contains a more distinct narrative progression, switching from the perception of a funeral taking place to the speaker’s reflections on the significance of the event. Divided into sixteen sections, the speaker shifts across time and space in order to muse about death in a manner that breaks down the revelatory ability of the *je* speaker and their claim to autonomous and uninterrupted subjectivity. As Claude Rétat observes, while aspects of the speaker’s disquieting vision can be related in a metaphysical sense to what “La bouche d’ombre” states as factual revelation, the central thematic of the poem lies not so much in its content but, like “Ibo”, in its ‘attitude à prendre’[[148]](#footnote-148) against the existential anguish experienced when thinking of one’s mortality.

Harkening back to the *memento mori* motif of Medieval and Renaissance art, the primary imperative expressed is one of denouncing frivolity and vanity (particularly sections 11-14), and espousing an interiorisation of guilt in regards to one’s present existence over the deceased of the past.[[149]](#footnote-149) This sense of shame echoes in part the line of Eriphile in Racine’s *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1669)*:* ‘Dans la nuit du tombeau j’enfermerai ma honte.’[[150]](#footnote-150) Closer to the period of composition, Gérard de Nerval’s “El Desdichado”(1854) reprises Racine’s line in a more condensed and symbolic form (‘Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m’as consolé/ Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d’Italie’[[151]](#footnote-151)) and would certainly have been read by Hugo only months before writing the first draft of “Pleurs dans la nuit.” At the very least, both poems share an elegiac and lamenting tone, as well as a Pascalian outlook that seeks to shrink the importance of the self that is often accompanied by a melancholic disposition.[[152]](#footnote-152)

Questions of genre and context aside, we will be focusing most strongly on, firstly, Hugo’s representation of the funeral sequence as an initial “scene-event” for the speaker’s further meditations on mortality, followed by a writing of melancholy in line with Ross Chambers’ analysis of the affect written across 1850s French literature,[[153]](#footnote-153) and finally how both intertwine to create a poetics that aligns with a theologically-informed thinking through of creaturely finitude in relation to God.

## Free Variation in Phantasy on a Corpse

To begin with, Husserl’s conceptualisation of what he calls ‘free variation in phantasy’ or, in more technical terms, performing the ‘eidetic reduction,’ denotes the imagination’s ability to re-create a phenomenon, stripping it of its accidental components and attempting to reduce it to its essential qualities. For example, when a real-world experience is perceived by a subject and held in retention through memory, it can be reimagined and reformed as an exercise to help refine the experience’s essential nature without depriving its visual presentation to consciousness.[[154]](#footnote-154) Taken in this sense, the act of 'free variation in phantasy' effectively mirrors artistic practice. We can draw a striking example in the phenomenon of the corpse as it is presented to the reader in “Pleurs dans la nuit”. Before the corpse is presented, the first marker of a related experience is in section four, when the speaker moves from their opening oration on finitude and mortality to suddenly observing an event: ‘O deuil ! qui passe là ? C’est un cercueil qu’on porte’ (v.89-90). The speaker then clarifies the setting as a cemetery in section six, with the line ‘Le corbillard franchit le seuil du cimetière’ (v.133). After which, the reader is given twenty stanzas of free variation in phantasy as the speaker ponders the possibility of souls trapped within inanimate objects, before the focus is put back on the open grave: ‘La fosse, plaie au flanc de la terre, est ouverte, / Et, béante, elle fait frissonner l’herbe verte’ (v.264-5). Not yet fully buried, we hear in section eleven that the mourners casually begin to depart and the grave keeper, echoing Shakespeare’s unsentimental literary character in *Hamlet,* is not far behind.[[155]](#footnote-155)

Once abandoned, the speaker re-endows the cadaver with life by means of the same lyrical animation we have seen in the previous poems under analysis and begins to apply this process of 'free variation in phantasy' on the deceased:

Le mort est seul. Il sent la nuit qui le dévore.

Quand naît le doux matin, tout l’azur de l’aurore,

Tous ses rayons si beaux,

Tout l’amour des oiseaux et leurs chansons sans nombre,

Vont aux berceaux dorés ; et, la nuit, toute l’ombre

Aboutit aux tombeaux.

Il entend des soupirs dans les fosses voisines ;

Il sent la chevelure affreuse des racines

Entrer dans son cercueil ;

Il est l’être vaincu dont s’empare la chose ;

Il sent un doigt obscur, sous sa paupière close,

Lui retirer son œil.

Il a froid ; car le soir, qui mêle à son haleine

Les ténèbres, l’horreur, le spectre et le phalène,

Glace ces durs grabats ;

Le cadavre, lié de bandelettes blanches,

Grelotte, et dans sa bière entend les quatre planches

Qui lui parlent tout bas.[[156]](#footnote-156)

J.C Ireson has pointed out that, although the narrative structure of “Pleurs dans la nuit” adopts in tone the genre of elegiac poetry, it does not fully satisfy the typical standards of the genre, in that the death and burial it celebrates is that of an unknown individual.[[157]](#footnote-157) On one hand, we can interpret this anonymity of the body as amplifying the *memento mori* message explicit in the poem, in that the undefined deceased can be identified with anyone, but we could also read this as the speaker’s own envisioned death, infused with their own voice, their own sensations, their own sense of self, but blended with the third-person singular (‘il sent’, ‘il entend’, ‘il a froid’). Perhaps most horrific of all is the image of a buried-yet-living individual having their own eye taken out by a ‘doigt obscur,’ negating in literal fashion Hugo’s privileging of the eye as artistic gaze. The description of a conscious subject trapped in an unresponsive and decaying body is, furthermore, the culmination of the poem’s central philosophical mind/body problem: that of the subjective production of an object-self set at odds against the cycles of nature and the body’s material corruption back into the earth.

Most importantly, the speaker’s verbal reanimation of the dead is jarred against an instance of alienation implicit in this conception of the mind/body problem, showing *a contrario* the meaninglessness of a body without a voice. Denying the equation of the body to the self and adamantly holding to a view of the active transcendental “I” as superior, the imagined corpse reflects a major tension in the way that Hugo’s idealism must resolve the issue of finitude and death, preferring a solution of alienation to the world rather than confronting the possibility of a dissolvable *ego.*

## The Melancholic Writer

The classical nemesis, however, that arises from such alienation of the self to the material world is melancholy, where the individual’s depression is exacerbated by their own perceived schism or disunion with the external world. Ross Chambers’ work *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism* focuses on the prevalence of this affect across its various manifestations in mid-nineteenth century French literature (most notably in Baudelaire, Nerval, and Flaubert), treating each writer’s disillusionment as symptomatic of their sublimated opposition to the political and demographic ascendency of the bourgeoisie class under Napoléon III.

Chambers' discussion on Hugo’s work is however restricted to the role that it plays in confirming his own working definition of melancholy during this epoque of rapid change, stating:

Anger at the 1851 coup d'état could be openly expressed only by those living outside France, and Hugo would be the only writer to do so, reviving political satire on the model of Juvenal from his exile in Jersey. In France, where such violence was blocked by self-censorship, this anger could be expressed only in a sublimated (and hence repressed) form by becoming a writing of melancholy. For melancholia is anger vaporized, the result of repression and a sign of the return of the repressed.[[158]](#footnote-158)

Strangely, Chambers does not draw on *Les Contemplations* as signalling a delayed-onset of what the mainland French writers were already experiencing, nor in its evident relation to Hugo’s loss of his daughter Léopoldine, but his definition of melancholy as ‘a sign of the return of the repressed’ nonetheless fits well with the visual ensnarement’s of death that we have identified thus far in “Pleurs dans la nuit.” For Chambers, the ‘“fogs” (*brouillards)* of melancholy are phenomenological descriptions of the seemingly scrambled forms (*brouillages*) of reality,’[[159]](#footnote-159) the imagery of which is testified from the opening lines of the poem:

Je suis l’être incliné qui jette ce qu’il pense ;

Qui demande à la nuit le secret du silence ;

Dont la brume emplit l’œil ;

Dans une ombre sans fond mes paroles descendent,

Et les choses sur qui tombent mes strophes rendent

Le son creux du cercueil.[[160]](#footnote-160)

The contrast between the speaker’s persona and the compounding lexicon of fog, shadow and darkness becomes a site of continuous interplay throughout the poem, broken up at times by the depictions of the funeral service but persisting to the penultimate stanza. The melancholy as ‘sign of the return of the repressed’ is, in this case, the speaker’s inability to banish the thought of death as an unretractable veil, inaccessible to the visual investigations of the active transcendental ego and against which the ‘strophes’ and ‘paroles’ of the poet rebound aimlessly.

Attempting to compensate for this absolute impasse, the enunciative structure of section seven - which is where we famously find the twenty stanzas of speculation on palingenesis and the fate of historical tyrants and dictators - enacts a melancholic attitude towards a natural phenomenon. In fact, the animation of rocks to speak (‘Quoi ! ce caillou dirait : - J’ai mis Thèbe en décombres!’, v. 206) says less about the metaphysical possibility of a soul inhabiting minerals than it does about a typically Romantic penchant towards *projecting* the speaker’s preoccupations onto inanimate objects; or, as Yves Vadé explains, ‘jouer avec une liberté inconnue jusque-là, d’énonciateurs variables et d’allocutaires multiples, transgressant sans la moindre peine l’opposition de l’animé et de l’inanimé, comme de l’abstrait et du concret.’[[161]](#footnote-161) Again, we see in the following lines a melancholic sense of alienation arising from the speaker that is transferred to the ‘cailloux’:

Est-ce que ces cailloux, tout pénétrés de crimes,

Dans l’horreur étouffés, scellés dans les abîmes,

Enviant l’ossement,

Sans air, sans mouvement, sans jour, sans yeux, sans bouche,

Entre l’herbe sinistre et le cercueil farouche

Vivraient affreusement ?[[162]](#footnote-162)

Stripping away through the rhetoric of amplification any sentient qualities in the stones (‘sans air, sans mouvement, sans jour, sans yeux, sans bouche’), the speaker is imagining their own self reduced to the imponderable nature of these stones, associated with the dead of the past. However, due to what Laurent Jenny calls ‘l’impropriété des figurants du moi’[[163]](#footnote-163) in relation to the typically unceasing Romantic hypertrophy of the self, this process ends up only reinforcing the physical alienation experienced by the speaker.

In section thirteen, totalling twenty-six stanzas, the melancholic attitude is accelerated in the opposite direction. Whereas the corpse was initially given a voice to refract back onto the speaker’s perceived lack of self in the face of death, now the fate of entire civilisations is announced:

Tous tombent ; l’un au bout d’une course insensée,

L’autre à son premier pas ; l’homme sur sa pensée,

La mère sur son nid ;

Et le porteur de sceptre et le joueur de flûte

S’en vont ; et rien ne dure ; et le père qui lutte

Suit l'aïeul qui bénit.[[164]](#footnote-164)

Referentially, one could interpret ‘le porteur de sceptre’ as Napoléon III and ‘le joueur de flûte’ as the poet-figure and explain that Hugo was rationalising to himself in advance the inevitable end of the Second Empire. Yet it is more relevant for our purposes to point out that melancholy manifests itself as the wider explanatory framework for the poem, resembling a *memento mori* motif and the negation of the self as it fails to assimilate to the mute and motionless world. For insomuch as the subjectivity of the speaker wishes to be free, they are constantly thrown back on the fact of their own objective mortality.

Reinforcing this is a strong semantic triangulation between weight, downward movement, and death (‘tous tombent’), poeticising a secularised version of the Fall and its etymological relation to *lapsus*. Indeed, the poem’s back-and-forth focus between observing the natural cycles of life and death and ruminating over its cyclicality can be linked to theological discourses that use a similar method of *analogia entis* (analogies of being) to fathom and purify divine attributes from those observable in humanity.

## 'Une théologie nouvelle' ?

Early in the turning-table séances conducted at Marine Terrace, Pierre Leroux, after assisting in the proceedings one evening, not without incredulity, wrote: ‘une théologie nouvelle, assurément, va sortir de là.’[[165]](#footnote-165) As Jean-Marc Hovasse explains, the philosopher’s professed doctrine on the metempsychosis of souls inoculated him *a priori* from seeing how spirits could have time to consult with the living before their next reincarnation.

Furthermore, in Leroux’s eyes, the word ‘théologie’ also undoubtedly conveyed a pejorative connotation, particularly considering the Catholic Church’s response to the socialist politics of the 1850s as well as Leroux’s own grievances against the perceived monopolisation of the concept of Revelation by institutionalised religion. Nevertheless, the question to ask here is not whether moments of verse expostulations in “Pleurs dans la nuit” are credible or not, but rather, how the poetics of the text interacts with historic theological discourses that make it *seem* like a theological development. As a pre-emptive response, following on from the endowment of ‘personae’ to inanimate nature, we can align the speaker’s enunciative liberty with the use of *analogia entis* in theology.[[166]](#footnote-166)

To explore this conjunction, we will take up another passage in section thirteen, as it operates interestingly on the interstices between the breakdown of the “prison paradigm” and its reprisal in the wider boundaries of the *analogia entis:*

O coups soudains ! départs vertigineux ! mystère !

Combien qui ne croyaient parler que pour la terre,

Front haut, cœur fier, bras fort,

Tout à coup, comme un mur subitement s’écroule,

Au milieu d’une phrase adressée à la foule,

Sont entrés dans la mort,

Et, sous l’immensité qui n’est qu’un œil sublime,

Ont pâli, stupéfaits de voir, dans cet abîme

D’astres et de ciel bleu,

Où le masqué se montre, où l’inconnu se nomme,

Que le mot qu’ils avaient commencé devant l’homme

S’achevait devant Dieu ![[167]](#footnote-167)

The phenomenological characteristic of this passage is clear: it is one where ‘l’immensité qui n’est qu’un œil sublime’’ and ‘cet abîme’ function as space for an uncovering. This is reinforced by the flurry of antithetical imagery (‘d’astres et de ciel bleu’, ‘le masqué se montre’, ‘l’inconnu se nomme’) that suggests religious revelation, replacing the artificial prison walls seen before with the sole guard-keeper of ‘un œil sublime.’ While there are still detectable traces of anxiety over punishment and the threat of the diminution of one’s self-regard, there is also a sense of liberation and freedom that come with this terminal stage brought about by death. On the other hand, the nature of this divine ‘œil’ is still shrouded under earthly guises. Phrased more tersely by Victor Brombert, for Hugo and his conception of the liberating force of contemplation: ‘the prison cell is easily converted into a monastic cell.’[[168]](#footnote-168)

Finally, through these metaphors we see the melancholic attitude dissipate in front of the participation, mediated now through language (‘Le mot, c’est Dieu’, v. 643), of the earthly and divine (‘Soyons l’immense Oui,’ v. 651). As a poetised re-communion with nature after the anxiety of the separation between mind and matter, the final stanzas of “Pleurs dans la nuit'' conclude by resolving the *brouillage* that clouded the speaker’s judgement, expressed through the oxymoronic affirmation of one who is blind but can see (‘Que notre cécité ne soit pas un obstacle; / A la création donnons ce grand spectacle / D’un aveugle ébloui’, v.652-4). The narrative progression of the poem has thus come full circle, back to the significance of the corpse and its broader questioning of an emptied object-self after death. Admitting that blindness conditions our human experience with regards to the divine, relayed through the heavy use of carceral metaphors, Hugo’s closing to “Pleurs dans la nuit” nonetheless returns to the notion of *theosis* (assimilation to the divine)at the heart of the speaker’s enunciation. Yet, how this may occur is not so easily solved, leaving open the question of Revelation and its reception by the contemplator attentive to its possibility.

# The Impersonal Self: “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre”

Written at the half-way juncture of the two-year stretch of table-turning *séances* in Jersey, “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre” is widely read as assuming Hugo’s defining metaphysical doctrine that revolted both Catholic and socialist critics alike. A long poem of approximately eight hundred lines, the didactic verve of the spectre, as it initiates the speaker into secrets beyond the grave, can easily be read as Hugo’s own eclectic amalgamation of spiritual and philosophical traditions. Under this reading, different elements of esotericism are tied loosely together by the hiddenness of God as ultimate source from which trapped souls and speaking apparitions emanate.[[169]](#footnote-169)

Other readings of the poem depart from the *séances* as an intellectual backdrop and focus on the impressive and extensive use of metaphors that illuminate these ideas,[[170]](#footnote-170) while others insist on its more formal, pathos-filled culmination of the elegiac themes present in Book VI.[[171]](#footnote-171) To a certain extent, we will consider each of these readings, firstly reviewing the “factuality” or epistemological import attached to the *séances* at Marine-Terrace, this time through the lens of Hugo’s deliberate choices in enunciative structure. We will then analyse a few metaphors in the poem essential to a phenomenological opening of the possibilities of revelation, treated as forming part of the poem’s “revealability.”[[172]](#footnote-172) Finally, the first-personspeaker displaced now by an impersonal and revelatory voice, will breach the subject of theodicy (that is, the divine justification for the existence of evil) in a way that has direct theological bearing on our wider phenomenological reading of *Les Contemplations.*

Indeed, this last propensity of the poem, seeking to harmonise evil with a divine purpose, is immediately reminiscent of two other long texts: the first section of *La Fin de Satan,* entitled *Satan pardonné* at its time of composition, written roughly four months prior, and the chapter of the Old Testament that left an indubitable impression on Hugo: *The* *Book of Job*. The first, narrating the fall of Lucifer and the subsequent creation of evil, is intertextually reprised in the eschatological *dénouement* of “La bouche d’ombre,” when Belial and Jesus emerge side by side. The latter text, in its theodicy of God’s providence during the protracted drama of Job’s suffering, is similar in didactic tone to the long pronouncements of what was first called “Explications nocturnes” before “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre.”[[173]](#footnote-173)

Of course, neither text shares the same structure to our poem, full as it is of irregular stanza lengths and “rimes suivies” in Alexandrine verse. In order to work through it, we will be following the thematic outline identified by J.C. Ireson, one that divides the poem into three central sections (ontological, cosmogonic, psychological) in addition to its short introduction and conclusion.[[174]](#footnote-174) Astute to these three categories, we will then highlight certain metaphors that animate each section.

## Searching for Religious Factuality

As early as 1852, turning table *séances* had moved across the Atlantic from their home source in America and were being conducted throughout European society. By April 1853, French journalists were reporting on the subject, and by the 11th of September, Mme Delphine de Girardin was initiating Hugo, his family, Auguste Vacquerie, and two dinner guests into the conjuring of spirits. It is important to note that, around the same time, various pamphlets and articles had been written attempting to explain the new phenomena, the most widely read of which, in mainland France, was Félix Roubaud’s *La Danse des tables, phénomènes physiologiques démontrés.*[[175]](#footnote-175) Similarly, merely several weeks before Hugo’s first session, the journal *L’Illustration* had published a long article by the English scientist Michael Faraday, most likely read by Hugo, offering a stricter naturalistic explanation for the supposedly supernaturally-induced movements of the table.[[176]](#footnote-176)

Yet, for Hugo, the physical was only half of the explanation: he was also looking for the psychological.[[177]](#footnote-177) This can be attributed to not only Hugo’s insatiable sense of curiosity and free-roaming imagination, as is commonly intimated by his biographers,[[178]](#footnote-178) but also to the changing climate of religiosity in 1850s French society. John Warne Monroe asserts that, to a considerable extent, the intense attraction of the *séances* across the socio-political spectrum of French culture at the time can be attributed to a ‘crisis of factuality in religious life,’[[179]](#footnote-179) an opening up of the emotional aspects of religious experience that manifested itself, within Catholic milieus, in the growth of the Cult of Mary, the visions at Lourdes, renewals in pilgrimages and more intensified devotional practices.

In “La bouche d’ombre”, the poem’s enunciative structure crosses over between the lyrical and the epic in such a way that it captures this contemporaneous search for renewed factuality. As a ‘poème philosophique’ using Dominique Combe’s category, it operates on the boundary between these two genres, by opening with a mythic sequence that sets the pretext for a much longer philosophical discourse melded with a lyrical voice.[[180]](#footnote-180) Beginning with the first stanza, readers are given both a third-person singular declaration followed by a first-person singular statement that provides a very specific spatial context to the poem:

L’homme en songeant descend au gouffre universel.

J’errais près du dolmen qui domine Rozel,

A l’endroit où le cap se prolonge en presqu’île.

Le spectre m’attendait ; l’être sombre et tranquille

Me prit par les cheveux dans sa main qui grandit,

M’emporta sur le haut du rocher, et me dit :[[181]](#footnote-181)

As Michael Riffaterre has detected, the opening sequence is highly mythological, in that the ‘spectre’ operates stylistically as ‘un figurant du répertoire légendaire, proche parent des utilités du mélodrame ou de l’épopée,’[[182]](#footnote-182) one who establishes the supernatural horizons for an impending revelation. The original *je* speaker who is dragged on top of the rock becomes a passive receiver of the spectre’s pronouncements, and in fact becomes subsumed by their voice throughout the poem (‘Ah ! je t’entends’, v. 490 ; ‘Je viens de te montrer le gouffre. Tu l’habites’, v. 564). In opposition to the *séance’s* long nights of vocal interrogation and table-tapping answers, the spectre’s lyrical, eloquent, and prolific voice demands full captivation on the part of their interlocutor, mimicking a religious enlightenment akin to the reception of revelation.

Given this religious vocabulary, it is not surprising that the role of translation is prominently emphasised in the poem. Whether or not one takes at face-value Hugo’s insistence that ‘jamais je n’ai mêlé à mes vers un seul des vers venus du mystère [for instance the *séances*], ni à mes idées une seule de ces idées,’[[183]](#footnote-183) it is obvious that the spectre in the poem is imparting knowledge that needs to be translated to be comprehended and, in turn, democratised by the *je* speaker. The lyrical voice of the spectre is therefore both one who reveals as well as translates, a sign of the supernatural and an intermediary figure crossing into finite space and time. Marie-Claire Pasquier suggests that the sacerdotal poet-figure latent behind this voice specifically stressed their societal role as a translator of the unknown, drawing upon recognisable aspects of religious rituals and customs.[[184]](#footnote-184)

As with Monroe’s assessment of the crisis of spiritual and psychological truths during the epoch, so too do the axiomatic truth-claims made across the three sections of the poem rely on a readership who themselves are searching for a reliable authority; one capable of offering meaning to the turbulent socio-political times experienced around them in a way that departed from the growing positivist explanations that were challenging spaces traditionally occupied by French Catholicism.

## Metaphor as Revealability

After the initial pronouncements of the spectre, including a new articulation of the biblical creation narrative with one significant alteration - that the world was made ‘imparfait’ (v.62) - a raft of metaphors are deployed in order to convey the constantly shifting state of the visible and invisible world. One of the more stunning assortments of metaphors occurs in the following lines:

Le mal, qui par la chair, hélas, vous asservit,

Dégorge une vapeur monstrueuse qui vit !

Là, sombre et s’engloutit, dans des flots de désastres,

L’hydre Univers tordant son corps écaillé d’astres ;

Là, tout flotte et s’en va dans un naufrage obscur ;

Dans ce gouffre sans bord, sans soupirail, sans mur,

De tout ce qui vécut pleut sans cesse la cendre ;

Et l’on voit tout au fond, quand l’œil ose y descendre,

Au-delà de la vie, et du souffle et du bruit,

Un affreux soleil noir d’où rayonne la nuit ![[185]](#footnote-185)

Compressed here in verbal form are a number of important sensual markers that indicate to the reader a synesthetic confusion between movement, sound, and colour, summarised by the invisible ‘vapeur monstrueuse qui vit’: first, the undulating, fluid movements of ‘dégorge’, ‘s’engloutit’ and ‘flotte’; then, the noises associated with these organic actions of belching, devouring, and the stormy conditions of a ‘naufrage obscur’; finally, the lack of visual definition in ‘ce gouffre sans bord’ and the oxymoronic ‘soleil noir’ that obscures rather than reveals.

While these elements intend to confound the reader and produce a Burkian, psychological sensation of the sublime as an experience of repulsion towards the terrifyingly large and indefinite, they also, inversely, show the reader something where there is supposedly nothing. In other words, this extended metaphor of the fluidity of life, identified by Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe,[[186]](#footnote-186) aims at visualising what is otherwise intangible in the spectre’s revelation: namely, the interconnectedness of the cosmos and of the self. Speaking of how *Theopoetics* also utilises this rhetorical dynamic to add to theological inquiry, Keith Putt draws on Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenological understanding of metaphor as it ‘centres [on] the imagination’s ability to encounter the semantic impertinence of the metaphorical predication and to “see” new combinations of meaning and reference developing out of that impertinence.’[[187]](#footnote-187) Similarly, the metaphors of this passage display a tendency towards conjuring a number of conflicting images in order to reinforce the greater analogy between the changing state of the universe and the perceptive state of the self that experiences it. Though the moment of the cosmos’ appearance and the object-self’s glimpsing of it through metaphor is momentary and fleeting, set against the backdrop of nothingness, it is offered nonetheless as an instance of revelation.

This metaphor of both physical and psychic life as fluid, intermixed with both organically healthy and corrupted images, magnified to such a scale that it exceeds comprehension, forms the crux of the given revelation across the main body of the poem. An important corollary to this sustained metaphor is the effacement of the initial lyrical subject, as mentioned above, into the speech of the spectre and ultimately, to the world as illuminated by the new revelation. After having seen the entrapment of the subject in “Pleurs dans la nuit” with its carceral metaphors, we are now shown the psychological consequences of this entrapment, represented in the following passage as a subject in panic:

Donc, représente-toi cette sombre figure :

Ce gouffre, c’est l’égout du mal universel.

Ici vient aboutir de tous les points du ciel

La chute des punis, ténébreuse traînée.

Dans cette profondeur, morne, âpre, infortunée,

De chaque globe il tombe un flot vertigineux

D’âmes, d’esprits malsains et d’êtres vénéneux,

Flot que l’éternité voit sans fin se répandre.

Chaque étoile au front d’or qui brille, laisse pendre

Sa chevelure d’ombre en ce puits effrayant.

Âme immortelle, vois, et frémis en voyant :

Voilà le précipice exécrable où tu sombres.[[188]](#footnote-188)

The lyrical subject, disturbed by the sight of ‘l’égout du mal universel’ and ‘ce puits effrayant’, constitutes a prime example of Hugo’s near-systematic semantic pairing of hydraulic metaphors with affects of repulsion and anxiety. Hence also the flurry of adjectives (‘malsains’, ‘vénéneux’, ‘exécrable’) that compounds a sense of moral reprehension. However, as with the apocalyptic imagery of the overwhelming floods in *Genesis,* where the corruption of God’s creation was entirely destroyed, there is also a suggestion in this passage of water as a purifying force. It remains to be seen, therefore, how this organic imagery is axiomatically configured in such a way that it implicates a theological poetics of good and evil.

## The Matter of Evil

In “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre,” the impersonal revelation of this cosmic process passed on from the spectre-figure bears a close resemblance to Medieval scholastic theologies of natural law.[[189]](#footnote-189) However, the intellectual proximity of the doubting modern subject, as conceived by Descartes and Kant and assumed by Hugo, essentially separates any natural law theology from the poem’s metaphysical take, on the grounds that the *je* speaker is inwardly constituted *in opposition to* the external phenomena of nature. The final eschatological section of the poem intensifies this binary of personal spirit/impersonal nature, as the problem of evil becomes entirely situated on the side of inert matter:

Quand, du monstre matière ouvrant toutes les serres,

Faisant évanouir en splendeurs les misères,

Changeant l’absinthe en miel,

Inondant de beauté la nuit diminuée,

Ainsi que le soleil tire à lui la nuée

Et l’emplit d’arcs-en-ciel,

Dieu, de son regard fixe attirant les ténèbres,

Voyant, vers lui, du fond des cloaques funèbres

Où le mal le pria,

Monter l’énormité, bégayant des louanges

Fera rentrer, parmi les univers archanges,

L’univers paria ![[190]](#footnote-190)

The organic imagery of cleanliness and uncleanliness achieves here its fullest religious expression in ‘L’univers paria’, as the world’s imperfection (‘monstre matière’, ‘cloaques funèbres’) will be harmonised by God at some unknowable time in the future. There seems to be a tension between the thus depicted physical aspect of evil and what in Augustinian-Thomistic theodicy is known as the *privatio boni* or the necessary insubstantiality of evil; that is, its ‘lack of goodness.’[[191]](#footnote-191) Consequently, this narrative ending to the poem can be seen in the light of a Gnostic disdain for the world, characterised by a ‘grammar of imitation, a metamorphic grammar’[[192]](#footnote-192) that reprises textual passages of creation and destruction from the Bible, such as in *Genesis* and *Revelation*, in order to subvert them.

Finishing with the last stanza, the imitation in verse of the biblical creation narrative that began in the first section of the poem forms its narrative arc while leaving in suspension the resolution of the spectre’s doctrine on the eradication of evil:

Tout sera dit. Le mal expirera, les larmes

Tariront ; plus de fers, plus de deuils, plus d’alarmes ;

L’affreux gouffre inclément

Cessera d’être sourd, et bégaiera : Qu’entends-je ?

Les douleurs finiront dans toute l’ombre : un ange

Criera : Commencement ![[193]](#footnote-193)

The final line is a figure of speech semantically akin to the line in Genesis (*et facta est lux*), with its initiation by means of a creator God’s speech, transposed into ‘un ange / Criera : Commencement’ and the finality of ‘Tout sera dit.’ Once again blending the lyrical with the epic, the narrative ends with the infusion of voice given to the abyss (‘Qu’entends-je ?’) over which the creation of being and matter was commanded, where the *Tohu wa-bohu* (‘the emptiness without form’) was given life and form according to the Hebrew Scriptures.

Here the problem of evil is associated with the gnostic doctrine of an imperfect *creatio ex nihilo* and the eventual renewal of the imperfect by the perfect, but without desiring to enter the fray of metaphysical speculation, it is enough to observe that this ending closes abruptly. For, ultimately, the revelation of the spectre is of an eschatological time yet-to-come, relayed by a late flurry of future simple verbs and the animation of the ‘gouffre’ through prosopopoeia that signals a difficult straddling of the enunciative structure between the epic and the lyrical. Unable to sustain this phenomenality, the theological overload of “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre” ultimately relapses back to its broader context within *Les Contemplations* as a didactic poem that aspires towards religious factuality but is unable to shed its lyrical overtones and the transparency of the spectre-figure as an impersonal, written object-self. Intersubjectively shared revelation comes from somewhere else than the mythological realm, and so it is back to the status of the Romantic mage-figure as modern genius that we return.

# The Interpersonal Self: “Les mages”

“Les mages” was written after “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre,” dated in the manuscript as completed on the 24th of April 1855. The final version of the poem contains seventy-one stanzas of ten lines broken into eleven sections - around one hundred lines shorter than the latter - and is set to octosyllabic verse in a regular rhyme scheme. As a poetic type, “Les mages” is best understood as an ode, or as J.C. Ireson describes it, as a ‘grande ode’ that shares the same ten-line structure with Lamartine’s “Enthousiasme” in *Méditations* and a wider lineage with many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious odes.[[194]](#footnote-194)

Unrelated to the biblical magi in Matthew’s Gospel, Hugo’s “mages” are a collection of eighty-one eminent individuals across history, mostly scientists, who best exemplify a divine nature working within humanity; they are the ‘pontificat[s] de l’infini’[[195]](#footnote-195) who by extraordinary genius contribute to his vision of universal “Progress” and thus counteract the fatalistic cosmic indictments pronounced by the “bouche d’ombre”. In its early form, “Les mages” was only 500 lines in length and centred around a group of eight stanzas that constitute the philosophical and theological kernel of the poem. Jacques Seebacher’s magisterial study, “Sens et structure des *Mages*”, pinpoints these stanzas within the original section IV, where the challenge of the appropriation of God into humanity is laid out in Promethean-like fashion.[[196]](#footnote-196)

Given this thematic, the culmination of this chapter’s focus will be on the divinisation of the *je* speaker as constituted theologically. This will be demonstrated by way of three sections. In the first section, we will explore the difference between sign and symbol in the work, witnessed by the speaker’s radically subjective attachment to infinity. Then, we will focus specifically on the repeated imagery of the eye in its symbolic relation to the mage-figure. Finally, we will conclude with the consequent ethical imperatives of an intersubjective relationship forged between the speaker’s own idealised self and the symbolism of a united people under the guise of Romantic nationalism.

## The Intersubjectivity of the Infinite

Unlike in “Ibo”, where the *je* speaker is gradually formed as an autonomous entity separate from the biographical subject, and unlike “Magnitudo Parvi” too, where the doubling of the shepherd as mage mirrors the duplication of the “Moi de l’infini”, “Les mages” offers more explicit insight into how the divinisation of the lyrical subject can be recognised as an interpersonal self. As Ludmila Charles-Wurtz convincingly expresses it in her work on the poetics of the lyrical subject in Hugo’s corpus: ‘Dieu, ce “on” qui parle en moi, est donc à la fois en moi et hors de moi; il est, en moi, l’intuition de l’universel; il est, hors de moi, le principe qui fonde l’universalité de la conscience de soi - c’est-à-dire ce qui rend mon Moi solidaire de tous les autres.’[[197]](#footnote-197) To be in direct, personal contact with the infinite in oneself is thus the principal proposition, for Hugo, that generates the mage-figure in the poem (‘Pourquoi donc faites-vous des prêtres / Quand vous en avez parmi vous ?' , v. 1-2), later tied to consciousness itself in the lines:

Savent-ils ce qu’ils font eux-mêmes ?

Ces acteurs du drame profond ?

Savent-ils leur propre problème ?

Ils sont. Savent-ils ce qu’ils sont ?

Ils sortent du grand vestiaire

Où, pour s’habiller de matière,

Parfois l’ange même est venu.

Graves, tristes, joyeux, fantasques,   
 Ne sont-ils pas les sombres masques

De quelque prodige inconnu ?[[198]](#footnote-198)

Tirelessly concerned with the spectacle of existence, the mage-figures who are then listed, are grouped less for their disciplinary contributions to knowledge (hence the eclectic mix of scientists, poets, and musicians) than for their contribution to the expansion of self-consciousness.

To be more precise, it is for Hugo their pioneering effectuations of the imagination that are vaunted, promoting what Richard Kearney calls ‘consciousness as an attitude towards being.’[[199]](#footnote-199) Hence the lexicon surrounding “appearance” and the metaphor of life as a play and spectacle (‘acteurs’, ‘vestiaire’, ‘masques’). However, following on with Hugo’s paradoxical imagery of the ‘aveugle ébloui’ in “Pleurs dans la nuit”, the objective behind the use of the metaphor is in fact to remain imageless: ‘quelque prodige inconnu’ is a purely regulative idea that provides subjective orientation in thinking, famously described later on in “Les Mages” as ‘une sorte de Dieu fluide/[qui] Coule aux veines du genre humain’ (v.439-440).

Given that the poem is written as an ode, and therefore must sustain its distribution of praise, not much can be gathered about the *je* speaker themself, but rather they are effaced across the encomium on the virtues of the imagination. What is more important to recognise, from an enunciative standpoint, is that the long list of historical figures occupying the first twenty-three stanzas are both visible manifestations of divinity within history and iconic symbols of the invisible yet to be manifest. In a phenomenological sense this distinction is vital: visibly, the mages have successfully converted what has appeared in their consciousness into a sign (be it through the visual mediums of language, music, painting, etc.), but they are also themselves symbols of the invisible; that is, of the irreducible qualities of the mind of genius, itself the human appropriation of God’s divine attributes.

Hugo was undoubtedly fascinated at this stage of his writing on Jersey by the capacity of the mind to marvel. Didier Philippot elaborates on this by stating that, in Hugo’s exile-period writing, we see that ‘le sujet est englobé et non englobant...le moi est d’autant plus “original” qu’il n’est jamais ni le centre ni l’origine, mais le témoin, sidéré ou émerveillé, de ce qui s’impose à lui parce qu’il le dépasse.’[[200]](#footnote-200) The idealised mage figure is therefore also presented as one who can successfully convey a state of ‘effarement’ in expressive and imaginative art - a term repeatedly employed across Hugo’s philosophical poetry yet which was rarely used in the same literary sense.

Once again, just as in “Ibo” and “Magnitudo Parvi” an ample use of prosopopoeia spills over from the speaker extending their range of lyrical address and initiating a hermeneutical interrogation of nature, a similar process is incarnated by the mages through the mediums of sight and sound:

Oui, grâce aux penseurs, à ces sages,

A ces fous qui disent : Je vois !

Les ténèbres sont des visages,

Le silence s’emplit de voix !

L’homme, comme âme, en Dieu palpite,

Et, comme être, se précipite

Dans le progrès audacieux ;

Le muet renonce à se taire ;

Tout luit ; la noirceur de la terre

S’éclaire à la blancheur des cieux.[[201]](#footnote-201)

Besides the internal rhyming that sonically draws together ‘penseurs’, ‘noirceur’, and ‘blancheur’ into an association of thinking in the visual imagery of black and white, this stanza is also representative of how the speaker envisions the mages’ ability to clarify phenomena presented to consciousness, to provide definition to and humanise ‘les ténèbres’ that is considered an act of ‘progrès audacieux’ precisely because it was hitherto mysterious and sacredly exclusive to God’s omniscience. But now, with the subjectivity of the mage being derived from the internalisation of divinity into the concept of consciousness (l’homme, comme âme, en Dieu palpite’), the mysterious in nature can be encapsulated by signs and communicated to others who have not personally experienced the same phenomenon.

## The Eye as (I)mage

Providing this medium is, above all other senses, the faculty of sight. It is most notably valorised in Hugo’s poetry because of its semantic relations with light, the infinite, and visionary experience. Considering the former, Pierre Albouy has connected Hugo’s mythological imagination in large part within a ‘doctrine de la lumière, fluide divin, [qui] enrichit le symbole,’[[202]](#footnote-202) recognising that not only is symbol central to a mythological imagination, but that the enabling quality of light captured by the eye is also an essential component to the visions of myth-making.

Consequently, imagery such as ‘L’œil de l’astre dans la lumière/ Et l’œil du monstre dans la nuit’ (v.229-30) in “Les Mages” attributes a mythological layer to Hugo’s lyrical poetry while also reiterating an important phenomenological and religious claim: that the eye is the gateway of our impressions and intellect and therefore that knowledge cannot be fully abstracted from its source in the image-presentation. Of course, that does not mean that the perceived phenomena should not inform abstract rules,[[203]](#footnote-203) but it does mean that there is no “neutral” vantage-point uninfluenced by our immersion in the phenomenal world and the clash of symbols discovered therein.

Indeed, the fact that ‘l’œil’ also serves as a symbol of infinity for Hugo is backed by the broader Romantic claim of the imaginative faculty’s “inexhaustibility” in an abstract sense, represented pictorially in the form of a circle. That is, for Hugo, there is no end-point in the imaginative process, but rather it is a revolving faculty of the mind that converts sensory phenomena into perceived objects in the world. This symbolism is arguably at the heart of “Les Mages”, condensed into the lines:

L’unité reste, l’aspect change ;

Pour becqueter le fruit vermeil,

Les oiseaux volent à l’orange

Et les comètes au soleil ;

Tout est l’atome et tout est l’astre ;

La paille porte, humble pilastre,

L’épi d’où naissent les cités ;

La fauvette à la tête blonde

Dans la goutte d’eau boit un monde…-

Immensités ! immensités ![[204]](#footnote-204)

On a pictorial level, this stanza is full of circular shapes and objects (‘l’orange’, ‘comètes’, ‘soleil’, l’atome’, ‘goutte d’eau’) that, while not strictly speaking perfectly spherical, share the appearanceof circularity and roundness. They are also described as being in a state of change, what Jacques Seebacher calls ‘[des] curieuses métamorphoses’, where a ‘double face d’une unité panique...s’organise autour de l’image de l’œil, dont on ne sait plus très bien s’il est celui de Dieu ou celui du microscope.’[[205]](#footnote-205) Indeed, the shift of perspective from a macroscopic view to the microscopic is another recurring phenomenological marker across the poems we have analysed in *Les Contemplations*, emphasising both the relative perspectivism involved in sight and the potential affective destabilisation of the speaker’s sense of self. But how is it that the speaker can conjunctly claim that ‘tout est l’atome et tout est l’astre’ with any credibility?

This question harkens back to the sincerity of the lyrical subject as discussed in “Ibo”. In this case, just as the biographical subject must be conceptually differentiated from the lyrical subject, so too the imagery of nature, be it on the macroscopic or the microscopic level, must be removed from its original ontological embeddedness when relayed through language. The doubling of the image and the problematic gap that it creates (what lies between the two?) is a longstanding philosophical question that has been levelled as a charge against Romantic metaphysics by Clément Rosset in his work *Le Réel. Traité de l’idiotie,* summarised by Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne as consisting of the position that ‘la volonté de trouver un double rassurant au réel, ou de concevoir le réel comme double […] motivée par le désir d’échapper à sa cruauté, est l’illusion majeure […] de la métaphysique romantique.’[[206]](#footnote-206)

Yet, Rosset’s suspicion that there is an underlying motivation of escapism from reality occurring in Hugo’s poetry only goes so far, and indeed fails to convince, given the simple observation that often the images created in his poems intentionally *amplify* the anguish and unease experienced by the speaker instead of naively reassuring them. Furthermore, the notions of “illusion”, “phantasy”, or “hallucination”, when considered phenomenologically, need to be explored from their point of origin rather than simply being dismissed ontologically.

Furthermore, the visualisation of poetry through imaginative representation is vital to “Les mages” and its phenomenological outreach towards the divine. As Hugo once expressed, ‘toutes les lettres ont d’abord été des signes et tous les signes ont d’abord été des images.’[[207]](#footnote-207) Stéphanie Boulard has recently shown that the inventiveness of Hugo’s poetics is often tied to his alignment of semantics to geometrical configurations of space.[[208]](#footnote-208) A prime example of this is a drawing of nine stages of circular objects, moving from the pure shape past various symbolic manifestations (an eye, the world, the sun, etc.) and finishing with infinity. Similarly, the stanza below, which Seebacher regards as the central axis of the poem, follows a geometric pattern and is fundamentally tied to vision and sight:

Dieu, triple feu, triple harmonie,

Amour, puissance, volonté

Prunelle énorme d’insomnie,

De flamboiement et de bonté,

Vu dans toute l’épaisseur noire,

Montrant ses trois faces de gloire

À l’âme, à l’être, au firmament,

Effarant les yeux et les bouches,

Emplit les profondeurs farouches

D’un immense éblouissement.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Without any background context, one could be easily read this passage as theological commentary on the trinitarian nature of God, however it can also be viewed as a key articulation of Hugo’s phenomenological approach to the divine. Indeed, the image of God as a ‘prunelle énorme d’insomnie’ is an exemplar under which Hugo’s various genius figures of history can be aligned. The mage-figure is one that, in imitation of God, can dispel ‘l’épaisseur noire’ that has prevented humanity from advancing in knowledge. They are eminent phenomeno-logists in that they make sense of (*logos*) that which appears (*phainomenon*), sharing this new insight with a broader community.

## One Nation under God

The image of God as an omniscient eye is, nonetheless, biblical in origin and not an innovation on Hugo’s part. In addition to representing a shared intersubjectivity, its inclusion in “Les Mages” is to directly support a politics of divinity that attempts to answer the question unsatisfactorily replied to in the verse ‘Comment naît un peuple ? Mystère !’ (v. 521). The speaker’s response in the following stanza is a direct borrowing from the “Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones” in the Book of Ezekiel, where the prophet’s speech raises the bones of the dead, and the reanimated are considered united under the sovereignty of God.[[210]](#footnote-210) The speaker in the poem proclaims that this will be France’s eventual rebounding from historical injustice:

Ainsi s’accomplit la genèse

Du grand rien d’où naît le grand tout.

Dieu pensif dit : Je suis bien aise

Que ce qui gisait soit debout.

Le néant dit : J’étais souffrance ;

La douleur dit : Je suis la France !

O formidable vision !

Ainsi tombe le noir suaire

Le désert devient ossuaire,

Et l’ossuaire nation.[[211]](#footnote-211)

What seems to create a nation of united people, according to this passage, is the divinity of speech and its pursual in social interaction and convention. In another moment of *fiat lux,* where nothingness is transformed into something through language, the prophetic voice of the speaker relies on fortifying the symbolic with meaning (‘le néant’, ‘le désert’, and ‘l’ossuaire’ become semantically connected with the ‘nation’) rather than explicating them in a logical fashion.[[212]](#footnote-212) Once again, we see a mythologising preference for symbol over sign, ‘une mythologie totalisante, à la fois politique, morale et religieuse, propre à l’humanitarisme romantique, qui, au lieu d’accuser un écart irrémédiable entre l’Histoire et le sacré, se veut “trans-ascendance.”’[[213]](#footnote-213) Phrased otherwise, the interpersonal authority of the mages comes precisely from their historical contextualisation: they are retrospectively seen in a mythologising light for the fundamental reason that they incarnate the principle of a collectively-shared language capable of advancing in history, stealing Promethean-like from the realm of the unknown. Thus sacralised, the mage-figure can be viewed in its most idealised form as the culmination of the process of divinisation undergone by the *je* speaker in *Les Contemplations.* Their apotheosis results in the establishment of a verbal *locus* out of which emerge the principles of a liberal democratic nation, contextually understood as a manifestation of Hugo’s strident republicanism that opposed itself to *l’Ancien Régime* in France. It would be easy to adjoin here biographical anecdotes of Hugo’s symbolic planting of the “Arbre de Liberté’” at the Place Royale in 1848 and his post-exile advocacy for a “United States of Europe”, but for now it is enough to perceive the poetical and theological dimensions of this ambition for nation-founding.

That there can even be a “progression” of history and religion, taken as abstract concepts, is of course a highly problematic claim, especially when they are so frequently essentialised by Hugo. Nonetheless, when extracted from a discursive framework and viewed phenomenologically, it becomes less relevant to critique the characteristically nineteenth-century European fascination with historical teleology and more important to trace the *implications* of such thinking; namely, how *proscrits* such as Hugo, displaced in exile, conceived of themselves in relation to the formative events of secular history and the mutations of religious thinking occurring at the time. Contrary to the accusation of Romantic escapism neatly summarised by Clément Rosset, we can conclude that there is as much debunking of symbols occurring in the religious poetry of *Les Contemplations* as there is enchantment, gesturing towards a richer understanding of an object’s nature than the competing ideologies of positivism and theological exclusivism circulating at the time. Grappling with the nature of subjectivity through the apparition of various “object-selves” in his work, the panoply of voices that we have seen in the poems reflect a phenomenological investigation of the subject in contemplation of both mind and nature. Having adequately highlighted a subjectivity infused by divinity, however, we have now to approach the constitution of the lyrical subject from the place of alterity; that is, moving from how the active transcendental *ego* concretises itself into various objects by comparing and expanding into the world to how it is itself conditioned by the demands of the other. It is thus to the Other *par excellence* that we must go; that is, to God.

Section II: The Other and the Absolute

# Chapter 3: Fearful Symmetry: Plotting Transcendence in *Dieu*

*‘Abîmes, abîmes, abîmes. C'est là le monde. Et maintenant que voulez-vous que je fasse ? Cette énormité est là. Ce précipice de prodiges est là. Et, ignorant, j'y tombe, et, savant, je m'y écroule. Oui, savant, j'entrevois l’incompréhensible ; ignorant, je le sens, ce qui est plus formidable encore. Il ne faut pas s'imaginer que l'infini puisse peser sur le cerveau de l'homme sans s'y imprimer. Entre le croyant et l'athée, il n'y a pas d'autre différence que celle de l'impression en relief et l'impression en creux. L'athée croit plus qu'il ne pense. Nier est, au fond, une forme irritée de l'affirmation. La brèche prouve le mur. Dans tous les cas, nier n'est pas détruire. Les brèches que l'athéisme fait à l'infini ressemblent aux blessures qu'une bombe ferait à la mer. Tout se referme et continue. L'immanent persiste.’ —* Préface philosophique des *Misérables*. *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo.* Edited by Jean Massin, Club Français du Livre, t. XII, 1969, p. 33-34.

For Hugo, the world in all its guises spares no room for the neutral observer. Rather, this ‘précipice de prodiges’ provokes affectively-based responses to it, impressions of *pathos* that can be described but not fully comprehended. To further investigate Hugo’s entwining of the modern subject with divinity, we now turn from *Les Contemplations* to a work begun at the apex of the writing of the “Apocalyptic” poems of Book VI and that gradually grew into its own autonomy. Though there is a clear bridge between the philosophical and theological import of “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre” and several sections of *Dieu*, as René Journet has remarked, the utter magnitude of the epic poem eclipses the revelations manifested in the *séances* and leaves open-ended the further appearance of enigmatic creatures.[[214]](#footnote-214) Our guiding question for analysing these appearances in the next two chapters will therefore be: how does Hugo represent the search for God viewed as the Other?

Instead of treating the poem as didactic or pedagogical, as it is often construed, we will be reviewing the progression of *Dieu* in its *ontic* rather than *ontological* aspect – that is, we will be taking seriously its starting-point as bypassing deliberations over God’s (in)existence, providing instead a series of concrete experiences that convey different phenomenological and affective qualities of transcendence. Put otherwise by Yves Gohin, who reads the fundamental axis of Hugo’s theological poetics in *Dieu* as coterminous with the above unpublished “préface philosophique” to the novel *Les Misérables*:

Toute la théologie de Hugo culmine en fait dans cette question, où le lyrisme de l’inconcevable entoure d’une *aura* de stupeur le contour des concepts : “De quelle nature est le prodigieux être en qui se réalise au fond de l’absolu l’identité inouïe de la nécessité et de la volonté ?”[[215]](#footnote-215)

Although the integration of these two concepts (‘nécessité’ and ‘volonté’) as they relate to an active subjectivity has already been shown to be polyvalent and difficult to resolve in *Les Contemplations*, the lyrical impetus that drives this question forward throughout *Dieu* can be approached from different angles. In addition to anthropomorphism, we will be turning our attention to how the literary devices of antithesis and paradox punctuate the speeches of the fantastical harbingers of divinity as they appear across the poem as mitigated encounters with God’s full alterity.

Specifically of interest will be how these devices are used in a phenomenological process of sifting, a ‘herméneutique anagogique’[[216]](#footnote-216) similar to the fourth level of scholastic biblical exegesis that applies, in this case, to both a spiritual ascent and descent (“*ana*” containing the sense of both forward and backward movement). Thus, we will be seeing again Hugo’s use of *analogia entis* as a recognisably theological endeavour[[217]](#footnote-217), used to express the dissimilitude between the human and God, whilst nonetheless allowing room for comparison.

Furthermore, this chapter is structured to trace the “transascendence” and “transdescendence” of the *ego* as represented by the speaker in their *movement* towards and away from alterity. Jean Wahl, who coined the two terms, sought to extend the definition of transcendence to include not just an epistemological limit-point outside of human comprehension, but also to endow a sense of affectively-based movement towards and away from this end-point. Importantly, these twin terms posit a two-way spectrum of disrupted subjectivity in the presence of alterity, with one direction (“transdescendence”) signifying an accumulation of negative affects experienced by the subject and the other direction (“transascendence”) signifying positive affects towards the accommodation of the other.[[218]](#footnote-218)

For if interiority is the metaphorical site of the self, it must also be the site of hospitality towards the other, which includes the Absolute Other, namely God. The first two sections will therefore treat the upwards ascent of the ego as it progresses towards an iconographic understanding of God, while the latter two sections will restrain this progression and descend back down towards the distinctly human by exploring epistemic limitations.

## Compositional Context: The Issue of Incompleteness

Given the complicated compositional history of *Dieu,* it is necessary to provide a brief overview of its different sections at the outset, in order to then be in a position to address the issue of its incompleteness. In order to follow the chronological order in which the text was written, this chapter will be working backwards from its published arrangement. The first two sections will look at the second half of the poem first begun by Hugo under the name of “Solitudines coeli” (“The Deserts of the Heavens”), then changed to “Ascensions dans les ténèbres” before being finalised as “L’Océan d’en haut.” The latter half of the chapter will then look at the first section of the epic poem, entitled “Le Seuil du gouffre,” which contains a short passage entitled “L’esprit humain” followed by a sequence of thirteen voices entitled “Voix” as arranged in the Robert Laffont edition. Under the authority of René Journet, who was co-responsible for the first critical publication of *Dieu,* alongside Guy Robert,[[219]](#footnote-219) between 1960 and 1969, we are told that ‘telles qu’il [Hugo] les a laissées, les deux parties du poème forment un tout cohérent,’[[220]](#footnote-220) indicating that the posthumous publication of the poem was not due to any reluctance on Hugo’s part and that any competing fragments were easily swept up into other collections.

Historically, Hugo’s first output, “Solitudines coeli”, was written across 1854-1855 before being read to his family on the evening of the 1st of May 1855.[[221]](#footnote-221) The ending was at the time incomplete, consisting of the reprisal of the refrain that opened each previous section (“et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir”), but was followed, in the last instance, by only a series of three suspension points. The ending had been kept in the Laffont edition of the text, in line with Journet and Robert’s, however there exist two alternate endings: one published in the 1911 Imprimerie nationale edition (‘Dieu me toucha du doigt le front et je mourus’) and an unused fragment usually retained as an appendix in various editions (“L’ange me montra du doigt le ciel, et je vis Dieu”).[[222]](#footnote-222)

After moving to Guernsey in 1856, Hugo continued to build on the poem, swelling it to 3666 lines and including two extra apparitions to what was now referred to as “Ascensions dans les ténèbres” as well as adding a number of voices that form the core of “Les Voix” and its prologue “L’esprit humain.” Furthermore, by this point *Dieu* was conceived to be inextricably linked to another epic poem underway: *La Fin de Satan.* Indeed, both these works were announced on the inside cover of the first publication of *Les Contemplations*. Yet, after reading through the drafts in 1857, Hetzel managed to dissuade Hugo from publishing them, advancing instead the project of the “petites épopées” of the first series of *La Légende des siècles* that would then appear in 1859. Consequently, both poems were left in their massive dossiers as Hugo changed from poetry to the novel form, reworking *Les Misères* into its eventual publication as *Les Misérables* in 1862.

It was only in 1869 that Hugo returned to the manuscript of *Dieu* that Hovasse calls ‘l’un des laboratoires d’écrivain les plus formidables jamais constitués’[[223]](#footnote-223) so as to entice the publisher Lacroix into an agreement. Unsuccessful again, he instead began to extract thousands of lines, taken largely from the section “Les Voix”, for reappropriation in what would be published as *Religions et religion* in 1880. His self-assessment of the readiness of *Dieu* for publicationwas still nevertheless high, writing in his notes on the 12th of June 1870 that it was only awaiting its final touch by the addition of “Le Seuil du gouffre” as an opening.[[224]](#footnote-224) From here onwards, the poem was to remain in this state, eventually published in 1891 by Hetzel and Quantin under the supervision of Hugo’s will executor Paul Meurice.

Though the issue of whether or not *Dieu* can be considered a unified text has yet to be resolved, much depends on the critical perspective taken on the work. As Jean-Pierre Jossua has remarked, ‘si du point de vue de l'histoire littéraire la place du second volume [“Le Seuil du gouffre”] est variable et floue, du point de vue théologique au contraire la position de portique, de prologue, que Hugo lui assigne souvent par rapport à  “L'Océan d'en haut”*,* se comprend très bien.’[[225]](#footnote-225) In other words, while in terms of attracting critical attention the first half of the poem is less remarkable than the second half, and can therefore be considered as contingently attached, in theological terms the ‘prologue’ to the body of the text acts as a kind of “prolegomena”; that is, as a critical introduction to the text that foreshadows the type of theological investigation that will ensue. For instance, the apparitions in the section “Les Voix” emphasise in advance a kind of negative theology that will later direct the progression of figures in “L’Océan d’en haut”. It is under this conceptualisation of the broader epic poem that we will be considering the two parts of *Dieu* as an artifactual whole, avoiding an over-privileging of the Romantic notion of an “organic” whole that would be highly problematic for this work.

Defining the genre of the poem is more difficult. Adèle Hugo’s journal entry of the poem’s recitation on the 1st May includes herself as one of ‘les auditeurs [qui] veulent écouter encore cette œuvre toute abstraite qui avait le caractère d’un drame et d’une épopée.’[[226]](#footnote-226) The abstract quality of the work is evident, but there is disagreement surrounding the dramatic and epic qualities of the poem. For instance, though its sheer length may be an eligible criterion, the narrative structure of narration is not at all dependent on the actions of heroic figures such as those presented in Greco-Roman classics.[[227]](#footnote-227) René Journet even goes so far as to state that it has no narrative characters as such, that it is ‘sans personnages,’[[228]](#footnote-228) which we can concur with, to the degree that the *persona* of the speaker is conditioned predominantly by the speech of the apparitions, who in turn each speaks on behalf of an absent other. Nonetheless, these instances of anthropomorphism and prosopopoeia operate as figurative devices in mythical narrative and thus endow a certain epic tone to the poem. Similarly, though its dramatic qualities do not go far beyond a sustained dramatic suspense, the same lyrical enunciative components of the *je* speaker as seen in the poems of *Les Contemplations* support this suspense, summarised otherwise by Daniel Larangé:

Comme *Dieu* s'avère être à la fois une œuvre abstraite élaborée à partir de techniques argumentatives et une œuvre épique et dramatique relevant de procédés de narration fictionnelle, il est difficile de préciser le statut et la fonction du "Je", car la première personne fait un constant va-et-vient entre le signe de la présence de l'auteur/narrateur communicant une parole de révélation et un relais fictionnel dans un espace textuel pourvu d'une certaine autonomie.[[229]](#footnote-229)

If one insisted on giving *Dieu* an *étiquette*, it would therefore be the somewhat long designation of a ‘poème épico-philosophique moderne’, or, more succinctly termed, a ‘poème humanitaire.’[[230]](#footnote-230) Yet, the lyrical aspects of the work must not be dismissed. For the ‘constant va-et-vient entre le signe de la presence de l’auteur/narrateur communicant une parole de revelation et un relais fictionnel’ identified by Larangé lies at the heart of the question of the lyrical subject*.* Not that *Dieu* is the first poem “humanitaire” to situate itself between the lyrical and the epic,[[231]](#footnote-231) but its continuing relevance arguably owes to this sensitivity towards the subject as objectifiable as well as objectifying; that is, in the final analysis, as porous and difficult to define.

## Reclaiming the Living God

Many epic modern poems written in the first half of the nineteenth century fall under this label of ‘poème humanitaire’ because of their philosophical importations of new religious ideas that were currently circulating amongst French society. Previously, a continuum of epic poetry, ranging from Voltaire’s *La Henriade* (1723) to Philippe-Alexandre Le Brun de Charmettes’ *L’Orléanide* (1821), were judged largely by their adherence to the Greco-Roman canon. However, as the dissemination of works by theosophist writers such as Pierre-Simon de Ballanche, Edgar Quinet and Alphonse Louis Constant increased, deliberately pairing their prose with an illustrative, poetic counterpart,[[232]](#footnote-232) the breadth of the modern epic genre leading up to *Dieu* widened substantially.

Moreover, throughout the 1830s and 1840s, an explosion of theoretical treatises on the intersection of the divine with that of a secular understanding of politics furrowed ripe territory for new theologies to emerge, while the epistemological foundations supporting existing orthodox Christian doctrine were concurrently being challenged.[[233]](#footnote-233) One consequence amongst many of this radical liberalisation of theological discourse is that the Judeo-Christian concept of the ‘Living God’ shifted across to historical and secular registers. Once effected, this entailed a widespread refutation of the distinction between clergy and laity, which in turn endowed the theosophical and mystic pronouncements of Romantic and Saint-Simonian style writers with sacerdotal-like authority.[[234]](#footnote-234)

Given this background, we can better investigate how *Dieu* enacts a dislocation of theology from its institutionally-established religious context and its re-immersion in poetic works. Responding to the French journalist Auguste Neftzer, Hugo wrote on the 26th of July 1860 that: ‘Il faut détruire toutes les religions afin de reconstruire Dieu. J’entends : le reconstruire dans l’homme. Dieu, c’est la vérité, c’est la justice, c’est la bonté ; c’est le droit et c’est l’amour.’[[235]](#footnote-235)This desire of relocating divine attributes to humanity (‘le reconstruire dans l’homme’) clearly serves to justify the “humanitarian” qualificative in the title ‘poème humanitaire’. Yet, whether unbeknownst to Hugo or not, there are theological parallels embedded in this process, most notably in the obvious paradox of the God-Man figure of Jesus Christ. Jean-Claude Fizaine notes the convergence between the Christian concept of *kenosis*, meaning the emptying of God’s divinity into the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the transferral of divinity to humankind as evidenced in the poem: ‘pour Hugo, il s’agit d’un transfert de sacralité de la religion catholique vers l'idéal révolutionnaire. Incontestablement la laïcité hugolienne garde intacts quelques éléments du christianisme.'[[236]](#footnote-236) In this chapter we will be teasing out the implications of this transferral, which are numerous and complex, precisely because of the challenges confronting humanity in finding plenitude in transcendence.

# The Passions of the Desiring Subject: “L’Océan d’en haut”

As stated, we will begin with the second half of *Dieu* so as to respect both a chronological ordering of the text and its central status in relation to the other sections*.* “L’Océan d’en haut” traces the journeying of a disembodied speaker through the darkness of ‘l’éther qui s’ouvre à l’essor des esprits’ (v.1,914) introducing various apparitions all sighted originally as ‘un point noir’ that slowly come into focus in the form of winged creatures. The repetition of this introductory observation ‘Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir’ forms the backbone of the narrative in the second half of the poem, signalling the impending arrival of a new apparition.

In this way, readers could easily be left with the impression of an agonistic “battle of religions” layout, where the atheist is relegated to agony at the bottom of the list while Hugo’s own theological musings triumph as the most contemporary of revelations (section VIII). One of Hugo’s notes while crafting the poem might even be considered to offer weight to this interpretation, having reminded himself to ‘ne pas oublier de maintenir toujours la ligne primitive... le commencement Matière et Nuit (Haine), la Fin Âme et Lumière (Amour), chaque religion progrès sur la précédente… la spiritualisation de plus en plus dégagée jusqu’à l’arrivée.’[[237]](#footnote-237)

However, there are two main limitations to viewing “L’Océan d’en haut” as a positivistic progression of a “history of religions.” Firstly, the ordering of the apparitions that supposedly speak on behalf of a particular religion is not historically accurate (for example, the “atheist” appears before the Persian cult of Mazdeism). Secondly, reading the poem as a treatise on the primacy of one religion over another misses entirely an alternative reading suggested by Hugo in his note: that of the poem as conveying an experience of transcendence with lyrical expression, moving teleologically from ‘Haine’ to ‘Amour’, to use Hugo’s words.

As such, it is imperative to recognise the lyrical qualities of the poem that provide the narrative framework with an appeal to subjective experience and that concentrate the drama of the unfolding events into a recognisably human attempt at conceptualising God. Indeed, it will be demonstrated how it is an overt exercise in phenomenological thinking, and we will be looking firstly at how the transcendence of the individual ego permits a “trans-ascendance” of the speaker towards the divine, figured through not just the deployment of allegorical anthropomorphism in the form of the winged creatures but also through the lyrical function of antithesis in the manner of pronouncements they make and how it affects the speaker. This in turn will provide the poetical premises for a kind of negative theology (*via negativa*)[[238]](#footnote-238) that will be further explored in the rest of the poem.

## Lyrical Address and Pathos

The enunciative structure of this half of the poem follows suit with “Le Seuil du gouffre” in that the speaker is introduced as the first person ‘je’ in ‘je voyais au loin sur ma tête un point noir’ in the first verse and continues throughout the poem to ground the narrative structure with variations on the same statement, in this case opening “L’Océan d’en haut” with the simple past tense equivalent and a slight reformulation of the proximity of the object above the speaker: ‘Et je vis au-dessus de ma tête un point noir’ (v.1,910).

This indefinite spot is followed by the perception of the speaker that it ‘semblait une mouche du soir’ in the first section and then ‘une mouche dans l’ombre’ for the seven remaining apparitions, before being cut out in one of the three final endings to the poem. Besides its incantatory regularity, from the perspective of lyrical address, the formula is also interesting because it creates anticipation over how the phenomena will appear, with the reader often having to wait a number of lines before the object is named and formed. For example, after the ‘chauve-souris’is announced in a relatively short amount of time (4 lines after the descriptive ‘une mouche du soir’), the second apparition to arrive is preceded by a lengthy digression on the spatial surroundings of the speaker:

Et rien n’avait de borne et rien n’avait de nombre ;

Et tout se confondait avec tout ; l’aquilon

Et la nuit ne faisaient qu’un même tourbillon.

Quelques formes sans nom, larves exténuées,

Ou souffles noirs, passaient dans les sourdes nuées ;

Et tout le reste était immobile et voilé.

Alors, montant, montant, montant, je m’envolai

Vers ce point qui semblait reculer dans la brume ;

Car c’est la loi de l’être en qui l’esprit s’allume

D’aller vers ce qui fuit et vers ce qui se tait.

Or ce que j’avais pris pour une mouche était

Un hibou, triste, froid, morne, et de sa prunelle

Il tombait moins de jour que de nuit de son aile.[[239]](#footnote-239)

The stanza is worth citing in full because it demonstrates not just the dramatic suspense of naming the ‘hibou’after eleven lines of indistinctness, but also conveys the attitude of the speaker willing to ‘aller vers ce qui fuit et vers ce qui se tait’; in other words, an attitude expressive of desire rather than fear of the ineffable. As we have seen in the previous chapter, it is this call/response process initiated by the lyrical subject, stretched to the boundaries of the infinite, that generates the phenomenality of the object, in this case the winged apparitions.

Moreover, these apparitions convey much more than a religious or philosophical symbolism traditionally associated with the creature: they reflect an emotional state that renders transparent the speaker’s own concern through the personification of the creature (‘Un hibou, triste, froid, morne’). Soon to announce a sceptical disposition towards any substantive nature to the divine (‘Il est là ; mais qu’est-il ?’ [v. 2,096]), the owl first imparts an affect-driven response to the communicable intentional act of questioning our knowledge of God.

Looking at the depictions of the winged creatures as emotive mirrors to the consciousness of the speaker requires a reassessment of their ordering and their semantic value. Instead of an interpretation that imparts a “religion” to each creature and leads to their complete abstraction, we can guide our interpretation by two considerations that particularly apply to *Dieu*. First, that ‘with intentional acts the existence of God is irrelevant to the experience of God;’ and, secondly, that ‘*affectus* precedes *intellectus*.’[[240]](#footnote-240) This preponderance of affect before intelligibility, or, in other words, of emotion conditioning conception, is indeed a defining feature of Romantic lyricism and is immediately observable in the opening stanzas of “L’Océan d’en haut” with the appearance of the ‘chauve-souris’.Indeed, the bat functions as a figuration of the emotion of fear, announced without any intelligible description of the object that has instigated their dread:

Et ce lugubre oiseau volait seul dans l’espace

Et disait : - C’est énorme et hideux. Ce qui passe

Devant mes yeux me fait trembler. C’est effrayant.

Quand donc serai-je hors de l’ombre ? - Et, me voyant,

Il cria :

— Que veux-tu de moi, passant rapide ?

Je regarde, éperdu, la matière stupide.

Homme, écoute : je suis l’oiseau noir que trouva

Démogorgon en Grèce et dans l’Inde Shiva.

Je contemple l’horreur de la sombre nature.

Homme, quel est le sens de l’affreuse aventure

Qu’on appelle univers ? Je le cherche et j’ai peur.[[241]](#footnote-241)

What is most evident here is the inability of the bat to externalise their emotion, seeing only ‘la matière stupide’ and ‘l’horreur de la sombre nature’ as an immense, terrifying presence. As opposed to the fear of an object, the bat’s fear of the universe is an existential angst, bereft of any object in which to resolve their dread. It should therefore be obvious from this starting point that the fundamental *a priori* of the poem is an acknowledgement that something lies beyond the individuated ego, i.e., a form of alterity, which in turn produces both a fear and a desire to search for it. Just as fear has been described as being the appropriate initial affective response to a monotheistic world-view,[[242]](#footnote-242) so too is the ‘chauve-souris’ an early articulation of the speaker’s attempt at making their desire for God intelligible phenomenologically.

## Limitless Desire

After the bat, the dramatic progression continues with the sighting of an owl (II), raven (III), a vulture (IV), an eagle (V), a griffon (VI), an angel (VII), before the penultimate vision of the light (VIII) and the three alternate endings to the poem. What is most interesting to observe about this overall progression is that the identity of the speaker is continually obscured in favour of each creature’s appearance and the monologue they each deliver. Whereas in classical epic poetry emphasis is typically on the hero’s deeds, in “L’Océan d’en haut” the short transitory stanzas voiced by the speaker comprise only a marginal amount of the poem and are contained, for the most part, to descriptions of their affective reaction to each event.[[243]](#footnote-243) This is similar to “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre”, where the revelatory message of the spectre forces the speaker into the passive position of a receptor. In *Dieu,* the eagle (V) is the first to explicitly harangue the speaker in an equally threatening manner:

-Quel est ce ver de terre ?

De quel droit voles-tu dans l’ombre où tu rampas ?

Est-ce toi qui disais tout à l’heure : il n’est pas ?

Si c’est toi

-Je n’osais parler -

Si c’est toi, sache

Qu’il se montre surtout dans tout ce qui le cache.

Qu’es-tu ? Réponds. Sais-tu le but, l'objet, la loi ?[[244]](#footnote-244)

At this stage the reader has learnt very little about the speaker, and it is not until the questioning of the angel (VII) that we gain a statement that attributes any qualities to their identity. The angel that initially faces away from the speaker turns towards them in order to inspect them, before turning away again and instead addressing the surrounding abyss with their message:

Et, sentant que vers lui d’en bas quelqu’un venait,

- Qu’es-tu ? dit l’ange, beau comme l’astre qui naît,

Et sans tourner vers moi ses yeux ni sa figure ;

Et je lui dis : - Ô front voisin de l’aube pure,

Je suis l’être à qui plaît la tombe dans l’exil. -

L’ange me regarda. - Demeure, me dit-il.

Puis, et je vis alors qu’il tenait une palme,

Il se mit à parler au gouffre :[[245]](#footnote-245)

Having seen the fascination with death and the tomb creating an estranged relation to the self in *Les Contemplations,* it is easy to match ‘l’être à qui plaît la tombe dans l’exil’ with both Hugo’s personal situation of exile and his fragmentation of written selves in poems from Book VI. What is most seizing in this passage, however, is the command of the angel, turning to face the speaker, to stay where they are (“demeurer” indicates both a physical act of settling down somewhere and the maintaining of a physical state for a period of time) - a command that the speaker nonetheless promptly disobeys, harkening the next ‘point noir’ to appear in the simple form of light (VIII).

As with “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre”, the effacement of the lyrical subject by their anthropomorphic creations is symptomatic of a paradoxical desire to both expand the reaches of consciousness in order to encompass more and more phenomena and to collapse it into a universal, divinised self-consciousness that would destroy its own particularity. Jean-Claude Fizaine articulates this juncture as one between, on one hand, an attempt at conceiving God conceptually (that is, as an object), and on the other, in rendering a descriptive account of this impossible task in the poem:

Le sujet assiste, passivement, au jaillissement intarissable en lui d'une pensée négatrice qui, lui interdisant la saisie de tout objet, l'empêche aussi de se constituer comme sujet. On passe ainsi progressivement d'une théologie poétique à une phénoménologie du désir de Dieu.[[246]](#footnote-246)

Furthermore, this crossover carries an important phenomenological bearing: that of the *passivity* of the transcendental *ego* in its experience ofbeing acted upon rather than acting. This means that, in *Dieu,* not only do we see the *je* speaker in a different position than that of their omnipresence in *Les Contemplations*, but they are held in the radically different position of being determined by the phenomena around them. Fizaine goes on to note the ‘inspiration kantienne’[[247]](#footnote-247) of this unfolding drama in the narrative, specifying how it is the ‘pensée négatrice’ of the sublime that is foremost in Hugo’s thinking of the divine. For our purposes, we can associate the Kantian sublime with the literary use of antithesis, contradicting the claims of the *je* speaker to “know God” in a way akin to apophatic theology and its preservation of absolute divine transcendence through propositional negation.

In a later instance, the speaker is once again rebuked for seeking to visualise God, this time by the figure of light in yet again biblical terms. The allusion to Moses reinforces the notion above of the necessary destitution of the self into a purely passive receiver of revelation, against which the speaker resists:

Ici la clarté me dit :

-Si tu m’en crois,

Va-t’en. Car les rayons brûlants dont tu t’accrois

Pourraient te consumer, frémissant, avant l’heure.

L’homme meurt d’un excès de flamme intérieure ;

L’ange qui va trop loin dit : Ne restons pas là.

En voulant trop voir Dieu, Moïse chancela ;

Un peu plus, il tombait du haut de cette cime,

L’œil plein des tournoiements terribles de l’abîme.

-Parle ! oh ! parle ! criai-je à la forme de feu.[[248]](#footnote-248)

The scene of the burning bush in the *Book of Exodus* is rearticulated by ‘la forme de feu’, but in this case, the voice’s interlocutor is not reluctant to listen but wishes complete bewilderment upon themselves. It can be partially explained not just by a lyrical illustration of the Kantian sublime, but also by the speaker’s intentional pushback on the very same metaphysical framework, by refusing any fixed speculative boundaries and insisting that the dissolution of the ego leads to a positive outcome. Across the entirety of “L’Océan d’en haut”, the response of the speaker to each winged apparition’s speech captures the phenomenological experience of the religious inquirer as they lose their spatio-temporal orientation while simultaneously desiring a visualisation of God.

## The Theological Foundation of the Ego

It could be challenged that this desire for God has diverted so far away from any traditional definition of divinity (that is, as a *deus* in the Latin sense) that it has been vacated of any meaning and is therefore simply nonsensical in such a context as the poem suggests. For surely, the “battle of religions” interpretation is more suitable to the poem than one that forfeits the fundamental premise of a Hugolian notion of spiritualised progress in order to salvage the worth of the previous seven apparitions before ‘la clarté’ appears. The limitation with this critique, however, is that it minimises the importance of the sublime in Hugo’s poetics as much as it overstates the symbolic value of the anthropomorphised creatures.

In typically Romantic fashion, the overloading of meaning in poetic language onto an object does not seek to enrich and satisfy traditional definitions, but rather explodes it, becoming what Clayton Crockett calls ‘sublime phenomena.’[[249]](#footnote-249) Crockett explains that this can be understood in a theological way: ‘theological exigency demands that this fragile tension between the *ego* and the object be held onto, despite desires to flee to a transcendent extra-linguistic or pre-linguistic realm, or simply to accept language, get comfortable within it, and take it for granted.’[[250]](#footnote-250) It is also why *Theopoetics* as a departure from the discipline of systematic theology has gained significant traction, given its principal aversion to objectifying God in *onto*-theological terms (that is, in terms of being).[[251]](#footnote-251) In a poetic context, there is thus all the more reason to take a step back from *Dieu* and consider it as relating emotions, impressions and experiences rather than as a tractate or as an analytical work that holds tight to the consistency of its terms and definitions.

Given this caveat, when readers arrive at the final pronouncements of the “Light” and are baffled by the insistence on the nonexistence of certain natural states (‘O Ténèbres, sachez ceci : la nuit n’est pas’ [v.5,380] ; ‘La matière n’est pas et l’âme seule existe’ [v.5,470]), these can be read as much less shocking paradoxes than might be expected.[[252]](#footnote-252) The following excerpt highlights the theological framing of these statements:

L’univers, c’est un livre, et des yeux qui le lisent.

Ceux qui sont dans la nuit ont raison quand ils disent :

Rien n’existe ! Car c’est dans un rêve qu’ils sont.

Rien n’existe que lui, le flamboiement profond,

Et les âmes, les grains de lumières, les mythes,

Les moi mystérieux, atomes sans limites,

Qui vont vers le grand moi, leur centre et leur aimant ;

Points touchant au zénith par le rayonnement,

Ainsi qu’un vêtement subissant la matière,

Traversant tour à tour dans l’étendue entière…[[253]](#footnote-253)

The connection being made here is between subjective consciousness and a grounding, omniscient consciousness (‘le moi de l’infini’) that assures the *possibility* of perceiving motion and change in the universe. In Husserlian terms, this relation between ‘les moi mystérieux’ and ‘le grand moi’ is simply another expression of the relation between the individual conscious ego (the perceiving subject) and a transcendental ego which grounds a teleological understanding of external phenomena. Housset rephrases this with a quote from Husserl:

A partir du regard ouvert par la réduction phénoménologique, croire en Dieu, c’est pouvoir faire l’expérience de la téléologie à l’œuvre dans le monde, qui est la condition pour se vouloir soi-même : “De même pour pouvoir croire en moi, en mon vrai moi et en mon développement vers celui-ci, je dois croire en Dieu, et tandis que je le fais je vois dans ma vie la direction de Dieu, le conseil de Dieu, l’avertissement divin.”[[254]](#footnote-254)

For Hugo, this epiphanic ending to “L’Océan d’en haut” simply reiterates what we have already seen to be his grounding of subjectivity in God, co-equating consciousness with divinity and then expanding it into the environmental surrounds in order to resonate with it. Hence also the condemnation of ‘ceux qui sont dans la nuit’ as living phenomenologically in a dream, because the *acausal* nature of dreaming blocks one’s ability to recognise that they are in a dream: it is a series of images imposed on the dreamer without granting their own ability to organise them.

The primary theological insight to retain from this progressive drama of the speaker “transascending” their own individual consciousness towards a ‘grand moi’ is that Hugo’s understanding of divinity does not rely upon the metaphysical security of traditional Christian theology, even though his poetry is fully saturated with various Catholic theological presuppositions of his time. Rather, the theological emphasis in this famous section of the poem is the assertion that the *ego* can not only be positively transcended, but is moreover compelled to do so by a counterpart and ulterior ‘grand moi’ or transcendental ego to which it ultimately identifies. Deployed as a theological poetics in the poem that portrays both the existential agony of the speaker and a revelling in the clarification of the ‘points noirs’, the result is an exploratory search for the other as Absolute that purges idolatrous identifications of the self with the divine in a way completely unique to other epic poems of Hugo’s epoque.

# Iconoclasm, Idolatry and Iconography: “L’Océan d’en haut”

Given what we have seen with the narrative progression of “L’Océan d’en haut” and its expression of a phenomenally-gradated transcendence of the ego, we can now move to viewing the sequence in the phenomenological terms of the idol and the icon. More specifically, the concepts of idolatry, iconoclasm, and iconography will be helpful here in defining how key apparitions operate as *visual* encounters with alterity that provoke reflections on the speaker’s ability to conceptualise divinity. To do so, we will be following Jean-Luc Marion’s definition of the idol and icon as we engage with each instance in the poem.

Contrary to accusations of pantheism that were historically levelled at thinkers such as Hugo who sought to elevate nature to the divine,[[255]](#footnote-255) there are strong Judeo-Christian points of contact in these visual encounters that complicate either notion of God as fully-immanent (pantheism) or fully-transcendent (deism), taking readers as far back as the second commandment in the Decalogue of the Old Testament: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.’[[256]](#footnote-256) If indeed, as we have come to see, the speaker of “L’Océan d’en haut” is left with very little phenomenality of God after hearing ‘la clarté’, this has less to do with divine hiddenness, than it has to do with negative theology’s insistence on God’s absolutely impossible visualisation. This exigency, however, also constitutes a phenomenological claim.[[257]](#footnote-257)

In order to be iconoclastic, there must first be a representation deemed idolatrous of some kind. Usually this is associated with artistic depictions, images and physical objects. However, idolatry can also be attached to philosophical concepts and literary conventions, in that both can claim to be totalising explanations or principles of reality. In a wider context, Aurélie Loiseleur has noted the distinct correlation between iconoclasm and idolatry that manifested itself as a recurring feature in the production of Romantic lyrical and epic poetry in the nineteenth century:

Le poète lyrique peut se revendiquer iconoclaste. Il brise alors les frontières entre les espaces. Puisque profaner, c’est étymologiquement faire sortir de l’intérieur sacré du temple, le réflexe du poète consiste à imprégner l’univers du divin, bref, à sacraliser la nature sans restriction. Car ces murs, selon lui, ont été dressés par l’homme, impuissant devant l’infini de Dieu, et non pas par Dieu lui-même, qui échappe à toutes les limites qu’on s’acharne à lui imposer pour le comprendre.[[258]](#footnote-258)

The sacralisation of nature for which Hugo is widely known, promoting in turn both idolatry and iconoclasm, is one such liberating gesture, in that the subject’s own conception of divinity must both fit into the intelligible world around them (i.e., nature) and remain beyond its seemingly rigid laws and patterns (i.e., conventions). The only truly enduring representation of divinity, that of iconography, must therefore be one that succeeds in both offering an experience of enchantment and of liberation.

We will be arguing in this section that *Dieu* contains all three of these different manners of searching for the divine. In ascending order, we will first start with the figure of the Owl (II), whose speech revolves around iconoclastic anxieties and the promotion of suspicion so as to demask any false representations of God. Then, the Angel’s discourse (VII) flips this dis-enchantment by re-sacralising all of nature to a divine status, which will be understood as an idolatrous reaction to suspicion and the problem of evil. Finally, the last section of the poem, the Light (VIII) offers a new phenomenality through which to reconcile these two processes and to view God; namely, through the icon as amorous exchange, shifting focus away from the confines of nature back to the status of the searcher as a *lover* of the invisible.

## “Le Hibou”: Iconoclasm and Suspicion

The owl’s speech was written in 1856 by Hugo, totalling six hundred lines in addition to thousands of others utilised in “Les Voix” or eventually reworked for inclusion in *Religions et religion*. Its central motif revolves around the insufficiency of reason alone in comprehending the divine. In this sense, the symbolism of the owl seems to diverge from the Owl of Athena, signifying wisdom and erudition, to the owl as a fallen, blinded creature as in Renaissance Christian artwork. In Hugo’s poem, there are few hints to any direct intellectual lineage, leaving to readers their own interpretation of the owl, in relation to the ‘chauve-souris’preceding it and the ‘corbeau’that follows.

Having seen already that the bat figure, however, belays its atheistic characterisation by assuming a divine presence just beyond sight, it is worth noting that the owl figure cannot be labelled as a systematic *porte-parole* for either “scepticism” or “agnosticism”, even in light of their introductory remarks: ‘Quelqu’un est là. Mais qui ? Doute ! angoisse ! énigme !’ (v.2,087). Though it would seem that this statement expresses both of these positions, once again we find that they indicate a more developed phenomenology of the divine than first established, going beyond the bat’s acclamation ‘je n’ai vu personne’ (v.2,168) to the implied personalism of ‘quelqu’un’, in lieu of the objectified “quelque chose.”

Nevertheless, when it comes to the owl’s initial musing over the meaning of the word ‘Dieu’, a sceptical attitude is deployed that attempts to empty the word of any semantic value, collapsing the possibility of visualising God as an object:

Dieu ! J’ai dit Dieu. Pourquoi ? Qui le voit ? Qui le prouve ?

C’est le vivant qu’on cherche et le cercueil qu’on trouve.

Qui donc peut adorer ? qui donc peut affirmer ?

Dès qu’on croit ouvrir l’être, on le sent se fermer.

Dieu ! cri sans but peut-être, et nom vide et terrible !

Souhait que fait l’esprit devant l’inaccessible !

Invocation vaine aventurée au fond

Du précipice aveugle où nos songes s’en vont !

Mot qui te porte, ô monde, et sur lequel tu vogues !

Nom mis en question dans les lourds dialogues

Du spectre avec le rêve, ô nuit, et des douleurs

Avec l’homme, et de l’astre avec les sombres fleurs

Qu’éveillent sur l’étang les froids rayons lunaires ![[259]](#footnote-259)

The owl’s target appears to be the ‘lourds dialogues’ of religious and metaphysical thinkers who insist on the capacity of both reason and intuition to grasp God’s existence (‘Qui le voit? Qui le prouve ?’). The owl insists that the name does not carry any visual or semantic referent, and yet, suggests that the vanity of the name impacts on the possibility of understanding the world (‘Mot qui te porte, ô monde, et sur lequel tu vogues !’). It seems then that the unintelligibility of the word “God” is reflective of the world’s unintelligibility more broadly, bolstered by the fact that the owl sees at night rather than by the light of day.

If there is any originality in the form of doubt proposed by the owl, it can be found in the passage where they relate a story of the founder of scepticism, Pyrrho of Elis, albeit in a purely imaginative way. After discerning the truth, condescended to by God (‘Il vit la vérité, Dieu la lui laissa prendre’ [v.2,417]) he decides to reject the gift in order to gain further insight into its source:

« Soudain, sombre, il tourna vers les grands cieux brûlants

« Son poing terrible et plein de rayons aveuglants,

« Et laissant de ses doigts jaillir l’astre, le sage

« Dit : je te lâche, ô Dieu, ton étoile au visage !

« Et la clarté plongea jusqu’au fond de la nuit ;

« On vit un instant Dieu, puis tout s’évanouit. »[[260]](#footnote-260)

The innovativeness of this dramatic sequence in the midst of the owl’s speech has been identified by Claude Rétat as owing to Pyrrho’s confrontational attitude towards divinity, his ‘capacité d’injure et de défi.’[[261]](#footnote-261) It is a mythologically-charged sequence (almost an inversion of Prometheus’ myth, where the divine fire was stolen from the gods and given to humanity as a gift) that portrays an act of iconoclasm in the truest sense of the word: that of a “shattering” or “breaking” the face (“visage”) of divinity in order to test its supposed value. The climax, however, ends ambiguously, for the brief glimpse of God that ensues leads to no change in position from the sceptical stance. Pyrrho’s brief narrative, rather, exhibits the violence of iconoclasm, capturing the agonistic and emotional side of “doubt” that contains the possibility of suspicious questioning transforming into physical animosity.

This confrontational stance is most fully expressed towards the end of the owl’s speech, where the mission of “demasking” or uncovering is brought to culmination. Bent on the certainty that God exists, but agonising over how to perceive divinity without *ipso facto* collapsing into idolatry, the solution proposed by the owl is to constrain their efforts to existence itself:

Oh ! si je trouvais Dieu ! Si je pouvais, à force

D’user ma griffe obscure à saisir cette écorce,

Déchirer l’ombre ! voir ce front, et le voir nu !

Ôter enfin la nuit du visage inconnu !

Mais rien ! Le ciel est faux, l’astre ment, l’aube est traître !

Je n’ai qu’un seul effort, je me cramponne à l’être ;

Je me cramponne à Dieu dans l’ombre sans parois ;[[262]](#footnote-262)

Paradoxically, nature assumes here the concepts of falsehood, lying and betrayal at the same time as the owl seeks to rid the external world of its deceptive appearance, so as to come closer to seeing it in its most fundamental aspect. The attitude of suspicion and its power of critique therefore appears to rely on the presumption that, behind the phenomenality of the world and its duplicity, there is a divine presence waiting to be revealed. Joining the Iconoclasts of the 8th and 9th Century, the owl’s ultimate intention is to retain a purified notion of God as fully-transcendent. In this sense, an iconoclastic attitude is analogous to the negative approach in theology, depicted in the poem as a paradoxical clinging to God (‘je me cramponne à Dieu dans l’ombre sans parois’). From this section onwards, it becomes clear that the task of visualising God must involve an intense scrutinising of the further winged appearances as potential idols emerging from the dark mental recesses of the speaker’s vision.

## “L’Ange”: Idolatry and Pantheism

The section dedicated to the speech of “L’Ange” is the longest in the poem, totalling close to fifteen-hundred lines. Its aim is to contrast the griffon’s previous speech on the clemency of a fully transcendent God by expounding on the theme of theodicy. In doing so, the angel builds on the owl’s concern for discovering a purified aspect to God, but takes the opposite approach by fully immanentizing God to nature. As mentioned above, in Hugo’s era this amounted to a pantheistic theodicy, where God is assimilated fully within cosmology, such as in Spinoza’s “God or nature” solution to the problem of evil.[[263]](#footnote-263)

What induced the greatest scandal in this interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy, however, was less an undermining of the Christian ethic of atonement and forgiveness than the attempt to, in the words of Jean Greisch, ‘réifier Dieu en le transformant en l’unique substance.’[[264]](#footnote-264) This transference of divine attributes to nature is central to the angel’s address:

Qu’il ait sa cendre au cœur, qu’il ait sa flamme au front,

Tout être est immortel comme essence ; et retrouve

Ce qui lui reste dû par la loi qui l’éprouve ;

Ce n’est point un motif parce qu’on est petit

Pour ne pas être vu ; nul en vain ne pâtit ;

Dieu n’est pas le myope immense de l’espace.

L’aboiement de l'écueil qui jamais ne se lasse,

Le tonnerre, le vol de l’astre échevelé,

Tous les rugissements du vent démuselé,

La trombe, le volcan, font, dans l’éternel gouffre,

Moins de bruit que ce cri d’un moucheron : je souffre !

Tous les êtres sont Dieu ; tous les flots sont la mer.[[265]](#footnote-265)

The idolatrous statement that is being made here is that ‘tout être est immortel comme essence.’ Instead of asserting the pantheistic formula “Tout est Dieu”, the final proposition is a more nuanced revision: ‘tous les êtres sont Dieu.’ However, we can prioritise a phenomenological reading of this passage over a metaphysical one by identifying how magnitudeand proportion become focal points in Hugo’s reasoning. Indeed, the size of ‘le volcan’ and ‘un moucheron’ are contrasted so as to evoke a perception of God as covering the full spectrum of magnitude as well as reconciling opposites. Instead of simply fitting in divinity to phenomena, which would annihilate any meaningful use of the term “divine” as that which transcends nature, the nuanced representation in this passage is of God as the *medium* in which all shapes and forms participate. This is captured in Hugo’s preferred analogy of God as the ocean (‘tous les flots sont la mer’).

Furthermore, there is another form of visual idolatry present in the angel’s proposed revelation. According to Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenological definition of an idol, whose ‘precise function consists in dividing the invisible into one part that is reduced to the visible and one part that is obfuscated as *invisable,*’[[266]](#footnote-266) we can detect the former case in the angel’s insistence on the equivalence of nature and divinity (pantheism), and the latter case in their metaphysical claim resembling Spinozian monism. The following excerpt will help to instantiate this:

Tout fait, germe. Et la vie est un flanc qui conçoit,

Quoi ? la vie à venir. Tout être, quel qu’il soit,

De l’astre à l’excrément, de la taupe au prophète,

Est un esprit traînant la forme qu’il s’est faite.

Autant que dans la grâce et que dans la beauté,

L’être persiste et vit dans la difformité

Sous l’engloutissement de la matière infâme ;

Autant qu’Eve au doux front, Léviathan, c’est l’âme.[[267]](#footnote-267)

The imagery of auto-generation, invoked by the literary and biblical sense of the word ‘flanc’ as alluding to Eve, illustrates a pantheistic conceptualisation of animate matter or a “hylozoism”[[268]](#footnote-268) that narrows focus onto the object’s visual form in the first instance. In the second, it obscures any further investigation by referring to its essence as an ineffable quality usually synonymous to “soul” or “spirit”. The idol is expressed as that of a life-giving figure, as much in beauty as in deformity, both ‘Eve’ the mythical first mother and ‘Léviathan’ the creature of the deep. The phrase ‘matière infâme’ is also significant in this regard, denoting as it does the imprisonment of the idol in matter, defecting and masking its invisible, supposedly life-giving nature behind it.

Towards the end of the angel’s discourse, there is a change of versification that heightens a mathematical conceptualisation of divinity. No longer organic, God becomes ‘le cercle’ (v.5,133), ‘l’axe’ (v.5,153), ‘la raison et le centre imperdable’ (v.5,141). There is a jolting sense in this passage caused by a change from idolised nature as evidence of divinity to idolising transcendental “proofs” under the guise of mathematics and geometry. That this idolisation of rationality emerges in the penultimate section of *Dieu* is not surprising, particularly given the ambitious task Hugo set himself in tracing poetically the various understandings of the word “God” within the boundaries of his historical and cultural intellectual contexts, which most certainly includes the strong tradition of French deism that stretches from René Descartes concept of *Mathesis universalis* to Voltaire’s “Traité de métaphysique” (1734) and through to Robespierre’s Cult of the Supreme Being. Yet, even more astonishing is the final revelation given in section VIII, constituting a renunciation of sorts of both the Pyrrhic effort to ‘guette[r] Dieu’ (v.2,100) and the angelic effort required to perceive phenomenally a pure abstraction of divinity.

## “La Clarté”: Iconography and Amorous Exchange

The final completed section of “L’Océan d’en haut'' returns to a scope of approximately three hundred lines, much closer in length to the other apparitions, save that of the owl or angel. The primary philosophical import distilled from the speech of the “light” is a negation of all that has been said about divinity up until this stage, expressing in poetic form one of Ingolf Dalferth’s definitions of transcendence, in this case as a negatively-geared ‘divine transcendence’ that escapes rational categorisation or representation.[[269]](#footnote-269) One might be tempted therefore to equate this section with that of the owl’s iconoclasm; however, there is an important difference: while the former function depends upon a metaphorisation of divinity in order to question it, such as the spatialisation given in Pyrrho’s visit to heaven (‘il vint un jour au ciel’ [v.2,416]), a reading of the light’s speech as iconographic must work to transform the invisible into the visible.[[270]](#footnote-270) The first stanza of the “light” encapsulates this remarkably:

– Pas de droite et de gauche ;

Pas de haut ni de bas ; pas de glaive qui fauche ;

Pas de trône jetant dans l’ombre un vague éclair ;

Pas de lendemain, pas d’aujourd’hui, pas d’hier ;

Pas d’heure frissonnant au vol du temps rapace ;

Point de temps ; point d’ici, point de là ; point d’espace ;

Pas d’aube et pas de soir ; pas de tiare ayant

L’astre pour escarboucle à son faîte effrayant ;

Pas de balance, pas de sceptre, pas de globe ;

Pas de Satan caché dans les plis de la robe ;

Pas de robe ; pas d’âme à la main ; pas de mains ;

Et vengeance, pardon, justice, mots humains.[[271]](#footnote-271)

Clearly there is here both a showing and a taking away happening, a relentless drive of anaphora (‘pas de’) negating objects, concepts and metaphors that intend to schematise space and time. It verges on an anti-logic by voiding language of its ability to define divinity (ergo anti-theo-*logic*al), asserting a few lines later that ‘l’essai de la louange est presque le blasphème’ (v.5205). Yet, at the heart of this passage is the description of an experience of the divine, or, phrased otherwise by Georges Gusdorf, of a ‘sens du sacré, ouvert en abîme sur la transcendance vive.’[[272]](#footnote-272) It is a phenomenological description that permits itself to controvert the very object it represents and thus fulfil the status of an icon as a depiction without a referent.

This complex understanding of the icon can be understood more readily in relation to the modality of “religious speech” in general. Bruno Latour argues that religious speech ‘does not have a referent in the precise sense of the term that the study of the sciences has allowed us to define it: it does not distil information through a chain of graduated documents, each of which serves as material for formatting the next one.’[[273]](#footnote-273) In other words, its *mediation* occurs differently to how we communicate in a scientific sense, for instance through object-oriented concepts that produce transferable information. Latour later calls this alternative transformation of information ‘person-making’,[[274]](#footnote-274) in that it channels towards the viewer of the representation (in this case the reader) by directing attention onto their own presence and not elsewhere (i.e. to the text).[[275]](#footnote-275) It is best analogous to amorous exchange, where there is no information transfer at all, but rather one’s own presence is phenomenologically given to the interlocutor.

This unconditional act of self-giving or ‘person-making’ is where the speaker’s “transascendance” towards the divine ends: in a Johannine formulation that does not break from the Christian God but stems directly from it: God as love.[[276]](#footnote-276) The search for a Supreme Being rid of all idolatry reaches its zenith-point in a broken alexandrine of 6-2-4 syllables:

‘Âme ! être, c’est aimer.’

Il est.

C’est l’être extrême.

Dieu, c’est le jour sans borne et sans fin qui dit : j’aime.[[277]](#footnote-277)

Mimicking a scholastic syllogism, this final revelation by the “light” articulates the unconditionality of God’s being, whose phenomenality or “givenness” can only be conceived analogously to the free movement of love as it instantiates the presence of the other - in this case, the absolutely Other. We thus reach in the culmination of the progression of the poem an epistemic limit. Hugo’s graded levels of revelation reaches an end-point with the phenomenality created by what Marion calls a ‘gaze of charity’[[278]](#footnote-278), which ends the process of both iconoclastic scrutinising and idolatrous rationalising over what God is and is not. Rather, the paradoxical imagery of ‘le jour sans borne et sans fin qui dit : j’aime’ redirects attention back to the fact that one only loves *after* God. For Hugo, the iconographic function of “la clarté” therefore provides the intellectual horizon for us to return to his antithetical and pre-eminently visual figurations of the human as lover of the divine. It is the intuitive medium through which the all-important function of sight is able to operate, aspiring to respond to ‘l’œil gouffre, ouvert au fond de la lumière’ (v.5,197).

# Chapter 4: Humbling Heights: Plotting Transcendence in *Dieu* (Continued)

# The Paradox of the Infinitely Finite: “L’Esprit Humain”

Returning to the first part of *Dieu,* entitled “Le Seuil du gouffre”, itself broken into two sections, first “L’Esprit Humain” and then “Les Voix”, we move away from examining the ascent in the text’s presentation of the divine to its earlier counterpart (though written much later) in Hugo’s phenomenological use of paradox. Just as the iconographic function of the ‘clarté’ at the end of the poem ends by holding open the tension of articulating a transcendental object by combining the impulse of idolisation with the deconstructive task of iconoclasm, so too are the epistemic limits of human knowledge of divinity engaged early on in the text by the voice of “L’Esprit Humain”, acting as a sort of theological introduction to what follows. Looking at this section of the poem with the prism of “transdescendence” in mind, we will see that Hugo’s use of paradox corresponds to a theological exigency, one that insists on balancing an anthropological epistemology of God with that of divine alterity, which paradoxically results in a ‘counter-experience’ of shedding light on both areas of concern.

At the outset, we can say that there are two kinds of paradoxical thinking exhibited in *Dieu*: that of a *logical* paradox, which contains a seemingly unresolved contradiction in the form of antinomies, and that of aparadoxical *phenomenon*, which manifests its incongruity to the exact degree that it contradicts the finite conditions of the permissible experience of an object. While both categories are recognisable through the principle of non-contradiction, it is the latter which we will be focusing on in this section, for the primary reason that we are investigating a *phenomenology of divinity,* the phenomenality of which is characterised by a refusal to be fully present in the text. We must therefore be attentive to the ways in which different phenomena in this section of the poem exceed the explanative capacities of the various religious and philosophical discourses circulating in Hugo’s time. We will do so by first beginning with his use of symbols, followed by the relevance of unintelligibility and nothingness in regards to theological inquiry, before finishing with some comments on how Hugo’s use of theological language is consciously aware of these limitations.

## The Paradox of the Symbol

As Mircea Eliade noticed long ago in his seminal study of the sacred and profane, for an object to be understood religiously it must first become a symbol. The symbol assumes a paradoxical task: to be both a manifestation of divinity and a material vehicle for it (as a “*syn-bole*” in Greek is that which is thrown or cast together). In Eliade’s words, ‘by manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else,* yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.’[[279]](#footnote-279) In a similar way, language adopts a certain sacred/profane binary, depending on how it is used in different cultural contexts. As we have already seen, for Hugo there is an irreducibly gnomic aspect to poetic utterance that, even when not profusive, says more than one initially cares to consider. As evidence of this, one need simply observe the amount of antithetical phrases that punctuate his poetic language, compounding the broader paradox of language as both an internally and externally-referential system.[[280]](#footnote-280) Why is this important when it comes to considering the appearance of the “Esprit Humain”? Because this first monstruous apparition in the poem symbolises for Hugo humanity’s essential entrapment in contradiction (‘Homme, toujours en moi la contradiction’ [v.58]) and arrives therefore as the first epistemological obstacle to be overcome.

From its commencement, the description of the evocation of the human spirit harkens back to the prophetic visions of Daniel and Ezekiel, where beasts with multiple body parts rise out of the ocean and winged creatures bearing both animal and human features appear in the sky. The same visionary, dream-like register is reprised in the poem, when the speaker begins to relate the growing definition of the black spot into a conglomeration of forms:

Et je vis apparaître une étrange figure ;

Un être tout semé de bouches, d’ailes, d’yeux,

Vivant, presque lugubre et presque radieux.

Vaste, il volait ; plusieurs des ailes étaient chauves.

En s’agitant, les cils de ses prunelles fauves

Jetaient plus de rumeur qu’une troupe d’oiseaux

Et ses plumes faisaient un bruit de grandes eaux.

Cauchemar de la chair ou vision d’apôtre,

Selon qu’il se montrait d’une face ou de l’autre,

Il semblait une bête ou semblait un esprit.

Il paraissait, dans l’air où mon vol le surprit,

Faire de la lumière et faire des ténèbres.[[281]](#footnote-281)

A creature full of antithetical qualities (lugubre/radieux, bête/esprit, ‘lumière/ténèbres), the apparition embodies the essential paradox of a symbol in its dualistic form, changing according to the standpoint of its viewer: it is either ‘cauchemar de la chair ou vision d’apôtre.’ Unlike the visions of the Old Testament however, the initial characterisation of the creature is largely bestial, blending a lexicon of physical features (‘bouches’, ‘yeux’, ‘prunelles’) with that of ornithology (‘ailes’, ‘plumes’, ‘oiseaux’).

Nonetheless, the speaker quickly recognises from this encounter that it bears something resembling a humanlike quality as well (‘Et je sentais en lui quelque chose d’humain’ [v.26]), which the reader can readily surmise, judging from Hugo’s idealism, constitutes the “esprit” in “L’Esprit Humain.” The fact that this occurs from the indistinct description of a humanlike bird is worth noting, because it signals an ambition by the speaker to instantiate a classical distinction between the *homo duplex* of man-animal, avoiding therein the polarities of the merely bestial or the purely angelic and maintaining the paradox of a synthesis. It can also be read as a mythological description that dramatises humankind’s anxious and totemic relationship to the animal realm.

As the compounding of paradoxical statements continues during the monologue of the creature’ self-description, it becomes clearer that the human spirit is in fact an animation of a philosophical rationalism reaching its own limits:

Je garde les penseurs, ces pauvres mouches frêles.

Je tiens les pieds de ceux dont l’azur prend les ailes.

Je suis parfum, poison, bien, mal, silence, bruit.

Je suis en haut midi, je suis en bas minuit ;[[282]](#footnote-282)

The gravitational metaphor restricts the speaker from ascending into ‘l’azur’, signifying the sky and its visual unfurling of the seemingly infinite horizon. Nevertheless, for the speaker to escape from this indictment presented by the human condition, they must counter-intuitively work from within it, lest they dare to lose the qualification of “human” and become either angelic or bestial.[[283]](#footnote-283) This dynamic of “either/or” is the implicit alternative to the speaker, presented in contrast to the paradoxical “both/and” that seems unsatisfactory in their desire to identify and name the divine. When asked ‘Que demandes-tu ? (v.196)’, their reply is at first complete bewilderment and an inability to articulate a response. Then, when asked a second time, the terse response by the speaker indicates that they are seeking a monotheistic God: ‘LUI (v.250).’

## The Threat and Prospect of “Le Néant”

Upon this request for knowledge of a monotheistic God, who by definition must be placed outside of epistemic limits, being wholly transcendent to the world, the speaker is met with an outburst of laughter from the winged monster, followed by sheer darkness (‘J’entendis un éclat de rire, et ne vis rien’ [v.254]). For an instant, the search for glimpsing divinity ends here. Yet the following stanza reacts to this threat of nothingness, translated as the meaninglessness of the speaker’s request, that contains *in nuce* the entire spiritual enterprise of *Dieu* as well as secondary insight into Hugo’s exile-period political anxieties:

Hélas, n’étant qu’un homme, une chair misérable,

Dans cette obscurité fauve, âpre, inexorable,

Dans ces brumes sans jour, sans bords, sous ce linceul,

Je songeai qu’il était horrible d’être seul.

Puis mon esprit revint à son but : – voir, connaître,

Savoir ; – pendant que l’ombre informe, louche, traître,

Roulant dans ses échos l’affreux rire moqueur,

Grandissait dans l’espace ainsi que dans mon cœur.

Et je criai, ployant mes ailes déjà lasses :

– Dites-moi seulement son nom, tristes espaces,

Pour que je le répète à jamais dans la nuit ! –

Et je n’entendis rien que la bise qui fuit.[[284]](#footnote-284)

Though the moral qualities of ‘louche’ and ‘traître’ attributed to the shadow seem literally nonsensical, they reflect the speaker’s unease when faced with emptiness and propound the Romantic insistence that meaning can be ascribed to anything, even an experience of supposed nothingness; in this case, the shadow becomes like an opponent who dismissively mocks and laughs at their interlocutor. The last line of the cited passage also foreshadows “La clarté” and Hugo’s ultimate statement in the poem that God is most akin to love. Indeed, ‘la bise qui fuit’ is also a sign of presence that recedes, promising appeasement to the speaker’s spiritual discontent while fugitively frustrating it.

One could pursue this contrapuntal relationship from different phenomenological angles. Suffice to say that for Hugo’s poetic exploration of non-existence or non-being in this critical junction of the poem, the key function of the ‘tristes espaces’, the supposedly empty spaces bereft of meaning, is to act as receptacles for the instillation of meaning by the poet. In other words, all the intentional objects seen by the speaker are brought into sharp focus against the tenebrous backdrop of nothingness.

In this regard, it becomes quite clear that the entire poetical structure of *Dieu* is analogous to the process of thinking divinity in concrete terms; that is, with phenomenal content rather than abstract thought. The active negation of meaning, wherever it is found, in a compound of symbols or otherwise, hence *relies* on the appearance of the object in question before the negation can occur. In this sense, the object is “verified” to the degree that it can be negated, which as a paradoxical instance of counter-experience is fundamental to maintaining the epistemological distance of a wholly transcendent divinity.

With this understanding of the negatively-geared “threat” of nothingness in mind, we can now better interpret the speaker’s reply to the monstrous creature, stretching across one hundred lines as an encyclopaedic, syncretic discourse that encapsulates numerous historical representational attempts at perceiving the divine. At bottom, this panoptic display reinforces the speaker’s broader assertion that, before anything else, God is an axiomatic principle necessary to humanity’s understanding of itself:

– Quoi ! l’homme tomberait, hagard, exténué,

Comme le moucheron qui bat la vitre blême !

Quoi ! tout aboutirait à du néant suprême !

Tout l’effort des chercheurs frémissants se perdrait !

L’homme habiterait l’ombre et serait au secret !

Marcher serait errer ! l’aile serait punie !

L’aurore, ô cieux profonds, serait une ironie ![[285]](#footnote-285)

Easily identifiable is a strong voluntarism in these lines, in which the significance of the line ‘l’homme habiterait l’ombre et serait au secret’ is to be completed with the implication that humankind would be a secret to itself without the extension of thought involved in thinking divinity against which are measured our efforts at knowledge-acquisition.[[286]](#footnote-286) However, instead of seeing this passage as a reflexive repulsion by the speaker away from meaninglessness in the form of nihilism, it is better situated within Didier Philippot’s insight: that ‘l'hostilité profonde de Hugo au nihilisme moderne (et à son frère, le positivisme étroit) aide à prendre toute la mesure, par contraste, de la puissance d’affirmation à la fois prudente et résolue, que renferme la notion de possible’[[287]](#footnote-287) - specifically, in its paradoxical relianceon the power of negation to indirectly affirm. If indeed poetic creation amounts to ‘what may be’ as Aristotle first defined it,[[288]](#footnote-288) then it must be considered unstable, contingent on its capacity to *not be* in order to mean something on an aesthetic level to its interpreter.[[289]](#footnote-289) Similarly, for theological inquiry to be internally consistent and meaningful, it too must recognise the conditionality of its constructs in light of the demands placed on it by a *theos* that is wholly Other. Indeed, Hugo’s enterprise of speaking of God (*theo-logos*) owes as much to the prospect as it does to the threat of “le néant”, wherein creative force is found.[[290]](#footnote-290)

## At the Boundaries of Language

The end of the section “L’Esprit humain” comes as the speaker’s pleading with the disappeared spirit causes it to re-emerge, growing in size, then becoming indistinct, and finally emanating into a series of voices that form the next section of the poem. These ‘voix, mêlant le cri, l’appel, le chant’ [v.454] summarise once again the concerted efforts of humankind to define the divine attributes in an analytic sense, as a rational process of inquiry terminating in the inability to know with *certainty*, hence offering a variation or rather an extension on the singular voice of “L’Esprit Humain”.

Before moving into that section, however, it is important to summarise how paradox has so far been used as a literary device, as well as reflecting on its greater purpose in a *theopoetics*. As Jean-Pierre Jossua remarked:

Hugo n’emploie presque jamais un terme ou une image anthropomorphiques ou moraux, ou cosmiques, ou ontologiques, ou de type métaphysique négatif (in-fini, etc.), ou de type apophatique (in-connu, etc.) sans les compenser aussitôt par d’autres remplissant la fonction opposée.[[291]](#footnote-291)

The opening section of *Dieu* has already proved exemplary of this principle, emphasising early on to readers that the visionary theology is not intended to be systematic or dogmatic, but pro-visionary in the etymological sense of the word. Thus, both “L’esprit humain” and “Les Voix” serve as a critical introduction to “L’Océan d’en haut” and are valuable in phenomenological terms insofar as they set out early on the clear dialectic of balancing the dual epistemological weights of revelation and reason; that is, what is given and how it is to be understood.

The speaker’s first impression of the voices is as a cacophony of noise, ‘de funèbres voix’ [v.393] that can be heard from the darkness before the augmented human spirit reappears. They incarnate the emotional response often incited by apophatic theology and its *prima facie* derisive manner of subverting received truths, compared in this case to irony:

Noirs discours ! l’ironie y grinçait le râle ;

Des plaintes, sanglotant dans l’ombre sépulcrale

Comme entre les roseaux gémit le gavial,

S’achevaient en sarcasme amer et trivial ;

Je croyais par moment qu’en ces vagues royaumes

J’assistais au concile effrayant des fantômes

Que nous nommons raison, logique, utilité,

Certitude, calcul, sagesse, vérité ;[[292]](#footnote-292)

This recurrence of irony as expressing an incongruity reminds readers of the elusiveness of the phenomenology of divinity that Hugo is attempting to present in the poem as well as its insurmountable distance when conveyed through language. Indeed, the paradoxical phenomenon of God even lends itself to derision and humiliation (‘sarcasme amer et trivial’). A ‘gavial’ is a large Indian crocodile, the *Gavialis gangeticus,* perhaps used for the suggestive imagery of its sneer-like snout and the element of danger and menace that awaits partially-submerged under these ‘noirs discours.’ The excerpt, furthermore, connects this menacing possibility with that of the religious ‘concile’, most likely targeting the Roman-Catholic practice of forming a conciliar assembly of clergy to determine doctrine with the tools of ‘raison, logique, utilité / Certitude, calcul, sagesse.’

As a corrective, the negative path of theology that Hugo is promoting from the beginning of the poem asserts the claim that language cannot attain to divine truths but must be tempered by a critical distance in its application and hospitable to scepticism, lest one fall into wilful deception. Certainly, in a biographical sense, it is accurate to notice that this impulse was intensified at the time of writing by Hugo’s repulsion towards two Roman Catholic clergymen: that of Mgr Sibour, archbishop of Paris from 1848-1857, who Hugo lambasted in the poem “Te Deum du 1er janvier 1852” for celebrating Louis-Napoleon’s *coup d’état* a month prior; and that of Pope Pius IX’s decree on the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary as dogma in his apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854.

Regardless of any personal motivations, an important corollary to draw from these historical antagonisms is Hugo’s unwavering determination to carry over the religious into the secular, including both its various subject matter and the language in which it is described. In this regard, Dante is Hugo’s most prominent predecessor and *La Divina Commedia* the most comparable text to that of *Dieu.* Both epics fundamentally embody William Franke’s observation that ‘it is paradoxically because of their utterly (and unutterably) transcendent nature that theological verities can find only worldly human, and poetic expression. There is no proper or purely spiritual language for them.’[[293]](#footnote-293) Thus does negative theology in turn continue to feed off poetic language *tout court,* circling around the ambivalent nature of the symbol.

Looking at this process as a problematic of representation that carries an ethical dimension, Delphine Gleizes takes this further, by saying that the recurrent confounding of the religious and the secular creates ‘un continuum entre la loi d'en bas et la loi d'en haut dans la pensée hugolienne, continuum qui révèle en fin de compte le caractère ambivalent de cette dernière, entre acceptation et révolte, dénonciation et soumission aux arrêts divins.’[[294]](#footnote-294) Most importantly for Hugo, it is the political and the ethical that animate his religious language and texts, avoiding any type of obscurantism and openly advocating for certain political causes in the name of God. Our interpretation of *Dieu* as an apophatic theological endeavour would therefore be incomplete without concluding with the ethical relationship Hugo derives from the demands placed on each individual’s response to God as the Absolute Other.

# Ethics of the Absolute Other: “Les Voix”

Given the strident condemnation of speculative philosophy in *L’Âne* and of dogmatic theology in *Religions et religion,* both symbiotically related to the composition of *Dieu,* it should not be forgotten that, at bottom, ethical obligations were paramount to Hugo. In the former poem, the donkey Patience takes aim specifically at Immanuel Kant as the intellectual cornerstone of nineteenthcentury French philosophy, reminding the German philosopher that ‘la phrase est une grande fourbe. / On croit qu’elle se dresse alors qu’elle se courbe’[[295]](#footnote-295); in the latter, the theologian is castigated for not only hiding behind language’s opacity, but for erecting rigid institutionalised structures that secure exclusivist understandings of divinity (‘Il faut une maison pour mettre la prière’[[296]](#footnote-296)). In both cases, the professions of philosopher and theologian are characterised as being antithetical to the inherently destabilising reality of the infinite, applied intellectually as open-mindedness and the allowance of contingency in forming arguments. More gravely, even, in accommodating the difference of the other, be it in the form of a donkey, an atheist, or otherwise.

In this way, the series of voices that arise from the “Esprit humain” portray the figure of the other in various guises, metamorphizing across eleven instances in the original manuscript of “Le Seuil du gouffre” and thirteen in the Robert Laffont edition. Many more were however written by Hugo, and some were picked out to form the fourth division, entitled “Des voix”, of *Religions et religion.* As individual voices, each announces the futility of calculative reason in comprehending the divine and thus simply express variations on the same theme begun in “L’Esprit humain”, but together, they embody Hugo’s growing practice across exile of ritualising poetry as a privileged site of revelation.

As Emmanuel Godo has observed, after de-ritualising his relationship to God, ‘Hugo sur-ritualise sa poésie, en théâtralisant à outrance, dans “l’Esprit humain” et “Les Voix”, sa quête de connaissance […] qui ont pour vocation affirmée de former une religion à part entière.’[[297]](#footnote-297) Daniel Larangé also sees in these series of voices a connection to Ballanche’s concept of palingenesis: they are ‘celles des générations perdues, de ces hommes morts et ressuscités. Elles raisonnent sur le principe du *gene-ratio,* de la raison (*ratio*) du génie humain (*genus*). Dans leur disparité et polyphonie, elles forment la voix de l’humanité.’[[298]](#footnote-298)

There is, however, an important element missing in this account of the ‘formes, sortant du monstre’ (v.461), and that is the significance of the “monster” of humanity, understood as the other in the third-person singular and others in the third-person plural. The last form of “transdescendence” we will be analysing in *Dieu* relates therefore to the ethical transcendence of the other over the *ego*, serving as an aesthetical primer to the series of winged monsters that will come to appear in “L’Océan d’en haut.” Indeed, as “monsters” they not only provoke negative affects such as fear and anxiety, but also provide intense experiences of confronting difference and alterity.

## “Le monstre sacré” as Relative Other

Nonetheless, the problem of assuming experiences of alterity into the *ego* goes further than merely becoming conscious of an experience of difference. Rather, it touches upon the difficulty of expressing collective identity in either explicit or implicit terms, of a first-person plural “we” that immediately qualifies who and what is being represented. In Husserlian phenomenology, the presence of alterity must always be presupposed for a subjective horizon to even emerge, be that through apperception (internal recognition of the “I” of self-consciousness as a form of alterity) or in the perceptive act of apprehending a physical object.

However, the ethical transcendence of the other has less to do with recognising the superiority of the other than it has to do with *becoming* or *assimilating* one’s ego to the other. Here is where the imaginative portrayal of “monsters” in religion and literature has been central. For monsters (derived both from *monstrare,* “to show” and *monere* “to warn”) convey in their appearance both similarities and radical dissimilarities to how a collective group perceive themselves; they are, to use Richard Kearney’s phrase, ‘metaphors of our anxiety.’[[299]](#footnote-299)

“Le monstre sacré” would therefore be that which attracts as much as it repels; the being is perceived as a semantic channelling of evil that, once extirpated, destroyed, or controlled, promises to exorcise our collective imagination of its existential anxieties. It can be considered “sacred” according to Eliade’s definition cited above; that is, it channels something else (in this case, it harbours divinity) while still retaining its immediate reality.[[300]](#footnote-300) Interestingly, Hugo himself could be conceived of as “un monstre sacré”, perhaps under the visualisation of Benjamin Roubaud’s 1841 caricature *Panthéon charivarique*, depicting a macro-sized Hugo with enormous forehead, leaning onto Notre-Dame de Paris under a swirl of fantastical apparitions, accosted by Frenchmen reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s Lilliputians in *Gulliver’s Travels.* This popular image captures what we have seen previously in Hugo’s “Les mages”, where the mage-figure is sacralised as representing both themselves and others.[[301]](#footnote-301)

The swirl of voices that harangue the speaker in“Les Voix”brings to the forefront how searching for divinity assumes the ability to identify sameness over the difference of the fantastical and the phantasmagorical. For example, the second voice proudly states ‘c’est nous que vous nommez démons’ (v.550), whereas the third voice warns that ‘ce n’est pas sans danger que des hommes d’argile, / Tremblants quand ils sont las, glacés quand ils sont nus, / Dialoguent dans l’ombre avec des inconnus’ (v.594-96). Indeed, the very concept of dialogue implies a hospitable conversation with difference, a *dia-legein* (“speaking through”)that is willing to transact oneself-as-another. As a true alter-*ego*, the Romantic monster not just threatens but also entices, most notably through the idealist lens of re-imagining nature under altered manifestations. This highly solipsistic process consequently augments the individual’s psychological sense of being attuned to the world, precisely because it can be imagined otherwise.

Yet, whereas the “Esprit humain” had a visible, albeit obscure, form, the voices in this section of the poem remain invisible and, therefore, point to an unidentifiable and unlocalisable source of alterity. The speech of the fourth voice strings off a series of questions that mock the speaker’s initial imprecision in articulating what they seek:

Que viens-tu demander à ce monde nocturne ?

Un Dieu ! Pourquoi viens-tu plonger ta main dans l’urne ?

Job en tire Satan et Mahomet Iblis.

Les gouffres ont-ils Dieu dans leurs profonds oublis ?

Ce Dieu sert-il de centre à leurs circonférences ?

Le voit-on à travers leurs sombres transparences ?

Ou bien est-ce ce Tout, cette âpre immensité,

Ce ciel, que vous prenez pour une volonté ?

Sont-ce ces profondeurs, ces vents, ces fondrières,

Ces forêts de nuée aux livides clairières,

Ces éléments, ces nuits, ces mornes régions,

Que vous appelez Dieu dans vos religions ?[[302]](#footnote-302)

In regards to a phenomenology of the monstrous, this passage highlights the uncertainty in distinguishing the monstrous owing to its derivative qualities of size, magnitude, obscurity, and organicity. The difficulty of separating the sacred from the profane, the hospitable from the hostile, is not only inconclusive for Hugo, but also harkens back to a necessary tension in the symbolic manner of thinking of the three main monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This is because, for these Axial-age religions, the concept of “human flourishing” was fundamentally altered by the imposition of a cosmological split (the transcendent vs. mundane, pure alterity vs. perceivable alterity) that irreparably shifted the ethical ordering of entire societies.[[303]](#footnote-303)

Hugo reprises this religious tension most directly in his poetics of the sublime, insofar as it informs how the affective responses elicited by monsters and the grotesque are rendered in the text. There is normally cathartic resolution awaiting the reader of Hugo’s texts, able to anticipate the narrative demise of the monster in novelistic endeavours such as Quasimodo in *Notre-Dame de Paris,* Gwynplaine in *L’Homme qui rit,* and the octopus in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*. In turn, the very fact that the speaker is able to emotionally mitigate a series of deriding voices in “Les Voix” is testament to the Romantic inclination towards sublimating negative experience, expressed most typically in melancholic attitudes, *Sturm und Drang* death-drives, and ruminations on anti-Enlightenment mysticism. The fifth voice resonates with this interpretation of the Romantic thinker, addressing the speaker as ‘songeur dont la nuit hérisse les cheveux’ (v.739) but who, contrary to their fears, also wishes to ‘vider l’ombre’ (v.742). This determination is founded entirely on Hugo’s early intuition that the repulsive and the ugly, as attributes of the other, are, in the end, reconcilable: ‘ce que nous appelons le laid est un détail d’un grand ensemble qui nous échappe, et qui s’harmonise non pas avec l’homme, mais avec la création tout entière.’[[304]](#footnote-304) It would therefore be unethical, by this standard, to refuse to acknowledge forms of otherness, and to provide occasion for its synthesis with the beautiful, which for nineteenth-century French Romanticism meant sublimation in the artwork itself.

## The Call of the Absolute Other

Moving from the relative other to the absolute other, the sixth voice begins a process that is remarkable in its deconstruction of various representations of God. The voice’s initial question and command, ‘de quel Dieu veux-tu parler ? Précise’ (v. 895), leads into a short historical digression on various discourses of power that are championed under the guise of monotheistic faith. A quick summary will indicate the critique at play, premised by the anthropomorphism of attributes onto an abstract entity: readers are presented with God equipped with the attributes of a king or a priest (‘portant couronne, étole, et glaive, et sceptre’ [v.900]); God as capricious arbitrator (‘qui met Galilée en prison, et de Maistre / en sentinelle au seuil du paradis terrestre’ [v.907-8]); God as courtisan (‘Aux carrosses du roi, bien né, suivant les modes / Rendant aux Montespans les Bossuets commodes’ [v.927-28]); God as bourgeois ideology (‘Dieu facile, logeable, aimable, utile en-cas’ [v.954]); and finally, the God of philosophers (‘Dieu consenti par Locke et que Grimm refusa, / Très-Haut à qui d’Holbach a donné son visa’ [v.1,009-10]). Yet, instead of abandoning the idea of a singularly transcendent God, the voice doubles down on an iconoclastic critique, stating : ‘Tous ces dieux, quel que soit le nom dont on les nomme, / Sont tout, excepté Dieu’ (v.1,016-17). Statement to which the speaker replies, echoing their ethical commitments already laid out: ‘Je veux le nom du vrai… / Pour que je le redise à la terre inquiète’ (v.1,060-61).

In other words, what the speaker is searching for is an encounter with the Impossible, with the Absolute Other, seeking an utterance that would address *everyone* and thus efface the need for alterity. This is perhaps the high-point of Romantic faith: a hope in discovering the *logos* that would unlock their most authentic self-understanding while being simultaneously capable of transferral through the medium of language to others, in order to promote consciousness-raising in the most democratic sense.[[305]](#footnote-305) However, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, in a critical passage in his phenomenological study of responsibility worth citing entirely:

But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility... I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other, [tout autre est tout autre],* every one else is completely or wholly other. The simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concept of duty as much as that of responsibility. As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude.[[306]](#footnote-306)

The fully or “wholly” other demands absolute exclusivity and is not a shared commitment but, on the contrary, a non-transferable article of personal responsibility. Under this framework, the monotheist’s exclusive attachment to God becomes one ethical commitment set against the rest, i.e., anybody can fill the place of the Absolute Other. For Hugo and his phenomenological investigation of divinity in the early stages of *Dieu,* this complicates his search for God as the Absolute Other, because it requires seeing each form of alterity as an incarnation of the Absolute Other.[[307]](#footnote-307) It then becomes questionable whether or not this experience of the other can really be shared via language, let alone constitute grounds for a social and political ethic.

The speech of the seventh voice seeks to answers this question in the following terms: while the experience of the Absolute Other cannot be shared intersubjectively, the signifier “Dieu” can be emptied of its meaning when utilised in discourses on power and yet remain valid as a container for existential epiphanies. This position by the seventh voice forms a kind of compromise with the previous apophatic voices, and it is tied to Hugo’s privileging of the sacerdotal poet-figure, characterising them first as a dauntless interlocutor with the divine (‘le poète saint’ [v.1,199]) and then implying that all are called to this role in the future:

L’homme à saisir ce mot s’est parfois occupé ;

Mais en vain ; car ce nom ineffable est coupé

En autant de tronçons qu’il est de créatures ;

Il est épars au loin dans les autres natures ;

Personne n’a l’alpha, personne l’oméga ;

Ce nom, qu’en expirant le passé nous légua,

Sera continué par ceux qui sont à naître ;

Et tout l’univers n’a qu’un objet : nommer l’être ![[308]](#footnote-308)

One form of the “religious” in this passage comes as historical actualisation, where the past and the future are tied together by ‘ce nom ineffable’ that is strewn ‘en autant de tronçons qu’il est de créatures.’ This fragmentation of the divine is Hugo’s solution to the problem of committing exclusively to the Absolute Other: by optimistically proclaiming that ‘ceux qui sont à naître’ will respond in a similarly positive way to the pure alterity of the name “Dieu” and therefore communally break down its inexpressible, intensely subjective dimension. In the words of the Bishop Myriel as he speaks to the ailing revolutionary in *Les Misérables*:‘le progrès doit croire en Dieu’.[[309]](#footnote-309) Redefined in terms of consciousness, as we have seen, the ‘moi de l’infini’ enables Hugo to safeguard a place for the Absolute Other in his utopic visions of history. This is because, phenomenologically speaking, one’s conscience is an “I” at a distance, the voice of alterity that questions one’s actions and changes in line with personal and social expectations. Hence, the infinite self is simply a logical extension of this introspective process. Just as the call of personal conscience shapes how we respond to ourselves and is able to be reshaped in turn, so too is the ‘moi de l’infini’, according to Hugo, both informed and formed by the progress of historical events.

## The Two Poles of the Subject: Self and Other

We are now in a better position to conclude this phenomenological reading of *Dieu* by having spent time focusing on the finite self in opposition to figurations of the other, extending Hugo’s notion of the “moi de l’infini” to concrete instances of interaction between the two poles. This relationship has been seen in a number of ways in the poem, from the visual iconoclastic and iconographic dynamic in “L’Océan d’en haut”, to the limits of language in “Le Seuil du gouffre” and the underlying ethical dimensions demanded by the relative other and the Absolute Other.

Yet, if indeed this drama of subjectivity can be summarised as a phenomenological investigation of individual consciousness, the criticism that this amounts to a shallow egotism or worse, a kind of solipsism, must be addressed. As we have seen, the most immediate response to this concern is that *Dieu*, on the contrary, can be minimally interpreted as a lyrico-epic poem completely oriented towards the other – ultimately, to the most radically possible Other: the idea of God. In fact, through the responsivenessof the interior self to these voices and manifestations of one’s own conscience, Hugo reinforces his wider societal notion of responsibility, which we will come to discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

There is, nonetheless, a wider problem of agency that animates this criticism of the idealisation of the self *as* other. Reacting against the mechanistic and disenchanting philosophies of the Enlightenment, Romantic idealism sought to protect the individual’s possession of free will from a reductionist determinism by re-harmonising the natural and the human world through the supremacy of mind (*esprit* or *pensée* in French*, Geist* in German)over matter.[[310]](#footnote-310)As a consequence, this places an agonisingly enormous task of self-reflection on the individual wishing to realise their own ipseity, their own selfhood, by purely internal means of validation. In a religious sense, Guy Rosa has remarked that this onus of individuation significantly informed Hugo’s rerouting of Christianity, stating that ‘il n'y avait plus de place pour le Christ dès lors qu'étaient conférés aux individus les prérogatives du Sujet. Les hommes sont donc divins, non par vocation et sous condition de leur rédemption, mais par nature : d'origine et de destination.’[[311]](#footnote-311) The final lines of the thirteenth voice in “Les Voix” alludes to this centrality of self-actualisation, establishing in advance its dramatic progression in “L’Océan d’en haut”, by adjuring to the speaker :

Esprit, fais ton sillon, homme, fais ta besogne.

Ne va pas au delà. Cherche Dieu. Mais tiens-toi,

Pour le voir, dans l’amour et non pas dans l’effroi.[[312]](#footnote-312)

The iconographic ending of *Dieu* is forecast here in the voices' admonition to view God as animated by amorous exchange and not by the *mysterium tremendum* of the sacred, where awe quickly turns into ‘effroi’ and fear prevails over desire. For it is in the positively-affected “transascendence” of the speaker’s subjectivity towards their desired object that, for Hugo, comes the closest to experiencing divinity. Claude Rétat aptly notes that ‘*surnaturel* et *surnaturalisme* sont pour Hugo des mots dépourvus de sens’[[313]](#footnote-313), because his phenomenological infusion of the divine with that of nature and the temporal operates fully within an immanentised field of vision.

Needless to say, from a theological perspective, the notion of God’s transcendence needs not refer solely to that which is beyond natural or empirical reality, but can be used interpretatively to reinvest what is observable with an additional set of meanings. Ingolf Dalferth calls this hermeneutical exercise “reinterpret[ing] the interpretation of phenomena in a particular theological way: the world is interpreted as creation, living beings as creatures, human persons as images of God, evildoing as sin, forgiveness as redemption, and so on.’[[314]](#footnote-314) Interpreted through this framework, Hugo’s theological poetics in *Dieu* can therefore be summarised as a re-interpretation of a largely Christian hermeneutics, equating God with the “moi de l’infini” that is immanent behind the relationship between the lyrical subject and the other as creatures.

Thus understood, the movement of “transascendence” in the poem is another way of observing how Hugo’s subject moves towards divinisation; inversely, when the subject “transdescends”, they are moving away from this possibility and, worse still, are confined to their own buffered subjectivity. Indeed, Romantic variations on the satanic figure are, as we shall see, prime indications of the modern subject fused with the theological, rejecting attached confessional premises and rewriting biblical traditions, but, unwittingly or otherwise, still leaving space for experiences of transcendence.

Section III: Politics of the Divinised Modern Subject

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# Chapter 5: Rewriting Myths: Narratives of Contested Freedom in *La Fin de Satan*

*'We must perceive this common occurrence of mimetic crises and the scapegoating they produce, behind myths and the Bible, in order to perceive as well the unfathomable abyss that separates mythology from Judaism and Christianity.*' *—* René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* Orbis Books,p. 183.

The third section of this thesis now turns from the phenomenological and theological constituents particular to Hugo’s lyricism to the deep wealth of narrative, in particular mythical narrative, that similarly addresses human consciousness in relation to the divine, albeit with much greater interpretative allowance. Hugo’s *La Fin de Satan* isan epic-length poem that, like *Dieu,* consists of various sections and fragments that were never avowedly integrated into a finished whole nor published in Hugo’s lifetime.

Yet, unlike *Dieu,* the poem more obviously belongs to the epic genre, adopting third-person narration and covering a wide expanse of place and action. Departing from Jean-Pierre Jossua’s conclusion, that ‘l’inachèvement de l’œuvre affecte trop profondément sa structure théologique pour que celle-ci soit vraiment lisible,’[[315]](#footnote-315) this chapter offers a phenomenological reading that interprets the poem’s patchwork of narrative events as instances of mimetic rivalry, which form part of a wider discussion on how the modern subject acts after being divinised. According to René Girard, “mimetic rivalry” is ‘rivalry resulting from imitation of a model who becomes a rival or of a rival who becomes a model.’[[316]](#footnote-316) In *La Fin de Satan,* we can see it as the most distinctive feature of the satanic motif of the narratives: it is expressed above all through how different iterations of the satanic figures act in an agonistic relationship to God.

Far from representing Manichean evil, Hugo’s Satan and derivative figures in the poem act in ways that seek to imitate rather than oppose divine attributes, in the process touching on the greater themes of ritualised violence in society that engrossed Hugo’s political thought around the time of composing *La Fin de Satan*. By following the actions, reactions and emotions of these dramatic characters in their internal and external manifestations, we will continue to see how counter-experiences of divinity are pivotal in defining Hugo’s theological poetics across his works.

More specifically, we will be looking into Hugo’s literary use of personification and prosopopoeia in their application to the various satanic figures in each mythical sequence of the poem. These devices are fundamental to the poem’s mythological manifestations of mimetic rivalry inherent in the satanic motif, particularly when one understands, alongside René Girard, that ‘Satan is the absent subject of structures of order and disorder, which stems from rivalistic relations among humans’[[317]](#footnote-317) and is thus unrepresentable in a strict sense.

To date, most criticism of the epic has isolated the problem of evil as the central theological implication of the text and judged it accordingly. Emmanuel Godo writes that ‘Hugo, dont l'œuvre [*La Fin de Satan*] est émaillée d'images de la souffrance et du malheur *réels,* fait le détour par l'imagerie traditionnelle du diable, afin de condenser, à travers la figuration imaginaire, l'essence même du mal pour mieux le circonscrire et l'affronter.’ [[318]](#footnote-318) Our guiding question for this chapter, however, will be on a concomitant but distinct issue: how does each instance of mimetic rivalry engage a religious experience of contending with God? In answering this question, we will need to look at each mythical sequence in the poem through its proffered existential lens; that is, by asking what kinds of experiences these mythical narratives are describing and how they fit within the broader political and cultural context of mid nineteenth-century France. For in situating these myths alongside his own versification in French of the Passion account of the Gospels,[[319]](#footnote-319) it is no surprise that Hugo’s own thought is readily found immersed in the speeches, the creative alterations, and the expanded representations of key Judeo-Christian texts.

## Compositional Context: The Devil That Became Jean Valjean

The first preliminary sections of *La Fin de Satan* were composed in the spring of 1854 and consisted of Satan’s opening monologue in “Et nox facta est”,[[320]](#footnote-320) Nimrod’s assault on the heavens in “Le Glaive”, and the appearance of Isis-Lilith in “L’entrée dans l’ombre.”[[321]](#footnote-321) The cry of Satan’s ‘je l’aime’ to God after his exile from heaven is considered by Max Milner to be ‘le point de départ, la cellule-mère de toute l’œuvre’[[322]](#footnote-322) in that it articulates the poem’s central motif of Satan’s problematic liberation from God as a modern figure of defiance who moves away from but is still bound up in desiring the transcendent. Indeed, this nuclear structure of the poem was initially called *Satan pardonné* by Hugo, changing title only when it was optimistically announced as forthcoming, along with *Dieu,* in the back cover of the first edition of *Les Contemplations*.

The readiness of the work for publication, however, was far from certain: of the three materials of bronze, wood, and stone touched by Satan in “Et nox facta est” that would serve as materials for the evils of conquest, capital punishment, and imprisonment, respectively, only “Le Glaive” had been written by 1856. Hugo, writing to Barthélemy-Prosper Enfantin on the seventh of June of that year, reroutes this evident incompleteness in his typically prophetic fashion:

Ces deux ouvrages sont à peu près terminés [*La Fin de Satan* & *Dieu*] ; pourtant je veux laisser quelque espace entre eux et *Les Contemplations.* Je voudrais, si Dieu me donnait quelque force, emporter la foule sur de certains sommets ; pourtant, je ne me dissimule point qu'il y a là peu d'air respirable pour elle. Aussi, je veux la laisser reposer avant de lui faire essayer une nouvelle ascension.[[323]](#footnote-323)

Leaving aside these works until the publication of the first series of *La Légende des siècles* in 1859, Hugo’s return to *La Fin de Satan* consisted inadding the section “Le Gibet” as a wooden structure that epitomised capital punishment, the final section, “L’Ange Liberté”, as Satan’s redemptive offspring, and embellishments on Satan’s monologues elsewhere in the poem.[[324]](#footnote-324) The evil of imprisonment by stone, intended to be symbolised by a section entitled “La Bastille” and a narration of its storming in 1789, only reached eighty-five lines and was never completed, put aside in the spring of 1860 for the sake of the resumption of another interrupted work-in-progress: *Les Misères.* When eventually published by Hetzel in 1886, a year after Hugo’s death, the assortment of sections comprising *La Fin de Satan* had remained in the same compositional state for twenty-five years, eclipsed by the success of its prose counterpart (*Les Misérables*), yet telling a remarkably similar tale of fall, trial and redemption.

Bearing a resemblance to the monster announced in Hugo’s *Odes et Ballades* (1828)poem “L’Anté-christ”(“Noir dragon, déployant l’aile aux ongles de fer” / Pâle, et s’épouvantant de son propre mystère[[325]](#footnote-325)),the devil in *La Fin de Satan* intrigues much more for its problematising of free will and destiny under the weight of divine authority than for its decaying cultural value as the incarnation of absolute evil. Yet, whereas the young royalist found resolution through adherence to a Roman Catholicism that subordinated the powers of the antichrist to that of Christ, the older, inveterate *proscrit* re-adapted the mythical figure into a subject readily comparable to his own exiled situation.[[326]](#footnote-326) As noted above, Hugo’s sequential resumption of *Les Misérables* and elaboration on its central protagonist Jean Valjean shares the same concern as *La Fin de Satan* of an unjust fall that is redeemed by the following of one’s own conscience. To this biblio-biographical mix we might also add the historical hauntings of Voltaire and Napoleon I, who, according to Jacques Seebacher, ‘vont devenir pour Hugo le couple infernal contre lequel son envie fascinée se débattra longtemps.’[[327]](#footnote-327) The acerbic, jocose stance of the former and the determined, agonistic independence of the latter animate Satan’s monologues in a distinctly revolutionary fashion, conjuring up simultaneous impressions of fervent anti-clericalism and oratorical nationalistic sentiment.

Like *Dieu,* the incompleteness of which has been viewed from a number of angles, Hugo’s unfinished myth-making of the storming of the Bastille and the devil’s abrupt rebirth and reconciliation at the end of the poem as ‘Lucifer céleste’[[328]](#footnote-328) can be given different readings. On a metaphysical level, just as the impossible task of reifying God in *Dieu* explains the poem’s abrupt ending, so too must the preoccupation of resolving the problem of free-will end in ambiguity. On an aesthetic level, the largely biblical structure of *La Fin de Satan* threatened to sit forebodingly askew with a segment taking place in recent modern history (14th of July 1789).

Offering an alternative explanation, Laurence Porter has suggested that the identification between an exiled Satan and the changing nature of Hugo’s exiled situation in 1860, obstinately dismissing an offer for amnesty by the French government in the summer of 1859, and vowing not to return to France until the fall of the Second Empire, created in itself a barrier to concluding the poem’s narrative, prompting instead a rejuvenated return to the manuscript of *Les Misérables.*[[329]](#footnote-329)Given this, perhaps the most elegant defence of the lacunary nature of *La Fin de Satan* is René Journet’s idea that ‘[p]ar le vide des espaces, par l’absence de dialogues, ce pourrait bien être avant tout un grand poème de la Solitude.’[[330]](#footnote-330)

## Narrative, Myth and Romanticised Religion

The basic outline of the biblical Fall narrative in Genesis was an active locus of poetic adaptation in nineteenth-century Romantic literature. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) serves as a particularly important precursor, in that his endowing of the satanic figure with explicit self-consciousness in the form of monologue, combining acuity with existential *ennui*, became the proto-typical model for rebellious heroes and heroines brandishing the possibility of transgression. In an Anglophone context, this interpretation of the demonic soon grew into what Robert Southey coined ‘The Satanic School’[[331]](#footnote-331), targeting mainly Lord Byron’s *Cain* (1821) and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). In France, fallen angels had also become *de rigueur* across the same period of time, with Alfred de Vigny’s *Éloa, ou la sœur des anges* (1824) and Alphonse de Lamartine’s *La Chute d’un ange* (1838) forming an antecedent poetic matrix under which Hugo would craft his version.

Closer to the writing of *La Fin de Satan,* Henri Delpech’s *Satan* (1856) and Amédée Pommier’s *L’Enfer* (1856) were late flowerings of this infernal genre, although their lapse into relative obscurity attests to the overworked banality of the epico-narrative form. By contrast, Hugo’s reworking of the Miltonian-Byronic arch-villain comes amended with the satirical qualities of a ‘rire de force’[[332]](#footnote-332) that relates Satan’s speeches to a strong political concern for justice, complicating their traditionally-received interpretation as a perverter of justice. Furthermore, when couched within Hugo’s additional innovations on other myths and biblical episodes in the poem, there arises a strong disjunction between the orthodox poetry of Delpech and Pommier and the recontextualising of these received narratives by Hugo during a period of transition in French literary culture.

Though many models have been proposed to theoretically account for the functions of myth in society, ranging from the etiological to the dialectical,[[333]](#footnote-333) Robert Miller’s definition is particularly helpful in highlighting how myth operates as a form of religious expression. Reprising Giambattista Vico’s Counter-Enlightenment explanation of myth as articulating in symbolic form a collective group’s expression of their *sensus communis* (common sense),[[334]](#footnote-334) Miller goes on to state that:

Myth, as we have said, expresses in terms of the world what is beyond the world. Concepts bearing upon metaphysical or religious reality have to work with a sensible image even when they themselves are remote from direct experience. The sensible image is not the original phenomenal form of that reality; it is arrived at from elsewhere. But the image is a dramatic representation — a mythical representation (or can be developed into one). In this case, mythical discourse would always be essentially involved in genuine and permanently valid knowledge of truth. As a dramatic representation, the mythic image creates an “existential arena” wherein we encounter truth.[[335]](#footnote-335)

This “existential arena” is exactly what Hugo provides in *La Fin de Satan.* It is best viewed asan appropriation of collectively-recognised myths that directly explore and alter the religious realities of that epoch’s *sensus communis.* In line with a wider, more fundamental concern of literary Romanticism that clashed with the authority of the Catholic Church in denouncing ancient myths, the free embracing of myths and the truths they purport to convey can moreover be understood as an attempt at the transformation of religious language itself. Alexander Hampton specifies this idea, calling it ‘the Romantic project of finding a language for the transcendent within immanence, a task which makes the movement at once inherently religious, but equally secular in the original sense of that word as orientated toward the immanent, but fundamentally concerned with the transcendent.’[[336]](#footnote-336)

As searchers of a new religious language for a secularising age, the symbolic terrain of myth was consequently profaned (*pro-fanum,* “outside the consecrated place”) by Romantic poets, in the sense of leaving a sacred site and being redirected to the personal activity of writing poetry, creating a new ‘sacralité profane’[[337]](#footnote-337) that conferred an element of the mystical to the poem. This meant that human participatory engagement with the divine could be pursued outside the confines of institutionalised rituals and rites. It also meant that many theological discussions over the differences of myth and revelation were submerged during this period of change. Such, at least, is some of the context under which Satan, the champion of individualism, reappears prominently in the realm of poetry and politics.

# Satan (Re)Mythologised: “Et Nox facta est” & “La Sortie de l’ombre”

The figure of Satan has received a wide range of mythological layering over time, originating in certain biblical verses and expanded upon across popular European folklore and Christian denominations. Personifications and epithets of the arch-villain differ even in the Bible: there is the speaking serpent in *Genesis* and the derivative reptilian forms of Leviathan, a dragon, and the ancient serpent in *The Book of* *Revelation*[[338]](#footnote-338); there is the “adversary” in the Book of Job (*satán* in Hebrew) and “the tempter” (*ho diabolos* in Greek) of Jesus in the Gospel narratives;[[339]](#footnote-339) there is the disgraced angel Lucifer (“Morning Star” or “Light-Bringer”), expelled from the heavens in the *Book of Isaiah*;[[340]](#footnote-340) and then there are wider associations with Semitic deities such as Baal (*Beelzebub*) and Belial.

It was not until medieval Christianity that the bestial qualities of hoofs, horns, and hair began to popularly characterise the devil in various codex illustrations, emphasising the fallen angel’s relegation to the wilderness of nature. Dante’s *Divina Commedia* is largely responsible for situating the devil’s abode in the subterranean regions of hell, inspired by a verse in *Revelation* as well as the Judaic underworld imagery of “*sheol.”*[[341]](#footnote-341) In short, the cultural impulses emanating from Judeo-Christian traditions to *phenomenalise* evil and sin cluster around the qualities and attributes of the polymorphous satanic figure, and have proven to be fluid across time.

When considering Hugo’s own appropriations in *La Fin de Satan,* it is important to begin from the ambiguity of the title of the poem itself. Does it refer metonymically to the abolition of evil in a specifically moral sense? Or does it indicate the terminal-point of representing relativeevil in a mytho-poetic manner? Either reading seems *prima facie* plausible.

In the former case, Hugo’s ardent desire to resolve the historical relapse of Napoleon III’s *coup d’état* into a metaphysics of political progress can be read into the addition of the *Deus ex machina* character “L’ange Liberté”[[342]](#footnote-342) and their liquidation of evil as a cosmic force; in the latter case, there is also a perceptible Voltairean-like commentary on the end of mythological thinking as such, emboldening French society to be weaned off religious and mythical credulity, particularly with regards to certain biblical passages.

In a theological context, this would amount to Rudolf Bultmann’s process of “demythologisation”, where certain biblical episodes are decoded and modernised for a more palatable interpretation, targeting for instance the importance of Satan in bearing any strong import to the overall salvation narrative. There are, however, obvious complications with both of these glosses of Hugo’s title. On a narrative level, the angel of Liberty’s final commissioning by Satan leaves unanswered what is to come for revolutionary-era France, with the work abandoned at this point.[[343]](#footnote-343) As for the surpassing of mythical discourse by Enlightenment logic, the very genre of the poem belies this claim, relying as it does on mythical narrative as its primary structure. Far from repudiating myth as archaicor obsolete, we shall argue that Hugo relies on the hermeneutical openness of mythical discourse to allow space for a re-appraisal of Satan and what it means to possess free will in relation to the divine.[[344]](#footnote-344)

## Mythologising the Fall: Satan as Adam

The fall of Satan in “Et Nox facta est” that opens *in media res* has no direct scriptural equivalent. The closest biblical passage, one that inspired the backdrop to Milton’s *Paradise Lost,* is found in *The Book of Revelation,* where a heavenly war is won between the Archangel Michael and ‘the dragon’, who was subsequently ‘cast out into the earth.’[[345]](#footnote-345) Similarly, the *Gospel of Luke* relates a saying by Jesus, reprised in Girard’s title: ‘I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.’[[346]](#footnote-346)

What is interesting in Hugo’s decision, however, is to begin *La Fin de Satan* in such a way that it bypasses the Fall narrative in *Genesis* and only implicitly refers to Adam and Eve by way of Cain, whose name is evoked synonymously when Satan cries the word ‘mort!’ (v.10) during his own fall from grace. The next biblical figure to emerge after describing Satan’s descent is Noah, and then Nimrod. A fundamental feature of the opening narrative structure is therefore that of Satan as closest approximation to humankind, in effect transposing Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden into another a-historical setting: ‘depuis quatre mille ans il tombait dans l’abîme’ (v.1). In other words, the antagonist of the Fall in *Genesis* is, from the outset, far removed from the Gospel accounts, and has now assumed the role of victim and hero of “Et Nox facta est”, crushed under the external domination of God’s expulsion. Laurent Jenny insists on this imaginative re-presentation of the Fall narrative in the poem as constituting its very singularity, stating:

La Chute dont traite Hugo n'est pas donnée dans un *a priori* conceptuel fixé une fois pour toutes, elle n'est léguée par aucun dogme, elle n'est posée poétiquement que dans la mesure où elle est originalement représentée. En ce sens, elle n'est pas réductible à la Chute des théologiens ou des penseurs chrétiens qui ont précédé Hugo. Elle n'est pas non plus assimilable à celle qu'ont décrite des poètes antérieurs. Elle ne prend de consistance qu'à être d'abord re-produite imaginairement.[[347]](#footnote-347)

We can better understand this shift of focus through the Romantic propensity towards remythologising as previously discussed. Initiated by Schiller and Goethe but wider in application as a programmatic ‘radicalization of the aesthetic critique of Christianity,’[[348]](#footnote-348) Romantic mythology sought to revive the aesthetic and emotional appeal offered by mythical symbols and narratives. Granting that this aestheticisation of commonly-shared myth goes further back than the Romantics, it is nonetheless not until the late eighteenth-century that the most optimistic transformations of the Fall begin to appear, with Hugo’s *La Fin de Satan* occupying the medial point.[[349]](#footnote-349)

Beginning from the assumption that Hugo’s satanic figure is, in this vein of thought, a rewriting of the postlapsarian myth of humanity, we can now look phenomenologically at the described experience in “Et Nox facta est.” Besides the evident sensory combination of verticality, heaviness, and the weight of gravity (the verb ‘tomber’ occurring eight times in the first forty lines and often semantically paired to ‘tombe’ as “grave”), there is also a gradual diminishment of light and perspective as each stanza begins to close with the extinguishing of the stars from that of three suns to a single point of light. After falling, the description of the flight of the ‘chauve-souris du cachot éternel (v.143)’ harkens readers to the ‘chauve souris’ in *Dieu,*[[350]](#footnote-350)searching desperately in the darkness for his former abode:

Satan, égaré, sans haleine,

La prunelle effarée et de ce rayon pleine,

Battit de l’aile, ouvrit les mains, puis tressaillit

Et cria : - Désespoir ! le voilà qui pâlit ! -

Et l’archange comprit, pareil au mât qui sombre,

Qu’il était le noyé du déluge de l’ombre ;

Il reploya son aile aux ongles de granit,

Et se tordit les bras, et l’astre s’éteignit.[[351]](#footnote-351)

Instead of a frightful depiction of the devil we are presented with one who is frightened. Just as the bat in *Dieu* convinces less as an allegory for atheistic thought than as a reflection of fear, so too does Satan fear the loss of sight. Indeed, the internal rhyme ‘égaré/effarée’ sums up well the pathetic state of the fallen angel, the latter adjective being Hugo’s characteristic use of a word that was formerly employed mainly to describe the frightened expression in an animal’s eye, etymologically related to the word “*farouche”.* Here the hybrid form of the devil as part-angel-part-animal suits the term (‘il se vit devenir monstre, et que l’ange en lui / Mourait, et le rebelle en sentit quelque ennui’ [v.57-58]), however it is also more widely used in Hugo’s exile-period poetry as an initial response by those who search the darkness for answers, reinforced in the final lines of “Et Nox facta est”: ‘le sage / Dont un reflet d’abîme éclaire le visage (v.232-233)’.

At the close of the first section of the poem, it seems that we therefore have a portrayal of Satan as a modern subject, caught between the frantic attitude of roaming and a fear of *ennui* and immobility. Just as the speaker in “Pleurs dans la nuit” deplores the phenomenal world as a metaphorical prison,[[352]](#footnote-352) so too does Satan find himself physically immersed in a cosmic bind:

Puis, quoiqu’il eût horreur des ailes de la bête,

Quoique ce fût pour lui l’habit de la prison,

Comme un oiseau qui va de buisson en buisson,

Hideux, il prit son vol de montagne en montagne,

Et ce forçat se mit à courir dans ce bagne.[[353]](#footnote-353)

As the reluctant “prince of this world,”[[354]](#footnote-354) the jailer has found themself, according to Hugo’s variation, jailed and without prisoners. In the broader argumentation of the epic poem, it is precisely this unrest that leads to their eventual reconciliation with their offspring ‘L’ange Liberté’ and the fragmented apotheosis of Satan back into Lucifer. In contrast to orthodox Christian theology that sees Satan as an insidious tempter of the material and temporal world, what is abundantly evident at this stage of the poem’s narration is Hugo’s juxtaposition of an uncorrupted and superior natural environment set against the mental confines of Satan’s receding perceptions of the world, unable to manipulate it to his benefit.

## L’ange qui rit

Having established an unorthodox portrayal of a fearful Satan, it is not until the final section of the epic, “Hors de la terre III,” that readers are explicitly given the reason for their banishment, conforming to the traditional instigator of demonic pride: ‘Je fus envieux. Ce fut là / Mon crime (v.4259-4260)’. The mimetic rivalry of desiring God’s omnipotence, however, is far from a Manichean contestation of good versus evil. Instead, Hugo creates a conflicted figure whose monologue presents a symbiotic relationship between hatred and love of God:

« Et je ris. Je suis fier et content. J’ai quitté

Les anges vains, abjects, vils, et toi, la clarté,

Qui les corromps, et toi, l’amour, qui les subornes !

Ô gouffres, quel bonheur que la haine sans bornes !

Ce Dieu, ce cœur de Tout, ce père lumineux

Que l’ange, l’astre, l’homme, et la bête, ont en eux,

Ce pasteur près de qui le troupeau se resserre,

Cet être, seul vivant, seul vrai, seul nécessaire,

Je vais m’en passer, moi le colosse puni !

C’est bien. Comme je vais maudire ce béni,

Et faire contre lui, tandis qu’Adam l’encense,

De la révolte avec mon ancienne puissance

Et de la flamme avec les rayons que j’avais !

Comme je vais rugir sur lui ! Comme je vais,

Moi l’affreux face à face avec lui le suprême,

Le haïr, l’exécrer et l’abhorrer ! » - Je l’aime ![[355]](#footnote-355)

The ‘rire’ of Satan can be read, in the first instance, as a ‘rire pathétique,’[[356]](#footnote-356) indicating a nervous recognition of the disparity between ‘lui le suprême’ and the devil’s own inferior and demoted state, expressive of the negative sentiments of disdain and contempt. The hyperbolic language used to compensate for this attempt at inverting the master/slave, superior/inferior paradigm (‘colosse’, ‘exécrer’, ‘abhorrer’) merely fuels this antagonism and highlights the ultimately indissociable relationship between each existence, dramatically conceded in the closing pronouncement of the section: ‘Je l’aime!’[[357]](#footnote-357)

Similarly, one could see these reproaches as comical, child-like defiance, reminiscent of the laughing figure of Gavroche in Hugo’s ink-drawing *Gavroche à onze ans* (1861-62), a fellow outcast who gleefully defies authority and is sustained by their own independence.[[358]](#footnote-358) Finally, it is possible to make a connection to the 1856 addition of the figure of Pyrrho in *Dieu* and their confrontational attitude towards divinity whose poetic productivity Claude Rétat has previously identified.[[359]](#footnote-359)

Of course, the laughter of Satan can also be viewed under other prisms. It could simply be that of a grotesque display of presumed superiority, a ‘gaîté perverse’[[360]](#footnote-360) that characterises evil through its vaunting of the self and negation of the other. Such an austere philosophy of humour was predominant in Greco-Roman and biblical accounts of laughter and was typically paired with the concept of hubris and its tragic consequences.[[361]](#footnote-361) Alternatively, Satan’s laughter may be an expression of Romantic irony, positing an aesthetic distance between the event of their fall from grace and its original significance in a religious context. Like Gwynplaine in *L’Homme qui rit* (1869)*,* a character whose permanent smile unsettles the English aristocracy and exposes their own ‘rire de force’ or contempt for the public, the imagery of Satan laughing mid-fall serves to highlight Hugo’s own political positioning within the text, evidenced later on by Barabbas’ release from capital punishment:

Satan rit, et cracha du côté du tonnerre.

L’immensité, qu’emplit l’ombre visionnaire,

Frissonna. Ce crachat fut plus tard Barabbas.

Un souffle qui passait le fit tomber plus bas.[[362]](#footnote-362)

Highly ambiguous, laughter is evidently used by Hugo to add complexity to the portrayal of Satan and to re-mythologise their status outside the confines of an orthodox community of believers. Rather, taking the mythical discourse of the Fall and transposing it into poetic terrain already cultivated by Dante and Milton, Hugo’s utilisation of the narrative gives voice to a religious expression that is overtly humanising and pathetic in tone (‘Je suis le misérable à perpétuité’ [v. 4636]). What emerges from the fallen angel’s speech is an experiential exploration of the boundaries of compulsion and freedom, where the supposedly autonomous devil appears shackled to their consciousness of a more divine nature than their own.

## Finitude and Free-Will

By this point, it is clear that Hugo’s character does not act like a deity, following a distinction of relative evil to absolute good which early Christian theologians took great pains to maintain against their Manichean proponents.[[363]](#footnote-363) For in classical monotheism there is no counterpart to the unicity of God, there is only misplaced attribution of God’s eternal qualities to other idolatrous entities, otherwise known as sin.

In phenomenological terms, Jean-Luc Nancy refers to sin as 'an indebtedness of existence as such..."indebtedness of existence" meaning, at one and the same time, that existence itself is in debt, and that what it is in debt for is precisely for itself, for the self, for the ipseity of existence.’[[364]](#footnote-364) This definition is helpful in understanding Hugo’s move away from Satan as the ultimate sinner (one who will never acknowledge their indebtedness to God) to a figure that is unsettled by their own independence. Indeed, this ambiguous tension between self-idolatry and self-dissolution is, according to Hugo’s redemptive narrative in *La Fin de Satan*, the very cause of Satan’s misery, struggling as they do to assume their designated role as the arch-villain who confidently sows doubt and division in the minds of others while remaining immune:

Grâce ! pardonne-moi ! rappelle-moi ! prends-moi !

Grâce ! Ne sens-tu pas qu’il faut que toute chaîne

Se rompe, et que le mal finisse, et que la haine

S’éteigne, évanouie en ta sérénité ?

Quoi ! le bien infini, le mal illimité !

Toi le bien, moi le mal ! est-ce que c’est possible ?

Le monde gouverné par un double invisible !

Y songez-vous, Seigneur ? un partage entre nous !

Non, vous êtes la face, et je suis les genoux.

Laissez-moi me plier et tomber, juge immense,

Sur ce pavé des cieux qu’on nomme la clémence ![[365]](#footnote-365)

Whereas a full expression of evil would consist in mimicking the infinite autonomy of God (‘le mal illimité’), Satan’s plea for pardon shies away from this conceit, refusing a world ‘gouverné par un double invisible.’ It could also be that Satan is asking for forgiveness for the invectives proffered in the preceding stanza, where a revolutionary iconoclasm is scathingly noticeable (‘Je suis le bourreau sombre, et j’exécute Dieu. / Dieu mourra.’ [v. 514-515]). Nonetheless, Hugo’s wavering Satan has clearly been de-divinised, a victim to worldly imperfection, exhibiting a finite state of consciousness that runs contrary to the promise given by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: ‘For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.’[[366]](#footnote-366) The enticement offered by the serpent was understood by Patristic theologians as a perverted form of divine imitation, a misplaced authority over creation that runs counter to divinisation through the imitation of Christ as the perfect model of humility.[[367]](#footnote-367) Here, the devil rejects their own pretence to autonomy, expressed in the spatially-inverted phrase of ‘ce pavé des cieux qu’on nomme la clémence.’

Central to Hugo’s portrayal of an exculpated Satan is his transferral of malevolent agency in the historical world towards another mythological figure: Isis-Lilith. It is this figure that most closely symbolises radical evil in the poem and who facilitates the poem’s overall structuring into the three books of “Le Glaive”, “Le Gibet”, and the unfinished “Bastille.” Each correspond to a material (bronze, wood, stone) that is unearthed by Isis-Lilith after the fall of Satan, and henceforth re-baptised as symbols of gratuitous evil:

Alors une lueur sortit, sinistre et sombre,

De ces trois noirs témoins des temps qui sont dans l’ombre ;

L’être toujours voilé, blanc et marchant sans bruit,

Se pencha vers la terre et cria dans la nuit,

Et comme s’il parlait à quelqu’un sous l’abîme :

– O père ! j’ai sauvé les trois germes du crime !

Sous la terre profonde un bruit sourd répondit.

Il reprit : – Clou d’airain qui servis au bandit,

Tu t’appelleras Glaive et tu seras la guerre ;

Toi, bois hideux, ton nom sera Gibet ; toi, pierre,

Vis, creuse-toi, grandis, monte sur l’horizon,

Et le pâle avenir te nommera Prison.[[368]](#footnote-368)

The contextual background for these relics is Cain’s fratricide of Abel in *The Book of Genesis,* a biblical myth that was widely rewritten by European Romanticists across the long nineteenth century and taken as a starting point for Hugo’s mythical genealogy of free will.[[369]](#footnote-369) Similar to Byron’s treatment of the passage in *Cain: A Mystery* (1821), where the theological issue of original sin torments the conscience of the protagonist Cain (‘My father could not keep his place in Eden. / What had *I* done with this? – I was unborn’[[370]](#footnote-370)), Hugo’s decision to base the foundation of his epic poem on this passage reveals a distinct concern with the relationship between free will and evil. His solution is simply mythological: to valorise these earthly materials in such a way that they epitomise humanity’s attachment to certain malevolent and recurring tendencies (conquest, capital punishment, incarceration). By confining these tendencies to materials, Hugo moves the problem of evil from being innate in humanity to materials that can be manipulated. Just as “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre” in *Les Contemplations* and “La clarté” in *Dieu* pronounce the creation of an imperfect world and the relativity of the material against the ideal,[[371]](#footnote-371) so too by seeing past these physical symbols of oppression - specifically through the act of contemplation - can the temptation towards tyrannical behaviour involved in free-will be overcome.

# A Genealogy of Mimetic Rivalry: “Le Glaive”

Before arriving at Satan’s contrition in “Hors de la terre III”, the hunter-king Nimrod first appears in “Le Glaive” as a personification of aspiring conquest and subjugation, whose malevolence is aided by the now cursed material bronze and its formation into weaponry. The setting draws its source from the postdiluvian land of Canaan described in *Genesis* 10:11, which famously includes the rise and fall of the Tower of Babel, the building of which is traditionally attributed to Nimrod.[[372]](#footnote-372)

In Hugo’s episode, however, it is not through architecture or language that Nimrod leads an assault on the heavens, but by means of a flying cage, constructed from the debris planks of Noah’s ark and propelled upwards by four enchained eagles. The tale is not entirely Hugo’s own; it derives from classical Judeo-Islamic commentary that was discovered and translated into French across the nineteenth century.[[373]](#footnote-373) Yet, given the general distancing of myths at the time away from their original socio-cultural milieus and into French, evidenced by the popularity of works such as Charles Dupuis’ *Origine de tous les cultes ou Religion universelle* (1795) or Friedrich Creuzer’s *La Symbolique et la mythologie des peuples anciens* (1810-1812), it is not surprising that Hugo’s adaptation of this legend came with a few noticeable alterations.

As a self-contained narrative, “Le Glaive” was written across February-May 1854 and was originally intended to be included in Hugo’s “Petites Epopées”*.* Having negotiated with Hetzel after the publication of *Les Contemplations* to prioritise what was forming into the first series of *La Légende des siècles* over the publication of *Dieu* or *La Fin de Satan,* a flurry of poems inspired by the Bible emerged across 1857-1858 (“La conscience”, “Booz endormi”, “Le sacre de la femme”) that effectively eclipsed the need for including “Le Glaive.” Moreover, it became clearer by this stage of production that the latter poem had begun to sit uneasily in the proposed ordering of *La Légende des siècles,* perhaps owing to its uncertain genre status as straddling ancient mythology and Christian folklore, or being rather, in the words of Jean-Marc Hovasse, ‘une espèce de science-fiction biblique.’[[374]](#footnote-374)

Regardless of the designation, Nimrod’s tale was soon re-assimilated into *La Fin de Satan* when Hugo returned to the dossier in 1859, slotting it in to conveniently fulfill the mythological conceit of the bronze sword as well as complementing the diabolical trope of hubris faced against the divine (‘Satan est mon aïeul [v. 1,104]’). In this way, the customary epic procedure of direct cause-and-effect narrative was preserved, suggested via these underlying metaphors in addition to the juxtaposition of the story directly after Satan’s imprecations in “La sortie de l’ombre.”[[375]](#footnote-375)

## The Warrior Archetype Challenged

The physical depiction of Nimrod presented to readers of “Le Glaive” is that of a half-giant, half-human hunter who, similar to the zoomorphic-anthropomorphic split in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, exhibits humanity’s odyssey in agonistically distinguishing themselves from the monsters and beasts of nature.[[376]](#footnote-376) Thus, whilst ‘chacune de ses mains, affreux poignets de fer, / Avait six doigts pareils à des gonds de l’enfer (v. 537-538)’, he also triumphantly carries a horn ‘fait d’une dent des antiques mammons (v. 541)’ and subdues a host of wild creatures, after which he becomes a master of his own species:

Et quand il eut dompté le tigre, il dompta l’homme ;

Et, quand il eut pris l’homme, il prit Dan, Tyr, Sodome,

Suze, et tout l’univers du Caucase au delta,

Et quand il eut conquis le monde, il s’arrêta.

Alors il devint triste et dit : Que vais-je faire ?[[377]](#footnote-377)

Besides the *ennui* sharedbetween Satan and Nimrod, there is also an obvious connection here between the hubris of conquest and the myth of the “Great Man” in history. Edward Ousselin argues convincingly that it was not until the replacement of the “*Grand homme”* myth with his self-curated list of geniuses and mages from exile-period onwards that Hugo was able to break away from the charm of Napoleon I and ‘les gestes royaux, les tapages guerriers’[[378]](#footnote-378) that accompanied his reputation.

In particular, with the historical background of Napoleon III’s betrayal of democratic progress serving as direct political context, there are easily discernible links between how Hugo viewed “Great Men” as inhibiting rather than promoting human flourishing and, akin to the ongoing lineage in “Les mages”, there is thus a genealogy of historical persons that spring from the primordial myth of Nimrod:

Le premier Bonaparte voulait réédifier l’empire d’Occident, faire l’Europe vassale, dominer le continent de sa puissance et l’éblouir de sa grandeur, prendre un fauteuil et donner aux rois des tabourets, faire dire à l’histoire : Nemrod, Cyrus, Alexandre, Annibal, César, Charlemagne, Napoléon ; être un maître du monde.[[379]](#footnote-379)

For Hugo to rewrite a traditional narrative that features and starts with Nimrod himself is therefore a form of genealogicalcommentary on the role of “Great Men” and violence in history, one that goes as far back to the atemporality of myth itself. In doing so, Hugo is enumerating a group of individuals who display the qualities of a warrior archetype, one who in mythical narrative often recognises the fate of their endeavours but possesses a single-minded wilfulness to persist nonetheless. Moreover, there is the exculpating argument for the violence committed by these warriors in that they also serve as great civilisation builders, beginning with Nimrod’s feat as ordering the construction of Babel, which can be viewed in positive terms as an advancement of *technē* and art.[[380]](#footnote-380)

Yet, whereas for many mythologies this constructive dimension redeems the acts of the bellicose hero, whose desires are mimetically assumed and endorsed by their audience, there is also a contrasting negative corollary, often expressed by agents of gratuitous violence, such as certain polytheistic deities portrayed in Greco-Roman myth (Ares, Perses, Bellona). Voiced through the eunuch minister Zaïm (Arabic for “leader” or “chief”), it becomes clear that Nimrod’s mimetic rivalry with God predominates over any positive and secondary benefits for civilisation-building. Expressing a death-driven desire for destruction, Zaïm’s monologue undergirds a cyclical vision of violence that stems from the eunuch’s resentment of God’s creation and his own inability to create:

Ô vengeance ! – Tuez ! pourquoi ? pour rien. Allez.

Ils tueront. Ils tueront, des massacres essoufflés,

Le riche en son palais, les pauvres dans les bouges,

Et se proposeront, portant des urnes rouges,

D’emplir avec du sang le sépulcre sans fond.

Tuez. Ce que Dieu fit, les hommes le défont.[[381]](#footnote-381)

The subjects of this passage are an assortment of beast-like combatants imagined as emerging from the night to wreak havoc on humanity, evoking an archaic fear of the unknown and the unconscious. It is also interesting to note how ritualised the acts of violence are described here: carrying urns full of blood is analogous to the physical act of offering libations to satisfy the perceived demands of divinities. The inherently mimetic aspect of ritual is further supplemented in this instance by the language use of myth - in this case the incantatory repetition of the word ‘tuer’ - that results in an impression of religious experience, albeit with connotations of blasphemy.[[382]](#footnote-382) The speech of Zaïm can therefore be understood as complementing the mythological figure of Nimrod by lauding his actions and divinising them to the level of a cosmic force, where destruction follows necessarily from creation (‘sois le ver monstrueux du fruit création [v. 686]’).

The section in which Zaïm delivers his monologue is nonetheless entitled “Ceux qui parlaient dans le bois”, the other speaker, a leper, then arriving on stage to deliver his counter-speech. The leper’s monologue is addressed to God and offers an antithesis to that which preceded it as a *porte-parole* for God’s mercy and compassion. Needless to say, the image of the leper is suffused with biblical connotations. Their response centres around the theological concept of *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit* (“grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it”):

Soufflez sur les fureurs et les horreurs humaines,

Et faites une fleur avec toutes ces haines !

Versez sur tous leurs fronts la sereine beauté.

Ô songeur de l’obscure et calme éternité,

Être mystérieux dont les sphères débordent,

Dieu ! faites se baiser les bouches qui se mordent ;[[383]](#footnote-383)

Once again, there is a close parallel between the emancipatory work of “Les mages” and their divine genealogy back to the ‘songeur de l’obscure et calme éternité,’ both of whom act as agents to subdue the rage of the warrior archetype and challenge the *grand homme* myth, which can both be seen in phenomenological terms as personifications of mimetic desire and rivalry, the frustration of which, according to Girard, eventually leads to the single victim mechanism.[[384]](#footnote-384)

Far from asserting the abolition of violence in the future, what Hugo brings to the forefront at this stage of his mythical musings on the relationship between violence and history in “Le Glaive” is an insistence on the possible redemption of the *perpetrators*, given to them even by their victims; that is, by those subjected to their injustices. As such, this section foreshadows the incomplete ending of *La Fin de Satan* and the ethical dilemmas posed by the fall of the Bastille and the ensuing bloodshed of the Reign of Terror.

## Orpheus and Melchizedek

The next section of “Le Glaive” introduces two additional mythical figures that jolt by way of their transgression into the broader narrative. Their sudden appearance in the poem abruptly reminds readers that the greater narrative is fundamentally mythopoetic in nature, distancing the *décor* and timeframe of the Near East legend from its reshaping in the broader thematic scheme of *La Fin de Satan.* Similarly, their incredible appearance relies on a form of metonymy, in that each signifies the contrasting religious traditions of Greek polytheism and Judaic monotheism, respectively.

Orpheus’ recitation is that of the Gigantomachy, where the original ancestry of Uranus and Gaea, known as titans in Greek mythology, were overthrown by the ascendency of the next generation, that of the Olympian gods. Hugo’s fascination with this saga intensified from his own exile-period onwards, captured in his famous poem of 1859 “Le Satyre” and its commentary on the despotism of the polytheistic gods. In “Le Glaive”, Nimrod is equally charmed by Orpheus’ story, particularly with the defiance of the central figure Titan:

« Andès, frère d’Astrée et père de Thallo,

« S’en allait à grands pas au plus profond de l’eau,

« Et jusqu’à la ceinture avait la mer Egée ;

« Zeus Jupiter vint, la main d’éclairs chargée,

« Et lui cria : Sois pierre, ô monstre ! Et le géant

« Vit Zeus, devint roche et s’arrêta béant.

« Et Titan dit : Merci ! tu nous donnes des armes !

« Et, pendant que tremblait la terre, aïeule en larmes,

« Il courut, et, prenant Andès par le milieu,

« Il jeta le géant à la tête du dieu. »

Et Nemrod rêveur, dit : Titan est mon ancêtre.[[385]](#footnote-385)

The strange inclusion of this episode can be accounted for by the fact that it offers an alternative phenomenology of the Fall as presented in *Genesis.* In place of Cain killing Abel, it is the inter-familial genealogy of gods and titans at war with each other, representing through figurative language what is effectively a gradual anthropomorphising of nature. Jean Greisch argues that this vision of a ‘polythéisme successif’ has conditioned how we have historically divinised abstract human qualities: ‘la vérité permanente de la conscience mythique est qu’elle nous donne à penser un Dieu vivant, le fait que toute vie est sujette à la souffrance et au devenir. Le divin lui-même, pour être vivant, doit y être soumis lui aussi.’[[386]](#footnote-386) In Hugo’s theological poetics, such a process is often amplified to serve the political expediencies of protest and rebellion, by demonstrating that rulers are no more divine than the polytheistic gods whose attributes are mistakenly given to them rather than to humanity.

Just two months prior to writing “Pleurs dans la nuit”, where the metempsychotic imprisonment of souls in various earthly materials is described, Hugo wrote of Nimrod encountering the high priest that blessed Abraham in *Genesis*,Melchizedek, ‘enfoui sous la pierre (v. 1,061).’ This enigmatic biblical figure, typically considered as a priestly prototype of the Messiah,[[387]](#footnote-387) is given a stanza of fifty lines to expound on the initial chaos of the universe before its ordering through creation:

« Partout apparaissait, à l’œil épouvanté,

« La face du néant, faite d’obscurité.

« A chaque instant, le fond redevenait la cime ;

« Et, comme une nuée au-dessus d’un abîme,

« Dans cette ombre où rampaient les larves des fléaux,

« Le monstre Nuit planait sur la bête Chaos.

« C’était ainsi quand Dieu se levant, dit à l’ombre :

« Je suis. Ce mot créa les étoiles sans nombre,

« Et Satan dit à Dieu : Tu ne seras pas seul. »

Nemrod pensif cria : – Satan est mon aïeul.[[388]](#footnote-388)

The personification of ‘Nuit’ and ‘Chaos’ as monsters and beasts form part of Hugo’s teratological explanations of the imperfect and the grotesque. The postulate that chaos preceded creation is mythological in nature and reduces an omnipotent creator God to a demiurge, one who is in perpetual agony to prevent the universe relapsing into chaos. It is against this powerful ‘face du néant’ as pronounced by Melchizedek that Hugo’s immanent philosophy of nature is espoused, into which Satan and Nimrod enter as central personifications of the negative pole of existence. The primary theological issue at this stage of the poem, however, remains not so much how evil entered the phenomenal world, but whether God is to be implicated in its imperfect nature.

## Divine (Im)passibility?

Galvanised by these encounters, Nimrod returns to Zaïm with the intention of building his aircraft and carrying out the ‘projet sombre (v. 1,136)’ of conquering the heavens. Skipping ahead to the culmination of this flight, which lasts for over a year and sees the eunuch given over to the eagles as nourishment to continue their ascent, Nimrod becomes impatient and shoots an arrow into the sky. The result of this action is left in suspense, with the next stanza indicating that it is a month later before Nimrod is seen falling from the sky, landing in the field where Cain murdered Abel and replicating Satan’s fall in “Et Nox facta est”. The end of the narrative in the second-last stanza runs thus:

Couché sur le dos, mort, puni,

Le noir chasseur tournait encor vers l’infini

Sa tête aux yeux profonds que rien n’avait courbée.

Auprès de lui gisait sa flèche retombée.

La pointe, qui s’était enfoncée au ciel bleu,

Était teinte de sang. Avait-il blessé Dieu ?[[389]](#footnote-389)

It is left to the reader to surmise the cause of the bloody arrowhead, as well as how Nimrod’s destruction ensued. One hypothesis is that he shot one of the eagles, initiating a fall that lasted a month - the same amount of time spent pondering his mission (‘il resta trente jours au fond des solitudes [v. 1, 105]’); another would connect the blood with a previous mysterious appearance on his sword, bearing ‘une tache inconnue, empreinte indélébile, / Que Nemrod par moments contemplait immobile. (v. 1,054 -1,055).’

In either case, the final question posed to readers is important primarily in a theological sense, identified by Jean-Pierre Jossua as touching upon the Greek concept of God’s “impassibility”.[[390]](#footnote-390) To briefly summarise, this concept states that God is excluded from corruption; that is, from suffering or from experiencing emotion (*passibilis* covering both sensations) due to their immateriality and hence immutability. In direct opposition to the abundance of accounts of injured and dying divinities across various mythologies,[[391]](#footnote-391) this monotheistic tenet is nonetheless questioned in Hugo’s narrative, albeit with much hesitation: the first drafted line originally stated ‘il avait blessé Dieu’ and this was reprised for the 1886 Hetzel and the 1911 *Imprimerie nationale* editions. It was only owing to a note left by him to change the line into a question form that led to René Journet and Guy Robert’s alteration in the 1979 edition and its adoption in subsequent editions.[[392]](#footnote-392)

It is possible to account for this uncertainty that Hugo reckoned with by comparing it to the problem of the *deus absconditus* that we have previously studied in chapter one.[[393]](#footnote-393) The primary dilemma is effectively that of choosing either a personal God or a deistic conception and assuming the logical aporias that follow: with the former, a personal nature implies the experience of emotions and suffering but at the detriment of superlative attributes; with the latter, a creative nature that absconds from the phenomenal world becomes irrelevant to human concerns.[[394]](#footnote-394)

As far as readers of “Le Glaive” are given a hint towards the question of the vulnerability of God (‘avait-il blessé Dieu ?’), we need only look at the progression of Nimrod’s fated flight. Impatient in arriving at the heavens, Nimrod asks four times to Zaïm about what he can see yonder, eliciting the same response: ‘Le ciel est bleu’ (v. 1,327; 1,348; 1,358; 1,369). Alone after a year, Nimrod then opens the upper trap of the machine and, indeed, ‘le ciel était bleu’ (v. 1,383). Strangely, this observation does not infuriate Nimrod, but nonetheless initiates his final provocation and fateful ruin:

Alors, son arc en main, tranquille, l’homme énorme

Sortit hors de la cage et sur la plate-forme

Se dressa tout debout et cria : Me voilà.

Il ne regarda rien en bas ; il contempla,

Pensif, les bras croisés, le ciel toujours le même ;

Puis, calme et sans qu’un pli tremblât sur son front blême,

Il ajusta la flèche à son arc redouté.[[395]](#footnote-395)

Instead of the typical warrior archetype, Nimrod is presented as ‘tranquille’, ‘pensif’, ‘calme’, suggesting parallels to the fated heroes of Greek tragedy who resolutely embrace their self-destruction for the sake of the community. This important cathartic aspect of Greek drama, ritualising the sacrifice of the hero to the gods, lies in stark contrast to the biblical narratives, which consistently refute the scapegoating process of myth and ritual. Taken as a hybridised myth, sitting awkwardly between Judeo-Christian and polytheistic paradigms, the final pronouncement of Nimrod in “Le Glaive”, ‘me voilà’, echoes the response of biblical figures to the call of the holy,[[396]](#footnote-396) but as an act of defiance rather than submission.

Testing God’s impassibility, Nimrod’s attempted violence against ‘le ciel bleu’, though seemingly absurd, foreshadows the following section, “Le Gibet”, in its ambivalent position on the Crucifixion. For if Nimrod’s tale is ultimately a mythical narrative of just punishment incurred for striving to surpass the infinite, the possibility of unjust punishment is yet to be fully disclosed, waiting to be instantiated in the heart of Hugo’s visionary poem.

# Chapter 6: The Triumph of Humanity: Narratives of Contested Freedom in *La Fin de Satan* (Continued)

# The Anti-Myth: “Le Gibet”

Comprising just under half of *La Fin de Satan* at around 2,700 lines, “Le Gibet” is the central episode in Victor Hugo’s epic. On a historical register, the poem transitions from the ancient Far East in “Le Glaive” to Judea in the time of Roman occupation, mimicking the division between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Indeed, the majority of the narration in “Le Gibet” is a versification of several passages of the synoptic Gospel accounts of Christ’s Passion, written between December 1859 and April 1860.[[397]](#footnote-397)

That Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross rather than hung on a gibbet does not detract from but rather intensifies the thematic preoccupation of the poem as it depicts one of the most famous instances of capital punishment in history. From *Le Dernier Jour d’un condamné* (1829)to protesting the hanging of Charles Tapner in Guernsey on the 10th of February 1854 and beyond, Hugo’s strident condemnation of capital punishment comes to the fore in this section through a mixture of religious symbolism and mythopoetic innovation, with the wood in “La sortie de l’ombre” operating in both instances as the cursed material used for carrying out such executions.

Of course, the action of turning directly to the foundational core of Christianity to harken the end of violence, state-endorsed or otherwise, does not come without pre-existing complications. Firstly, as we shall examine later on in a theological sense, there subsists a necessary ambiguity throughout the poem over the divinity of Jesus, held in tension so as to maintain the drama of Christ’s innocence against the scapegoat mentality of the authorities.[[398]](#footnote-398) Secondly, in an opposite vein, the re-affirmation of the injustice of Jesus’ death can be viewed as a regression back to this historical event that cuts against the humanitarian prerogatives of the epoch, as articulated clearly in a precautionary letter sent by Jules Michelet to Hugo in 1856:

Ne remuons pas trop le passé. Les morts mêmes ne veulent pas que nous pensions aux morts. Ceci, je l'étends au passé chrétien et à ce grand mort, le christianisme. Dans sa stérilité actuelle, il nous avertit assez de chercher d'autres rivages. Si quelqu'un en peut être le Christophe Colomb, c'est vous.[[399]](#footnote-399)

Only partially acknowledging Michelet’s warning in a response sent a few days later, Hugo replied: ‘je ne puis oublier que Jésus a été une incarnation saignante du progrès ; je le retire au prêtre, je détache le martyr du crucifix, et je décloue le Christ du christianisme.’[[400]](#footnote-400) Intrigued by the significance of the person of Jesus within the schema of his own wider vision of humanity’s secular advancement, Hugo’s interest in the Passion narrative lies mainly in his separation of its soteriological and eschatological dimensions; that is, between the importance of Jesus within a broader salvation narrative and the chronological terminus of an “end-time” in history.

Enchanted by the visionary and apocalyptic aspects of the Bible,[[401]](#footnote-401) Hugo’s attention towards eschatological thought will be read in “Le Gibet” as framing the conditions under which his alterations of the Gospel narratives work. Specifically, we will look at how the added speeches of a prophetic sibyl figure as well as Barabbas, the criminal who was released from capital punishment in exchange for Jesus, push forward the consequences of ritualised violence to their terminus, and in doing so, refutes the satanic motif lying behind myth. Paradoxically, “Le Gibet” thus expresses a mythical sequence that is anti-mythological in nature; that is, one which is revelatory of the possibility of free will to resist the actions of the collective group, religious or otherwise.

## The Sibyl of Achlab and ‘Le livre d’en haut’

The first key juncture that develops this theme through personification comes in the section entitled “La sibylle.” It is in this section that Jesus meets one of Hugo’s own figurative creations, for in Greco-Roman mythology there are only ten sibyls, none of whom hail from ‘Achlab’, a town mentioned only once in the Bible as belonging to the tribe of Asher.[[402]](#footnote-402) Nonetheless, following the traditional role of pagan sibyls as prophesying the future, this visitation is used as an opportunity to both forecast Jesus’ betrayal by Judas (‘Crains le baiser’ [v. 2,351]) and to expound on the questionable relationship between the infinity of God and the claims made by “Scripture.”

Embodying a juxtaposition between oral and literary cultures, the sibyl’s cave is replete with a flurry of paper, presumably written on, tossed to the wind:

Des feuilles, qui plus tard s’iront coller aux Bibles,

S’échappent par moments de son antre, et s’en vont

En vagues flamboiements dans l’espace sans fond.

Elle les suit des yeux, et rit : puis recommence,

L’immensité s’étant mêlée à sa démence,

Et le souffle infini la traversant toujours.[[403]](#footnote-403)

The situation is particularly odd because, in contrast to the pure orality of Greco-Roman sibyls, the imagery here is more suggestive of a modern writer’s studio, surrounded by discarded draft papers. Evidently, the implication in relation to the poem’s narrative progression is of the contingency of the New Testament accounts, derisible in their institutional canonisation as Gospels when opposed to ‘Le livre d’en haut’[[404]](#footnote-404) that the sibyl channels as direct, lived experience of the divine, unable to be totalised through writing.

Yet, putting aside the differences between oral and literary means of communication,[[405]](#footnote-405) it is important also to recognise the conflicting insights between scripture and myth at play in this passage. To briefly distinguish the two: while “Scripture” claims to refer back to events that, though inscribed in text, constantly thwart the written medium and insist on being constituted by a lived experience outside of language, the latter thrives in linguistic mutation and receives its veracity by merit of this transmissible mutability and indeterminacy.[[406]](#footnote-406) Though “Scripture” contains typically literary elements (metaphors, personifications, epithets, etc.), its credibility within a religious community relies on belief in a founding event, the interpretation of which must necessarily exceed its transcription and transmission to future generations.

A key argument advanced in the Romantic reaction to institutionalised religion takes aim at this distinction, voiced here by the sibyl, substituting an external, objectified founding event with the ongoing process of internal, self-authenticating experience. The idea of definitive, demarcated “Scripture” cedes to the writer’s own experience of autonomous production.[[407]](#footnote-407) Consequently, the mode of communication typical of Romantic mythical narrative becomes, on one hand, re-aligned to non-institutionalised religious discourse and, on the other, a privileged mode of authorially-based writing, exploiting the depths of symbolic language without the corollaries of rites, symbols, or communities that are normally attached to it. Indeed, the sibyl is particularly severe against the role tradition plays in connotating language, reminiscent of the apophatic discourse in “Les Voix” that we studied in the preceding chapter:[[408]](#footnote-408)

« L’erreur sort du nuage et sans fin se dévide.

« Un rite, c’est un geste au hasard dans le vide ;

« Avortement du chiffre et du mot ! labeur vain

« Trimourti ! Trinité ! Triade ! Triple Hécate !

« Brahmâ, c’est Abraham ; dans Adonis éclate

« Adonaï ; Jovis jaillit de Jéhovah ;

« Toujours au même mot l’impuissance arriva ;

« Toujours le sombre effort des religions tombe

« Dans le même fantôme et dans la même tombe.[[409]](#footnote-409)

Again, we see the semantic coupling of ‘tombe’ that was used during Satan’s fall in “Et Nox Facta Est”,[[410]](#footnote-410) this time to signify the dissension and decline of organised religions in their competitive struggle to concretise the qualities of God. The rites developed by each religion, ‘un geste au hasard dans le vide’, captures this desperation, which from a phenomenological perspective can otherwise be seen as a specific kind of intentionality that grasps onto the visible so as to re-enact and to commemorate a particular narrative.[[411]](#footnote-411) It is also in these lines that Hugo’s anti-clericalism is particularly evident: seeing ritual and dogma as ‘l’oiseleur, guettant dans la forêt’ (v. 2,310). Like the monsters of “Les Voix,” the sibyl is therefore presented as strongly warning readers of the dangers of religious scriptures and their purported entrapment of the ‘livre d’en haut’ by its earthly counterpart, implying moreover that this entrapment serves to justify ritualised violence.

The second of the two reasons for inserting the sibyl’s discourse directly before the Passion narrative is to serve as a dramatic encounter with Jesus. The situation is not without context: a number of Greco-Roman sibyls have been historically exonerated by Christian thinkers as pagan prophesying of the coming of the Messiah.[[412]](#footnote-412) Hugo’s figure, however, expresses no indication of this proclivity; rather, Jesus’ response to the preceding discourse, that ‘il faut pourtant sauver les hommes’ is replied to by the sibyl with the fatalistic retort of ‘à quoi bon ?’ (v. 2, 2340-2,341), which could well be one of the instances that have led some critics declaring a lack of eschatology in the epic poem, when the dialogue in fact refers to soteriological concerns.[[413]](#footnote-413)

Nevertheless, we will now turn away from any metaphysical commentary gleaned from the text and move towards the way in which expectations of a familiar narrative are made phenomenologically manifest through Hugo’s poetics. Specifically, we will focus on how the *eschaton* of Jesus’ deathis reframed in the poem, particularly in reference to the coming of the unexpected and the impossible within the scope of this versified Gospel account.

## Barabbas’ Personal Apocalypse

The second key juncture of the text is another variation of the Gospel narratives. It is a long descriptive embellishment and monologue delivered by the figure of Barabbas after he is freed by the crowd in exchange for Jesus to be crucified, entitled “Ténèbres.” Foreshadowing by only a couple of years the famous section of “Tempête sous un crâne” in *Les Misérables,* where Jean Valjean’s racked conscience must decide whether or not he will hand himself over to the authorities to spare the life of an innocent man, Barabbas’ amazement at being released from prison in exchange for Jesus results in his wandering across the hills of Judea:

Il a derrière lui les murs de la cité,

Mais il ne les voit pas ; son front troublé s’incline ;

Il ne s’aperçoit point qu’il monte une colline ;

Monter, descendre, aller, venir, hier, aujourd’hui,

Qu’importe ! il rôde, ayant comme un nuage en lui ;

Il erre, il passe, avec de la brume éternelle

Et du songe et du gouffre au fond de sa prunelle.

Il se dit par moment : C’est moi qui marche. Oui.

Tout est si ténébreux qu’il est comme ébloui.[[414]](#footnote-414)

The density of action verbs in this passage builds upon a tension of frantic movement, but it is also strangely at odds with the fact that Barabbas struggles to recognise himself as agent of his own actions (‘il se dit par moment: C’est moi qui marche. Oui’). Claude Romano has recently traced three main forms of how the “unexpected” as an eruptive event can be experienced phenomenologically, which help explain Barabbas’ reaction: first, as irreducible to a determined expectation; secondly, as ‘irreducible to a general and global expectation which is one with our aptitudes in general, with the very manner by which we inhabit the world’; and thirdly, ‘what calls into question our existence in project as such, thus our manner of relating ourselves to ourselves.’[[415]](#footnote-415) It is under this third form, that of conscience, that Victor Hugo has chosen to portray Barabbas: as having had no predetermined or general expectation of being set free for his crime of murder,[[416]](#footnote-416) but being entirely surprised by this unexpected pardoning, with the consequence that he is unable to see the world in the same manner as before.

That this experience can be viewed as an instance of eschatological import becomes clearer a few lines later, when Barabbas stumbles across the site of Jesus’ crucifixion at Calvary. That he confronts the dead body alone is problematic,[[417]](#footnote-417) but the encounter is used nevertheless as an opportunity for Hugo to imagine Barabbas confronting a simulacrum of his own death and the emotion of guilt that is experienced for having escaped it at the expense of another:

L’ombre immense avait l’air d’une accusation ;

Le monde était couvert d’une nuit infamante ;

C’était l’accablement plus noir que la tourmente ;

Pas une flamme, pas un souffle, pas un bruit.

Pour l’œil de l’âme, avec ces lettres de la nuit

Qui rendent la pensée insondable lisible,

Une main écrivait au fond de l’invisible :

Responsabilité de l’homme devant Dieu.

Le silence, l’espace obscur, l’heure, le lieu,

Le roc, le sang, la croix, les clous, semblaient des juges ;

Et Barabbas, devant cette ombre sans refuges

Frémit comme devant la face de la loi,

Et, regardant le ciel, lui dit : Ce n’est pas moi ![[418]](#footnote-418)

This encounter with judgment (‘une accusation’) seems to take place in a moment of silence and motionlessness (‘pas un souffle, pas un bruit’). Though in contrast to the *Book of Revelation* imagery of blasting trumpets and cataclysmic devastations of natural landscape, there is nonetheless a similar revelation made manifest to readers here by a metaphor of the act of writing, in the phrase ‘Une main écrivait au fond de l’invisible : / Responsabilité de l’homme devant Dieu,’ causing Barabbas to shudder and distance himself from the menacing apparition (‘ce n’est pas moi!’).

J.C Ireson likens this passage to Claude Frollo’s fevered dread upon seeing the phantom of Esmeralda after having sent her to be burnt at the stake in *Notre-Dame de Paris.*[[419]](#footnote-419)That Hugo chose to elevate the obscure figure of Barabbas to such a role in the poem is telling of not just his own propensity towards redeeming the monstrous and grotesque (‘larve tout effarée et toute frissonnante’ [v. 3,791]), but also of Barabbas’ usefulness in the poem’s narrative as a *misérable* whose sense of culpability is made manifest in dramatic fashion. It is, however, unclear whether Barabbas’ fear and repulsion at the sight of Jesus crucified is indicative of contrition over having his life exchanged for Jesus’, or whether it is simply existential anguish at the possibility of death, coupled with an internalisation of morality responding to one’s conscience.[[420]](#footnote-420)

To the extent that Barabbas’ horror at the sight of Golgotha is equivalent to Hugo’s exasperation with humanity’s consistent breaking of political and ethical ideals, it is understandable that his speech becomes, in turn, more and more prophetic. Addressing the ‘affreux peuple sanglant (v. 3,835)’, Barabbas curses the ease under which violence against an innocent victim is perpetrated: ‘Les hommes n’auront plus d’aurore dans leur cœur, / L’amour est mort, le deuil lamentable est vainqueur (v. 3,877-3,878).’

When considering Christ’s death from a theological perspective, however, the eschatological dimension of the section “Ténèbres” breaks down and no longer fits with the purely humanistic concerns of Barabbas’ liberation. For while the latter purports to hear Satan laughing underground after the execution, in orthodox Christian doctrine Jesus’ death leads to the duping of Satan and the harrowing of Hell, constituting the epicentre of a greater salvation history that brings about the possibility of redemption. Given the absence of this salvific turn in Barabbas’ denouncement, it can be surmised that Hugo’s theological poetics are focused less on why the Passion occurred than they are on the *pathos* and aesthetic impact induced by its re-presentation. Indeed, bypassing deliberation on the question of the divinity of Christ, the spectacle of his suffering and death suffices for Hugo as a fresco for meditation on the injustice of the death penalty and the innocence of the victim under the scapegoating mechanism. However, that Hugo chooses the death of Jesus as the central event of this meditation can be no coincidence, offering the intriguing mythical event that comprises not just the divinisation of the victim under unjust treatment by the gods, but the victimisation of the divine under humankind.

## The Kenosis of Christ

Kenotic theology attempts to resolve the paradox of how Jesus possesses both a divine and a human nature, particularly in relation to the event of his suffering and death on the cross.[[421]](#footnote-421) The most tangible evidence for a “self-emptied”[[422]](#footnote-422) divinity is associated with his final words as testified by the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, a cry of desperation that Hugo also relays in its Aramaic form in the final section of “Le Crucifix”: ‘Elohim ! Elohim! Lamma sabacthani (“My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”). This line comes just after one other of the “seven sayings” of Christ on the cross is reprised in French, with a small addition: ‘Et le grand patient dit : – Pardonnez-leur, Père / Car ces *infortunés* ne savent ce qu’ils font (v. 3,970-3,971, my emphasis).

As mentioned above and in line with René Journet’s comment on the fact that, for Hugo, ‘le sacrifice du Christ a apporté non la rédemption, mais la malédiction,’[[423]](#footnote-423) it appears that this final verse of the Passion narrative in “Le Gibet” suggests an interpretation of free will and evil as inseparable. Yet, in order to intensify the absolute unjustness of the act, readers are once again given an ambiguous portrayal of Christ’s dual nature:

Et pendant que les cœurs, les mains jointes, les yeux,

Sont éperdus devant ce gibet monstrueux,

Pendant que, sous la brume épouvantable où tremble

Ce crime qui contient tous les crimes ensemble,

Brume où Judas recule, où chancelle la croix,

Où le centurion s’étonne et dit : je crois !

Pendant que, sous le poids de l’action maudite,

Sous Dieu saignant, l’effroi du genre humain médite,

Des voix parlent, on voit des songeurs bégayants,

La pitié se déchire en récits effrayants.[[424]](#footnote-424)

For Hugo, the ‘brume’ has yet to dissipate from this historical event, and the voices which purport to faithfully relate it are liable to the same contingencies of time and place that the sibyl juxtaposed against the infinite. Nonetheless, the Christian appellation of ‘Dieu saignant’ highlights two pivotal theological consequences emerging from the crucifixion that Hugo’s humanitarian epic intentionally or otherwise pre-supposes: first, that God has assumed humanity and is thus capable of suffering (the Incarnation); and secondly, that humanity is radically dignified by this event and capable in turn of becoming God-like (through divinisation or *theosis).* Considered solely within a history of ideas,the first claim revolutionised classical antiquity, while the second is the theological principle under which the modern world has unfolded.[[425]](#footnote-425)

Assimilating the Passion narrative into a broader history of unjust actions committed by humankind, the remaining seventeen stanzas of the section “Le Gibet” break up into a series of loosely connected excerpts, the first six retrospectively going back to the Passion narrative and the remaining eleven offering condemnation of the ongoing injustices committed specifically by priests and kings (‘La flagellation du Christ n’est pas finie’ [v.4,098]; ‘Montfaucon à côté du Golgotha s’élève [v. 4,148]). The final stanza ends on a rhetorically powerful line that posits the death of God by the hands of religion:

Ainsi mourut Jésus ; et les peuples depuis,

Atterrés, ont senti que l’Inconnu lui-même

Leur était apparu dans cet Homme Suprême,

Et que son évangile était pareil au ciel.

Le Golgotha, funeste et pestilentiel,

Leur semble la tumeur difforme de l’abîme ;

Fauve, il se dresse au fond mystérieux du crime ;

Et le plus blême éclair du gouffre est sur ce lieu

Où la religion, sinistre, tua Dieu.[[426]](#footnote-426)

Of course, between the double confusion involved here with the God-Man paradox (‘cet Homme Suprême’) and the fact that early Christian theology quickly understood Golgotha as a place of triumph rather than ‘la tumeur difforme de l’abîme,’ it is perhaps easier to interpret this final statement in rhetorical terms: religion is hypostatized as an historical agent that mars what it claims to cherish. However, there is also an interpretation of God’s death that insists on Christianity being categorically distinct from religion precisely because it exposes the scape-goating mechanism that lies behind mythical-ritual structures.[[427]](#footnote-427) Under this interpretation, the triumph of the cross is indistinguishable from the triumph of humanity in finally being able to identify and reject ritualised violence.

From a bibliographical standpoint, the ending of “Le Gibet” constitutes a forerunner in anticipating Hugo’s post-exile projects of *Le Pape* (1878) and *Religions et religion* (1880), where an insistent application of negative theology, coupled with a healthy suspicion of authority and ritual, finds its poetic fruition. Only partially detaching Christ from the significance of the cross, the Passion sequence in the poem, at the very least, serves as a phenomenological portrayal of ritualised violence and the scape-goat mentality - both very much posing as threats from within ‘les peuples’ and the Second Empire governance whom Hugo sought to educate and enlighten through his versification of the central event of the Gospels.

# Satan Redeemed: “L’ange Liberté”

Having seen by now multiple instances of how the narrative of *La Fin de Satan* is structured around a biblically-informed framework that interacts heavily with mythology, it is fitting to conclude this chapter with a discussion of its allegorical dimension, in order to summarise several theological contentions that have arisen along the way. Central to the narrative progression of the text are the figures of Isis-Lilith and the Angel of Liberty, with the first acting as a substitute vehicle for the perpetuation of evil in the world, while the latter springs from a fallen plume of Satan’s wings (‘cette sœur de l’enfer et du paradis’ [v. 1,478]) and facilitates his redemption as Lucifer in the provisional ending to the poem. Our conceptual focus in this final section will therefore be on Hugo’s use of personification in regards to these two figures, especially as both a key mythologising device and in relation to the theological significance of the mask/face,[[428]](#footnote-428) which can be understood as the endowment of personhood to virtues, vices and concepts. More specifically, the fact that Isis-Lilith and the Angel of Liberty were *engendered* by Satan’s fall suggests an allegorical reading of these divine persons as messianic. Though shorn of its Christological context, the *prosopon* as a term for a divine person will be useful as we consider the theophanic ending Hugo envisioned for *La Fin de Satan*,where the valorised but abstract notion of “Freedom” is concretised and sent out into the world in place of Christ’s gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples.

Hugo’s use ofpersonification as a figurative device in *La Fin de Satan* presents a world in which humanity sits within a hierarchical relation alongside animals, angels, and gods. However, it is clear that Hugo’s phenomenology of the divine still favours an anthropocentric expression, wherein the actors of the cosmic drama gravitate around distinctly human conduct. As we have already seen, the mythical narratives in the poem often parallel an allegorical backdrop to Hugo’s conception of the course of ancient and modern history, propelled undoubtedly by the quasi-mythical status of the French Revolution and its direct aftermath in early nineteenth-century France. According to Margarita Amierio, the promulgation of a beneficent, revolutionary antagonism harkening back to this prodigious event underlies an allegorical reading of *La Fin de Satan:*

Disons que Victor Hugo nous a présenté dans le cadre de la théophanie biblique la personnification et la représentation de différentes images allégoriques construites sur la notion de cohésion antagoniste et antithétique, ce qui explique sa vision de l'histoire comme dynamicité, et où s'intègrent les réflexions sur le mal, la cosmogonie du pardon et la genèse idéale d'une humanité libre en dehors des structures établies. De là l'explication d'une révolution où l'expérience avec Dieu et avec Satan, celui-ci héros messianique, soit le fondement d'un monde en équilibre où l'on admet le progrès.[[429]](#footnote-429)

The Isis-Lilith/Angel of Liberty binary enacts this dynamism through personification and offers a point of philosophical reflection over the more problematic aspects of political and ethical conduct. Under this reading, the Angel of Liberty can be allegorically read as the positive pole of free will acting for the betterment of humankind in history, while Isis-Lilith would be the negative pole of free will choosing to frustrate this trajectory. Both are engendered by Satan, who can therefore be understood, as we shall see in greater detail below, as the modern revolutionary subject. This allegorical binary comes to a resolution in the section “L’ange Liberté”, which is the final sequence in the epic before the uncompleted “La Bastille” fails to leap into modern history, reminding readers of the immense project that Hugo had initially set out upon in verse and of its ultimate anchoring in the atemporality of myth.

## The Fatality of Violence: Isis-Lilith

The first appearance of Isis-Lilith is after the fall of Satan, in a section entitled “L’entrée dans l’ombre.” Described as ‘monstre et femme que fit Satan avec de l’ombre (v. 247),’ the naming of this figure carries both Isis, the Egyptian goddess of motherhood, fertility, and death, and Lilith, claimed to have been Adam’s first wife in Judaic legend. As a prime example of ‘Hugolian apposition’[[430]](#footnote-430), where two nouns are juxtaposed with one serving as an adjective, the name imparts a qualitative sense of the fertility cults in ancient Egyptian-Mesopotamian cultures to the Judeo-Christian belief in nefarious demons.

It is also possible that the inclusion of Isis is owing to Hugo’s own peculiar understanding of the name as etymologically related to the city of Paris, according to a text written between 1838-1840: ‘Elle [Paris] s’appelle *Lutetia,* ce qui vient de lutum, *boue,* et elle s’appelle *Parisis,* ce qui vient d’Isis, la mystérieuse déesse de la Vérité.’[[431]](#footnote-431) Though an unlikely relation, the inclusion does support a reading of the demon-figure as an allegorical incarnation of the negative, Dionysiac forces of the French Revolution that were indelibly linked to the gruesome events in Paris during the Reign of Terror. Under this interpretation, the name would additionally convey the organic and cyclical significance of birthing, nurturing, and death.

Nevertheless, viewed in functional terms and given the narrative role that Hugo created for Isis-Lilith, it is much more probable that the goddess-demon combination acts primarily as a substitute bane of humanity in order for the exculpation and humanisation of Satan to occur. Reporting back to her father of the havoc she has wreaked behind the scenes of the poem’s previous episodes, the concept of fatalityreturns from its inscription on the cathedral walls of *Notre-Dame de Paris* into one of Isis-Lilith’s many epithets:

« Père, ce qu’une fois j’ai saisi dans mes mains,

« Moi, la Fatalité, jamais je ne le lâche.

« L’airain, le bois, la pierre, ont accompli leur tâche ;

« L’airain s’est fait soldat, roi, prince, chevalier,

« Et le bois s’est fait juge et la pierre geôlier ;

« Caïn a reparu sous trois formes, le glaive,

« Le gibet, la prison ; et Babel se relève ;

« Le sang coule ; Jésus est mort, l’enfer prévaut ;

« L’échafaud monstrueux du monde est le pivot ;

« Tout croule ; et dans le sang humain l’homme se lave ;

« La guerre le fait brute et la prison esclave ;

« L’homme subit le joug en sortant du combat ;

« Et, tigre dans le cirque, est âne sous le bât.

« Sois content. Tout est fauve, impitoyable et triste.[[432]](#footnote-432)

Once again, we see the Old Testament myths of Cain and Babel resurface as foundational to the backdrop of *La Fin de Satan,* deployed across practically the entirety of the poem as the founding murderous event that led to the establishment of civilisation. That the three materials have transformed into the human professions of warrior, judge, and jailer is reminiscent of the metamorphosis of substances into humans and gods in Greek theogony tales.

Yet, while Isis-Lilith boasts of these accomplishments to Satan, addressing him as ‘Père’, the seriousness and gravity of the demon’s speech is suddenly imperilled by the recognition that Satan is in fact asleep (‘Ô Prodige ! Satan venait de s’endormir’ [v. 5,451]), which in turn provokes a diminishment of Isis-Lilith’s menacing stature as they too are shown to suffer (‘Il dort ! Je souffre seule. Oh ! je le hais’ [v. 5,479]). The communion of evil as personified agents in the underworld quickly begins to bear shades of familial discord and even farce, in contrast to the previously solemn tone of the sequence. [[433]](#footnote-433)

The demise of Isis-Lilith comes not long after, occasioned by a confrontation with the Angel of Liberty as the latter attempts to wake Satan and petition for the right to alter the course of humanity. In a display of light mastering darkness inspired by both kabbalistic doctrines of the unicity of God and the ninth chapter of *Book of Revelations,*[[434]](#footnote-434)the figure of Isis-Lilith is suddenly eradicated:

Ô vision terrible et sublime ! à mesure

Que l’astre grandissait, la larve décroissait ;

L’ardent grossissement de l’étoile poussait

Lilith-Isis vers l’ombre, et mêlait à la fange

Le fantôme rongé par la clarté de l’ange ;

Les rayons dévoraient l’affreux linceul flottant ;

L’étoile aux feux divins, plus large à chaque instant,

Météore d’abord, puis comète et fournaise,

Fondait le monstre ainsi qu’un glaçon dans la braise.

Quand l’astre fut soleil, le spectre n’était plus.[[435]](#footnote-435)

A substantial difference between *The Book of* *Revelation* and this passage, however, is that the Angel of Liberty becomes a furnace to cleanse the underworld, whereas in the biblical text the underworld is depicted as a furnace, belching out smokes and fumes followed by locusts. Here Liberty, ‘l’étoile aux feux divins’, is closer to the Promethean myth rather than imagery used in the New Testament, allegorically representing the audacity of humankind in challenging the gods, albeit without the consequent punishment that Prometheus was forced to endure in the Caucasian mountains.[[436]](#footnote-436) Thus destroyed, the spectre of Isis-Lilith cedes place to the forward movement of history, a linear trajectory receding ever further from the threat of the ‘échafaud monstrueux du monde.’

## Stepping Outside of History: L’ange Liberté

Of all the mythological characters in *La Fin de Satan,* the Angel Liberty is perhaps the most readily identifiable as bearing an overtly allegorical function. That is because, whereas Isis-Lilith or Satan contain a polysemy of meaning depending on different socio-cultural contexts, the name (another use of Hugolian apposition) directly refers to a specific concept, albeit a contentious one with many categorical subsets: freedom.

Considered as what Northrop Frye calls a ‘secondary concern’ distinct from the primary material concerns involved in mythical stories of survival, the notion of “freedom” implies a certain ideological layer set behind the allegorical character, which is to say that a particular rationalisation of the imagery is simultaneously offered to readers.[[437]](#footnote-437) Akin to the goddess Libertas in Roman antiquity and the figure of Marianne in the French Revolution, Hugo’s dual personifications of liberty and fate consequently manifest, on a surface level and through their shared femininity, a biological tension between life and death, as well as, deeper still, a problematic view of history that attempts to reconcile these two opposites.[[438]](#footnote-438)

The first perspective, that of the angel as a restorative figure, is revealed during their plea to Satan. After having dissolved Isis-Lilith in the previous passage, the human form of Satan returns in his sleep, causing the angel to kneel down beside him and utter a speech of over one hundred and thirty lines, imploring him to allow her to go out and humanise the living, resembling the invocation of the Holy Spirit during the Great Commission episode in the New Testament:

« Laisse-moi sauver tout, moi ton côté béni !

« Consens ! Oh ! moi qui viens de toi, permets que j’aille

« Chez ces vivants, afin d’achever la bataille

« Entre leur ignorance, hélas, et leur raison,

« Pour mettre une rougeur sacrée à l’horizon,[[439]](#footnote-439)

The angel’s salvific aspect reaches messianic proportions in these lines, cast rather oddly against an inflection of bellicose language (‘achever la bataille’) and ominous signs (‘une rougeur sacrée à l’horizon’), arguably representing a verbal cognate to Delacroix’s *Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830). Furthermore, her speech is then portrayed as ‘pareille au sein versant goutte à goutte le lait / À l’enfant nouveau né qui dort’ (v. 5,814-5,815), adding a maternal dimension to their discourse that conflicts with the previous battle imagery.

The secondary concern that the angel channels is their more specifically allegorical function as a progressive force to history. Upon waking, the first and only word that Satan says to the Angel of Liberty is ‘va!’ (v. 5,834), and this reflects both a valorisation of freedom trumping necessity, indicative of Romantic philosophy in general, as well as a uniquely nineteenth-century ideology of infinite progress applicable across multiple domains of collective life.

The aporia, of course, is that any conception of infinite progress strips the movement of a measurable target, thereby preventing conditions under which it could be said that “freedom” has been achieved. Instead, the notion in its poeticised rendering as illuminating light struggles to detach from this eschatological element: darkness is defeated (Isis-Lilith), individual redemption is achieved (Satan/Lucifer), and a revolutionary event is harkened on earth (Ange-Liberté). Understood as a secularising of religious language, these events no longer pertain to the individual, but to France as a nation-state. Before her eradication, Isis-Lilith complains to Satan of these citizens:

« Ce peuple est l’Homme même ; il brave avec dédain

« L’enfer, et, dans la nuit, cherche à tâtons Éden ;

« Ce peuple, c’est Adam ; mais Adam qui se venge,

« Adam ayant volé le glaive ardent de l’ange,

« Et chassant devant lui la Nuit et le Trépas ;

« Il va ; tous les progrès sont faits avec ses pas ;

« Pas de haute action que ses mains ne consomment ;

« Les autres nations l’admirent, et le nomment

« FRANCE, et ce nom combat dans l’ombre contre nous.[[440]](#footnote-440)

Because of this sanctification of the French people as a unique nation, the Angel of Liberty’s final commissioning at the culmination of the poem seems tautologous; the nation-people of ‘Adam qui se venge’ is paramount to a reversal of Satan’s initial superiority in the classical Fall narrative, stealing the flaming sword of the angel that was charged to guard Eden from postlapsarian humankind. In all of this, biblical millenarism transposed to national identity is writ large, with the personification of the Angel of Liberty merely crowning the political autonomy that Hugo attributes to the French people.

In the final analysis of the chapter, it is therefore important to tie together the converging narratives of a communal auto-determinism with its highest exemplar in the individual journey of reconciliation with God that is assumed by the modernised satanic myth.

## The Troubles of Free Will: Satan Humanised

Returning to Hugo’s description of the underworld that Satan finds himself in while Isis-Lilith is abroad, we see the seasonal analogy of winter used to impress upon readers the static nature of the environment. The Angel of Liberty must request permission from the ‘vieil ange Hiver (v. 5,176)’ to descend into the cold abyss of hell, following Dante’s medieval poetic of Satan frozen mid-breast in a lake of ice. Indeed, the true torment of Dante’s hell arises from the fact that, from a temporal perspective, its denizens rest immobile, without the possibility of change, forever condemned to repeating the cardinal sins that brought them there.[[441]](#footnote-441)

In Hugo’s hell the angel encounters no entrapped souls along the way; rather, she traverses ‘le lieu funeste où rien n’existe (v. 5,251)’, a place of solitude and darkness that illustrates the Augustinian notion of evil as the absence of good: ‘l’abîme où l’esprit lit ce mot triste : Absent (v. 5,281).’ Not only does this description encapsulate Hugo’s refutation of the Christian doctrine of eternal punishment, but it lays further emphasis on hell as a psychological state of mind, rather than an actual place. Continuing this vision, Hugo’s Satan is entrapped in lassitude and torpor before he can finally sleep. The assumed freedom achieved from revolting against God has left him alternately bored and agitated: ‘Il se traînait, visqueux, blême, éclipsé, terni (v. 5,314).’

In phenomenological terms, boredom can be viewed as an arrestation of time, the world perceived as in stasis under a disinterested gaze and consequently producing ‘a stagnation of existence.’[[442]](#footnote-442) Hugo’s darkness of hell reflects this undifferentiated visible state while simultaneously tormenting Satan with an anxiety of nothingness:

Satan apparaissait dans toute sa souffrance ;

Le démon fulgurant, dans cette transparence,

Horrible, se tordait comme un éclair noyé.

Puis la nuit revenait, glacée et sans pitié ;

La vaste cécité refluait sous la voûte

De l’éternel silence et l’engloutissait toute ;

Et l’enfer, un instant montré, se refermant,

Lugubre, s’emplissait d’évanouissement.[[443]](#footnote-443)

Surpassing the imagery of Dante’s Satan half suspended in ice, Hugo’s poetic variation has the Prince of Darkness evidently subservient to the greater cosmological forces of night and day, with his prison flickering in and out of view to readers in a dramatic *chiaroscuro* setting.

Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe reminds us that, following Michelet, Hugo’s conception of freedom is ‘not against God but against matter,’[[444]](#footnote-444) a point that is particularly apt when looking at Satan’s suffering from having revolted against the former and now enslaved to the latter. Of course, “enslavement to matter” is a phrase highly suggestive of Gnosticism, flipping as it does God’s declaration in *Genesis* of the goodness of the entire created order to that of inhibitory evil and its necessary overcoming.[[445]](#footnote-445) Nevertheless, Satan’s final release from this cosmic claustration at the end of the poem signals a parallel advancement in humanity’s mastering of nature, insofar as, for Hugo, humanity is continually called to liberate the earthly shacklesthat prevent future material advancement.

Taken as the primary narrative across the poem, we can now summarise Hugo’s configuration of the satanic cycle of violence as relaying a broader allegorical commentary on the issue of free will that, though certainly not resolved, assimilates a phenomenological grounding to the theological insistence on the banality of Satan, by way of showing their suffering in malaise and boredom and their alternating emotions of love and hate towards God. Indeed, so rapid is the denouement of Satan’s redemption that it seems to alleviate the seriousness of the potentially violent nature of free will and action, such as those depicted in “Le Glaive” and “Le Gibet”; however, as with myth in general, the narrative is never satisfactorily completed but continues to re-present ongoing existential concerns. As for the *prosopon* cross-over between theology and mythology, it is now clear that the humanisation of these three “characters” in this section runs counter to their supposed divine status, given that they are all susceptible to suffering, albeit under different affective valences. Isis-Lilith’s despair upon viewing Satan asleep, the Angel of Liberty’s pleading, and Satan’s torpor all point towards personifications of affective states that, once actualised across the epic’s narrative, undermine their supposedly divine qualities.

At a time when epic poetry was quickly losing ground to the new form of the novel, *La Fin de Satan* is a unique example of a “modern epic” that openly manifests all the contradictions that this label suggests. Before setting it aside and transposing certain thematic elements to *Les Misérables,* however,Hugo shifted to an alternative poetic method of telling the tale of gods and God, not in one sweeping and connected narrative, but in an assortment of myths and legends that would further elucidate his own musings on humanity’s guiding role in history.

# Chapter 7: The Sublime Event: Confronting Secular Time and Eternity in *La Légende des siècles*

*‘Au dix-neuvième siècle, l'idée religieuse subit une crise. On désapprend de certaines choses, et l'on fait bien, pourvu qu'en désapprenant ceci, on apprenne cela. Pas de vide dans le cœur humain. De certaines démolitions se font, et il est bon qu'elles se fassent, mais à la condition d'être suivies de reconstructions. ’ —* Les Misérables, *op. cit.,* p. 525.

As the above quote from *Les Misérables* attests, the way religious time and historical progress were viewed underwent a substantial change in nineteenth-century French society. Along with sweeping societal changes came the growing awareness of living under a new historicism, one which, as modern industrial life had begun to accelerate, seemed to lose its bearing on keeping up with the present orthe “just now”.[[446]](#footnote-446)

No less than *La Fin de Satan* or *Dieu,* Hugo’s ambition of writing *La Légende des siècles* as a vast representation of humanity that stretched across prehistory, history, and apocalyptic finality was destined to remain a project awaiting its completion *ad infinitum.* Not that this was an issue for Hugo, given that his conceptualisation of these three works as a triptych corresponding to ‘le progressif [*La Légende des siècles*], le relatif [*La Fin de Satan*], l’absolu [*Dieu*]’in the preface to the first series was followed by self-avowed fallibility in attaining these ideals, taking the form of an exculpatory statement: ‘l’intention de ce livre est bonne.’[[447]](#footnote-447)

It is helpful to explore the theological framing of this project in light of what we have already investigated in the two previous sections: in chapters three and four, the necessary iconoclasm involved in claiming God as the Absolute Other, and in chapters five and six, the relativising of evil through mimetic interaction and Satan’s humanisation. As a synthesis of these two ambitions, *La Légende des siècles* emerges most notably as a great hymn to the nineteenth-century notion of *Infinite Progress*, Hugo’s poetical terminuson his theorising over humanity’s authoritative place in history, and God as the unreachable asymptote. Central to this notion of progress is the morphing of divine actualisation of the world from God to a “sublime event”, discernible in various poems of *La Légende des siècles* that are distinct from the ways that the sublime has been analysed in previous chapters.

Whereas we have seen the excessive and allegorical sides of the natural or, one might say, environmental sublime in *Les Contemplations,*[[448]](#footnote-448) as well as the more fear-inducing sublime through the monstrous apparitions of *Dieu,*[[449]](#footnote-449) this chapter will focus on the phenomenological framing of the sublime as both a positive and negative event that seeks to visualise a Romanticised form of historical progress through the process of ruination and renewal. Our readings will be guided by the following question: how does Hugo represent the passing of time in each poem and what theological determinants either implicitly or explicitly condition these manifestations? At the outset, we can say that Hugo’s elevation of humanity to the subject (“La Légende”) of history in *La Légende des siècles* is itself founded in a historical movement, one that transferred certain theological categories such as eschatology and soteriology (doctrines of salvation) to temporal dimensions.

We will be looking at key poems across the three series of the collection (*Première*, *Nouvelle*, *Dernière*) that illustrate this transformation through imagery of material decay and renewal, engaging a combination of myths and historical figures recognisable as such to readers of Hugo’s period. Yet, unlike traditional epic poetry, where kings and heroes are valorised for their exploits, each of these poems associate a strong ethical imperative to the passing of time from the past into the future, favouring the small, the outcast, and the victimised. Hence, instead of merely “petites épopées” as they were originally termed by Hugo, Claude Millet has referred to them as “anti-épopées,”[[450]](#footnote-450) a term that gestures towards the apocalyptic poetics we shall see emerge.

## Compositional Context: A Symphony in Three Movements

It is worthwhile surveying briefly the three series and their publication histories because of the contexts that separate the *Première Série* (1859) from the *Nouvelle Série* (1877) and the *Dernière Série* (1883). After the immense success of *Les Contemplations,* Hetzel’s negotiations with Hugo to prioritise what was still called at the time “Les Petites Épopées”over *La Fin de Satan* or *Dieu* saw a flurry of poems produced in Guernsey from late 1857 up until the finalising of the preface in August 1859 and the simultaneous publication of the first edition of *La Légende des siècles* in Brussels and Paris on the 28th of September that year.[[451]](#footnote-451) “Le Sacre de la femme”, “Le Satyre”, and “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel” were all written over this time and form, respectively, the structural foundations for the opening, middle, and penultimate ending of the collection.

The poem “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre”, comparing the ruined tower of Babel to the course of history, also written in mid-1859, was reserved for the *Nouvelle Série,* due largely to its incongruity with the envisioned linear trajectory of humankind’s ascent in the *Première Série*: ‘un seul et immense mouvement d’ascension vers la lumière.’[[452]](#footnote-452) Similarly, “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir”, composed back in June 1854 under the spell of the Jersey *séances,* was retained for the *Nouvelle Série*, owing to its intimations of fatality and cyclical history. “L’épopée du ver” adopted a similar vein and was henceforth ordered into the second series. “La Vision de Dante”, a poem in which Hugo’s literary idol is summoned from the dead to condemn the errancy of a suite of popes, was written under the spirit of *Les Châtiments* in 1853, but patiently kept aside until the *Dernière Série* of 1883, five years after the papacy of Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) came to an end.

Hugo’s personal situation was, of course, very different by the time of the publication of the *Nouvelle Série* in 1877. He had now been back from his eighteen-year exile for seven years and was close to his seventy-fifth birthday. So close, in fact, that its publication coincided with the date, revealing a keen awareness of his now mythical status as *l’homme-siècle.* Though its reception was once again successful, there is an evident pessimism ingrained in the second instalment, explained by Claude Millet with reference to the Battle of Sedan in 1870 and the civil strife of the Paris Commune:

Le pessimisme de la *Nouvelle Série* s'explique en grande partie par ce paradoxe vivant : la décadence de la patrie du progrès, et par le prix qu'elle paye, pour revenir à elle-même, République mettant fin au Second Empire : une défaite infamante.[[453]](#footnote-453)

Certainly, the confident progressivism of the *Première Série* dampens in tone by the time of the *Nouvelle Série,* leaving open questions over the actual course of history as opposed to the imagined utopian future of a “United States of Europe”, held dearly by Victor Hugo and other republican sympathisers since the 1840s.[[454]](#footnote-454)

By the time of the publication of the *Dernière Série* in 1883, his stint as a senator in the Third Republic had gone awry, and the stroke he suffered in 1878 had crippled his literary output,[[455]](#footnote-455) now reliant on a ready stockpile of poems to compile the final series. By then, a younger generation of poets and novelists had taken their crafts in diverging directions away from Romanticism, from Verlaine’s *Sagesse* (1881) to Zola’s monumental *Rougon-Macquart* series (1871-1893). Nonetheless, Hugo’s reputation earnt the series a favourable reception, with his regular publications becoming practically an instituted rite, culminating in his long funeral march and canonisation in the Panthéon in 1885.

## History, Revolution, and the Sublime

It is no coincidence that Hugo’s understanding of history, revolution, and the sublime intersect. As a consequence of the French Revolution, the justification of a divinely-supported monarchy responsible for directing temporal human affairs was radically rejected. One of many ensuing ramifications of this foundational event to modernity was the rise of a new way to understand history, and more specifically, the relationship between humankind and God in determining the course of history.

To crudely summarise three intellectual currents present around the time of the first publication of *La Légende des siècles*, Catholic ultra-Montanists such as Louis Veuillot considered God’s direct intervention in history a providential fact, one that counterbalances humanity’s incursion of original sin;[[456]](#footnote-456) Catholic liberals such as Charles Forbes René de Montalembert favoured a God of more indirect means, more amenable to naturalistic explanations; and secular positivists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Jules Michelet rejected any form of supernatural metaphysics that denigrates the autonomy of humankind. Additionally, not long after the publication of the *Nouvelle Série,* Emile Gautier’s importation of Charles Darwin’s discoveries in his pamphlet *Le Darwinisme social* (1880) also entered the intellectual fray, rendering problematic both secular humanism’s claims of exceptionalism and a voluntaristic conception of divine intervention in history.

Guillaume Cuchet articulates this turning point in the crisis of God’s purported action in history by citing a text written by Fr. Alphonse Gratry, entitled *La morale et la loi de l’histoire* (1868). Cuchet goes on to paraphrase Gratry’s concerns with the revolutionary developments in the techno-industrial sphere and the sociological consequences that were in the process of depreciating faith in God’s providence:

Désormais, on choisirait Dieu, non plus poussé par la pression collective ou par la nécessité de desserrer symboliquement l'étau de fer des contraintes matérielles qui pesaient autrefois sur l'humanité souffrante, mais *pour lui-même,* librement, comme dans les premiers temps de l'ère chrétienne.[[457]](#footnote-457)

Interestingly, there is an adjacent revolutionary parallel going on in Gratry’s understanding of history. Given its etymological stem in *revolvere* (Latin for “to roll back”), revolution can be seen as the return to a former historical moment, in this case back to the first three centuries AD of the Roman Empire and the clandestine growth of Christianity in ‘les premiers temps de l’ère chrétienne’.

There is thus a temporal ambiguity embedded in the word “revolution”, hidden in its stricter sense as the overthrowal of a political system, but inextricably associated with the idea of a return to a previous point in time. Indeed, much depends on one’s nostalgic viewpoint of the past as to whether a particular revolution marks the arrival of a new event in history, one that radically ruptures from all prior experience, or whether it is merely significative of an *older* historicalevent and can thus be assimilated back into it. Each of these senses are held in tension throughout *La Légende des siècles*, and both convey theological questions willing to be asked.

Furthermore, Claude Millet has quite rightly compared Hugo’s fascination with the bilateral, progressive/regressive sway of history to Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* (1681), because both understand history in an idealised sense. Indeed, for Bossuet, historical development is also circumscribed by the notion of “Humanity”, albeit signifying foremostly the chosen people of God.[[458]](#footnote-458) In contrast to the diverse micro-moments chronicled by journals as “historical” since the advent of the printing press, Millet argues that Hugo’s adoption of Bossuet’s “Universal History'':

Inscrit l'Histoire dans la longue durée, d'un peuple, d'une « civilisation », de l'Humanité. Cette deuxième direction de l'historiographie romantique, et de l'écriture hugolienne de l'Histoire, constitue le récit historique en récit synthétique et conceptualisant, qui éclaire la logique des évolutions, dégage le sens des événements en les réintégrant dans leur vaste situation, raconte le voyage du progrès depuis la nuit des temps.[[459]](#footnote-459)

Bossuet’s extension of the ecclesiastical body (clergy and laity alike) to the sphere of nation and peoples depends upon divinity permeating and actualising the history of humankind, changing the nature of the latter to a collective pilgrimage towards death on this earth followed by the afterlife.[[460]](#footnote-460)

While Hugo’s borrowings of Bossuet’s version of a “Universal History” certainly sheds the associated doctrine of no salvation outside the church,[[461]](#footnote-461) it nonetheless retains the bipolar anchoring of history (*saecula*) between a pure, pre-historic state (i.e. Edenic, prelapsarian), and a post-historic, eschatological finality (i.e. The End of History). Hence the unlimited nature of progress arrives in tandem with the providential nature of divinity as a starting and endpoint, only retranslated into the poetic terms of the sublime, which serves as an event that harkens to these extremes while shorn of any theological dogma and doctrine.

Keeping this in mind, we can see how revolutionary moments such as that of 1789 were readily seen by Hugo as instances of the “Romantic sublime.” For the rupture caused by such moments creates the impression of both the end of something (the end of monarchical authority, for example) and a new beginning (the birth of democracy). As we know, of course, this did not correspond to reality, as Hugo himself grew up during and was patronised by the Restoration Monarchy. Nonetheless, the significance of the Revolution of 1789 as an event that irrevocably changed the course of France’s history assumed for Hugo mythological proportions. Consequently, the Romantic sublime that we will see in this chapter is characterised by a clash between mythical imagery and historical observation.

The greatest limitation to the Romantic sublime understood as a perceptual prism, however, comes in the form of a question asked by Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne: ‘simplification de la réalité par l’archétype et l’utopie, la poétisation de l’Histoire par le sublime ne conduirait-elle pas à une évacuation de la complexité du réel, à une trahison de ce qu’elle entend expliquer ?’[[462]](#footnote-462) Such a question would be difficult to answer if one had to remain in the explanatory framework of archetypes and utopian thought alone. However, given that we will be exploring the theological dimensions of the Romantic sublime through representations of change and time, we can respond in a preliminary fashion to Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne’s question by insisting that it does not go far enough. Rather, Hugo’s use of the sublime merges with an apocalyptic dimension, one that *de-naturalises* realities of thepresent in favour of a future, unrevealed state to which humanity must strive.

# Imagining the Apocalypse: “L’épopée du ver” & “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir”

“L’épopée du ver” is a dramatic monologue of five-hundred and thirty-three lines written in six-line stanzas (A-A-B-C-C-B) of alexandrine and six syllable verses, voicing the supremacy of the worm over all material beings. Similar in length and form, “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir” totals six-hundred and forty-one lines and only changes the six syllable verses for octosyllables. It is composed of a dialogue between an ‘être mystérieux’ and a first-person speaker over the nature of change and time. Reserved for the *Nouvelle Série* of the collection but in fact written before the publication of the *Première Série,* the thematic elements of death and decay in “L’épopée du ver” and “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir” thus reinforce a conception of history as discontinuous that is preponderant in the second instalment of Hugo’s modern epic.

The two are, moreover, fitting for comparative analysis because both fall under the genre of “apocalyptic literature”, emphasising as they do the temporality of the phenomenal world and announcing its eventual destruction. In contrast to the eschatological poetics examined in the previous chapter,[[463]](#footnote-463) one that focuses on the individual’s conflicted state of mind, the apocalyptic poetics in these poems depict the destruction of material reality across long periods of time. It forms part of several commonly recycled Romantic tropes, including the imagery of ruins, the dichotomy of nature/civilisation, and a longing to spiritualise matter into a permanent state of immutability. Of these three sets of imagery, it is the latter, that of arresting material corruption, that will primarily occupy our attention.

However, the term *apokaluptein* (Greek for “uncovering”) can also be understood as more than simply environmental devastation. In a theological sense, it more importantly heralds a terminal point in time, one where a final disclosure of divine knowledge is revealed. In phenomenological terms, it can be described as the final complementing of the visible components of reality with their invisible components that govern their essence. This would be akin to the arrival of an event that fully reveals the conditions to which all objects are subjected in forming their outward appearance, hence linking to the notion of revelation.[[464]](#footnote-464)

Hugo’s apocalyptic poetics contain both senses, most notably through his signalling of the future as not only capable of exposing the inadequacies of the present, but of removing the otherwise necessary constraints that govern objects in the present, reflecting a truly utopian desire. As Claude Millet rightly remarks, ‘son [Hugo’s] historicisme se double d’un anti-historicisme, comme se doublent les deux dénouements de la première *Légende des siècles,* “Vingtième siècle” et “Hors des temps.”’[[465]](#footnote-465)

We will therefore see that, above all, Hugo’s intense discontent with the past manifests itself in imagery of dissolution and decay in order to figure a radically different, idealised future that is *per se* unrepresentable, albeit nonetheless poetically imagined.

## The Worm of Time

The triple association of worms, material decay, and the passing of time is a symbolically fecund site in religion, art and literature. In the Bible, depictions range from the devouring worm that despoils labour and worldly riches,[[466]](#footnote-466) to the more wrathful and enlarged forms of the serpent, the sea creature Leviathan, and the dragon in *Revelation.*[[467]](#footnote-467) Their most important shared semantic feature is a connectedness to and regeneration of the earth, as well as to the decomposition of material states of reality, thus harkening to an instinctual fear of death and its inevitability. Hugo’s “L’épopée du ver” begins, in this vein, with a *memento mori* style speech by the personified earthworm:

Au fond de la poussière inévitable, un être

Rampe, et souffle un miasme ignoré qui pénètre

L’homme de toutes parts,

Qui noircit l’aube, éteint le feu, sèche la tige,

Et qui suffit pour faire avorter le prodige

Dans la nature épars.

Le monde est sur cet être et l’a dans sa racine,

Et cet être, c’est moi. Je suis. Tout m’avoisine.

Dieu me paie un tribut.

Vivez. Rien ne fléchit le ver incorruptible.

Hommes, tendez vos arcs ; quelle que soit la cible,

C’est moi qui suis le but.[[468]](#footnote-468)

As with the wisdom literature in the Old Testament, so too is the opening here a deliberate attack on humankind’s pride and sense of exceptionalism. Yet, instead of attributing the ultimate authority to God, Hugo inverts the boast back towards the earthworm, constructing a hubristic *persona* that both mimics God’s aseity (‘Je suis’; ‘C’est moi qui suis le but’) and claims to be an indispensable partner in creation (‘Dieu me paie un tribut’). As a result, readers are given a prosopopoeia of death as a tyrannical agent - a verbalised form of the otherwise silent *danse macabre* imagery common in the Middle Ages. In a similar vein, the worm’s defiant posturing resembles the satanic motif of mimetic rivalry analysed across the previous chapter,[[469]](#footnote-469) which Hugo had just revisited while writing “L’épopée du ver” and which he had previously employed in several other exile-period poems that were written close to the composition of “Et Nox facta est” in the early spring of 1854.[[470]](#footnote-470)

As for the main speaker of “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir,” though it does not concern a ‘ver de terre’, the poem commences with a monologue by ‘l’être mystérieux qui me parle à ses heures’,[[471]](#footnote-471) who reiterates the same humbling message in a metre close to its cognate poem:

– Vivants ! l’orgueil habite vos demeures.

Il fait nuit dans votre cité !

Le ciel s’étonne, ô foule en vices consumée,

Qu’il sorte de la paille en feu tant de fumée,

De l’homme tant de vanité !

Tu regardes les cieux de travers, triste race !

Tu ne te trouves pas sous l’azur à ta place.

Tu te plains, homme, ombre, roseau !

Balbutiant ! Peut-être, et bégayant ! Que sais-je ?

Tu reproches le soir à l’aube, au lys la neige,

Et ton sépulcre à ton berceau ![[472]](#footnote-472)

Moving through the imagery of this passage is the extension of time and its unravelling of human pride, employing binary oppositions such as “soir/aube” and “sépulcre/berceau” as well as including Hugo’s frequent pairing of ‘homme’ and ‘ombre’ to signify the thin veil of human pretension in the face of fragility and vanity. This is followed by an allusion to Pascal’s ‘roseau pensant,’[[473]](#footnote-473) but without the contrasting qualificative that renders dignity to the thinking subject. The complaint is, however, not centred upon a particular creature (such as a worm) but on the fleetingness of time and the uncertainty produced in the mind of those who contemplate this process of change (“Balbutiant ! Peut-être, et bégayant ! Que sais-je?”). There is therefore clearly a parallel to be made between the mordant speech of the worm, whose vaunted occupation is to recycle matter, and the exposition of finitude in these lines.

## The Revenge of the Small

The second apocalyptic feature in “L’épopée du ver” that deserves mention is its deployment of inverted magnitude and grandeur in order to create a reversal of the (classical) sublime aesthetic. Specifically, the miniscule size of the earthworm, combined with its grotesque status, is vindicated by its ability to persist across time, surpassing the legends and legacies of conquerors and rulers. Whereas the sublime, classically formulated, vaunted an appreciation of noble valour in direct opposition to the debasements of lower society,[[474]](#footnote-474) Hugo’s earthworm boasts in a revolutionary manner on its ability to erase distinctions and accolades:

La dénudation absolue et complète,

C’est moi. J’ôte la force aux muscles de l’athlète ;

Je creuse la beauté ;

Je détruis l’apparence et les métamorphoses ;

C’est moi qui maintiens nue, au fond du puits des choses,

L’auguste vérité.

Où donc les conquérants vont-ils ? mes yeux les suivent.

À qui sont-ils ? à moi. L’heure vient ; ils m’arrivent,

Découronnés, pâlis,

Et tous je les dépouille, et tous je les mutile,

Depuis Cyrus vainqueur de Tyr jusqu’à Bathylle

Vainqueur d’Amaryllis.[[475]](#footnote-475)

Here we can easily perceive why this kind of poetry is “apocalyptic” in both senses of the term: there is not only the action of destruction, but also the action of revealing, of making visible what was once covered up (‘la dénudation absolue et complète’). The valour of the earthworm in this case, what endows it with a noble purpose, is therefore its unmasking of false appearances, which in turn produces effects of the sublime through the disproportion of its stature when compared to the ‘athlète’ and the ‘vainqueur’.

This is compounded by the potential sensation of disgust in response to the earthworm’s description of dissolving the human (‘je les mutile’), sitting at odds with their ostensibly just function of dethroning pride and earthly glory. Indeed, though Hugo’s ‘ver de terre’ may be in some ways an analogue to and champion for “le peuple,” they are certainly not intended to be admired, as the following poem in the series “Le poëte au ver de terre” proclaims: ‘Non, tu n’as pas tout, monstre ! et tu ne prends point l’âme. / Cette fleur n’a jamais subi ta bave infâme.’[[476]](#footnote-476)

Echoing the poet’s repulsion at the worm’s supposed revenge, which by now clearly articulates not just a pessimistic outlook on humanity’s influence on history but also of a nihilistic will-to-power motif, the mysterious speaker in “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir” goes on to address those who fall captive to any induced despondency caused by this realisation. Their rebuke reverses the micro-macro framework back to a macro-micro approach, naming the addressee this time pejoratively as the earthworm in comparison to God’s omnipotence:

Ah ! tu trouves tout mal ! trop d’ombre et de misères !

D’autres mondes mieux faits te semblent nécessaires.

L’astre naît de brouillard terni ;

On peut se servir mieux du germe et du mystère ! -

Parle. Dieu formidable attend, ô ver de terre,

Tes commandes dans l’infini.

Ah ! le travail te pèse et la douleur t’étonne !

Ah ! décembre après juin te semble monotone !

Ah ! pourrir répugne à ta chair !

Ah ! tu n’es pas content de ce cercle où l’on erre !

Bien. Fais la guerre à Dieu. Canonne le tonnerre ;

Croise l’épée avec l’éclair.

Ah ! tu portes en toi, reptile, un exemplaire

D’idéal qu’il eût dû copier pour te plaire !

Tu compares, homme de peu,

Moucheron que prendrait l’araignée en ses toiles,

Ce que ton front contient au ciel rempli d’étoiles,

Ce dedans du crâne de Dieu ![[477]](#footnote-477)

As Claude Rétat repeatedly shows in her commentary on the divine in Hugo’s exile-period poetry, the call to ‘fais la guerre à Dieu’ is Hugo’s way of challenging the infinite with the temporal, of not just provoking pious reactions in his epoque but, more positively, asserting a very Jobean-like insistence on the absolute distance and yet, paradoxically enough, symmetry between infinite creator and finite creature.

Hence the readiness to permit metaphors like ‘ce que ton front contient au ciel rempli d’étoiles / ce dedans du crâne de Dieu’, even though, theologically speaking, there are no physical parts to God. The accumulation of animal nouns to identify the addressee (‘ver de terre’, ‘reptile’, ‘moucheron’) is furthermore an interesting counterbalance to their own anthropomorphic and imaginative attempt of figuring God as human.[[478]](#footnote-478) For as we have seen with the power of the earthworm to persist and regenerate in a revolutionary manner, so must the comparison in this passage carry both the ennobling and the degrading connotations of the symbolism. In short, tiny creatures such as the gnat and the earthworm convey apocalyptic qualities precisely because they form the *punctum* of the small breaking up the visible, reminding the observer of their material status and those invisible organisms and elements that form part of their finite constitution.

## Anti-Historicism

While the preceding elements of time and magnitude that we have analysed so far certainly form an essential layer to the apocalyptic nature of the two poems, it is in tandem that they better inform Hugo’s depiction of the ‘anti-historicisme’ that Millet posits as haunting *La Légende des siècles*. This possibility of an anti-historicism corresponds to the doctrine of Universal History articulated by Bossuet and reprised by Hugo. Put succinctly, Hugo rejects an account of history that only considers material processes. Rather, his approach retains the material but only to the degree that it is shaped into observable phenomena by the mind. In other words, his idealism lies outside of time. Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne notes the implication that this epistemological insistence has on the meaning of aesthetic experience more generally for Romantic thinkers: ‘C'est par un vocabulaire du sacré - Apocalypse, Création - que le romantisme est désormais sans cesse désigné; l'art se veut donc à la fois conscience du chaos de l'Histoire et vision d'un nouvel ordre esthétique, expérience du malheur et espoir d'un horizon élargi.’[[479]](#footnote-479) In other words, the Romantic project of directing history through art is fundamentally linked to a concern for furthering phenomenological horizons- that is, how time appears to the individual and how it is experienced - which is a significant turn away from Enlightenment rationalism in its dismissal of both religious experience and the metaphorical thinking inherent in mythical discourse.

It is not just Hugo’s return to specific vocabulary that hints at the imparting of a religious sense to history, but also his more obvious insistence on the stability of eternity’s pre-eminence to the visible and temporal. In order to best demonstrate this triumphant denouement, we shall contrast the last stanza of “L’épopée du ver” with the concluding lines of “Le poëte au ver de terre”:

L’univers magnifique et lugubre a deux cimes.

O vivants, à ses deux extrémités sublimes,

Qui sont aurore et nuit,

La création triste, aux entrailles profondes,

Porte deux Tout-puissants, le Dieu qui fait les mondes,

Le ver qui les détruit.[[480]](#footnote-480)

Tu n’es que le mangeur de l’abjecte matière.

La vie incorruptible est hors de ta frontière ;

Les âmes vont s’aimer au-dessus de la mort ;

Tu n’y peux rien. Tu n’es que la haine qui mord.

Rien tâchant d’être Tout, c’est toi. Ta sombre sphère

C’est la négation, et tu n’es bon qu’à faire

Frissonner les penseurs qui sondent le ciel bleu

Indignés, puisqu’un ver s’ose égaler à Dieu,

Puisque l’ombre atteint l’astre, et puisqu’une loi vile

Sur l’Homère éternel met l’éternel Zoïle.[[481]](#footnote-481)

The first observation to be made is how the dualism involved in the lines ‘deux Tout-puissants, le Dieu qui fait les mondes / Le ver qui les détruit’, relays a specifically Manichean cosmology that, historically speaking, preceded the Judaic understanding of time in Indo-European culture.[[482]](#footnote-482) Under this worldview, the highest order of the cosmos is contested between two equally-powerful deities (the World of Light and the World of Darkness), with one endowed with the power of creation and the other of destruction. Further, this dualism is not at all discounted by Hugo’s poet-figure in their response, but strangely reinforced when they pit ‘l’abjecte matière’ against ‘la vie incorruptible.’ Instead of escaping from the horrific consequences of this vision, there is a diversion from the metaphysical towards the emotional: ‘s’aimer’ against ‘la haine qui mord.’ The second point following from this is the evident desire to spiritualise matter - to avoid its supposedly negative power (Zoilus was a cynical Greek philosopher critical of Homeric epics) that would deny what Hugo conceives as the redemptive beauty of the temporal. However, as with the idea of Utopia, so too a world without matter is indeed a “no-place”, unable to be seen and experienced, and therefore the implication of this world as a prison assumes an arbitrary position with no relation to lived reality.

The grafting of dualistic binaries and the purification of matter by spirit onto a particular experience of time is similarly amplified towards the end of “Tout le passé et tout l’avenir.” What emerges is a mixture of mythological and sacred language that morphs time into independent agents, capable of assuming the disappointments of the historical past as well as expectations the poet has for the future:

Mais le passé s’en va. Regarde-nous ; nous sommes

Un autre Adam, une autre Eve, de nouveaux hommes.

Nous bénissons quand nous souffrons.

Hier vivait d’horreur, de deuil, de sang, de fange ;

Hier était le monstre, et Demain sera l’ange ;

Le point du jour blanchit nos fronts.

Deux êtres sont en nous ; l’un ailé, l’autre immonde ;

L’un montant vers Dieu, l’autre ombre et tache du monde,

Se ruant dans d’infâmes lits ;

Et, pendant que le corps, marchant sur des semelles,

Vil, abject, boit l’opprobre et la lie aux gamelles,

L’âme boit la rosée aux lys.[[483]](#footnote-483)

Again, there is an evident depreciation of matter and the body, compiled through the semantics of purity and impurity (‘sang’, ‘immonde’, ‘tache’, ‘vil’). There is also the assertion of humankind remade (‘un autre Adam, une autre Eve’) built off both the erasure of original sin and the relevance of the past. Whether or not the speaker believes that history can radically recommence without relation to past experiences is beside the point: what is more interesting is that the fundamental, ternary structure of time (past-present-future) has not changed from its biblical and apocalyptic origins but has been radicalised by it.[[484]](#footnote-484)

There is still a flow of time from the horrors of the past (‘Hier était le monstre’) to the imperfections of the present (‘Nous bénissons quand nous souffrons’) and the anticipated fulfilments of the future (‘Demain sera l’ange’). From this perspective, Hugo’s apocalyptic “anti-history”, when pitted against a positive form of historical progress, as displayed in this ending, can be seen as amounting to a tension between an embodied experience of time versus a disembodied, abstract experience. Indeed, the classical *homo duxplex* complex (‘deux êtres sont en nous’) alluded to in the second stanza forms part of a broader historical tension between the failures of the past and present owing to personal vice and the promises of a more virtuous future. Before seeing this culminate in the obvious juxtaposition of “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel”, two poems that equally manifest this tension, “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre” and “La Vision de Dante”, reprise Hugo’s crystallisation of the course of history.

# Seeing the Future Possible : “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre” & "La Vision de Dante”

Having seen several ways in which Hugo concretises his theologically-grounded concept of progress into physical and material metaphors of movement, we can now hone in further on the imaginative bedrock that connects this poetics of time to the wider series. As can be evinced by their titles, both “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre” and “La Vision de Dante” carry over the Hugolian privileging of prophetic sight that has guided our phenomenological reading of his texts.

In these poems, however, the implied correlation between sight and futurity is at its most obvious, delivered amongst the *décor* of dreamscapes that are themselves constituted by highly mythologised visions of history. Central to our investigation of a phenomenology of divinity herein will be the identification of repetition and disruption as important modes of narration that manipulate the perceived flow of time in the poems, establish visual metaphors that further parallel a revealed/concealed paradigm to historical development, and implicate Hugo’s underlying conception of God as holding open any chance of the (im)possible to occur in the future.

Furthermore, there is a vital and positive connection between dreaming and prophesying that conditions much of the theological content in this section. Beginning from Hugo’s “La pente de la rêverie” in *Les Feuilles d’automne* (‘Amis, ne creusez pas vos chères rêveries’)[[485]](#footnote-485), the poet-figure who readily mingles reality with dreaming is amplified under his exile-period writing, instanced by Hugo’s journaling of his dreams in Jersey and the saga of ‘La Dame blanche’ on the 23rd of March 1854.[[486]](#footnote-486) As with the Old Testament motif of deep sleep, dreaming is often a preliminary state to the instauration of a major event.[[487]](#footnote-487)

Yet, whereas this is not always the case in the Bible,[[488]](#footnote-488) for Hugo dreaming is almost always perceived positively. This is owing principally to his belief in the correlation between image and thought, of perceivable reality as exceeding any rationalising reduction. Consequently, we can see why, in a poem such as “La Vision de Dante”, there is a tendency to mythologise history; or, in the words of Jean-Marc Hovasse, ‘de déplacer l’intérêt de l’actualité vers le mythe.’[[489]](#footnote-489) At the same time, however, the myth itself is historicised; it becomes tied to the concerns of the story-teller in their present age. In the case of “La Vision de Dante”, for example, Hugo is targeting Pope Pius IX for having supported the *coup d’état* of December 1851. What we shall see predominate in these poems, therefore, is a theological poetics similar to what William Franke has discerned in Dante’s own works:

Dante’s language is not so much mystical revelation as historically incarnated revelation of God. God is present, or rather effective, not as an object of language but rather right within the dynamism of language and history—as what can never be objectified and yet motivates and guides language in its engagement with history, thereby revealing an ethical and perhaps also a metaphysical transcendence.[[490]](#footnote-490)

One affinity shared between both poets is how they readily mix history, myth, and theology, in order to further their own imaginative depictions of an ineffable God acting in time. In other words, it is through the dreaminess of myth that the realms of history and theology can be understood, astutely translated into a singular poetic language capable of maximising the oneiric nature of the twin visions.

## Repetition *ad infinitum*

To begin, there are two kinds of repetition in “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre” that interact with each other to form the dreamlike state of the poem. The first is concerned with its prosodic features: a consistent dodecasyllabic metre with coupled rhymes, creating the experience of not only predictable, phonetically-stable forward movement, but also an eventual overlapping and folding over of sound endings that mimic the spiral-like structure of ‘le mur des siècles (v.1).’ The second aspect of repetition that persists across the poem is the thematic duality between the seen and the unseen as established in the opening lines, alternating between what is intermittently called ‘ce Rien que nous appelons Tout (v. 30)’ and ‘cette vision sombre, abrégé noir du monde (v.141).’

Like a dream, the reader’s experience of time as measured through prosody is therefore altered from the opening stanza, moving at a quick pace through a flurry of paratactical lines along with a spatial change of perspective that presents the experience of endless depth:

J’eus un rêve : le mur des siècles m’apparut.

C’était de la chair vive avec du granit brut,

Une immobilité faite d’inquiétude,

Un édifice ayant un bruit de multitude,

Des trous noirs étoilés par de farouches yeux,

Des évolutions de groupes monstrueux,

De vastes bas-reliefs, des fresques colossales ;

Parfois le mur s’ouvrait et laissait voir des salles,

Des antres où siégeaient des heureux, des puissants,

Des vainqueurs abrutis de crime, ivres d’encens,

Des intérieurs d’or, de jaspe et de porphyre ;

Et ce mur frissonnait comme un arbre de zéphire ;[[491]](#footnote-491)

Sensory confusion over the appearance of the wall is heightened by the porousness between its animate and inanimate states (‘de la chair vive avec du granit brut’), captured succinctly in the simile ‘ce mur frissonnait comme un arbre de zéphire.’ However, instead of evacuating the narrative of any sense, this opening description serves to highlight a particular continuity to history: that of the lineage of the ‘heureux’, the ‘puissants’ and the ‘vainqueurs,’ exploiting the weaker to their own profit.[[492]](#footnote-492) Equated to predators living in a giant den (‘antre’), it is they who are beneficiaries of the master-slave relationship that persists across time.

Written back in 1853 as an offshoot of *Les Châtiments*, “La Vision de Dante” is also composed in dodecasyllabic meter with coupled rhyme and concerns the cyclicality of crimes committed by the powerful. More specifically, Dante is awakened from a five-hundred-year slumber to include into his infernothose responsible for the ongoing murder of ‘le genre humain saignant (v. 258),’ devolving from the soldiers who are summoned to defend their acts of violence through to their captains, judges, princes, kings, and finally, Pope Pius IX. The narrative structure of the poem therefore contains in itself a repetitive function: that of the deferral of ethical responsibility from one apparition to another, resulting in the banishment of the pope at the end of the poem to a state of endless repetition, described earlier on in the following terms:

On est dans l’impalpable, on est dans l’invisible ;

Des souffles par moments passent dans cette nuit.

Puis on ne sent plus rien. — Pas un vent, pas un bruit,

Pas un souffle ; la mort, la nuit ; nulle rencontre ;

Rien, pas même une chute affreuse ne se montre.

Et l’on songe à la vie, au soleil, aux amours,

Et l’on pense toujours, et l’on tombe toujours !

Et le froid du néant lentement vous pénètre !

Vivants ! tomber, tomber, et tomber, sans connaître

Où l’on va, sans savoir où les autres s’en vont !

Une chute sans fin dans une nuit sans fond,

Voilà l’enfer.[[493]](#footnote-493)

Though it is resoundingly proclaimed in *Dieu* that there is no eternity to Hell,[[494]](#footnote-494) we see here the same phenomenological state of physical suspension and deprivation as described in *La Fin de Satan.*[[495]](#footnote-495) The stress, of course, is focused on a ternary repetition (‘tomber, tomber, et tomber’), provoking angst and despair at the lack of change in time. Interestingly, this situation is not just reserved for the damned, but can also be glimpsed by the Romantic contemplator, intrigued by the subversive power of the unseen.

Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne argues that, for Hugo, ‘les risques de la contemplation sont ceux d’un ressassement obsessionnel... car l’univers nocturne ne révèle rien d’autre que lui-même, indéfiniment répété.’[[496]](#footnote-496) Hence the state of suspension in the darkness is likened to a process of constant ‘ressassement’, wherein ‘l’on pense à la vie, au soleil, aux amours / Et l’on pense toujours, et l’on tombe toujours !’ In order to break away from this mental entrapment, which Hugo implicitly assimilates to the blockage of historical advancement, there must occur a disruption of some sort - an event that brings with it a new potential for sight and vision to seize upon.

## Divine Disruption

As with the repetition we have seen, there is also a syntactical equivalent to disruptive aspects that emerge in both poems. Though we will focus on just a couple passages in which they occur, it is important to remember that disruption, understood simply as a break in sound production, is vital in counterbalancing repetition, both in poetry and in music.[[497]](#footnote-497) This interplay forms rhythm, which, in the case of “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre”, maintains itself in a relatively constant pace up until the point where the speaker hears ‘deux fracas profonds (v. 153)’, causing the first split in the twelve-syllable verse and delaying the anticipated fulfilment of the rhyme-ending:

J’entendis deux fracas profonds, venant du ciel

En sens contraire au fond du silence éternel ;

Le firmament que nul ne peut ouvrir ni clore

Eut l’air de s’écarter.

Du côté de l’aurore

L’esprit de l’Orestie, avec un fauve bruit,

Passait ; en même temps, du côté de la nuit,

Noir génie effaré fuyant dans une éclipse,

Formidable, venait l’immense Apocalypse ;[[498]](#footnote-498)

The introduction of these two figures, one a mythical figure and the other a personification, temporarily unsettles the rhythm of the poem, awkwardly breaking up the 6-6 alexandrine form in the ensuing lines ‘Et le premier esprit cria : Fatalité / Le second cria : Dieu ! L’obscure éternité / Répéta ces deux cris dans ses échos funèbres (v.166-168).’ After this disruption, the metre returns to its previous rhythm for the remainder of the poem, albeit now with the imagery of the ‘mur des siècles’ as irreversibly shattered.

Given the singularity of this prosodic shift, it is reasonable to surmise that there is a particular semantic significance attached to this passage. Indeed, the only words that the two apparitions shout (‘fatalité’/ ‘Dieu’) indicate a juxtaposed interpretation of the event as well as its consequence for the course of history; namely, that of Greek mythology and its emphasis on tragedy and fate, embodied in this case by the figure of Orestes and his pursual by the Furies, contrasted with the Judeo-Christian notion of apocalyptic finality. It soon becomes clear that preference is given to apocalyptic rupture over the harrowing recurrence of the same, illustrated in the following manner:

Tous les siècles tronqués gisaient ; plus de lien ;

Chaque époque pendait démantelée ; aucune

N’était sans déchirure et n’était sans lacune ;

Et partout croupissaient sur le passé détruit

Des stagnations d’ombre et des flaques de nuit.[[499]](#footnote-499)

These lines, expressing a material state of disjunction between the ages, can be read as qualified by the earlier lines ‘lorsque je la revis, après que les deux anges / L’eurent brisée au choc de leurs ailes étranges (v.180-181).’ An important distinction is thus established between what was previously seen and what is now uncovered, showing that what was destroyed has been transformed, rather than eradicated. In other words, though the speaker *claims* that the past has been destroyed, it would be more accurate to say that it has changed appearance, first as the deconstruction of a material structure (‘chaque époque pendait démantelée’) and then in the form of liquid metaphors (‘Et partout croupissaient sur le passé détruit / Des stagnations d’ombre et des flaques de nuit’).[[500]](#footnote-500) Fundamentally, what this turning-point of “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre” demonstrates in a phenomenological way is the attempt to reimagine an abstract concept (“the past”, “history”) in order to break away from it; a task inscribed into the totality of *La Légende des siècles.*

In “La Vision de Dante”, the key disruptive juncture occurs after Pope Pius IX has been called before the archangel to face judgment. At this point (section XVI), the versification changes abruptly to fifteen six-line stanzas with a syllabic structure of 12-12-6-12-12-6 and a delayed rhyme on the third and sixth lines (A-A-B-C-C-B). Soon after, it is inferred that this is the voice of God addressing itself to the pope, rendering his papacy negligible and denouncing the misuse of divine justification:

« Chien du troupeau, tu fus un loup comme les autres !

« O rois, ses attentats amnistiaient les vôtres ;

« Si bien, pape romain,

« Qu’aujourd’hui, dans le trouble et dans l’inquiétude,

« Pas un abri lointain, pas une certitude

« Ne reste au genre humain !

« Pure étoile éclairant les vivants dans leurs routes,

« La vérité brillait au fond des sombres voûtes

« Où l’œil de l’homme atteint,

« Je t’avais, comme Aron et comme Zoroastre,

« Mis si haut que toi seul pouvais souffler sur l’astre ;

« Prêtre, tu l’as éteint !

« J’avais entre tes mains déposé la justice,

« De peur que l’homme n’erre et ne se pervertisse

« Comme au temps de Japhet,

« Des âmes des vivants j’avais fait ton domaine,

« Je t’avais confié la conscience humaine.

« Réponds, qu’en as-tu fait ? »[[501]](#footnote-501)

Given what we have seen of Hugo’s phenomenological descriptions of conscience and divinity,[[502]](#footnote-502) this failure of sacerdotal authority is a heavy charge laid upon the ‘pape romain,’ whose lineage goes back to not only the high priest Aaron but also, strangely, to Zoroaster. In an important sense, therefore, this section dramatises a rupture in the validity of the doctrine of apostolic succession; that is, in the otherwise uninterrupted continuity of ecclesial authority granted to church ministers by God.[[503]](#footnote-503)

In contrast to Dante’s *Divina Commedia,* where Pope Boniface VIII is destined for hell whilst the overall concept of papal authority remains intact, Hugo’s feud with Pope Pius IX implicates the entirety of the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, as well as of institutionalised religion more broadly. Following the paradigm of revelation/concealment (‘Toi seul pouvais souffler sur l’astre/ Prêtre, tu l’as éteint !’), Hugo's critique is a variation on the Enlightenment-era accusation of obscurantism emanating from organised religion, with the difference residing less in a conflict over symbolic versus literal explanation, than in a complaint over the confinement of meaning to rigid dogmatic categories that do not sufficiently account for divergent experiences of being.

## God as Absolute Possibility

At the heart of these observations of cosmic repetition and disruption, enacted through both the form and content of each poem, is a theological claim: that God is the origin and the destination of these actions, the *alpha* and the *omega*. The apocalyptic poetics of both “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre” (i.e., its personification) and “La Vision de Dante” (Pope Pius IX facing judgment) have already indicated so much.

However, fundamental to these narrative occurrences is also the idea of God as Absolute Possibility; or, in the words of Richard Kearney, of a ‘God who possibilizes our world from out of the future, from the hoped-for *eschaton*.’[[504]](#footnote-504) As opposed to a traditional scholastic understanding of God as holding open the world in a *purus actus* (“pure act”), Kearney’s hermeneutic of understanding God as *Possest -* a combination of *posse* [possibility] and *esse* [being], attributed to the theologian Nicholas of Cusa[[505]](#footnote-505) - provides an apt explanation to what is happening in Hugo’s theological poetics. In short, it effectively dynamises our conception of history, veering away from a divinely predetermined plan for historical progress and extending the range of human agency in conceiving the limits of the possible. Didier Philippot has identified and articulated this dynamism in terms amenable to the repetition/disruption and revealed/concealed binaries hitherto analysed:

*La dynamique du possible* s'inscrit dans une cosmogonie ininterrompue, dans la prodigalité illimitée d'un univers instable, d'un cosmos toujours à reconquérir sur les velléités de reprises du chaos, qu'on a pu dire baroque non sans raisons, en quête de fondements capables de conjurer le défilement vertigineux des apparences et la labilité des choses, *de garantir l'authenticité de l'Être* - fondements, assises qui tendent à se dérober, peut-on croire parfois, dans la profondeur d'un abîme sans fin.[[506]](#footnote-506)

This dynamic lability, of course, is condensed in his favoured image of the ruined tower of Babel that concludes “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre,” called in this case ‘La lugubre Tour des Choses (v. 236).’ Through it, Hugo attempts to convey the necessarily incomplete nature of not only *La Légende des siècles*, nor just historical phenomena, but of language - for once it is granted that God must remain beyond the limits of experience, describable only through the distanced past-tense and the optative future-tense, so too must all past and present phenomena remain enclosed within this dynamic of the possible.

At the end of “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre,” once the ‘mur des siècles’ has imploded, this principle of a *Possest* God emerges from the ruins:

Ce n’était plus, parmi les brouillards où l’œil plonge,

Que le débris difforme et chancelant d’un songe,

Ayant le vague aspect d’un pont intermittent

Qui tombe arche par arche et que le gouffre attend,

Et de toute une flotte en détresse qui sombre ;

Ressemblant à la phrase interrompue et sombre

Que l’ouragan, ce bègue errant sur les sommets,

Recommence toujours sans l’achever jamais.

Seulement l’avenir continuait d’éclore

Sur ces vestiges noirs qu’un pâle orient dore,

Et se levait avec un air d’astre, au milieu

D’un nuage où, sans voir de foudre, on sentait Dieu.[[507]](#footnote-507)

Implied in the latter stanza is a process of regeneration that succeeds the eventual destruction of the ‘flotte en détresse,’ signalling a characteristically Romantic cycle motif of birth-death-regeneration.[[508]](#footnote-508) Yet, the originality of the line ‘D’un nuage où, sans voir de foudre, on sentait Dieu’ lies in the fact that it is not a final moment of theophany, concluding the poem in a moment of spiritual triumph, but a more intriguing statement that tersely and simply assigns responsibility for the catastrophic event to God.

Moreover, what is being amalgamated is the observation of a new beginning (‘l’avenir continuait d’éclore / Sur ces vestiges noirs qu’un pâle orient dore’) with a kind of divine benediction, a renewed haste given to the imperative ‘va!’ that Hugo regularly rhymes with “Jehovah” to emphasise the eschatological aspect in his theological poetics. Across the narrative of “La Vision de Dante” can be perceived the same figuration of God, assuming the status of what Claude Millet calls ‘le grand impatient, dont la colère et l’amour font un révolutionnaire.’[[509]](#footnote-509) Within this astute epithet lies not only a nod towards the Jacobinism inherent in Hugo’s theology, but also, undoubtedly, recognition of the dynamic *élan* granted to the movement of history by a God who calls for the impossible to be made possible.

# Promising the New: “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel”

As the only poem in the section “Vingtième siècle”, “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel” is the penultimate ending to the *Première Série* of *La Légende des siècles.* Like others we have focused on in this chapter, it is primarily concerned with the stagnation of the past and the promises of “last things”; that is, with eschatology and its manifestation in an apocalyptic poetics.

In this case, we shall be looking at millenarian and messianic aspects in the poem that dynamise its dichotomous poetic structure and, in turn, create a distinct narrative of future salvation. In doing so, we will be building on what Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne has already identified in the poem as ‘un sublime cosmique, métaphore d’une vision sotériologique de l’Histoire.’[[510]](#footnote-510) Both through the use of the sublime as the yet unrepresented and the transferral of these eschatological aspects into a secular framework of history, technological development and democratic governance, Hugo’s hymn to Progress taps into discourses on theological salvation doctrines that can, in turn, assist in understanding a phenomenology of divinity in the poem.[[511]](#footnote-511)

Moreover, the twin imagery of a decrepit steamer languishing on the banks of the Thames and a hot-air balloon soaring above the cities and countryside of France comes with particular historical contexts. The first machine refers to an enormous steamship named *Leviathan,* designed by the engineer Isambard Brunel to be the largest ship ever built.[[512]](#footnote-512) By the time “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel” was finished (April 1859), the now renamed *SS Great Eastern* had set off on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York. The latter machine, referred to in the poem as ‘l’aéroscaphe (v. 112)’, distinctly resembles a ‘montgolfière’ - a hot-air balloon that was trialled in France by the brothers Montgolfier in 1783 and was subsequently refined for wider societal use.

Though anachronistic, the symbolism of a ‘montgolfière’ as a quintessentially revolutionary invention is at its strongest in Léon Gambetta’s flight out of Paris on the 7th of October 1870, successfully evading Prussian fire, *en route* to the assembly of Third Republic ministers in Tours. Nor is this a random comparison, for both Gambetta’s voyage and “Plein Ciel” gather together a millenarianism that, as Claude Dorfiac argues, was absorbed into various European socialist movements from the seventeenth century onwards.[[513]](#footnote-513) Indeed, Dorfiac defines millenarianism in terms readily comparable to Hugo’s imagined flight in “Plein Ciel”:

Contrairement à l'Utopie, il [le millénarisme] ne doit pas être institué. Il advient de lui-même et il place le millénariste idéal en position de départ vers cette échéance certaine. Il se traduit également comme ce mouvement en "acte" derrière lequel, au travers des mobiles, des convictions et des sentiments différents, se lit au sein d'une communauté identitaire, la quête d'un pays "sans mal", le désir d'unité et d'harmonie sociale, l'espoir d'apurer une nostalgie d'élévation et de se libérer des contraintes pesantes du moment.[[514]](#footnote-514)

This appeal for a radical political renewal, theological in nature, is embedded in the opposition “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel” and echoes the ascensional proclamations already written into the poetry of “Le Satyre” and *Dieu,* amongst others.[[515]](#footnote-515) It is foundational to the phenomenology under which Hugo conceives of a radically new beginning to History in splitting with the historical past. As we shall see, however, the displacement of a religious emphasis on individual salvation towards that of a collective one, guided by the messianic poet-figure and promised by advancements in technological progress, does not immediately resolve the complications inherent in such doctrines.

## Drawing out Hobbes’s Leviathan

In choosing to develop as a foil the aptly-named British steamer in its initial phase of construction, Hugo allowed himself ample connotative manoeuvring. In the Old Testament, the serpent-figure of Leviathan is presented in great detail in *The Book of Job,* where it is described by the voice of God as a ‘king over all the children of pride.’[[516]](#footnote-516) The principal section to this iconic wisdom literature is delivered through a series of rhetorical questions, aimed at deflating Job’s own questioning of God’s providence over creation, characterising the beast as of incommensurable stature when set against the vain pretensions of humankind.[[517]](#footnote-517) Elsewhere in the Old Testament, there are references to Leviathan as a specifically aquatic animal, such as in *Isaiah* and several Psalms.[[518]](#footnote-518) In *Revelation,* direct designation is made between the devil and Leviathan, chained by an angel for a thousand years before judgment is to be cast on earth.[[519]](#footnote-519) Most importantly, however, is the allusion to Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651); a work which Hugo was highly critical of, specifically in its justification of monarchical-sovereign power over the rule of democratic law.[[520]](#footnote-520)

Thus, after describing the dilapidated state of the docked vessel, deploying a wide vocabulary of nautical terms acquired since exile, Hugo is quick to pronounce the following in a clear play on the consonant sounds L-V-T in the ship’s name:

Léviathan : c’est là tout le vieux monde,

Âpre et démesuré dans sa fauve laideur ;

Léviathan, c’est là tout le passé : grandeur,

Horreur.[[521]](#footnote-521)

Cast in such terms, the steamer *Leviathan* sits in a tripartite semantic relation, between an inanimate and material object, a living beast, and an allegory for ‘le vieux monde.’ By exploiting this cluster of meaning through the further accumulation of mixed imagery, the resulting phenomenality of the vessel assumes an ominous magnitude: ‘un monstre à qui l’eau sans bornes fut promise (v.68).’ In further imitation of the prophetic-symbolic passages in the Old Testament,[[522]](#footnote-522) enumeration is also utilised, albeit in a combination of the organic-industrial:

Effroyable, à sept mâts mêlant cinq cheminées

Qui hennissaient au choc des vagues effrénées,

Emportant, dans le bruit des aquilons sifflants,

Dix mille hommes, fourmis éparses dans ses flancs,[[523]](#footnote-523)

Though they are carried across the waves in the beast’s belly (‘dix mille hommes, fourmis éparses dans ses flancs’), it is unclear whether those who profit from its service are its masters or its slaves. As an invention intended to further mastery and dominion of the world, it quickly becomes an allegory for an “Old-World” mentality of predatorial subjugation. Hence the ready allusions to Nimrod and Attila and the project of empire that follow; figures of conquest and territorial expansion who, in the Hugolian repertoire of *grands hommes*, embody an insatiable and often bestial thirst for power.

This condemning portrayal of the ‘vieux monde’ in “Pleine Mer” reaches full pitch towards the end of the first half of the poem (“Plein Ciel” is three-hundred lines longer than “Pleine Mer”), before the ‘montgolfière’ is spotted on the horizon. The language changes from the organic-industrial alternation used to describe the steamer to imagery of blurred vision and discontinuity that we have analysed in “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre,” contrasting as it does with Hugo’s aspired universalism for the future:

Ce monde, enveloppé d’une brume éternelle,

Était fatal ; l’Espoir avait plié son aile ;

Pas d’unité ; divorce et joug ; diversité

De langue, de raison, de code, de cité ;

Nul lien, nul faisceau ; le progrès solitaire,

Comme un serpent coupé, se tordait sur la terre,

Sans pouvoir réunir les tronçons de l’effort ;

L’esclavage, parquant les peuples pour la mort,

Les enfermait au fond d’un cirque de frontières

Où les gardaient la Guerre et la Nuit, bestiaires ;[[524]](#footnote-524)

Interestingly, the simile of ‘le progrès solitaire / Comme un serpent coupé’ clashes with the previous attribution of the Leviathan as a serpent of the sea, thereby reducing the supposedly negative connotations of the analogy. Primarily, however, it is the stress on discord and subjugation (‘divorce et joug’) that is highlighted in this passage, most likely mirroring the Hobbesian axiom of Nature as a site of constant warfare that demands the exercise of absolute power (‘la Guerre et la Nuit’).

And yet, as we shall see in the panegyric on the flying machine in “Plein Ciel”, there can be detected a similar strain of imperialism and force latent underneath the proposed unification of humanity. Indeed, as J.C Ireson has remarked, both the *Leviathan* and the rudimental flying machine are ‘capable of transporting numbers of people on missions of exploration in the remotest regions of the world, suppressing frontiers and drawing the inhabitants of the planet into a closer communion.’[[525]](#footnote-525) The justification that forms a bridge between the sharply-divided sides of the poem is therefore that of Providence, delivered not by monarchs or priests but by the supposedly civilising powers of Science and the Arts.

## Millenarian Revolutions

If we recall Claude Dorfiac’s more expansive definition of millenarianism, then it is not difficult to compare the arrival of the flying machine in “Plein Ciel” with the promise of a great and sudden societal transformation, a singularity in history. From the second stanza, in fact, the declaration is made of ‘quelque heure immense étant dans les destins sonnée (v.236),’ compounding the providential nature of the ‘inexprimable et surprenant vaisseau (v.230)’ as it leaves behind the ruins of the *Leviathan.* In lieu of the Christian *parousia,* where the re-appearance of Jesus Christ on earth harkens a peaceful reign for one-thousand years, Hugo’s ‘montgolfière’ announces a divine rebellion that has overthrown not just rulers and tyrants but even the law of gravity:

C’est la grande révolte obéissante à Dieu !

La sainte fausse clef du fatal gouffre bleu !

C’est Isis qui déchire éperdument son voile !

C’est du métal, du bois, du chanvre et de la toile,

C’est de la pesanteur délivrée, et volant ;

C’est la force alliée à l’homme étincelant,

Fière, arrachant l’argile à sa chaîne éternelle ;

C’est la matière, heureuse, altière, ayant en elle

De l’ouragan humain, et planant à travers

L’immense étonnement des cieux enfin ouverts ![[526]](#footnote-526)

A combined vocabulary of liberation and craftsmanship (‘fausse clef’, ‘arrachant l’argile à sa chaîne éternelle’, ‘des cieux enfin ouverts’) builds on the Promethean myth of stolen fire from the gods, rendering to humanity a civilising force (‘C’est la force alliée à l’homme étincelant’) capable of transcending material restraints. Yet the oxymoronic statement in the first line (‘C’est la grande révolte obéissante à Dieu’) sits uncomfortably with the Promethean myth, given that it was precisely the titan Prometheus’ disobedience of Zeus’ dictate that led to the gift of fire to humanity, as well as his consequential imprisonment and punishment. Hugo instead inverts this narrative by proclaiming it in alignment with the will of God to challenge the physical laws of nature, considered as constraints to the progressively improved governance of the world.

In effect, Hugo’s adaptation of the Prometheus myth is an exemplary manifestation of a deeper theological poetics at work in the poem “Plein Ciel.” For it is not just the authority of an Isis or a Zeus that has been usurped,[[527]](#footnote-527) but an entire shift of agency is occurring behind the descriptions of humankind’s astral journey into unexplored regions. In short, it is the valorisation of providential liberalism, of what Giorgio Agamben calls in his genealogy of power and the state ‘the birth of the governmental paradigm...set against the "economic-theological" background of providence with which it is in agreement.’[[528]](#footnote-528)

For Agamben, modern Western political governance can be explained by the fact that it has come to secularise the concept of divine providence. He locates this shift specifically in the appropriation of the theological relation between proximate and distant causes that was scholastically employed to explain God’s participation in history in order to assure the benefits of economic activity.[[529]](#footnote-529) One can readily recognise this providential liberalism in “Plein Ciel” by its strains of future-oriented teleology, comparing, amongst other instances, the trajectory of humankind’s flight ‘avec la certitude et la rapidité / Du javelot cherchant la cible (v. 127-8).’

Endowed with this divinised goal, the question of where the hot-air balloon is going becomes purely rhetorical and redundant. This is owing to the fact that, just as in theological explanations for God’s (in)actions differing degrees of gratuity are posited, so too is the future reserved for a transcendent reality that, concurring with the millenarist tradition, is described in the terms of perpetual prosperity and peace:

Où va-t-il, ce navire ? Il va, de jour vêtu,

A l’avenir divin et pur, à la vertu,

A la science qu’on voit luire,

A la mort des fléaux, à l’oubli généreux,

A l’abondance, au calme, au rire, à l’homme heureux ;

Il va, ce glorieux navire,

Au droit, à la raison, à la fraternité,

A la religieuse et sainte vérité

Sans impostures et sans voiles,

A l’amour, sur les cœurs serrant son doux lien,

Au juste, au grand, au bon, au beau…— Vous voyez bien

Qu’en effet il monte aux étoiles !

Il porte l’homme à l’homme et l’esprit à l’esprit.

Il civilise, ô gloire ! Il ruine, il flétrit

Tout l’affreux passé qui s’effare,

Il abolit la loi de fer, la loi de sang,

Les glaives, les carcans, l’esclavage, en passant

Dans les cieux comme une fanfare.[[530]](#footnote-530)

The apocalyptic scene is familiar: a razing of the past (‘il ruine, il flétrit / Tout l’affreux passé qui s’effare’); its replacement with an atemporal finality that is achieved by the attainment of ideal qualities; and stress on the visual uncovering/revelation of ‘la religieuse et sainte vérité / sans impostures et sans voiles.’

Furthermore, the tautological statement ‘il porte l’homme à l’homme’ participates in this deification of humankind through replicating God’s aseity.[[531]](#footnote-531) One might therefore, with reason, question the extent to which these aspirations remain attached to concrete reality rather than merely indulging a Romantic flight into hubris. It is, however, not just the case that Hugo’s vision of the ‘montgolfière’ portends a profound transformation of society - it also celebrates its salvific potential.

## A Messianic Republic

If the extended definition of millenarianism outside a directly religious context promises a future upheaval, understood in an ethically positive sense, then the corollary messianism would imply the concentration of that moment into the agency of a particular figure capable of assuring the salvation of the newly-wrought transformation. Hugo’s messianism in “Plein Ciel” intrigues because, though it replaces the return of a messiah figure with asymbol of technological progress (‘la montgolfière’) , it nevertheless does not fully dispense with traditional salvific imagery,and exploits their ethical binaries.[[532]](#footnote-532) Indeed, though the hot-air balloon is the most consistently lauded figuration of salvation, it still relies on the accumulation of allusions to other messianic traditions in order to gain prominence as a credible substitute:

On voit l’agneau sortir du dragon fabuleux,

La vierge de l’opprobre, et Marie aux yeux bleus

De la Vénus prostituée ;

Le blasphème devient le psaume ardent et pur,

L’hymne prend, pour s’en faire autant d’ailes d’azur,

Tous les haillons de la huée.

Tout est sauvé ! la fleur, le printemps aromal,

L’éclosion du bien, l’écroulement du mal,

Fêtent dans sa course enchantée

Ce beau globe éclaireur, ce grand char curieux,

Qu’Empédocle, du fond des gouffres, suit des yeux,

Et, du haut des monts, Prométhée ![[533]](#footnote-533)

Taken from the *Book of Revelation,* the lamb overcoming the ‘dragon fabuleux’ traditionally symbolises the victory of Christ over the Leviathan; that is, over the temporal powers claiming authority over the world that, in the poem, is condensed in the concept of ‘l’ancien monde.’

In this passage, however, it is ambiguous whether the transformations occurring in the first stanza are triumphs of the former from the latter (Christ from the dragon, the Virgin Mary from Venus), or if the lines should rather be read as the redemption of *both* figures, which in turn would signify a release from their Christian embedding in light of a broader relativisation of symbolic value. Indeed, the following stanza (‘Tout est sauvé !) suggests that the messianism of the ‘montgolfière’ is indiscriminate, that its salvific function goes beyond saving one group of adherents or another and is consequently universal in scope.

As a result, the ‘vision sotériologique de l’Histoire’ that Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne has associated with Hugo’s use of the cosmic sublime relies fundamentally on a negative conception of history; that is, of historical events as secondary to a greater, a-temporal reality. Circumscribed to a recognisably Kantian philosophical perspectivism,[[534]](#footnote-534) the poet-figure in “Plein Ciel” must adjure their addressee to participate in the aspirations of an idea (technological, patriotic, etc.) in order to gain a sense of collective identity and meaningfulness faced with infinite historical progress. In no better place is this appeal seen than in the final three stanzas of the poem, where the speaker evokes in rapturous praise the end of nation-states, now rendered obsolete by the change of perspective in boundaries:

Nef magique et suprême ! elle a, rien qu’en marchant,

Changé le cri terrestre en pur et joyeux chant,

Rajeuni les races flétries,

Établi l’ordre vrai, montré le chemin sûr,

Dieu juste ! et fait entrer dans l’homme tant d’azur

Qu’elle a supprimé les patries !

Faisant à l’homme avec le ciel une cité,

Une pensée avec toute l’immensité,

Elle abolit les vieilles règles ;

Elle abaisse les monts, elle annule les tours ;

Splendide, elle introduit les peuples, marcheurs lourds,

Dans la communion des aigles.

Elle a cette divine et chaste fonction

De composer là-haut l’unique nation,

A la fois dernière et première,

De promener l’essor dans le rayonnement,

Et de faire planer, ivre de firmament,

La liberté dans la lumière.[[535]](#footnote-535)

This vast change of perspective is what the hot-air balloon has brought to humankind: its flight has definitively ‘établi l’ordre vrai, montré le chemin sûr’; in short, extended the way in which one is to view the Republican concepts of ‘Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité’, now pronounced *urbi et orbi.* Those targeted as slow to advance in these principles, ‘les peuples, marcheurs lourds,’ are precisely those who are to benefit most by this democratic transfiguration instigated by the hot-air balloon.Moreover, we once again see the scholastic concepts of proximate and distant causes implied in the phrase ‘Elle a cette divine et chaste fonction / De composer là-haut l’unique nation,’ reinforcing the modern governmental paradigm of a boundless state ministering on behalf of divine providence. It is also a clear reprisal of Augustine and Bossuet’s notion of universal history, set apart from the temporal course of the profane world.

Not content with just the material alleviation offered by the invention of flying machines but pursuing a greater socio-cultural project of unification, Hugo’s canticle to progress in the nineteenth century closes the historical panorama of the *Première Série,* awaiting only the poem “La Trompette de jugement” and a final flight outside of time.

# Conclusion

*‘La religion, c'est la pénétration de la nature.*

*Penser, c'est prier. Voir, c'est prier.*

*Il y a deux prêtres : le penseur et le voyant.’*

*—* Hugo, Au verso d'un exemplaire de l'appel "Au peuple" du 31 octobre 1852

The memorandum chosen as epigraph, written just under a year into exile in Jersey, takes us back to the chronological threshold of our selected corpus. Understood in its direct context, work on *Les Châtiments* had been underway for a month, with Hugo in the process of forming trenchant attacks on several hierarchical figures of French Catholicism for their condoning of the 2nd of December 1851 *coup d’état*. In this regard, Hugo’s quickly-penned considerations on religion can be seen as antagonistic and oppositional in nature, alluding to the imminent replacement of the clerical order by secular thinkers and visionaries. However, after conducting a phenomenological investigation of divinity in this thesis, we can better appreciate how these short dictums correspond closely to Hugo’s religious poetry.

First, it is clear that ‘la pénétration de la nature’ is to be taken in a literal sense, harkening back to Claude Rétat’s observation of how representations of divinity in Hugo’s work ‘existe en occupant et dévorant l'espace.’[[536]](#footnote-536) This dynamic process has assumed different forms in each chapter; in the first two chapters, as a Romantic lyrical subject in *Les Contemplations*, expanding their conscious state into the environmental surrounds and charging it with anthropomorphised responses; in the third and fourth chapters, as the desiring subject in *Dieu* who is attracted to the Wholly Other and thus ascends and descends through different interactions with alterity; in the fifth and sixth chapters, as the warrior archetype in *La Fin de Satan,* who violently seeks to conquer space through mimetic rivalry; and in the seventh chapter, as the process of decay and regeneration in *La Légende des siècles,* signifying the destabilisation of lived time away from the factuality of the past and present towards an unconditioned future.

Lying behind all of these appearances is Hugo’s equation of divinity as a force to be harnessed by humanity, as a power (*dynamis, possibilitas, potentia*) that is capable of producing change and thus ensuring the phenomenological notion of God as both counter-experience (i.e., recognising our own finite limits) and absolute possibility, which in its simplest definition means the theoretically infinite extension of human agency. Though this culminates most obviously in “Pleine Mer/Plein Ciel” with the hot-air balloons ascension into the horizon and a rhetoric of emancipation (“C’est de la pesanteur délivrée, et volant”), the perception of God as a force emerges as early as *Les Contemplations,* as a forceto which the Romantic self identifies in the poem “Ibo” (“Je suis celui que rien n’arrête / Celui qui va”).

As for the two verbs ‘penser’ and ‘voir’ in their relation to each other and as synonyms for both prayer and poetry, it is equally clear by now that they operate in Hugo’s phenomenology of divinity. For as the phenomenological notion of intentionality explains, cognition always involves a thinking *about* something, which involves a kind of imaginative sight or mental vision of the intended object that in turn gives sense and meaning to the thought. That Hugo associates these two faculties with prayer is not surprising, because, as we have seen, he is not referring to a confessionally-based, rote-learned form of praying, but to a religious experience characterised by feelings of elation and awe.[[537]](#footnote-537) To instance one such example, the shepherd at the ending of “Magnitudo Parvi” enacts this kind of exaltation, drinking in through the visual act of contemplation “du surhumain, du sidéral / Les délices du formidable”.[[538]](#footnote-538)

Indeed, the poetry we have studied is a “re-reading (*relegere*)” of the self and world from a theological basis; that is, from an intelligibility that considers the infinite depth of these two domains. Each chapter in this thesis approached this “re-reading” from different angles, divided into three sections (the self, the other, the collective) that together charted the constitution of a modern religious subject: in the first two chapters, the “object selves” created in *Les Contemplations* reflected the self-constituting status of the modern subject and its trajectory towards deification; in the third and fourth chapters, the epistemological challenges presented by paradox and the iconographic in *Dieu* manifested a search for the Wholly Other in the form of desire that surpassed this extreme exaltation of the *ego*; in the fifth and sixth chapters, the satanic motif of mimetic rivalry in *La Fin de Satan* demonstrated the difficulties of the divinised modern subject in obtaining a fulfilled sense of freedom; and in the seventh chapter, the sublime event of historical discontinuity in *La Légende des siècles* exposed how, as the universal subject of history, the divinised modern subject destabilises realities of the past and the present in the name of infinite future progress.

These research findings have been obtained by utilising a methodology that closely aligns to phenomenological principles recently proposed by Kevin Hart but also assumed by a range of thinkers who broadly fit under the category of “philosophy of religion”. Given the long and polemical history of scholarship over the subject of divinity in Hugo’s novels and poetry, it appeared all the more necessary to adopt an approach to his works that accommodates the symbiotic relationship we have seen between Hugo’s representations of the modern subject and its historical embeddedness in the changing field of theology and the philosophy of religion, all the while accounting for the fact that these processes are implemented well beyond literary European Romanticism. Indeed, for Hugo as for current phenomenological theory, religious *experience* is a completely different matter from the propositional belief in the existence of God, which as to date has not been rigorously studied within his *oeuvre*. The purpose of following a phenomenological mode of inquiry was to describe these underlying experiences in key texts, beginning with the practice of contemplation in the first two chapters and ending with an eschatological perception of time in the seventh chapter.

Furthermore, our research has shown how the theological poetics that structure this phenomenology are precisely that: a theological *poetics* rather than a poetic theology. As we have insisted in our corpus selection, Hugo’s religious poems of the early-exile period are neither apologetic, programmatic nor definitive; they are exercises in visualising religious experience both attainable and out of the reach of subjective experience, or as Emmanuel Godo has said, as an attempt to ‘mettre en mots et en images ce qui excède toute mise en mots et toute mise en images.’[[539]](#footnote-539) To this end, it is important to recognise the paradoxical and aporetic nature of this endeavour, since in admitting the surplus phenomenality of God, both the writer and critic must admit the impossibility of completing their task of representing or elucidating any conclusive phenomenology of divinity.

During the course of this research, two intriguing and interrelated questions have emerged but were held at a distance while the primary task of identifying and describing Hugo’s theological poetics was performed. The first question that emerged was: if Hugo’s theological poetics transfers this kind of religious experience into the field of secular poetry, how does this complement recent research on the “return of religion” and the “post-secular”? A second question also intermittently imposed itself while investigating how Hugo constructed his poetic experiences by appealing to his readers as a collective group; namely, how does Hugo’s universal humanism, ultimately grounded theologically, relate to the postmodern critique of both universalism and humanism?

Starting with the twin concepts of secularisation and modernisation, from which our readings of the poems in *La Légende des siècles* drew indirect support, we saw how the dichotomies of past/future, old/new, darkness/light were deployed by Hugo in order to create a sense of change and movement in his poetry. The presupposition that lies behind this poetic decision is what is known as “classical secularisation theory”[[540]](#footnote-540), wherein a radical break is posited between religious traditions and modern societies, leading to the former’s increasing decline and the latter’s oppositional definition by means of scientific explanation and our technologically-based control of reality.

However, this largely sociological paradigm has come into question from many theoretical disciplines and perspectives, leading to recent interest in the term “post-secular” as being better suited in explaining recent cultural trends in the late-modern era.[[541]](#footnote-541) Given Hugo’s transferral of theological thought into poetic material in the corpus under study in this thesis, it would be interesting to examine in more detail this aspect of classical secularism in Hugo’s literary works with the retrospective awareness of its own contingency and historicity. Put otherwise, once perceiving what one might call a “metaphysics of secularisation” in these poetic works, there is then opportunity to deconstruct this metaphysics in order to show how its ideological commitments constitute a historically-situated mutation of religious thought rather than the beginning of the end of religion *per se*.[[542]](#footnote-542) This approach would have the potential to elucidate the persistence of religious belief and practice in light of secular ideas and governance and to inform research in areas outside of literary criticism.

Stemming from this observation, our second research suggestion also seeks to situate itself in secular humanism’s genealogy, being aware of its purportedly problematic status in the era of the Anthropocene and the breakdown of universalist modes of thought. From our perspective, there are two directions that this research could take: one that builds on delineating the theological foundations to Hugo’s universal humanism as latent in his poetry or prose, and one that scrutinises the presuppositions of phenomenology in greater detail. This diverging course splits our combined method in the thesis back into their distinct disciplines, namely theological and philosophical reflection. The first approach would interrogate further how such notions as Hugo’s “mage” figures and his reprisal of a “Universal History” correspond to a fully-fledged secularisation of the Incarnation understood in a Christian context, transposing the deification of humanity across history away from the *Corpus Christi* to a Romantic nationalism.[[543]](#footnote-543)

The second approach would look at re-appraising the role of intentional consciousness in Hugo’s proto-phenomenological poetry, asking whether or not it can convey any “universal” sense to twenty-first century readers. For it seems that, after analysing the perceptive powers of intentional consciousness in Hugo’s poetry and how he relates through them representations of limit experiences of objects in the world, much more could be said about the affective and unconscious forces that undergird these intentional apprehensions and perhaps resonate more so with readers than with the given object of shared attention. This might involve incorporating recent insights from cognitive science into literary criticism, a nexus that has already begun to evolve over the last few years, so as to regenerate a theoretical ground from which to judge any universal reception of meaning in the text.[[544]](#footnote-544)

Having offered a couple of indications as to where the results of this thesis could be directed, we conclude by returning to our initial problematic. We noted, at the outset, how the corpus of Hugo’s religious poems studied have been conceptualised in the past under either historical and biographical frameworks (i.e., emphasising his increasing anti-clerical, deist, or spiritualist tendencies) or sociological explanations of the theological elements in his texts, particularly in regards to the above-mentioned “secularisation” model, idealised in the “mage” figure and brought to the fore in Bénichou’s work.[[545]](#footnote-545) Not willing to reduce his poetry to either the biographical or the sociological, we have sought instead to explore the issue from a phenomenological angle, drawing out from Emmanuel Godo the idea that ‘Hugo n’est pas un croyant qui écrit : c’est un écrivain croyant, c’est-à-dire un homme dont l’expérience intérieure et le rapport à Dieu passent par la médiation obligée de l’écriture.’[[546]](#footnote-546) From this basis, we have sought to show how Hugo’s poetry reveals much more about how the modern subject engages in religious experience than it does about any idiosyncrasies to his particular theology.

Indeed, Hugo’s phenomenology of divinity can be succinctly summarised as his own visual working through of the symmetrical relationship between creature and creator. For Hugo this was not a radical claim. The very profuseness of his writing expresses so much; it constitutes the privileged milieu in which he sought to meditate on language as capable of unfolding the infinite possibilities within us, akin to a theology of the Verb that recognises God as having spoken the world into existence and sustains it through the *Logos*. Drawn towards responding to this divine attribute through his extensive knowledge of biblical tradition, Hugo’s phenomenology of divinity is, in the final analysis, a sustained depiction of *coram deo, coram hominibus* (“in front of God, in front of humanity”), ascribing to the latter a phenomenality coterminous with the former’s; that is, following what we have called in this thesis, after Jean-Luc Marion, regarding the human as “infinitely finite.” It is, ultimately, in hearing the many tones of joy and suffering that come with fathoming this interior vitality during exile that we can read a note written by Hugo at the very end of his exile-period in 1870: ‘Ma vie se résume en deux mots: solitaire, solidaire.’[[547]](#footnote-547)

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Glossary of Theological Terms

*Analogia entis* –(Lat. “Analogy of being”) According to Thomas Aquinas, the relationship between God as creator and humans as creatures establishes the legitimacy of using analogy as a way for finite humans to be able to speak of the infinite God.

Apocalypse – (Gr. *Apokalypsis,* “revelation, disclosure, unveiling”) The final revealing of divine mysteries. Also a type of revelatory literature. The book of Revelation is called the Apocalypse.

Apophatic Theology – (Gr. *Apophasis,* “denial”) Also called negative theology or the *via negativa.* The position that human categories are not capable of conceptualising God.

Cataphatic Theology – (Gr. *Kataphasis,* “affirmation”) Also called positive theology or the *via positiva.* A mode of theology used to describe God positively on the basis of the divine self-revelation, in contrast to apophatic theology.

*Creatio ex nihilo –* (Lat. “creation from nothing”) The Judeo-Christian view that God created all things out of nothing and is thus the ultimate cause and source of meaning for the whole created order.

Deism – (Lat. *Deus,* “god”) A view contrasting to atheism and polytheism. It emerged in 17th- and 18th-century England. It holds that knowledge of God comes through reason rather than revelation, and that after God created the world, God has had no further involvement in it.

*Deus Absconditus –* (Lat. “The Hidden God). Term based on Isaiah 45:15, often used by Martin Luther (1483-1546) to indicate that a knowledge of God can only come through God’s self-revelation, since God is hidden from our reason by human finitude and sin.

Eschatology – (Gr. *Eschatos,* “last” and *Logos,* “study”) Study of the “last things” or the end of the world. Theological dimensions include the second coming of Jesus Christ and the last judgment.

Iconoclasm – (Gr. *Eikon,* “image” and *Klaein,* “to break”) The breaking of physical images in churches. Notably it occurred during the 8th century in the Eastern Church and during the Reformation period.

Idolatry – (Gr. *Eidololatreia,* from *Eidolon,* “image” and *Latreia,* “worship”) The worship of a false god or image of such, a practice prohibited by the law of God (Exod. 20:4-5). Figuratively, any obsessive concern that turns away worship from God.

Immanence of God – (Lat. *Immanere,* “to remain in”) The view that God is present in and with the created order. In Christian belief, God is not identified with the created order. It contrasts with transcendence.

Pantheism – (Gr. *Pan,* “all”, and *Theos,* “God”) A term coined by John Toland (1670-1722), literally meaning “everything God.” The view is that God is all and all is God. It differs from “panentheism”, which views God as in all.

Revelation – (Lat. *Revelatio,* “an uncovering”) The self-disclosure and self-communication of God by which God conveys a knowledge of God to humans. It is important since it makes known that which inaccessible to human reason alone.

Soteriology – (Gr. *Soteria,* “salvation”) Pertaining to the doctrine of salvation.

Theodicy – (Gr. *Theos,* “God” and *dike,* “justice, right”) The justification of a deity’s justice and goodness in light of suffering and evil. The term was coined by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716).

Theosis – (Gr. *Theosis,* “deification, divinization, making divine”) The view held by Eastern Orthodox theologians that salvation from sin consists of the process of deification, through which believers become united with Christ’s divine nature and thus with God.

Transcendence of God – (Lat. *Transcendere,* “to climb over, surpass”) Description of God as being over and beyond the created order in all aspects.

1. Although it is important to recognise at the outset that at least one distinction between “religious” experience and “nonreligious” or secular experience is that the former involves an intentional and self-implicating hermeneutical relationship to a transcendent entity, while the latter need not. Within the Christian theological tradition, Patrick Masterson has articulated this relationship the following: 'From the phenomenological first-person perspective of viewing everything as it appears to conscious subjectivity, God is described as a phenomenon corresponding to or originating from a specifically religious form or dimension of human consciousness, namely the conscious quest for a self-involving relationship with that which constitutes the ultimate meaning and value of one's existence.' Masterson, Patrick. *Approaching God: Between Theology and Phenomenology.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Gusdorf, Georges. *Du néant à Dieu dans le savoir romantique*. Payot, 1983, p. 97 : ‘Alors que l'apologétique traditionnelle présupposait l'existence du Dieu des théologies et catéchismes, dont elle s'employait à justifier la souveraineté, la nouvelle spiritualité s'affirmait à partir de la condition humaine dont elle explorait les dimensions. L'investigation des conditions de possibilité de la conscience concrète doit mener l'homme jusqu'à Dieu par la voie d'une induction empirique et non d'une déduction *a priori.’* See also Mark Taylor’s more detailed account of this shift and its emergence in the form of secularisation in Taylor, Mark. *After God*, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 43-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lane, Richard. J. "Kant's ‘Safe Place’: Security and the Sacred in the Concept of Sublime Experience." *Sublimer Aspects: Interfaces between Literature, Aesthetics, and Theology*, edited by Natasha Duquette, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bénichou, Paul. *Le Sacre de l’**Écrivain, 1750-1780. Essai sur l’avènement d’un pouvoir spirituel laïque dans la France moderne*. José Corti, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Suzanne Guerlac’s *The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautréamont*. Stanford University Press, 1990, deals very briefly with the theological substrate to Hugo’s understanding of Kant’s aesthetic sublime, stating: ‘although ostensibly Hugo's argument depends upon a theological conception of totality, this framework is disrupted by the grotesque not simply because the grotesque exceeds it (in the sense of transgressing ontological boundaries) but because of the duplicity of the grotesque.’ By rerouting the topic back to Hugo’s 1827 *Préface de Cromwell,* she preserves Hugo’s binary definition of the sublime/grotesque without due acknowledgment of his later, exilic works that are as much concerned with experiences of transcendence as his more youthful theories. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The term was first used by the American theologian Stanley Hopper in a speech delivered to the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1971, entitled ‘The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology.’ In his address, Hopper references Martin Heidegger as a direct predecessor in opening up theology to wider interdisciplinary study. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality: An Essay on Cosmology*. First published in 1929 based on his Gifford Lectures delivered across 1927-1928. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A recent special issue of *Literature and Theology* devoted to *Theopoetics* has provided the occasion to group these three well-known scholars, guest edited by Heather Walton. Cf. Kearney, Richard. “My Way to Theopoetics through Eriugena.” *Literature and Theology*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2019, pp. 233-240; Caputo, John. “The Theopoetic Reduction: Suspending the Supernatural Signified.” pp. 248-254; Walton, Heather. “Theopoetics as Challenge, Change and Creative Making.” pp. 229-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Roland Faber’s *The Divine Manifold*. Lexington Books, 2014, most fully elaborates this completed inversion of the Judeo-Christian definition of a wholly transcendent God, writing: 'In a theopoetics of multiplicity, divine actuality can only mean *divine concreteness in pure immanence.* Since no necessity of God's "existence" can be established apart from the *necessarily contingent nature of the process itself,* it must always only appear as its *ultimate irrationality,’* p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jossua, Jean-Pierre. "Un essai méconnu de théologie poétique : *Dieu* de Victor Hugo." *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1969, pp. 658-674. Followed later by "Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo." *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1980, pp. 27-58. Note the swapping of qualifiers in the development of Jossua’s first exploration of a “poetic theology” in *Dieu* to a “theological poetics” studied more widely across Hugo’s work, forming an important distinction for this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jossua, Jean-Pierre. "Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo." *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques,* p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gusdorf : 'Inutile de chercher à élaborer une théologie du romantisme, en bonne et due forme ; la réussite d'une telle tentative serait le chef-d'œuvre de l'incompréhension. Le romantisme nous rappelle la supériorité de l'inspiration sur la doctrine. La théologie pourrait bien être le commencement de la fin de la religion, transférée dans l'univers du discours, alors que la religion est un sens de la vie,’ p. 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Appearing in celebration of the bicentenary of Hugo’s birth were two publications that reiterated his profound grasp of biblical literacy: Meschonnic, Henri and Manako Ôno. *Victor Hugo et la Bible*. Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001 ; Godo, Emmanuel. *Victor Hugo et Dieu : bibliographie d'une âme*. Cerf, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Stanley Hopper’s introduction of *Theopoetics* into the American academy coincided with a changing perception of religion in American society from the mid-1960s onwards. Indeed, only five years prior to his lecture, *Times* Magazine asked on its front-page ‘Is God Dead?’, sparking the need to reconsider the place of theology in a secularising age. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hamilton, Paul. *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory*. University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Otherwise known as apophatic theology, this approach states what cannot be known about God’s nature to the extent that it becomes accepted knowledge*.* In the history of Western Christian theology, for example, it is defined against positive (cataphatic) theology and together forms a third with Thomas Aquinas’ *via eminentiae,* which is a synthesis of the two that operates by way of analogy.  [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Most notably in Derrida, Jacques and John P. Leavey. "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy." *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1984, pp. 3-37, & Derrida, Jacques. “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.” *Derrida and Negative Theology,* edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, SUNY Press, 1989, pp. 73-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Although, that is not to say that recent work has not been done on resurfacing French Romanticism’s ongoing philosophical weight in light of twentieth-century continental philosophy. For an eminent study in this regard, cf. Stephens, Bradley. *Victor Hugo, Jean-Paul Sartre, and the Liability of Liberty,* Legenda, 2011.  [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See for instance Dubois, Pierre. *Victor Hugo : ses idées religieuses de 1802 à 1825*. Honoré Champion, 1913 ; Viatte, Auguste. *Le Catholicisme chez les romantiques*. E. de Boccard, 1922 ; Buchanan, Donald W. “Les Sentiments religieux de Victor Hugo de 1825 à 1848." *Thèses présentées devant la faculté des lettres de Besançon*, 1939. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Saurat, Denis. *La Religion chez Victor Hugo*. Hachette, 1929 ; Berret, Paul. *La Philosophie de Victor Hugo (1854-1859) et deux mythes de La Légende des siècles. Le Satyre - Pleine Mer - Plein Ciel*. Henry Paulin & Cie, 1910 ; Raymond, Marcel. "Hugo Mage." *Génies de France*, Editions de la Baconnière, 1942. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Brahamcha-Marin, Jordi. "Discours critique sur la religion de Victor Hugo (1913-1942)." Presentation given to *Groupe Hugo* on 12 December 2015. Accessed on the 5/4/2020 at

    <http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/15-12-12Brahamcha.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Albouy, Pierre. *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo*. José Corti, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Gaudon, Jean. *Le Temps de la contemplation : l'œuvre poétique de Victor Hugo des "Misères" au "Seuil Du Gouffre*" *(1845-1856)*. Flammarion, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid.,* p. 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Albouy, Pierre. *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo,* p. 455. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Villiers, Charles. *L'Univers métaphysique de Victor Hugo*. Vrin, 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Peyre, Henri. *Hugo.* Presses universitaires de France*,* 1972*,* p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Maurel, Jean. *Victor Hugo, philosophe.* Presses universitaires de France, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Bénichou, Paul. *Les Mages romantiques*. Gallimard, 1988, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l'exil.* CNRS éditions, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid.,* p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *La Joie spacieuse : Essai sur la dilatation*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 2007. In this remarkable work, Chrétien surveys the rapport between experiences of joy as both dilation and contraction and their explanation by writers as diverse as Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, Walt Whitman, and Henri Michaux. Though not given a chapter of his own, Victor Hugo is treated briefly in pp. 24-26 and pp. 101-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Rétat, Claude, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid.,* p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For a detailed investigation into this history, see Descombes, Vincent. *Le Complément de sujet : enquête sur le fait d’agir de soi-même.* Gallimard, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. That is, the study of the *ego* or self-consciousness as foundational to knowledge of the subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Jossua, Jean-Pierre. "Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo." *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1980, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Grossman, Kathryn M. *The Later Novels of Victor Hugo: Variations on the Politics and Poetics of Transcendence*. Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Philippot, Didier. *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible : essai sur l'ontologie romantique*. Classiques Garnier, 2017, p.11. Philippot cites this phrase of Merleau-Ponty’s from *L’Œil et l’esprit,* Gallimard, coll. Folio, 1964, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Ibid.,* pp. 111-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Preface to *Les Contemplations,* in Hugo, Victor. *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo : Poésie, Tome II.* Edited by Jacques Seebacher and Guy Rosa, Robert Laffont : Bouquins, 2002, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. That is, the rational study of God through the prism of being, a term most readily associated with Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological critique of Western metaphysics, but which for our purposes will not be oppositionally stressed. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Dominique Combe’s investigation into Hugo’s version of the “modern philosophical poem” has revealed how, far from rejecting rigorous thought outright, this style of poetry simply assimilates intellect to intuition : “**'**C'est donc sur un discours non démonstratif, sur une pensée non discursive, que s'appuie le "poème philosophique moderne", ainsi doté d'une légitimité nouvelle. Il apparaît clairement qu'il y a place pour une autre pensée que le *logos,* que la pensée ne se réduit pas au discours, au sens rhétorique du terme.' Combe, Dominique. "Le Poème philosophique ou "l'hérésie de l'enseignement"."*Études françaises*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2005, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. That is, the “tone” of a poem emphasises particular emotions and sentiments and can be more generally classified under different registers (comic, tragic, epic, pathetic, lyric, etc.) depending on the intended effect on readers. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. “*Zu den Sachen selbst!”* [“to the things themselves!”] Husserl’s famous appeal to his phenomenological method. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Attridge, Derek & Staten, Henry. *The Craft of Poetry: Dialogues on Minimal Interpretation*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. Routledge, 2004. The “responsible” reader is one who, in short, recognises and takes the time to respond to the alterity of a work, viewed from a Levinasian framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Staten, Henry. *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Craft of poetry*, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Ibid.,* p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid.,* p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Ibid.,* p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Ibid.,* pp. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Ibid.,* p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ahern, Stephen. *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Hugo, Victor. “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre”, in *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo : Poésie, Tome II,* p. 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Rita Felski’s appeal for a “neo-phenomenology”, one that ‘declines to quarantine personhood from the pressures of context, to bracket the historical and cultural factors that shape interpretation’, is already accounted for within the discipline since Husserl and is thus not so much an advancement as a truism. Felski, Rita. “After Suspicion.” *Profession,* January2009, p.31. Cf. Gallagher, Shaun & Dan Zahari. *The Phenomenological Mind.* 2nd edition. Routledge, 2012, pp. 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Hart, Kevin. *Poetry and Revelation: For a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry*. Bloomsbury, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Hart’s chosen intellectual lineage from Husserl onwards centres around what has come to be known as the “New Phenomenology” school, including thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien. Tom Sparrow’s comment that no consistent phenomenological methodology exists, arguing that this constitutes the philosophy’s most ‘fateful, perhaps fatal, vice’, will be proven exaggerated by highlighting in this thesis the intellectual cohesion held between this diverse group of practitioners. Sparrow, Tom. *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism.* Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 4; Simmons, Aaron & Benson, Bruce Ellis. *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Although there are of course attempts made at expanding in greater detail Husserl’s founding maxims. Cf. Berghofer, Philipp. “Husserl’s Noetics – Towards a Phenomenological Epistemology.” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology,* vol.50, no. 2, 2019, pp. 120-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *Ibid.,* p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *Ibid.,* p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. ‘En effet, puisque mes éventuels concepts voulant dire “Dieu” ne disent en droit rien de Dieu, ils ne disent au mieux que quelque chose de moi, en tant que je me trouve affronté à l’incompréhensible.” Marion, Jean-Luc. *Certitudes négatives.* Grasset, 2010, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Hackett, Chris. "The Exercise of Spirit: Phenomenology in Response to Poetry." *Renascence : Essays on Values in Literature*, Marquette University, vol. 62, no. 4, 2010, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Cf. Grossos, Philippe. “La Phénoménologie à l'épreuve de l’œuvre littéraire.” *La Littérature comme expérience : phénoménologie et œuvres littéraires : Actes du colloque de l'institut catholique*. Edited by Jérôme de Gramont, Éditions de Corlevour, 2015 : 'Car si monstrative que soit la parole du phénoménologue, elle ne l'est qu'en étant de part en part traversée par l'exigence d'un *logos* philosophique, lequel n'a rien de littéraire,' p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Wunenburger, Jean-Jacques. “The Paradoxical Ontology of Image.” *Phenomenology, Modernism and Beyond,* edited by Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *Ibid.,* p. 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Kearney, Richard. *Poetics of Imagining: from Husserl to Lyotard*. Harper Collins Academic, 1991, p.16-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Philippot : ‘ […] qui vaut sans doute pour l'ontologie romantique en général (tel est du moins notre postulat), c'est qu'il y a une réalité de l'image, du songe, de la chimère, une réalité de l'imaginaire, que celui-ci soit ajouté à la nature ou produit par elle - car le rêve n'est jamais exclusivement psychologique ni subjectif chez Hugo ; il est cosmique, il est le prolongement en nous du grand rêve de la nature.' Philippot, Didier. *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible*, p. 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Zalipour, Arezou. “Phenomenological Studies of Imagination in Poetry: An Introduction.” *Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2010, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Wehrs, Donald. R and Thomas Blake. *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Manning, Nicholas. *Rhétorique de la sincérité. La poésie moderne en quête d'un langage vrai*. Honoré Champion, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. As Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher have pointed out, the self as a unifying principle of consciousness, first initiated by Husserl, is an object of research shared across the phenomenological tradition: 'The crucial idea propounded by all of these phenomenologists is that an understanding of what it means to be a self calls for an examination of the structure of experience, and vice versa. Thus, the self is not something that stands opposed to the stream of consciousness, it is not an ineffable transcendental precondition, nor is it a mere social construct that evolves through time; it is taken to be an integral part of the structure of our conscious lives.' Gallagher, Shaun & Zahavi, Dan. *Op. cit.,* p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Girard, René*. I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* Orbis Books, 2020, p. 8-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. These first two notions in their original French (“un moi romantique” and “un moi de l’infini”) are not the author’s coinage but have been already identified by critics of Hugo’s work as fundamental to understanding his lyricism. For the former, we will be following the definition of Ludmila Charles-Wurtz in her work *Poétique du sujet lyrique dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo*. Honoré Champion, 1998 ; for the latter, we take our starting-point from Guy Rosa’s "Dumoi*-*je au mage : individu et sujet dans le romantisme et chez Victor Hugo." *Hugo le fabuleux*, edited by Jacques Seebacher and Anne Ubersfeld, colloque de Cerisy, Seghers, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Literally, “becoming like to” or “in union with God”. Its definition as a spiritual transformation towards the fullness of God’s nature was first elaborated by Patristic writers as part of an incarnational theology and has since developed differently across Christian denominations. For the purposes of our argument, we will be confining our use of the term to its general meaning of “assimilation to the divine”. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo II. Pendant l'exil. I, 1851-1864*. Fayard, 2008, p. 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Letter to Pierre-Jules Hetzel, 26 March 1854. Cited in Sheila Gaudon’s notice to Hugo, Victor. OC : *Poésie,* v. II,p. 1066. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Cf. *Infra*-thesis, pp. 79-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. ‘L’explosion poétique de l’année 1854, même si elle n’est pas à strictement parler la conséquence des séances de spiritisme, leur doit son climat, et peut-être même sa direction.’ Gaudon, Sheila. In Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 1067. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Godo, Emmanuel. *Victor Hugo et Dieu : bibliographie d'une âme*. Cerf, 2001, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Hugo, Victor. *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo : Poésie, Tome I,* p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *Ibid.,* p. 929. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. This free use of artistic licence has been flagged by generations of critics. See Montanari, Claire. "Genèse réelle, genèse recréée : stratégies d'écriture dans *L*es *Contemplations.*" *Lectures des Contemplations,* edited by Judith Wulf & Ludmila Charles-Wurtz, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016, pp. 53-75, for a recent investigation. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Hugo, Victor. *Actes et Paroles : pendant l'exil, 1852-1870*. Nelson edition, 1912, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *Ibid.,* p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. I,p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. *Ibid.,* p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Maulpoix, Jean-Michel. "Remarques sur le lyrisme des *Contemplations*. " *Actes du colloque sur Les Contemplations des 4-5 novembre 2016*, Groupe Hugo, p. 7. Accessed on the 29/3/2020 at <http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/Colloques%20agreg/Les%20Contemplations/Textes/Maulpoix_Lyrisme.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. See Vanderwolk, William. *Victor Hugo in Exile. From Historical Representations to Utopian Vistas.* Bucknell University Press*,* 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo II*, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. That is not to say, however, that the *Deus Absconditus* motif results in complete incomprehension. Rather, as Jean-Louis Chrétien points out, citing Hugh of Saint Victor’s treatise on the Ark of Noah (1125-1130 AD), ‘le chemin qu’ouvrent en nous nos pas qui le [Dieu] poursuivent révèle des possibilités et des dimensions nôtres jusqu’alors inconnues…La maîtrise de soi et le contrôle de ses pensées ne forment que la retombée et la conséquence d’un désir de Celui qui ne peut jamais être maîtrisé, en même temps que la force plus grande qu’ils nous donnent nous permet d’aller plus avant à la rencontre de l’incontrôlable, en sa souveraine liberté.’ Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *L’Espace intérieur,* Les Editions de Minuit, 2014, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Brombert, Victor. *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition.* Princeton University Press*,* 1978, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics.* Translated by David Ross, Oxford University Press, 2009,Book X, §7. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. It serves to remember, however, that classical philosophy had not formulated the “self” or the “moi” in nearly the same way that a post-Descartian writer such as Hugo would have understood it. Claude Romano’s *Être soi-même. Une autre histoire de la philosophie.* Gallimard, 2019,tracks the progression of the “subject” from Greek *hypokeimenon* (“essential substrate”) through to its modern uses and anachronisms across examples in philosophy and literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. The passage of Augustine and his mother Monica’s shared vision in the garden of Ostia in Book IX of *The Confessions* is exemplary of this emerging form of contemplation. “*Interior intimo meo*”is quoted from Book III. Augustine. *The Confession.* Translated by R.S Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics, 1961, pp. 85-86 & pp. 23 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Cf. the preface in Louth, Andrew. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys.* 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. x-xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. The term “mystikos” eventually separated from contemplative prayer as it came to designate the *via negativa* of theological discourse, inflected by the Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius’s *The Divine Names (~*480-530AD*),* then the medieval Rhineland mystics of St. Hildegard von Bingen and Meister Eckhart and the spiritualities of various Reformation-era religious orders (Carmelites, Jesuits, Salesians). In this tradition, a distinction is maintained between “meditation”, where the mind and imagination are actively employed, and “contemplative prayer”, where the objective is to minimise these faculties in favour of achieving a closer union (*theosis*) with God. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. *Le Journal d’Adèle Hugo,* 2 mai 1855, quoted in Hovasse, Jean-Marc, *Victor Hugo II,* p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Echoing the important theological notion of *epektasis* (an “endeavouring”), latent in several passages of the New Testament (Philippians 3:13) first developed by Gregory of Nyssa (333-395 AD), wherein the soul is described as unceasingly expanding and progressing towards virtue, the knowledge of God, and spiritual perfection. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Letter from the 2nd of September 1855. Quoted in Hovasse, p. 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 467. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Maulpoix, Jean-Michel. "Remarques sur le lyrisme des *Contemplations*,” p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. The “*Erlebnislyrik*” (“lyric of experience”) was brought into common currency during the *Sturm und Drung* period of German poetry, designating poetry that is tied biographically to the historical poet and to the self-aware depictions of their state of mind in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Maulpoix, Jean-Michel. *Du lyrisme,* Corti, 2000, p. 45-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Hamburger, Käte. *Logique des genres littéraires*, translated by Pierre Cadiot, Seuil, 1986. While New Criticism in Anglo-Saxon circles encouraged wholesale abandonment of the biographical subject, Hamburger’s advice for understanding the first-person speaker is much more nuanced: “Certes, l’expérience peut être “fictive” au sens d’invention, mais le sujet de l’expérience, et, avec lui, le sujet d’énonciation, le *Je* lyrique, ne peut être que réel.” For further developments issuing from Hamburger’s translation into French, see Dominique Rabaté’s edited collection *Figures du sujet lyrique,* PUF, 2001.  [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Charles-Wurtz, Ludmila. *Poétique du sujet lyrique dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo*. Champion, 1998, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Bénichou, Paul. *Les Mages romantiques*. Gallimard, 1988, p. 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. ‘Est-ce donc la vie d’un homme ? Oui, et la vie des autres hommes aussi. Nul de nous n’a l’honneur d’avoir une vie qui soit à lui. Ma vie est la vôtre, votre vie est la mienne, vous vivez ce que je vis ; la destinée est une…’ Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. *Ibid.,* p. 469, v. 41-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. *Ibid.,* p. 470, v. 101-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 469, v. 69-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Manning, Nicholas. *Rhétorique de la sincérité : la poésie moderne en quête d'un langage vrai.* Honoré Champion, 2013, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 470, v. 77-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. *Ibid.,* p. 471, v. 121-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Gusdorf, Georges. *Du néant à Dieu dans le savoir romantique*. Payot, 1983, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Guerlac, Suzanne. *The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautréamont*. Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Suzanne Guerlac refers to it as the ‘intertwining of the visible and the invisible.’ *Ibid.,* p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 470, v. 97-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. ‘Je suis une force qui va !’ *Hernani,* Act III, Scene 4. This phrase has practically become, in popular currency, Hugo’s defining epithet. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Hugo, Victor. *Tas de pierres,* p.3 85. Quoted in Albouy, Pierre. *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo*. José Corti, 1963, p. 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Ireson, J. C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to his Poetry*. Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Frey, John. *Les Contemplations of Victor Hugo: The Ash Wednesday Liturgy*. University Press of Virginia, 1988, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Quoted in Combe, Dominique. "Le Poème philosophique ou "l'hérésie de l'enseignement"." *Études françaises*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2005, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 380, v. 462-465. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. The full passage runs : *“*L’infini est. Il est là. Si l’infini n’avait pas de moi, le moi serait sa borne, il ne serait pas infini ; en d’autres termes, il ne serait pas. Or il est. Donc il a un moi. Ce moi de l’infini, c’est Dieu”. Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables,* (éd) Allem, Maurice, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951,tome I, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Seebacher, Jacques. “Hugo et la quadrature des religions.” Communication presented to Groupe Hugo on the 20th of September 2003. Accessed on the 27/4/2020 at

     <http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/doc/03-09-20Seebacher.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. See Rosa, Guy. "Dumoi*-*je au mage : individu et sujet dans le romantisme et chez Victor Hugo", in *Hugo le fabuleux*, colloque de Cerisy, Seghers, 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. *Ibid.,* p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Hence the word “process” being used to express a necessarily incomplete and indefinite state of becoming, both on the part of creature and creator. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 370, v. 55-57 ; v. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l'exil*. CNRS éditions, 1999, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. See Cuchet, Guillaume. "Utopie et religion au XIXe siècle. L'œuvre de Jean Reynaud (1806-1863), théologien et Saint-Simonien." *Revue historique,* vol. 631, no. 3, 2004, pp. 577-599, for an overview of Reynaud's early form of process theology. For an introduction to Pierre Leroux, cf. Griffiths, David. “Pierre Leroux Redivivus.” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies,* vol. 12, no.1/2, 1983, pp. 105-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 372, v. 138-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Genesis 1:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Le Scanff, Yvon. "Comment infinir ? Le sublime*." Actes du colloque sur Les Contemplations des 4-5 novembre 2016,* Groupe Hugo, p. 6. Accessed on the 6/5/2020 at

     <http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/Colloques%20agreg/Les%20Contemplations/Textes/Le%20Scanff_Sublime.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Cf. Brombert, Victor. "The Rhetoric of Contemplation: Hugo's 'La Pente de la Rêverie'." in *Nineteenth-Century French Poetry*, edited by Christopher Prendergast, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 48-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 389, v. 799-804. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Ubersfeld, Anne. *Le Roi et le Bouffon.* *Études sur le théâtre de Victor Hugo de 1830 à 1839.* Corti, 1974, p. 473, quoted in Charles-Wurtz, Ludmila. *Poétique du sujet lyrique dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo,* p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 386, v. 678-689. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Vignest-Amar, Romain. "Le mage et l'histoire. Poésie et rédemption dans *William Shakespeare* de Victor Hugo." *Littérature*, vol. 126, no. 2, 2002, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Jeremiah 23:1-4; Ezekiel 34:1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Here I am indebted to one of my thesis examiners for their attentive remarks on this acoustic relationship in Hugo’s cosmic poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Charles Wurtz, *Poétique du sujet lyrique,* p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. *Ibid.,* p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Housset, Emmanuel. *Husserl et l'idée de Dieu*. Cerf, 2010, p. 72. The full passage runs : 'Husserl reprend ici Descartes, tout en le modifiant d'une façon considérable : Dieu est l'idée de l'infini en moi, il est la subjectivité idéalisant infiniment elle-même. Avec cet infini de type mathématique qui n'est pas l'infini qualitatif de Descartes, il ne s'agit pas d'une épreuve de l'incompréhensible, car l'idée de Dieu demeure dérivée par rapport à l'idée du moi, dans la mesure même où elle co-naît avec elle.' [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l’exil,* p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. In the words of Victor Brombert: ‘Hugo’s originality, with regards to political and theological thinking, is to situate incarceration within man, to make of man’s own guilt his own jailor.’ Brombert, Victor. *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition.* Princeton University Press*,* 1978, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Racine, Jean. *Iphigénie en Aulide.* Editions Didot, 1854, volume II, scene I, p. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. De Nerval, Gérard. *Œuvres complètes.* Edited by Jean Guillaume & Claude Pichois, Gallimard, 1993, III, p. 645. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Delphine Gleizes has also remarked that “Pleurs dans la nuit” prefigures in poetic form the narrative sequence of what will become the harrowing arrest of Gwynplaine in his exile-period novel *L’Homme qui rit.* Gleizes, Delphine. "Les Paradoxes de la cave pénale. De quelques représentations carcérales dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo." *Romantisme*, 2004, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. For other accounts on the writing of melancholy in mid nineteenth-century France, see also Starobinski, Jean. *La Mélancolie au miroir : trois lectures de Baudelaire.* Julliard, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Reeder, Harry P. *Theory and Practice of Husserl's Phenomenology*. 2nd Edition, Zeta Books, 2010, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. ‘Il rit, il mange, il mord ; / Et prend, en murmurant des chansons hébétées, / Un verre dans ses mains à chaque instant heurté, / Aux choses de la mort.’ (v. 356-359). [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 483, v. 366-383. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Ireson, J.C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry,* p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Chambers, Ross. *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*. The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. *Ibid,* p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Hugo, Victor, *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 474, v. 1-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Vadé, Yves, “L'Émergence du sujet lyrique à l’époque romantique.” *Figures du sujet lyrique,* edited by Dominique Rabaté and Michel Collot, PUF, 2005, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Hugo, Victor, *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 479, v. 187-192 [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Jenny, Laurent, “Fictions du moi et figurations du moi.” *Figures du sujet lyrique,* edited by Dominique Rabaté and Michel Collot, PUF, 2005, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Hugo, Victor, *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 486, v. 493-498. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Cited in Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo II,* p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. This method of theological reflection assumes that the freedom of one’s being is given by the fact that it participates indirectly and partially in God’s own infinite nature, and that consequently comparisons with our own experiences are not immediately to be dismissed. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Hugo, Victor, *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 487, v. 517-528. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. *Ibid.,* p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Such is the reading of John Frey, who writes: ‘The conclusions of the "Bouche d'ombre'' contain many metonymic truisms that have no convincing metaphorical impact. This is because Hugo is not able to show the "Paradiso'' as could Dante, and it may be because he travelled this road alone. Dante had Virgil, Hugo had the "Bouche d'ombre", which to me is very confused about final things. Dante worked his poetry out in a recognizable theological system; Hugo did not.’ *The Ash Wednesday Liturgy,* 1988, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Lunn-Rockliffe, Katherine. "Transformations in Victor Hugo's Cosmic Poetry." *Dix-Neuf*, vol. 20, no. 3-4, 2016, pp. 278-290. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Galand, David. “J’ai des pleurs à mon œil qui pense,” *Lectures des Contemplations,* ed. Judith Wulf & Ludmila Charles-Wurtz, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. That is, the metaphors that fundamentally configure how the poem reveals its imagery, i.e., under what conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo II,* pp. 281- 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Ireson, J.C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry*, pp. 199-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Roubaud, Félix. *La Danse des tables, phénomènes physiologiques démontrés.* 2nd Edition, Librairie Nouvelle, 1853. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo II,* p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. This paraphrases a passage in *William Shakespeare,* cited by Hovasse, *ibid,* p. 214: ‘Le phénomène du trépied antique et de la table moderne a droit comme un autre à l’observation. La science psychique y gagnera, sans nul doute. Ajoutons ceci, qu’abandonner les phénomènes à la crédulité, c’est faire une trahison à la raison humaine.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Robb, Graham. *Victor Hugo*. Picador, 1997, p. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Monroe, John. *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France*. Cornell University Press, 2018, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Combe, Dominique : ‘Les thèmes mythologiques sont souvent le prétexte à un discours philosophique, amplifié par la pensée romantique. La méditation théologique et métaphysique sur la mort du Christ, sur la mort des dieux et de Dieu, qu'on retrouve par exemple chez Jean-Paul Richter, Hölderlin, Vigny, Nerval, et encore chez Rimbaud ("Soleil et chair") trouve dans le poème mythologique son espace privilégié.' “Le poème philosophique ou "l'hérésie de l'enseignement"." *Études françaises*, pp. 71-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Hugo, Victor, *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 534, v. 1- 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Riffaterre, Michael. "La Vision hallucinatoire chez Victor Hugo." *MLN*, vol. 78, no. 3, 1963, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Cited in Kopp, Robert. “Du sublime au grotesque : Victor Hugo, *Dieu,* et les tables tournantes.” *Revue des deux mondes,* January2003, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Pasquier, Marie-Claire. "Hugo et la traduction," *Romantisme*, vol. 29, no. 106, 1999, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Hugo, Victor, *OC: Poésie,* v. II, p. 538, v. 182-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Lunn-Rockliffe, Katherine. “Transformations in Victor Hugo’s Cosmic Poetry,” p. 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Cited in Putt, Keith and John Caputo. "Theopoetics of the Possible." *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, edited by John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Fordham University, 2006, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Hugo, Victor, *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 547, v. 576- 587. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Indeed, Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe notes this theological connotation to the poem: ‘Hugo is using organic images to motivate a vision of evil turning into good. Grounding the description in organic images lends it the air of a natural law.’ “Transformations in Victor Hugo’s Cosmic Poetry,” p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Hugo, Victor, *OC: Poésie,* v. II, p. 551, v. 739- 750. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa* *Contra Gentiles*. Translated by Charles J. O’Neil, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, III, pp.7-9 and S*umma Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries.* Blackfriars, 1964, Ia, q. 48. art. I. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. O'Regan, Cyril. *Gnostic Return in Modernity*. State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 235-236. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Hugo, Victor, *OC: Poésie,* v. II, p. 552, v. 793-798. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Ireson, J. C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry*, p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 517, v. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Seebacher, Jacques. "Sens et structure des *Mages* (*Les Contemplations*, VI, XXIII)." *Victor Hugo ou le calcul des profondeurs*, Presses universitaires de France, 1993, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Charles-Wurtz, Ludmila. *Poétique du sujet lyrique dans l'œuvre de Victor Hugo*, p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 523, v. 301- 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Kearney, Richard. *Poetics of Imagining: From Husserl to Lyotard*, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Philippot, Didier. *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible : essai sur l'ontologie romantique.* Classiques Garnier, 2017, p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 525, v. 411- 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Albouy, Pierre. *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo.* José Corti, 1963, p. 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Philippot cites Myriam Roman as identifying a Kantian division between the noumenal and phenomenal in Hugo’s phenomenology: 'On a pu trouver dans l'utilisation insistante du terme de *phénomène* par Hugo un écho de son sens kantien et post-kantien : selon Myriam Roman…le terme de phénomène s'imposerait "pour signifier…que le monde intelligible demeure inaccessible, que l'homme ne peut saisir que ce qui est de l'ordre de l'apparaître (mais qui ne se confond pas avec l'apparence)". Citation on page 31, quoting Roman, Myriam. *Victor Hugo et le roman philosophique* ; *du “drame dans les faits” au “drame dans les idées”*, Honoré Champion, 1999,p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 527, v. 471- 480. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Seebacher, Jacques. "Sens et structure des *Mages* (*Les Contemplations*, VI, XXIII)." *Victor Hugo ou le calcul des profondeurs*, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Rosset, Clément. *Le Réel. Traité de l’idiotie.* Minuit, 1978. Cited in Peyrache-Leborgne, Dominique. *La Poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au Romantisme : Diderot, Schiller, Wordsworth, Shelley, Hugo, Michelet.* Honoré Champion, 1997, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Hugo, Victor. *Alpes et Pyrénées, Voyages. Œuvres complètes*, Robert Laffont, 2002,p. 684. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Boulard, Stéphanie. “L’Œil de Victor Hugo”, 2020, accessed on the 15/4/2020 at <https://serd.hypotheses.org/6985>. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 527, v. 491- 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Ezekiel 37:1-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 528, v. 541- 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. As Frank Bowman points out, Hugo refused ‘la démarche de la désymbolisation proposée par les néo-hégéliens et les néo-cousiniens : loin de dégager le religieux du symbole, il l'y engage et ainsi lui donne vie.’ Bowman, Frank Paul. "Le système de Dieu." *Hugo le fabuleux,* colloque de Cerisy. Seghers, 1985, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Peyrache-Leborgne, Dominique. *Op.cit.,* p. 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Journet, René. “*Dieu* et Dieu" in *Hugo le fabuleux*, colloque de Cerisy, Seghers, 1985, pp. 202-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Gohin, Yves. “Une écriture de l'immanence.” *Hugo le fabuleux,* 1985,p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Fizaine, Jean-Claude. "La Cuisinière et son maître : religions et philosophies chez Victor Hugo." *Romantisme*, vol. 15, no. 50, 1985, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Cf. *supra*-thesis, pp. 75-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Wahl, Jean. *Human Existence and Transcendence.* Translated by William Hackett, University of Notre Dame Press, 2016, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. *Dieu* (*L’Océan d’en haut),* critical edition published by René Journet et Guy Robert, Nizet, 1960 ; *Dieu* (Le Seuil du gouffre), same editors, Nizet, 1961 ; *Dieu* (Fragments), same editors, Flammarion, Cahiers de Victor Hugo, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, dossier de René Journet, p. 1148. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. This testimony is taken from Adèle Hugo’s *Journal,* cited by René Journet, *Op.cit.*, p. 1146. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Grant, Richard B. "Progress, Pessimism, and Revelation in Victor Hugo's "Dieu"." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1/2, 1988, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo. Pendant L'exil I, 1851-1864*, p. 409. He further notes : ‘il a fallu attendre sa reconstitution en 1969 pour pouvoir découvrir dans toute leur ampleur les quelque mille cinq cent pièces qui le composent et mesurer le travail quotidien de l'auteur, qui jetait sur des morceaux de papier d'origines diverses (bandes d'envoi de journaux, marges de lettres reçues, bouts d'emballage, enveloppes, etc.) des rimes, des titres, des idées en prose d’où naissent des vers et des développements pouvant atteindre plusieurs centaines d'alexandrins.' Cf. Gaudon, Jean. "De la poésie au poème : remarques sur les manuscrits poétiques de Victor Hugo." *Genesis (Manuscrits-Recherche-Invention)*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1992, pp. 81-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Larangé, Daniel. "La Singularité de la théopoésie. L'écriture théologique du poème *Dieu*." *Thélème*. *Revista Complutense de Estudios Franceses* vol. 27, 2012, p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Jossua, Jean-Pierre. "Un essai méconnu de théologie poétique : "Dieu" de Victor Hugo." *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1969, p. 668 [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. *Journal d’Adèle Hugo,* cited by René Journet, notice to *Dieu*, Robert Laffont, 2002, p. 1146. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Ireson, J. C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry*. Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Journet, René. Notice to *OC,* Robert Laffont, 2002, p. 1149. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Larangé, Daniel. “La Singularité de la théopoésie,” p. 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Combe, Dominique. “Le Poème philosophique ou “l'hérésie de l’enseignement””, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Two such examples would be Alphonse de Lamartine’s *Jocelyn (*1836) and Edgar Quinet’s *Prométhée* (1838). [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. To name a few pairings: Ballanche, Pierre-Simon. *Orphée* (1829) / *Essais de palingénésie sociale* (1827 - 1829); Quinet, Edgar. *Ahasvérus* (1833), *Prométhée* (1838) / *Le Christianisme et la Révolution française* (1845); Constant, Alphonse Louis. *Doctrines religieuses et sociales* (1841) / *La Mère de Dieu, épopée religieuse et humanitaire* (1844). [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. The most notable being of course Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christenthums* [The Essence of Christianity], Otto Wigand, 1841; however, it was not translated into French until 1864 by Joseph Roy, published originally by the *Librairie internationale* in Paris. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Rétat, Claude. "Le ‘Dieu Vivant’ romantique." *Romantisme*, no. 152, 2011, pp. 21-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Cited in Fizaine, Jean-Claude. "Victor Hugo penseur de la laïcité - le clerc, le prêtre et le citoyen," presentation given to the *Groupe Hugo,* 2013, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. *Ibid,* p. 17. In contrast, an epic poem such as Alexandre Soumet’s *La Divine épopée* (1840) that preferred to imitate the canon of classical Antiquity whilst promoting a Christian metaphysical worldview, never achieved popular success in his time, owing in part to its failure in elevating humanity to the status of the divine in the wake of the French Revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Grant, Richard B. "Progress, Pessimism, and Revelation in Victor Hugo's ‘Dieu’.", p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. “The negative way”, meaning that emphasis is to be placed on God’s ultimately ineffable nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 625, v. 2,065-2,077. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Hart, Kevin. *Poetry and Revelation: For a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry*, pp. 25-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 621-2, v. 1,916-1,927. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ Psalm 110: 10, KJV. Numerous other examples can be found across the Psalms and Proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. That each creature delivers their speech in the form of dramatic monologue is not surprising. According to Jean-Louis Chrétien, it is precisely this literary form that has fostered a space for the kind of “self-address” (‘l’adresse à soi’) pervasive in Hugo’s exile-period poetry. Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *Répondre : figures de la réponse et de la responsabilité.* Presses universitaires de France, 2007, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 654, v. 3,204-3,211. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. *Ibid,* p. 668, v. 3,792- 3,799. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Fizaine, Jean-Claude. "La cuisinière et son maître : Religions et philosophies chez Victor Hugo," p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. *Ibid.,* p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 700, v. 5,239-5,248. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Crockett, Clayton. *A Theology of the Sublime*. Routledge, 2001, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. *Ibid.,* p .106. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Cf. Deketelaere, Nikolaas. "Imagining the World Otherwise: Jean-Luc Nancy and John Caputo on the Poetics of Creation." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2020, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe has coined this section of the poem ‘one of Hugo’s most radical attempts to overcome the antithesis of dark and light.’ Lunn-Rockliffe, Katherine. *Op. cit.,* p. 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 705, v. 5,446-5,456. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Housset, Emmanuel. *Husserl et l'idée de Dieu.* Cerf, 2010, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. A widely debated theological and philosophical issue that, in modern European society, goes back to Jacobi’s interpretation of Spinoza’s monadism in German Idealism. Mme de Staël’s *De L’Allemagne* (1813) and the Abbé Maret’s *Essai sur le panthéisme dans les sociétés modernes* (1840) form a short textual itinerary on the dissemination and eventual condemnation of pantheism in France under German influence. As for Hugo, it is doubtful that he read Spinoza directly, posing primarily the ethical implications of a pantheistic understanding of God : “Et c’est d’abord au nom de la liberté, et non en celui de la vérité, que Victor Hugo entame le combat contre le panthéisme teinté de positivisme imputé à Spinoza, auquel il ne concède d’autre rôle que celui d’un obstacle dans l’épopée émancipatrice de l’humanité.” Macherey, Pierre. “Spinoza lu par Victor Hugo”. *Spinoza au XIXe siècle : actes des journées d’études organisées à la Sorbonne (9 et 16 mars, 23 et 30 novembre 1997),* edited by André Tosel, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2008, p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version*,* Oxford UP, 1998, Exodus, 20:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Marion : ‘Paradoxalement, l’impossibilité de Dieu n’a de sens que pour nous, nous qui seuls pouvons *a contrario* expérimenter l’impossibilité, en particulier l’impossibilité pour nous d’accéder à lui, mais n’a aucun sens *pour lui.*’ *Certitudes négatives,* p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Loiseleur, Aurélie. “Profanations du poème épique et lyrique (1820-1850).” Paper presented to the *Congrès international de la Société des études romantiques, "Religions du XIXème siècle" du 24 au 26 nov,* 2008, p.10. Accessed on 24/10/2020 at <https://serd.hypotheses.org/files/2018/08/AurelieLoiseleur.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 626, v. 2,122-2,134. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. *Ibid,* p. 633, v. 2,423-2,428. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l’exil*, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 637-638, v. 2,625-2,631. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Gusdorf, Georges. *Du néant à Dieu dans le savoir romantique*, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Greisch, Jean. "Cinquième leçon. Le ‘Seigneur de l’être’ et l’historicité de l’Absolu." *Du ‘Non Autre’ au ‘Tout Autre’ : Dieu et l’absolu dans les théologies philosophiques de la modernité*, Presses universitaires de France, 2012, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 686, v. 4,639- 4,650. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Marion, Jean-Luc. *God without Being*, p.18. Marion’s use of “invisable” captures in French the verb “viser” (“to aim at”) and denotes the shortcoming of the gaze’s aim, wherein all that it is visible is an idol. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 689, v. 4,750-4,757. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Gusdorf explains the relationship between pantheism and hylozoism thus: 'Les concepts de panthéisme et d'hylozoïsme apparaissent après la révolution mécaniste, laquelle a mis fin à la souveraineté du modèle astrobiologique. La cosmobiologie, depuis Aristote, Ptolémée et Galien jusqu'à Marsile Ficin, Giordano Bruno et Campanella, en passant par l'aristotélisme médiéval, est un hylozoïsme, puisque la matière universelle est animée ; elle est un panthéisme, puisque le Cosmos est régi par la présence spatiale, physique, des astres-dieux dont les influences déterminent les rythmes de la vie et les événements en ce bas monde.' *Du néant à Dieu dans le savoir romantique,* p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Dalferth, Ingolf U. “The Idea of Transcendence.” *The Axial Age and its Consequences,* edited by Robert Bellah and Joas Hans, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 147-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Marion: ‘The icon, on the contrary, attempts to render visible the invisible as such, hence to allow that the visible not cease to refer to an other than itself, without, however, that other ever being reproduced in the visible. Thus what the icon shows is, strictly speaking, nothing, not even in the mode of the productive *Einbildung* [imagination].' *God without Being,* p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 699, v. 5,179-5,190. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Gusdorf : 'La situation de l'être fini aux prises avec l'infini correspond à un affrontement avec la surabondance du sens, imposée à l'homme selon toutes les dimensions de son individualité. Ce rapport avec l'*omnitudo realitatis* en laquelle l'homme se découvre englobé peut se dissocier entre des perspectives différentes d'intelligibilité, mais l'expérience religieuse à l'état brut, *l'Erlebnis* du rapport vécu de l'homme avec l'absolu…est l'affrontement de la réalité humaine en sa finitude avec l'Être sans restriction, au sein duquel le divin n'est pas encore figé en configurations cosmiques ou théologiques précises. Le sens du sacré, ouvert en abîme sur la transcendance vive, est la source et la ressource où s'alimentent toutes les formes de la représentation religieuse.' *Du néant à Dieu dans le savoir romantique,* p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Latour, Bruno. *Rejoicing or the Torments of Religious Speech*. Translated by Julie Rose, Polity, 2013, p. 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Latour, Bruno. "How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion?" *Picturing Science - Producing Art*, edited by Carrie Jones and Peter Galison, Routledge, 1998, p. 428. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Latour: [theology’s] most essential phenomenon, its own original type of mediation, its very core, is defined in the exact terms of another one that goes in completely different directions and produces utterly different objects and subjects. An invisible world of belief is mistakenly built beyond the visible world of science, whereas it is almost the opposite: science gives access to a form of invisibility and religion to a form of visibility: *ego, hic, nunc*.' “How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion?”, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version*,* The Gospel of John, 4:7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 702, v. 5,299-5,302. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Marion, Jean-Luc. *Op. cit.,* p. 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane.* Translated by Willard R. TraskHarcourt, Brace and World, 1959, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Peyrache-Leborgne, Dominique, *La* *Poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au Romantisme,* p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 578, v. 13-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 580, v. 113-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. A lesson undoubtedly learnt from Pascal’s famous phrase in the *Pensées*: “L’homme n’est ni ange ni bête, et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l’ange fait la bête.” Pascal, Blaise. *Les Pensées.*Mignot, 1913, p. 103, originally published in 1670. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 583, v. 255-266. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 585, v. 370-376. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Of course, Marion argues that this is precisely the constitution of our ‘infinitely finite’ human nature [‘*infinie finitude’*], as that of unconditioned being that rebuffs any metaphysical determinants that seek to translate our humanity into an object of study, and which renders impossible the Delphic dictum “know thyself!’. Marion, Jean-Luc. *Certitudes négatives,* p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Philippot, Didier. *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible,* p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Aristotle. *Poetics.* Translated by Samuel Henry Butcher, Macmillan, section IX,1451b, 1922, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. In a neat phrase offered by the late French poet Yves Bonnefoy : ’la poésie ne serait jamais que le rêve que la poésie soit possible.’ *La vérité de parole*. Mercure de France, 1988, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. As Jean Vioulac reminds us in relation to Heidegger’s thought: “‘Le terme de Néant ne renvoie pas à la nullité vide mais à une modalité radicalement autre, et originaire, de déploiement d'essance [*of being-making*].” Vioulac, Jean. *Apocalypse de la vérité : méditations heideggériennes.* Ad Solem, 2014, p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Jossua, Jean-Pierre. “Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo,” p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 586, v. 403-410. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Franke, William. *Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante.* The Ohio State University Press, 2016, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Gleize, Delphine. "Les Paradoxes de la cave pénale. De quelques représentations carcérales dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo," p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. III, p. 1087. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. *Ibid,* p. 973, v. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Godo, Emmanuel. *Victor Hugo et Dieu : bibliographie d'une âme*, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Larangé, Daniel. “La Singularité de la théopoésie. L’écriture théologique du poème *Dieu,*” p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Kearney, Richard. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness.* Routledge, 2003,p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane,* p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Cf. *supra*-thesis, pp. 90-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie*, v. IV, p. 593, v. 703-714. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Charles Taylor summarises this decisive shift in the following manner: 'What the people ask for when they invoke or placate divinities and powers is prosperity, health, long life, fertility; what they ask to be preserved from is disease, dearth, sterility, premature death. There is a certain understanding of human flourishing here which we can immediately understand, and which, however much we might want to add to it, seems to us quite "natural." What there isn't, what seems central to the later "higher" religions, is the idea that we have to question radically this ordinary understanding, that we are called in some way to go beyond it.' Taylor, Charles. “What was the Axial Revolution?” *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Hugo, Victor. *Préface de Cromwell*, p. 13. Cited in Peyrache-Leborgne, *La poétique du sublime,* p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Henry Staten devotes a chapter of his book *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art* to this unattainable goal of literary Romanticism. In it he writes that: ‘the Romantic poet is in a difficult predicament with respect to language, because it is the medium of the poetic craft, of the poet's most authentic self-expression, yet comes from the outside and degrades the immediacy of the self-presence that it articulates, of the authentic self and the natural, proper voice.' Staten, Henry. *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art,* Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death.* Translated by David Wills, University of Chicago Press, 1995,p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. This observation, of course, touches upon Emmanuel Levinas’ distinction between “totality” and “infinity” when discussing ethics and subjectivity in continental philosophy. Cf. Stephens, Bradley, “Thinking ‘Otherwise Than Being’: Levinassian Ethics in Victor Hugo’s ‘La Force des Choses’”, in *Thinking Poetry: Philosophical Approaches to Nineteenth-Century French Poetry,* edited by Joseph Acquisto, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 43-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie*, v. IV, p. 605, v. 1,243-1,250. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables.* Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,tome I, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Cf. Gillespie, Michael Allen. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 278-280. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Rosa, Guy. "Dumoi*-*je au mage : individu et sujet dans le romantisme et chez Victor Hugo" p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 620, v. 1907- 1909. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l’exil,* p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Dalferth, Ingolf U. “The Idea of Transcendence,” pp. 179-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Jossua, Jean-Pierre. "Un essai méconnu de théologie poétique”, p. 673. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Girard, René. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Orbis Books, 2020, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. *Ibid.,* p. 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Godo, Emmanuel. *Victor Hugo et Dieu : bibliographie d'une âme*, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo. Pendant l'exil I, 1851-1864,* p. 589 [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. A nocturnal inversion of the Latin biblical verse ‘*Fiat lux et lux facta est’* (“Let there be light, and the light was made”) in Genesis 1:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Isis-Lilith is an assimilation of two mythical figures: Isis, the Egyptian goddess who was the wife of Osiris, god of the underworld; and Lilith, who, according to Hebrew midrash and kabbalistic doctrine, was the first wife of Adam in *The Book of Genesis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Milner, Max. *Le Diable dans la littérature française de Cazotte à Baudelaire, 1772-1861*. José Corti, 1960, p. 367. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Cited in Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo,* p. 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Ireson, J. C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry*. Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 201-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. I, Robert Laffont, 2002, p. 239, v. 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Babuts, Nicolae. “Hugo's *La Fin de Satan*: The Identity Shift.” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, vol. 35, n. 2, 1981, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Seebacher, Jacques. *Victor Hugo ou le calcul des profondeurs*, p. 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 152, v. 5,933. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Porter : ‘La tentation du retour devint sans doute si forte que Hugo s'en défendit en jurant solennellement, au mois d'avril 1860, de ne jamais rentrer en France. Onze jours plus tôt, il avait définitivement abandonné *La Fin de Satan*, poème de la fin heureuse de l'exil. Il eût trop aggravé son mal du pays en continuant de le composer. Avec acharnement, il se remit aux *Misérables* (intitulés alors *Les Misères*), qu'il devait terminer quatorze mois plus tard.’ Porter, Laurence M. "Pourquoi "La Fin de Satan" est-il resté inachevé ?" *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3/4, 1990, p. 472. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, notice de René Journet, p. 1117. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. ‘Men of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations, who, forming a system of opinions to suit their own unhappy course of conduct, have rebelled against the holiest ordinances of human society, and … labour to make others as miserable as themselves, by infecting them with a virus that eats into the soul!’ Southey, Robert. Preface to *A Vision of Judgement.* Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1821, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Prévost, Maxime. “Chapitre 6. Le Diable : *La Fin de Satan* (posthume).” *Rictus romantiques : Politiques du rire chez Victor Hugo.* Presses de l’université de Montréal, 2002, p. 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Cf. Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality.* Translated by Willard Trask, Allen & Unwin, 1964; Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning.* University of Toronto Press, 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Vico, Giambattista. *First New Science*. Edited and translated by Leon Pompa, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 384 [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Miller, Robert. "Myth as Revelation." *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2014, p. 556. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Hampton, Alexander J. B. *Romanticism and the Re-Invention of Modern Religion: The Reconciliation of German Idealism and Platonic Realism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. A general definition is provided by Stéphane Dufour and Jean-Jacques Boutaud : ‘un processus de sacralisation par lequel une société civile, une communauté ou même un groupe réduit à quelques individus confère la qualité de sacré à des objets a priori illimités.’ Dufour, Stéphane & Boutaud, Jean-Jacques, "Extension du domaine du sacré.” *Questions de communication*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2013, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. “The dragon” (Ancient Greek: ὁ δράκων *ho drakōn*) in *Revelation* 12:9 and *Revelation* 20:2**; “**The ancient serpent” (Ancient Greek: ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος *ho ophis ho arkhaios*) in *Revelation* 12:9 and *Revelation* 20:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Cf. *Book of Job* 1: 6-12; *Matthew* 4:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. *Book of Isaiah*: ‘How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.’ *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Isaiah 14:12-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. ‘And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.’ *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, *Revelation* 20:10. Dante’s depiction, however, presents a frosty abode in his *Inferno,* Cantos XXXIII-XXXIV. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo,* pp. 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Oliver, Harold. "Myth and Metaphysics: Perils of the Metaphysical Translation of Mythical Images." *Metaphysics, Theology, and Self: Relational Essays,* Mercer University Press, 2006, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, *Revelation* 12: 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. *Ibid.,* Luke 10:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Jenny, Laurent. *L’Expérience de la Chute. De Montaigne à Michaux*. Presses universitaires de France, 1997, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Williamson, George. “Myth.” *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought,* edited by Rasmussen, Joel, Judith Wolfe and Johanne Zachhuber, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Laurent Jenny’s study begins with Montaigne and ends with Henri Michaux, with the following trait existing across each chosen work: ‘'A l'encontre de sa signification théologique, on a donc assisté depuis Montaigne à une humanisation et même à un enchantement de la Chute.' *L’expérience de la Chute,* p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Cf. *supra* thesis pp. 116-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 8, v. 200-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Cf. *supra* thesis pp. 68-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 5, v. 96-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. John 14:30. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 111, v. 74-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Prévost, Maxime. *Rictus romantiques. Politiques du rire chez Victor Hugo.* Presses de l’université de Montréal, 2002, p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Cf. *supra* thesis pp.134-136 for an association between amorous exchange and the bridging of the gap created by the ontological difference between human and divine existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. A turning-table appearance of Jesus Christ on the 22nd of March 1855 described Satan as ‘le blessé de la barricade céleste’, foreshadowing Gavroche’s own fate later to be written in *Les Misérables.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Rétat goes on to make the further important point that ‘'L'abîme est en quelque sorte le lieu de réversibilité du tyran et du dieu’ - an ambiguous space where the political hegemony of rulers cannot spread. Claude Rétat, *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo,* pp. 110-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Prévost, Maxime. *Op. cit.,* p. 333. This interpretation is a reprisal of Baudelaire’s analysis in *De l’essence du rire*. *Curiosités esthétiques.* *Œuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, Michel Lévy frères, vol. II, pp. 359-387. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Cf. Plato’s *Philebus, §*48-50*;* Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,§4-8; Psalm 2: ‘He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure’, *The Bible,* authorised King James Version, Psalm 2: 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 3, v. 26- 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Most notably St Augustine’s definition of evil as *privatio boni* in his disputes with Gnosticism, extensively articulated in his work *Contra Faustum* (400 AD). [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity.* Translated by Bettina Bergo and Gabriel Malenfant, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 121, v. 523-533. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Genesis 3:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Cf. Brague, Rémi. *Le Règne de l’homme : Genèse et échec du projet moderne.* Gallimard, 2015,p. 44-52. René Girard also picks up on this need for Satan to imitate, writing that ‘the devil does not have a stable foundation; he has no *being* at all. To clothe himself in the semblance of being, he must act as a parasite on God's creatures. He is totally mimetic, which amounts to saying *nonexistent as an individual self.’ I see Satan Fall Like Lightning,* p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 15, v. 483-494. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Cf. Livorni, Ernesto. "The First Murder: The Myth of Cain and Abel in Modern Poetry." *Annali d'Italianistica*, vol. 25, 2007, pp. 409-434. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Byron, George Gordon. “Cain: A Mystery.” *The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry,* edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, vol. 5, Octagon Books*,* 1966, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Cf. *supra* thesis, p.87 & pp. 132-134 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. 'On a vu que, brodant sur les données de ce chapitre X, certains *Écrits intertestamentaires,* ainsi que l'historien Flavius Josèphe, avaient fait de Nemrod, non seulement le fondateur de la ville, mais aussi le "commanditaire" de la tour, donnant ainsi un chef à une entreprise initialement collective.' Parizet, Sylvie. “Naissance et développement du mythe littéraire”, in *Babel : ordre ou chaos ? Nouveaux enjeux du mythe dans les œuvres de la Modernité littéraire,* UGA éditions, 2010. Accessed on the 15/04/2020 at <http://books.openedition.org/egaeditions/6249>. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. The twin sources most readily attributable to “Le Glaive” are Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1783), a work Hugo consulted since the composition of *Les Orientales* in 1828, and Louis Dubeux’s *Chronique d’Abu-Djafar Mohammed Tabari* (1836), both of which relate this version of Nimrod’s rebellion against God. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo,* p. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Porter, Laurence M. "Pourquoi "La Fin de Satan" est-il resté inachevé ?", pp. 469-470. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. It is interesting to compare these two mythical narratives in light of their common cultural tradition in the ancient Near East. Both dramatise a newfound predatory nature in humankind that J.W Rogerson points towards as a fundamental shift in post-diluvian *Genesis*: 'The world described in Gen 1 is a vegetarian world, vegetarian for animals as well as humans. In other words, the world described in Gen 1 is not the world of our experience, but one in which there is harmony and peace between humans and animals. The world of our experience, in which there is enmity between humans and animals and in which humans are not vegetarian, does not come into existence until after the flood.' Rogerson, John. W. "“Myth” in the Old Testament." *Myth and Scripture*, edited by Dexter Callender, Society of Biblical Literature, 2014, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 18, v. 547- 551. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. A phrase of Hugo’s describing Napoleon I in *William Shakespeare,* cited inOusselin, Edward. "Madame de Staël et Victor Hugo face à la réalité et la légende napoléoniennes." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1/2, 2007, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Hugo, Victor. *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo : Napoléon-le-petit, Tome XIII.* Edited by Jacques Seebacher and Guy Rosa, Robert Laffont: Bouquins, 1987, p. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Cf. Dubois, Claude-Gilbert. *L’Imaginaire de la Renaissance.* Presses universitaires de France,1985, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 21, v. 669-674. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Manoussakis, John Panteleimon. "Sacred Addictions: On the Phenomenology of Religious Experience." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2019, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 25, v. 976-981. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Otherwise known as scapegoating, which purges the escalating *animus* involved in mimetic rivalry and which Girard defines in three different ways: ‘"scapegoat" designates (1) the victim of the ritual described in Leviticus, (2) all the victims of similar rituals that exist in archaic societies and that are called rituals of expulsion, and finally (3) all the phenomena of non-ritualized collective transference that we observe or believe we observe around us.' Girard, René. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning,* p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 27, v. 1,039-1,049. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Greisch, Jean. "Cinquième leçon. Le « Seigneur de l’être » et l’historicité de l’Absolu." *Du ‘Non Autre’ au ‘Tout Autre’,* Presses universitaires de France, 2012, pp. 301-302. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Genesis 14: 18-20 is the only passage in the Bible that mentions Melchizedek, king of Salem, who presented bread and wine to Abraham. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 28, v. 1,095-1,104. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 36, v. 1,403-1,408. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Jossua, Jean-Pierre. "Essai sur la poétique théologique de Hugo." *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1980, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Of course, the crucifixion of Jesus complicates this tenet, as we shall later see. Commonly cited ancient dying gods include the Egyptian god Osiris, the Mesopotamian god Tammuz, and the Greek gods Adonis, Attis, and Dionysus. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Cf. Journet, René & Robert, Guy. *Contribution aux études sur Victor Hugo : le texte de La Fin de Satan dans le manuscrit B.N. n.a. fr. 24.754.* Les Belles-Lettres, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Cf. *supra* thesis, pp. 84-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. ‘German Idealism in the early to mid-nineteenthcentury attempted to resolve these apparent problems through a re-affirmation of the Neoplatonic concept of *methexis,* wherein rational creatures are called through the mediation of *Eros* to participate in the superlative qualities of God, but who is otherwise inaccessibly transcendent. For thinkers such as Hegel and Schelling, this ultimately meant that a living God, or more accurately, the Absolute Idea in its relation to the natural world, must be contingent to the suffering of evil as experienced by individual consciousness. However, this theoretical explanation remained incomplete, as it failed to replace the orthodox Christian understanding of evil as *privatio boni* with a rigorous substitute that fully accounted for gratuitous violence.’ Fiddes, Paul. “Suffering in Theology and Modern European Thought.” *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought,* edited by Nicholas Adams, George Pattison and Graham Ward, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 36, v. 1,384-1,390. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. More specifically, as preceding a commission by God: Cf. Abraham’s binding of Isaac in Gen 22:1; Jacob’s returning to Canaan in Gen 31:11; Moses leading the Jewish people from Egypt in Exodus 3:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Although begun by Hugo as a literary exercise back in 1846. Hugo’s primary source was the French version of the Bible translated by M. Lemaistre de Saci, first printed in 1667, drawing particularly on Matthew’s Gospel. The other indispensable source material mined for developing the setting of Judea was *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde,* Bernard Picart, L. Prudhomme, Amsterdam, 1730. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. J.C. Ireson sees an unavoidable gamble in holding this tension: 'Presumably, Hugo accepted at the outset that the pursuit of divinity as a poetic theme would have to be given a narrative or dramatic formulation, and that, however skilfully the dramatic suspense was prolonged, the result would risk being an anticlimax.' Ireson, J. C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry,* p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Michelet to Hugo, 4 May 1856, cited in Hovasse, *Victor Hugo,* p. 588. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Hugo to Michelet, 9 May 1856, cited in Hovasse, *Victor Hugo,* p. 588. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. *William Shakespeare :*  'Toute la Bible est entre deux visionnaires, Moïse et Jean. Ce poème des poèmes s'ébauche par le chaos dans la Genèse et s'achève dans l'Apocalypse par des tonnerres.' Cited in Reynaud, Jean-Pierre. “Bible et roman chez Hugo : une passion orageuse.” Presentation given to the Groupe Hugo on the 25th of September 2010. Accessed online on 9/03/2020 at <http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/doc/10-09-25reynaud.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Judges 1:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 54, v. 2,077-2,082. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. There is cross-over with passages written across 1856 for “L’océan d’en haut” in *Dieu*, most notably the speech of the owl.  [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. '*L'écriture* and orality are both “privileged”, each in its own distinctive way. Without textualism, orality cannot even be identified; without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation - which can be endlessly titillating, even at those times when it is not especially informative.' Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: 30th Anniversary Edition.* Routledge, 2013, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Callender, Dexter E. “Myth and Scripture: Dissonance and Convergence.” *Myth and Scripture,* edited by Dexter Callender, Society of Biblical Literature, 2014, pp.45-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Ong: 'The romantic quest for “pure poetry”, sealed off from real-life concerns, derives from the feel for autonomous utterance created by writing and, even more, the feel for closure created by print. Nothing shows more strikingly the close, mostly unconscious, alliance of the Romantic movement with technology.' Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy,* p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Cf. *supra* thesis, p. 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 55, v. 2,120-2,129. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Cf. *supra* thesis, p. 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Manoussakis, John. *Op. cit.,* p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Most notably the Cumaean Sibyl. There has been nonetheless wide religious interpretation of the sibyllic prophecies, written across fourteen books in the *Oracula Sibyllina*, compiled and re-published in Hugo’s time by Charles Alexandre between 1841 and 1856.  [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Rogghe, Simon. "La Sibylle" as Ghost Work in Hugo's *La Fin de Satan*." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1/2, 2019-2020, p. 76; Fizaine, Jean-Claude. “Les Trois figures de l’autorité dans *Le Gibet*. Quelques précisions sur la poétique de l’exil chez Victor Hugo.” *L’interview d’écrivain. Figures bibliques d’autorité,* edited by Sylvie Triaire, Marie Blaise and Marie-Ève Thérenty, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2004, p. 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 96, v. 3,724-3,732. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Romano, Claude. “Awaiting.” *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not Yet in the Now,* edited by Neal DeRoo and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Ashgate, 2009, p. 47.  [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Barabbas is mentioned by the three synoptic Gospel writers as “a notable prisoner” (Matthew 27:16) and an aggressor in the insurrection against the Roman who committed murder (Mark 15: 7; Luke 23:19). *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are reported to have taken down the body of Jesus after his execution and laid it in the sepulchre, as related in John 19:38-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 97, v. 3,777-3,789. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Ireson, J. C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry,* p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. ‘Every man has a conscience and finds himself observed, threatened, and, in general, kept in awe (respect coupled with fear) by an internal judge; and this authority watching over the law in him is not something that he himself (voluntarily) *makes,* but something incorporated into his being.’ Kant, Immanuel. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 233 [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. The concept is Pauline in origin:‘Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.’ *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Philippians 2:6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. *Ekénōsen* in Greek. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Journet, René. “Notice to *La Fin de Satan”*, in *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 1121. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 101, v. 3,975-3,984. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. Cf. Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity,* p. 144; Brague, Rémi. *Le Règne de l’homme,* p. 42- 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* pp. 106-107, v. 4,206-4,214. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Girard, René. *Op. cit.,* pp. 149-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. In early Patristic theology, the *“prosopon*” was a term used to mean “divine person.” Its main function was to explain both the nature of the three divine persons in the Trinity and Christ’s dual nature in Christology. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Pascual, Pilar Suárez & Amieiro, Margarita Alfaro. “L’allégorie du Mal. Deux époques, deux perspectives.” *Analecta Husserliana XLII,* edited by Marlies Kronegger and Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Barnett, Marva. *Victor Hugo on Things that Matter,* Yale University Press, 2009, p. 10*.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Journet, René. “Notes to *La Fin de Satan”*, in Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV, p. 1118. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 137, v. 5,363-5,376. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Ireson points out, moreover, the inconsistency of Satan’s respite from punishment within the greater plot: 'The epic movement comes dangerously close to *bathos* when, after long passages of complaint against the eternal wakefulness imposed on him in his imprisonment, Satan falls asleep and has to be reawakened by his daughter Liberty, petitioning for his consent to her intervening in human life on earth.' Ireson, J. C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry*, p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. ‘And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.’ *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, *Revelation* 9:1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 143, v. 5,610-5,619. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Claude Rétat notes a similarity between the descent of Liberty into the underworld and the marriage of Pluto and Proserpine in Greek mythology. Rétat, *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo,* pp. 35-36*.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Frye, Northrop. "Concern and Myth." *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*, edited by Michael Dolzani, University of Toronto Press, 2008, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Cf. Gillespie, Michael Allen. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, p. 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 147, v. 5,802-5,806. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 137, v. 5,382-5,390. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Frye, Northrop. “Spirit and Symbol”, in *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*, (ed) Dolzani, M., University of Toronto Press, 2008, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Romano, Claude. “Awaiting”, pp. 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. IV*,* p. 137, v. 5,352 -5,359. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Lunn-Rockliffe, Katherine. "Humanity's Struggle with Nature in Victor Hugo's Poetry of Progress." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 107, no. 1, 2012, p. 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. ‘Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.’ *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Genesis 1:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. The “*modo*” of modernity. Cf. Rosa, Hartmut. *Accélération. Une critique sociale du temps.* Translated by Didier Renault, La Découverte, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, Robert Laffont, 2002, p. 568. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Cf. *supra* thesis pp. 61-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Cf. *supra* thesis pp. 84-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Millet, Claude. *Victor Hugo : La Légende des siècles*. Presses universitaires de France, 1995, p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. Hovasse elaborates on the deliberation of titles that led to Hugo’s eventual choice: 'Quant au nouveau titre, Victor Hugo préférait *La Légende humaine* à *La Légende épique de l'homme,* trop long, ou à *Ébauches épiques,* qui présentait finalement le même inconvénient que *Les Petites Épopées*.' Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo. Pendant l'exil I,* p. 518. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 565. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Millet, Claude. *Victor Hugo : La Légende des siècles*, p. 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. Metzidakis, Angelo. "Victor Hugo and the Idea of the United States of Europe." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1/2, 1994, pp. 72-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Robb, Graham. *Victor Hugo*. Picador, 1997, p. 506. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. For a short history of the tumultuous but mutually-productive relationship between Veuillot and Hugo, see Compagnon, Antoine. "Apologie de l’éreintage : sur Veuillot et Hugo." *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, vol. 119, no. 4, 2019, pp. 833-850. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Cuchet, Guillaume. "Trois aspects de la crise des représentations de l'action de Dieu dans l'histoire au XIXe siècle." *Transversalités,* vol. 128, no. 4, 2013, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Hence, the structure of Bossuet’s *Discours* begins with the creation of Adam and ends with the reign of Charlemagne, tracing the rise of Christendom and ending on the divine justification of monarchical authority. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Millet, Claude. “Bloc, événement - une représentation de l’Histoire dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo.” Presentation given to Groupe Hugo on 6 april 2002. Accessed on the 6/3/2020 at

     <http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/groupugo/02-04-06millet.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Indeed, Bossuet’s work shares a genealogy to St. Augustine’s *City of God* (426 AD). [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. *Ibid.,* p. 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Cf. *supra* thesis, pp. 197-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Cf. Vioulac, Jean. “Apocalypse de la vérité : Heidegger et la question de ‘l’autre commencement’”, *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, tome 108, n. 3, 2010, p. 463 : 'Le Mystère ne peut jamais advenir dans un décèlement, il ne peut advenir que dans un *dévoilement*, c'est-à-dire la levée des conditions assignée à la phénoménalité. L'événement d'une donation de ce que les conditions de la manifestation dissimulent expressément doit se nommer *révélation.*' [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Millet, Claude. “Le Dernier jour du monde : fins de l’histoire, catastrophes, et apocalypse dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo.” *Dix-Neuf,* vol. 20, no. 3/4, 2016, p. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Most notably in the *Book of Isaiah* and *The Book of Job:* ‘Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, and the noise of thy viols: the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee.’ (Isaiah, 14: 11); **‘**The womb shall forget him; the worm shall feed sweetly on him; he shall be no more remembered; and wickedness shall be broken as a tree.’ (Job 24: 20). *The Bible.* Authorized King James Version. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. *The Book of Revelation* 12:3-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* vol. II, p. 363, v. 1-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Cf. *supra* thesis, pp. 159-216. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Cf. Laforgue, Pierre. “ ‘Océan’ : texte, poésie, poème (février 1854).” *Genesis,* vol.45, 2017, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. *Ibid.,* p. 457, v. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. *Ibid.,* p. 457, v. 3-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Fragment 438 : ‘Roseau pensant. — Ce n’est point de l’espace que je dois chercher ma dignité, mais c’est du règlement de ma pensée. Je n’aurai pas davantage en possédant des terres : par l’espace, l’univers me comprend et m’engloutit comme un point ; par la pensée, je le comprends.’ Pascal, Blaise. *Les* *Pensées,*Mignot, 1913, p. 63.  [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Peyrache-Leborgne : 'Montesquieu lui-même, dans son *Essai sur le goût*, réactive les valeurs nobiliaires en distinguant le "bas", réservé au peuple, et le sublime, disposition esthétique propre aux gens bien nés et aux grands esprits.' Peyrache-Leborgne, Dominique, *La* *Poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au Romantisme,* p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 371, v. 313-324. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. *Ibid.,* p. 381, v. 1-2. In his notes to this additional poem, Jean Delabroy cites its inclusion as ‘l’ajout avant publication d’un correctif - ici pour empêcher le principe de négation, dont le ver est l’emblème, de devenir, au-delà de la décomposition des orgueils humains, le support d’une métaphysique nihiliste. Bref, une négation de la négation.’ “Notices et Notes”, p. 1432. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, pp. 459- 460, v. 104-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Psalm 22: 6 is a prime example of self-identification with the lowly and wretched: **‘**But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.’ *The Bible,* KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Peyrache-Leborgne, Dominique. *La* *Poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au Romantisme* p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 377, v. 598-603. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. *Ibid.,* p. 381, v. 21- 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Gauthier, Claudine. "Temps et eschatologie." *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, vol. 162, no. 2, 2013, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 469, v. 497-508. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Gauthier : 'Cette conceptualisation du temps comme s'écoulant dans la succession du passé, du présent et du futur est typique du système forgé par la tradition chrétienne où le temps est perçu comme linéaire et progressif, ayant eu un début et tendant vers une fin qui est une réalisation, vécue dans une tension située entre l'autrefois - la Création du Monde et la faute d'Adam -, le déjà - la Passion du Christ - et ce pas encore qu'est l'attente de la Parousie.' “Temps et eschatologie*”*, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. I, p. 631, v. 1. Interestingly, the same image of a downward spiralling structure that appears in “La Vision d’où est sorti ce livre” is prefigured in lines 5-8: ‘Une pente insensible / Va du monde réel à la sphère invisible ; / La spirale est profonde, et quand on y descend, / Sans cesse se prolonge et va s’élargissant.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Amidst the table-turning sessions, Hugo’s diary entries display a heightened sensitivity to midnight phantasms, claiming that he was visited one evening by the ‘Dame blanche’ issuing from a previous *séance.* Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo. Pendant l'exil I,* pp. 266-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Such as Abraham’s dream in *Genesis* 15:12 or the reception of prophecy in *Isaiah* 29:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Cf. *Daniel* 7:1-28; *Ecclesiastes* 5:3 (‘For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words’); *Joel* 2:28 (‘And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions’). KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Hovasse, Jean-Marc. *Victor Hugo. Pendant l'exil I,* p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Franke, William. "Dante and the Secularisation of Religion through Literature." *Religion & Literature*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2013, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 189, v. 1-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Marguerite Mouton directs our attention to the fact that it is repetition and variation on a theme that build order in the Hugolian-style epic: 'En effet, si l'épopée hugolienne peut être brève, elle n'est pas destruction systématique du sens (c'est-à-dire à la fois de toute direction et de toute signification) : si elle pratique la répétition et la variation, c'est pour mettre en place un ordre propre, et non pour vider le réel de tout sens.' Mouton, Marguerite. “La vision épique dans *Notre-Dame de Paris* et *La Légende des siècles.*” Presentation given to Groupe Hugo on 14 March 2015. Accessed on the 14/4/2020 at <http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/doc/15-03-14mouton.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 678, v. 125-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. With the angel in part VII of “L’Océan d’en haut” asserting in a line-break without a following rhyme:‘pas d’enfer éternel!'’ Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie*, v. IV, p. 669, v. 3,842. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Cf. *supra* thesis, pp. 177-183. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. Peyrache-Leborgne, Dominique. *La* *Poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au Romantisme,* p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. On a minimal level in poetic meter, this constitutes the line-breaks in versification, as well as additionally chosen features such as the disjunct caused by enjambment, cacophonic word choices, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 192, v. 153-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 193, v. 191-195. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. Jean-Louis Chrétien cites Lamartine as designating this specific fascination with organic ruin as “ruine en action”, distinguishing it from the general Romantic fascination with historical ruins and their apparently static nature. Cf. Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *Fragilité,* Minuit, 2017, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 693, v. 741-758. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Cf. *supra* thesis, pp. 202-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. Based on the Great Commission passage in *Matthew* 28: 19-20 (‘Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.’), as well as the papal primacy declaration of *Matthew* 16: 18-19 (‘And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’). KJV [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Kearney, Richard. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*. Indiana University Press, 2001, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. *Ibid.,* p. 103-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. Philippot, Didier. *Victor Hugo et la vaste ouverture du possible,* p. 231, italics are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, pp. 193-194, v. 196-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Cf. Colbert, Benjamin. "Romantic Palingenesis, or History from the Ashes." *European Romantic Review*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2017, pp. 369-378. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. Millet, Claude. “Bloc, événement - une représentation de l’Histoire dans l’œuvre de Victor Hugo.”, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Peyrache-Leborgne, Dominique. *La* *Poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au Romantisme*, p. 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. Of course, as it should by now be clear, there can be no direct or complete assimilation from the poems to any particular religion or their soteriological doctrine. As Claude Millet states: ‘'Dieu est l'horizon du sens de cette Histoire eschatologique, qui n'est sacrée que pour autant qu'elle est profane: elle n'est digne d'un respect absolu (et non vaine), et n'a de dimension religieuse que pour autant qu'elle ne se replie plus dans les discours séparés (mythes, légendes, livres, histoires sacrées) des religions instituées, mais s'engage dans la totalité du devenir universel.' Millet, Claude. *Victor Hugo : La Légende des siècles,* p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, “Notices et Notes” de Jean Gaudon, p. 1084. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. Dorfiac, Claude. "Millénarisme et Utopie." *Quaderni*, vol. 42, 2000, p. 19. Dorfiac cites Étienne Cabet’s *Voyage en Icarie* (1840)as a prime example of this revived socialist utopianism in Hugo’s era. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. *Ibid.,* p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l'exil,* p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. *Job* 41: 34. KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. The section runs from 41:1-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. *Isaiah* 27:1: ‘In that day the LORD with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that *is* in the sea’; Psalms 104:26: ‘There go the ships: [there is] that leviathan, [whom] thou hast made to play therein.’ ; Psalm 74:13-14; Psalm 18:8. KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. *Revelation* 20:2. KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Later in “Plein Ciel”, Hobbes and Spinoza are presented as two philosophers in need of edification: ‘Il [le navire] ramène au vrai ceux que le faux repousse ; / Il fait briller la foi dans l’œil de Spinoza / Et l’espoir sur le front de Hobbe (v.379-381).’ [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 806, v. 63-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. *Revelation* 12:3: ‘And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.’ Cf. Daniel 7: 1-7. KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 807, v. 71-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 809, v. 175-184. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Ireson, J.C. *Victor Hugo: A Companion to His Poetry,* p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 811, v. 258-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. Cf. the figure of Isis-Lilith in *supra* thesis, pp. 212-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. Agamben, Giorgio. *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini, Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 111-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. *Ibid.,* p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 819, v. 583-601. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. *Exodus* 3:14: ‘And God said unto Moses, I Am That I Am: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you.’ KJV [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. Cf. Jacques Derrida’s concept of “messianicité sans messianisme” in Derrida, Jacques. *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas.* Translated by Alan Bass, Routledge Classics, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 820-821, v. 661-672. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. Catharine Diehl: ‘Kant does not provide a specific form for historical time, a principle for the continuity of action...Instead, in acting - and acting not as isolated subjects but through the idea of humanity as a whole - human beings put into practice an idea, a hope, for an end or a sense. Insofar as this idea accompanies our actions, history can emerge as something beyond all experience or constitutive principles. It is in this sense that history arises "negatively" for Kant: It is neither presentable in the time of natural science nor does it have its own phenomenally accessible form of time.’ Diehl, Catharine. "The Demand for an End: Kant and the Negative Conception of History." *Messianic Thought Outside Theology*, edited by Anna Glazova and Paul North, Fordham University Press, 2014, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 822, v. 709-726. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Rétat, Claude. *X, ou le divin dans la poésie de Victor Hugo à partir de l'exil.* CNRS éditions, 1999, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. The opening poem to Book VI of *Les Contemplations,* introducing ‘un fantôme blanc’ as ‘la prière’, bears the title of “Le Pont.” Hugo, Victor. *OC : Poésie,* v. II, p. 467. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. Cf. *Supra-thesis,* p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Godo, Emmanuel. *Victor Hugo et Dieu : bibliographie d'une âme*. Cerf, 2001, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. For a detailed overview of this theory, see Swatos, William H., and Kevin J. Christiano. “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept.” *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1999, pp. 209–228. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Though the term has gained traction since Jurgen Habermas’ essay “Notes on a post-secular society”, *New Perspectives Quarterly,* 25, 2008, pp.17-29, its definition is still under revision. Cf. *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity,* (ed) Beaumont, Justin, Routledge, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. An approach already laid out in Jean-Luc Nancy’s work *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity.* (Trans) Bergo, Bettina & Malenfant, Gabriel, Fordham University Press, 2008. For important theoretical context, cf. Meganck, Erik. “Desecularisation: thinking secularisation beyond metaphysics”, *Angelaki,* 26:3-4, pp. 178-194. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Michel Henry’s work offers one such resource in this regard, explicating as he does the early Patristic hermeneutic on the Incarnation in its relevance to lived experience as well as its reductive adaptation in early modern philosophy. Cf. Henry, Michel. *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair,* Seuil, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. Cf. Hogan, Patrick Colm. “What Literature Teaches Us About Emotion: Synthesizing Affective Science and Literary Studies”, *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies,* (ed) Zunshine, Lisa, 2015, pp. 273-287.  [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. Bénichou, Paul. *Les Mages romantiques*. Gallimard, 1988 ; *Le Sacre de l’Écrivain, 1750-1780. Essai sur l’avènement d’un pouvoir spirituel laïque dans la France moderne*. José Corti, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. Godo, Emmanuel. *Victor Hugo et Dieu*, pp. 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. Hugo, Victor. *OC : Voyages,* p. 1099. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)