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**Edited by Franco Moretti:**

**The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes**

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UMBERTO ECO

## Excess and History in Hugo's *Ninety-three*

In 1902, a small review, *L'Hermitage*, asked two hundred French writers who their favorite poet was. André Gide replied, "Hugo, hélas!" Gide would have to go to great lengths in the years to come to explain his statement.<sup>1</sup> In the present essay I am not particularly interested in this episode, since Gide was speaking of Hugo the poet, but his cry (of pain? disappointment? begrudging admiration?) weighs heavily on the shoulders of anyone who has ever been invited to judge Hugo the novelist—or even the author of a single novel. Such is the case with this revisitation of *Ninety-three*.

Alas (*bélas!*), however many shortcomings in the novel one can list and analyze, starting with its oratorical incontinence, the same defects appear splendid when we begin to delve into the wound with our scalpel. Like a worshiper of Bach and his disembodied, almost mental architecture, who discovers that Beethoven has achieved mightier tones than many more temperate harpsichords ever could—why fight the urge to surrender? Who could be immune to the power of the Fifth or Ninth Symphony?

Was Hugo the greatest French novelist of his century? With good reason you might prefer Stendhal, Balzac, or Flaubert. Reread *Ninety-three*, however, and you become enthralled by the power of excess. It is this attraction that we shall explore, in a book that, like Hugo's other novels, turns excess into a golden mean and thrills us through sheer excess. You could avoid entering a Pantagruelian feast, but once you are in the game, it makes no sense to recall your dietician's advice or to yearn for the delicate flavors of *nouvelle cuisine*. If you have the stomach to join in an orgy, the experience will be memorable. Otherwise it is better to leave immediately and fall asleep reading the aphorisms of an eighteenth-century gentleman. Hugo is not for the faint of heart. While the battle of the Hernani may be a belated form of *Sturm und Drang*, the shadow of that storm and stress was still illuminating the last romantic in 1874, the date of the novel's publication, though not of its gestation.

I am well aware that I love Hugo because of his sublime excessiveness, which I have celebrated elsewhere: Excess can transform even bad writing and banality into Wagnerian tempests. To explain the allure of a film like

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<sup>1</sup> For the story of this reply and the ensuing justifications, see André Gide, *Hugo, hélas*, ed. Claude Martin (Paris: Editions Fata Morgana, 2002).

*Casablanca*, I have argued that while a single cliché produces kitsch; a hundred clichés, scattered around shamelessly, become epic. I once remarked that while the *Count of Monte Cristo* may be badly written (unlike other novels by Dumas, such as the *Three Musketeers*), redundant, and verbose, it is precisely because of these bad qualities, pushed beyond reasonable limits, that it borders on the sublime dynamic of Kantian memory and justifies its grip on the attention of millions of readers.<sup>2</sup>

Going back to *Ninety-three*, let us try to understand what is meant by excess. Before doing so, let me summarize the story that, at its heart, is elementary, sufficiently melodramatic, and, in the hands of an Italian librettist, could have produced the equivalent of, say, *Tosca* or *Il Trovatore* (but without the musical commentary that allows us to take the verses seriously).

It is the *annus horribilis* of the revolution. The Vendée has risen in revolt. An elderly aristocrat, a skilled warrior, the marquis of Lantenac, has come ashore to take command of the peasant masses, who are emerging from mysterious forests like demons, firing their weapons while saying the rosary. The revolution, which is expressed through the Convention, has sent its men against him. First comes Gauvain (Lantenac's nephew), a young aristocrat turned republican, of a feminine beauty, blazing with war yet also an angelic utopian who still hopes that the conflict can be settled through mercy and respect for one's enemy. Next is Cimourdain, whom we would call a police commissioner today: a priest as ruthless in his way as Lantenac, he is convinced that the only way to achieve social and political regeneration is through a bloodbath, and that today's pardoned hero is tomorrow's murderous enemy. Cimourdain, in yet another coincidence (melodrama has its demands), was once the tutor of the young Gauvain and loves him like a son. Hugo never conjures up a passion that is anything other than the total identification of a man—chaste because of his faith and later because of his revolutionary fervor—with spiritual fatherhood. But who knows? Cimourdain's passion is fierce, total, and carnally mystic.

In this struggle between revolution and reaction, Lantenac and Gavain attempt to kill each other, clashing and fleeing in a spiral of nameless massacres. Yet this story of multiple horrors opens with a battalion of republican soldiers coming upon a starving widow and her three children. They decide to adopt the little ones on a radiant day in May. The children

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<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco, "Casablanca, o la rinascita degli dei," in *Dalla periferia all'impero* (Milan: Bompiani, 1977), 138–46; and "Elogio del Montecristo," in *Sugli specchi e altri saggi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1985), 147–58.

will later be captured by Lantenac, who shoots the mother and takes the little republican mascots hostage. The mother survives the execution and wanders about desperately looking for her children. The republicans fight to free the three innocent prisoners, who are locked in the gloomy medieval tower where Lantenac will later be attacked by Gauvain. Lantenac manages to escape through a secret passageway, but his followers set fire to the tower. With the children's lives hanging in the balance, the distraught mother reappears, and Lantenac (who undergoes a transfiguration from Satan into Lucifer, the guardian angel) reenters the tower, rescues the children, and brings them to safety, allowing himself to be captured by his enemies.

Cimourdain arranges for a trial right then and there, bringing in a guillotine for the occasion. In the meantime Gauvain wonders whether it is right to execute a man who has already paid for his errors through an act of generosity. He enters the prisoner's cell, where Lantenac reaffirms the rights of the throne and of the altar in a long monologue. In the end Gauvain allows him to escape and takes his place in the cell. When Cimourdain learns of this gesture, he has no choice but to put Gauvain on trial and cast the deciding vote for the death of the only person he has ever loved.

The recurrent motif of the three children accompanies the tormented adventures of Gauvain, who in the name of kindness and mercy submits to the punishment he has brought on himself. Both motifs cast a ray of hope on a future that can only be ushered in through human sacrifice. The entire army raises its voice, demanding grace for its commander, but to no avail. Although he is deeply moved, Cimourdain is a man who has dedicated his life to duty and law. He is the guardian of the revolutionary purity that has come to be identified with terror, or rather, with the Terror. Yet at the moment that Gauvain's head rolls into the basket, Cimourdain takes his own life with a pistol: "And those two souls, tragic sisters, took flight together, the shadow of the one blending with the light of the other."<sup>3</sup>

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Is that it? Hugo only wanted to make us weep? Not at all. My first observation has to be made in narratological rather than political terms. Today the repertory of every scholar of narrative structures (I promise to avoid erudite references to secondary theoretical variants) includes the idea that while there are indeed actors in a story, they are embodiments of "actants," narrative roles

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Hugo, *Ninety-three*, trans. Frank Lee Benedict (1874; New York: Carroll and Graff, 1998). Subsequent quotations will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

through which the actor goes, perhaps changing his function in the plot structure.<sup>4</sup> For example, in a novel like *The Betrothed*, the forces of evil or human weakness can act against the forces of providence, which controls everyone's destinies, and an actor like the Unnamed One can suddenly change from being an Opponent to being a Helper. Hence, by comparison to actors tethered to an immutable actantial role, such as Don Rodrigo, on the one hand, and Fra Cristoforo, on the other, the ambiguity of Don Abbondio makes sense: an earthenware crock in the midst of iron pots, he constantly drifts from one role to the other, ultimately making him seem worthy of our forgiveness.

By the time the elderly Hugo finally started to write the novel he had long contemplated (he had mentioned it some years earlier in the preface to the *Man Who Laughs*), his youthful political and ideological positions had undergone a profound change. As a young man he had expressed legitimist ideas and sympathized for the Vendée, seeing 1793 as a dark spot in the blue sky of 1789. He later shifted toward liberal and then socialist principles. After the coup d'état of Louis Napoleon, he gravitated toward socialist, democratic, and republican positions. In his 1841 admission speech to the French Academy, he paid homage to the Convention, "which broke the throne and saved the country . . . which committed acts and outrages that we might detest and condemn, but which we must still admire." While he could not understand the Paris Commune, after the Restoration he fought for amnesty for the communards. The gestation and publication of *Ninety-three* coincide with his completed evolution toward more radical positions. To understand the Commune, he also had to justify the Terror. A long-standing opponent of the death penalty, he was mindful, nevertheless, of the reactionary lesson of an author he knew well, Joseph de Maistre: he knew that redemption and purification also come about through the horrors of human sacrifice.

Hugo's mentions de Maistre in book 1, chapter 4 of *Les misérables*, in the scene where Monsignor Myriel contemplates the guillotine:

He who sees it quakes with the most mysterious of tremblings. . . . The scaffold is a vision. . . . It seems a sort of being which had some sombre origin of which we can have no idea; one would say that this frame sees, that this

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<sup>4</sup> [Translator's note: The term *actant* was coined by the French structuralist Algirdas Julien Greimas to describe a form of agency in the text distinct from that of the "actor," since several characters in a narrative may embody a single actant. His fundamental work on the subject is *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976).]

machine understands, that this mechanism comprehends; that this wood, this iron, and these ropes have a will. . . . The scaffold becomes the accomplice of the executioner; it devours, it eats flesh, and it drinks blood . . . a spectre which seems to live with a kind of unspeakable life, drawn from all the death which it has wrought.<sup>5</sup>

But in *Ninety-three* the guillotine, which will claim the life of the revolution's purest hero, passes from the side of death to the side of life. A symbol of the future in contrast to the gloomiest symbols of the past, it is erected in front of the Tourge, the stronghold where Lantenac is under siege. The tower condenses fifteen hundred years of feudal sins, a tough knot to untangle. Before it stands the guillotine, as pure as the blade that slices the knot. The guillotine was not born *ex nihilo*: it was fertilized by blood spilt for fifteen centuries on that same land. It arises from the depths of the earth, an unknown vindicator, and says to the tower, "I am your daughter." And the tower senses that the end is near. This was not a new analogy for Hugo. It recalls *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, when Frollo compares the printed book to the cathedral's towers and gargoyles: "Ceci tuera cela." While the guillotine is always and still a monster, in *Ninety-three* it takes the side of the future.

What do you call a ferocious, death-sowing monster that promises a better life? An oxymoron. Victor Brombert has commented on the many oxymora that populate the novel: rapacious angel, intimate disagreement, colossal sweetness, odiously helpful, terrible peacefulness, venerable innocents, tremendous misery, hell in full daybreak, and Lantenac himself, who at one point shifts from being an infernal Satan to being a celestial Lucifer.<sup>6</sup> The oxymoron is "a rhetorical microcosm that affirms the substantially antithetical nature of the world," although Brombert emphasizes that the antitheses are ultimately resolved into a higher order. *Ninety-three* relates the story of a virtuous crime, a healing act of violence whose deep purposes must be understood for its episodes to be justified. *Ninety-three* aims to be not the story of what some men did but rather the story of what history forced those men to do, independently of their will, which is often fraught with contradictions. And the idea of those purposes justifies even the force ostensibly opposed to such purposes, the Vendée.

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<sup>5</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les misérables*, trans. Charles E. Wilbour (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 16. Subsequent quotations will be referenced parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 203–29.

This leads us back to the relationship between small actors and actants in the novel. Each individual and object, from Marat to the guillotine, represents not so much itself as the great forces that are the true protagonists of the work. Cocteau once claimed that “Victor Hugo was a madman who believed he was Victor Hugo.”<sup>7</sup> He was exaggerating. Victor Hugo merely believed that he was God, or at least God’s official interpreter, and every story he told tries to justify itself from God’s perspective.

On every page *Novantatré* repeats that the true actants appearing on the stage of his novel are the people, the revolution. Behind the scenes, implacable, is God.

Whatever Hugo’s God may be, it is always present in his narrative to explain the blood-drenched enigmas of history. He might never have written that everything real is rational, but he would have agreed that everything ideal is rational. Hugo always adopts a Hegelian tone, recognizing that history marches toward its own purposes, above and beyond the heads of actors who are condemned to personify its intents. Take, for example, the symphonic description of the battle of Waterloo in *Les misérables*. Unlike Stendhal, who describes the battle through the eyes of Fabrizio, a youth in the thick of it unable to comprehend what is happening, Hugo describes the battle through the eyes of God, who sees it from above. He knows that if Napoleon had known that beyond the ridge of the Mont-Saint-Jean plateau there was a cliff (which his scout failed to mention), Milhaud’s cuirassiers would not have been defeated by the English Army; that if the shepherd boy who had guided Bülow had suggested a different route, the Prussian Army would not have arrived in time to decide the fate of the battle. But who cares? Once Hugo has described Waterloo as a first-rate battle won by a second-rate captain, who cares about the miscalculations of Napoleon (actor), the ignorance of Grouchy (actor)—who could have returned but did not—or the tricks, if any, of the actor Wellington?

This madness, this terror, this falling to ruins of the highest bravery which ever astonished history, can that be without cause? No. The shadow of an enormous right hand rests on Waterloo. It is the day of Destiny. A power above man controlled that day. . . . This disappearance of the great man was necessary for the advent of the great century. One, to whom there is no reply, took it in charge. The panic of heroes is explained. In the battle of Waterloo, there is more than a cloud, there is a meteor. God passed over it. (296)

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le mystère laïc*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Lausanne: Maguerat, 1946), 10:21.

God also passes through the Vendée and the Convention, gradually taking on the actorial guise of fierce Bushman peasants or aristocrats converted to *égalité*, shadowy nocturnal heroes like Cimourdain or solar ones like Gauvain. At the rational level, Hugo saw the Vendée as a mistake, but since it was a deliberate mistake held in check by a providential (or fatal) plan, he was fascinated by it and made it into an epic. He is skeptical, sarcastic, and petty about the small men that populated the Convention, but as a group he saw them as giants. At the very least, he gives us a giant image of the Convention.

This is why Hugo did not care that his actors were psychologically one-dimensional and hindered by their destiny. He did not care that the cold furor of Lantenac, the harshness of Cimourdain, and the hot passionate sweetness of the Homeric Gauvain (Achilles? Hector?) were implausible. Through them he wanted us to perceive the great forces that were in play. Hugo wanted to tell us a story about excesses, about excesses that were so inexplicable that they could only be described through oxymora. What style could he adopt to tell of one, of many excesses? An excessive style. Straight from his stylistic repertory.

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The dizzying reversals of perspective and dramatic scenes are one of the first manifestations of excess. This technique, of which Hugo is the master, is hard to explain. He knows that the rules of tragedy demand what the French call a *coup de théâtre*. One such scene is usually more than enough in classical tragedy. Oedipus discovers that he has killed his father and slept with his mother: what more could you ask for? End of the tragic action and catharsis—if you want it in bite-sized pieces.

But one scene was not enough for Hugo (who believed, after all, that he was Victor Hugo). Let us take an example of reversal in *The Laughing Man*. Gwynplaine is horrendously mutilated by *comprachicos* who turn his face into a carnival mask. He is suddenly recognized as an English peer, Lord Clancharlie, the heir to an immense fortune. Before he even knows what has happened to him, he is introduced, in splendid aristocratic vestments, into an enchanted palace. The series of marvels that he discovers (alone in that shining desert) in the suite of rooms and chambers is mind-boggling for both him and the reader. The chapter, incidentally, is entitled “The Resemblance of a Forest and a Palace,” and the description of this particular Louvre or Hermitage fills five pages. From this point on I shall measure excess



in pages, since what matters in such cases is quantity.<sup>8</sup> So Gwynplaine wanders from room to room until he reaches an alcove where sitting on the bed, next to a tub of water drawn for a virgin bath, he sees a naked woman.

Not literally naked, Hugo mischievously tells us. She is clothed. But in a long chemise so fine as to appear wet. Seven more pages follow on what a naked woman looks like, and how she looks to the laughing man, whose only love till that point had been his chaste adoration of a blind girl. No description of a naked woman could ever surpass the erotic mischief of these pages. She appears to him like a Venus sleeping in the immensity of the soap bubbles. Stirring in her sleep she creates and then undoes seductive curves through vague movements of the watery vapor, shaping billowy clouds against the blue of the sky. It is hard to imagine pages of equal sensuality. Yet Hugo always has a sententious comment to add to an excess of representation. He tells us that “a naked woman is an armed woman.”

Seven ecstatic pages of the woman sleeping and Gwynplaine trembling, dying to run away yet hypnotized by the vision, realizing that the woman is the same Lady Josiana, sister to the queen, who had tried to approach him once before, excited by his monstrous appearance. Josiana awakes, sees Gwynplaine, and initiates a furious seduction (ten pages) that the unhappy man cannot resist, except the woman leads him to the brink of desire but still does not give herself over to him. Instead she erupts into a series of fantasies, more eroticizing than her own nudity, in which she reveals herself to be both virgin (still) and prostitute, anxious to enjoy not only the pleasures of teratology promised by Gwynplaine but also the thrill of defying the world and the court, a prospect that intoxicates her, a Venus awaiting the double orgasm of private possession and public exhibition of her Vulcan.

When Gwynplaine is just about to give in, a message arrives from the queen telling her sister that the Laughing Man has been recognized as the rightful Lord Clancharlie and that a marriage between them has been arranged. Josiana comments, “So be it.” She stands up, holds out her hand (shifting from the familiar to the formal), and tells the man with whom she has so ferociously wanted to mate, “Leave,” adding, “since you are my

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<sup>8</sup> My calculations are based on current Italian editions, but I also checked the French editions and, depending on the typesetting, there might be very slight variations. In my estimate the pages I have calculated always have between 2,200 and 2,500 characters, so if I speak of fifteen pages one could imagine between sixteen and eighteen pages of two thousand characters each. But, as you can see, the differences are minimal. To describe the movement from one room to another, five or six pages is, at any rate, a considerable quantity.

husband, leave . . . you have no right to be here. This place belongs to my lover.”

Excess abounds: Gwynplaine in his deformity, Josiana in her initial sado-masochism and in her reaction to the letter. The situation, which had already been reversed through a normal recognition device (you are not a monster but a lord) and enriched by a double change of fortune (you were a wretch, now you are a lord, a lord coveted by the loveliest woman in the kingdom whom you now covet with every inch of your flustered, quaking soul—and this would suffice if not for the sake of tragedy than at least for that of comedy) is reversed again. Not into tragedy (at least for the moment: Gwynplaine will kill himself only at the end) but into grotesque farce. Readers are exhausted: in one fell swoop they have grasped both the threads of Fate and the fabric of the eighteenth-century’s gallant society. Fear not, we are only two-thirds of the way through the novel. There’s more to come. Hugo is shameless. Josiana, by comparison, is as modest as a saint.

Now back to the initial reversal in *Ninety-three*. The sloop-of-war *Claymore* is trying to infiltrate the republican naval blockade off the coast of Brittany in order to bring to shore Lantenac, the future head of the Vendée revolt. From the outside the ship looks like a freighter, but it is armed with thirty pieces of artillery. The drama unfolds—Hugo, fearing that we have underestimated its moment, announces that “something tremendous has happened.” A twenty-four-gauge cannon breaks loose. In a ship that is tossing and turning at the mercy of choppy seas, a cannon rolling from one side of the ship to the other is worse than an enemy salvo. It hurtles from right to left like a cannonball, crashing through walls, making leaks—no one can stop it. They are headed for a shipwreck. It is a supernatural beast, Hugo exclaims. Concerned that we might not grasp the import and seeking to prevent any misunderstanding, he describes the catastrophic event for five pages. Until one brave gunner, playing with the iron beast like a matador with a bull, faces it down, throws himself in front of it, risking his life, dodges it, provokes it, attacks it again, and is about to be crushed by it when Lantenac throws a bale of counterfeit banknotes between the wheels, halting its run for an instant, allowing the sailor to stick an iron bar between the spokes of the back wheels, lift up the monster, turn it upside down, and restore it to mineral immobility. The crew rejoices. The sailor thanks Lantenac for saving his life. Lantenac praises his courage before the entire crew and takes the St. Louis Cross from one officer and pins it on his chest.

Then he orders him to be shot.

He was brave, but he was also responsible for the cannon and should

have made sure that it did not break loose. The man, with the decoration on his chest, offers himself up to the firing squad.

Is this reversal enough? No. Because the ship has been compromised, Lantenac has to make the rest of his journey on a dingy rowed by a sailor. Halfway there the sailor reveals that he is the brother of the executed man and announces that he will kill Lantenac. Lantenac rises before the avenger and delivers a five-page speech. He explains the meaning of duty, reminds him that their common task is to save France and to save God, convinces him that he, Lantenac, has acted in the interest of justice while if the sailor succumbs to the desire for revenge he will be committing the greatest injustice (“You steal my life from the king and deliver your own eternity to the devil!”). The sailor, overcome, asks him for forgiveness. Lantenac grants it, and from that moment forth, Halmalo, the failed avenger, becomes the servant of his brother’s executioner, in the name of the Vendée.

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Enough about the excess of endless reversals. Now let us move on to the other, primary engine of excess, the endless list. Having described the leader, the author has to convey some idea of his attending army. Hugo seeks to depict the full breadth of the promonarchy insurrection, village by village, castle by castle, region by region. He could have flatly reproduced a map of the townships, marking the centers of the revolt with a cross. But he would have reduced what he saw as a cosmic event to regional dimensions. So with prodigious narrative invention, he conjures up an omen from the memoirs of a certain Pico della Mirandola. Halmalo doesn’t know how to read, which does not bother Lantenac: a man who can read might get in the way. All he needs to be able to do is remember. Lantenac delivers his instructions, which I will only excerpt, as the list goes on for eight pages:

“That will do. Listen, Halmalo. You must take to the right and I to the left. I shall go in the direction of Fougères, you toward Bazouges. Keep your bag; it gives you the look of a peasant. Conceal your weapons. Cut yourself a stick in the thickets. Creep among the fields of rye, which are high. . . . Leave passers-by at a distance. Avoid the roads and the bridges. Do not enter Pontorson. . . . You know the woods?”

“All of them.”

“Of the whole district?”

“From Noirmoutier to Laval.”

“Do you know their names too?”

"I know the woods; I know their names; I know about everything."

"You will forget nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Good! At present, attention. How many leagues can you make in a day?"

"Ten fifteen—twenty, if necessary."

"It will be. Do not lose a word of what I am about to say. You will go to the wood of Saint-Aubin."

"Near Lamballe?"

"Yes. On the edge of the ravine between Saint-Reuil and Plédiac there is a large chestnut-tree. You will stop there. You will see no one." . . .

"You will give the call. Do you know how to give the call?" . . .

He held out the bow of green silk to Halmalo.

"This is my badge of command. Take it. It is important that no one should as yet know my name; but this knot will be sufficient. The *fleur-de-lis* was embroidered by Madame Royale in the Temple prison." . . .

"Listen well to this. This is the order: Up! Revolt! No quarter! On the edge of this wood of Saint-Aubin you will give the call. You will repeat it thrice. The third time you will see a man spring out of the ground." . . .

"This man will be Planchenault, who is also called the King's Heart. You will show him this knot. He will understand. Then, by routes you must find out, you will go to the wood of Astillé; there you will find a cripple, who is surnamed Mousqueton, and who shows pity to none. You will tell him that I love him, and that he is to set the parishes in motion. From there you will go to the wood of Couesbon, which is a league from Ploërmel, who has belonged to what is called the Constituent Assembly, but on the good side. You will tell him to arm the castle to Couesbon, which belongs to the Marquis de Guer, a refugee. . . . Thence you will go to Saint-Guen-les-Toits, and you will talk with Jean Chouan, who is, in my mind, the real chief. From thence you will go to the wood of Ville-Anglose, where you will see Gutter, whom they call Saint Martin; you will bid him have his eye on a certain Courmesnil, who is the son-in-law of old Goupil de Préfelu, and who leads the Jacobnery of Argentan. Recollect all this. I write nothing, because nothing should be written. . . . Then you will go to the wood of Rougefeu, where is Miélette, who leaps the ravine on a long pole." (59–61)

I skip three whole pages:

"You will go to Saint-Mhervé; there you will see Gaulier, called Great Peter. You will go to the cantonment of Parné, where the men blacken their

faces. . . . You will go to the camp of Vache Noire, which is on a height; to the middle of the wood of La Charnie, then to the camp of the Fourmis. Then you will go to Grand Bordage, which is also called the Haut de Pré, and is inhabited by a widow whose daughter married Treton, nicknamed the Englishman. Grand Bordage is in the parish of Quelaines. You will visit Epineux-le-Chevreuil, Sillé-le-Guillaume, Parannes, and all the men in all of the woods." (64)

And so on, until their parting words:

"Forget nothing."

"Be tranquil."

"Now go. May God guide you! Go."

"I will do all that you have bidden me. I will go. I will speak. I will obey. I will command." (66)

Of course it is impossible for Halmalo to remember everything. Even the reader quickly realizes with each succeeding line that he has already forgotten the names in the previous line. The list is boring, but it has to be read and reread, like music. It is pure sound. It could be the index of names at the back of an atlas, but this catalogical fury makes the Vendée seem infinite.

The list is an ancient technique. When something appears so immense and confusing that a definition or description could not capture its complexity, a catalog is used to create the sense of a space and all that it contains. The list or catalog does not fill a space—which would be neutral per se—with significant appearances, associations, clues, or eye-catching details, but rather aligns the names of things, persons, or places. It is an example of hypotyposis that *shows* by deploying an excess of *flatus vocis*, as if the ear had assigned to the eye the difficult task of memorizing everything that it hears, or as if the imagination were striving to construct a place to accommodate all of the named things. The list is a Braille hypotyposis.

In canto 2 of the *Iliad* the list of armies gives an example of a multiplicity of events that evoke the space they invade by filling it:

As ravening five rips through big stands of timber  
high on a mountain ridge and the blaze flares miles away,  
so from the marching troops and the blaze of bronze armor,  
splendid and superhuman, flared across the earth,  
flashing into the air to hit the skies

Armies gathering now

as the huge flocks on flocks of winging birds, geese or cranes,  
 or swans with their long lancing necks—circling Asian marshes  
 round the Cayster outflow, wheeling in all directions,  
 glorying in their wings—keep on landing, advancing,  
 wave on shrieking wave and the tidal flats reserve.  
 So tribe on tribe, pouring out of the ships and shelters  
 marched across the Scamander plain and the earth shook,  
 tremendous thunder from under trampling men and horses  
 drawing into position down the Scamander river flats  
 breaking into flower—men by the thousands, numberless  
 as the leaves and spears that flower forth in spring.

*The Iliad*. Book 2, ll.539–59.<sup>9</sup>

Despite a series of other similes, the poet still seems to feel that he has not made clear the immense plain of armies that he wishes to represent. Thus he employs the list. Homer appeals to the muses to show through the sounds of fame that which we cannot see, and immediately admits that he will not be able to name all the men, only their leaders, and will therefore list, by synecdoche, the captains and the ships. Schedeus and Epistrophus appear, leading the Phoceans. Ajax commands the Locrians, the Abantes of Euboea, the men of Styra commanded by Elephenor, Diomed and Sthenelus leading the men of Argos and Tiryns, and Agamemnon the men of Mycenae, and so on for four hundred verses.

At times the list is not meant to tell us that it would be impossible to describe a space otherwise but rather as a sign of descriptive weakness, as happens in Sidonius Apollinaris's presentation of the city of Narbonne in poem 23:

Hail, Narbo, surpassing in thy healthiness, gladdening the eye with thy town  
 and thy countryside alike, with thy walls, citizens, circuit, shops, gates, porti-  
 coes, forum, theatre, shrines, capitol, mint, baths, arches, granaries, markets,  
 meadows, fountains, islands, salt-mines, ponds, river, merchandise, bridge  
 and brine; thou who hast the best title of all to worship as thy gods Bacchus,  
 Ceres, Pale and Minerva in virtue of thy corn, thy vines, thy pastures, and  
 thine olive-mills!<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 1990), 114–15.

<sup>10</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris, *Poems and Letters*, trans. W. B. Anderson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936–65), 1:284–87.

At other times the list aims to capture not only the space but the movement and excitement that animate it, as in the description of a battle in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*:

To some others he spoiled the frame of their kidneys, marred their backs, broke their thigh-bones, bashed in their noses, poached out their eyes, cleft their mandibles, tore their jaws, dug their teeth into their throat, shook asunder their omoplates or shoulder-blades, sphacelated their shins, mortified their shanks, inflamed their ankles, heaved off of the hinges their ishies, their sciatica or hip-gout, dislocated the joints of their knees, squattered into pieces the boughts or pestles of their thighs, and so thumped, mauled and belaboured them everywhere, that never was corn so thick and threefold threshed upon by ploughmen's flails as were the pitifully disjointed members of their mangled bodies under the merciless baton of the cross.

If any offered to hide himself amongst the thickest of the vines, he laid him squat as a flounder, bruised the ridge of his back, and dashed his reins like a dog.

If any thought by flight to escape, he made his head to fly in pieces by the lamboidal commissure, which is a seam in the hinder part of the skull. If anyone did scramble up into a tree, thinking there to be safe, he rent up his perinee, and impaled him in at the fundament. . . . Others, again, he so quashed and bebumped, that, with a sound bounce under the hollow of their short ribs, he overturned their stomachs so that they died immediately. To some, with a smart souse on the epigaster, he would make their midriff swag, then, redoubling the blow, gave them such a homepush on the navel that he made their puddings to gush out. To others through their ballocks he pierced their bumgut, and left not bowel, tripe, nor entrail in their body that had not felt the impetuosity, fierceness, and fury of his violence. Believe, that it was the most horrible spectacle that ever one saw. . . . Some died without speaking, others spoke without dying; some died in speaking, others spoke in dying.<sup>11</sup>

At times (once again in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* 2:26 and 28), as in the priceless list of "pairs of little sacring bells," the list has a purely musical function, acting almost as a metalist that bares the essence of its technique. In other places, however, the list, in the vastness of irrelevant objects that it catalogs, tries to create the sense of an accumulation of nonessential items. Such is the catalog of objects in Leopold Bloom's kitchen in the penultimate

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<sup>11</sup> François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter Anthony Motteux (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1955), 1:27.

chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. This single passage on a drawer's contents should suffice (the list goes on for seventy pages in the Shakespeare and Company edition!):

A Vere Foster's handwriting copybook, property of Milly (Millicent) Bloom, certain pages of which bore diagram drawings, marked *Papli*, which showed a large globular head with 5 hairs erect, 2 eyes in profile, the trunk full front with 3 large buttons, 1 triangular foot: 2 fading photographs of queen Alexandra of England and of Maud Branscombe, actress and professional beauty: a Yuletide card, bearing on it a pictorial representation of a parasitic plant, the legend *Mizpah*, the date Xmas 1892, the name of the senders: from Mr & Mrs M. Comerford, the versicle: *May this Yuletide bring to thee, Joy and peace and welcome glee*: a butt of red partly liquefied sealing wax, obtained from the stores department of Messrs Hely's, Ltd., 89, 90, and 91 Dame street: a box containing the remainder of a gross of gilt "J" pennibs, obtained from same department of same firm: an old sandglass which rolled containing sand which rolled: a sealed prophecy (never unsealed) written by Leopold Bloom in 1886 concerning the consequences of the passing into law of William Ewart Gladstone's Home Rule bill of 1886 (never passed into law): a bazaar ticket, no 2004, of S. Kevin's Charity Fair, price 6d, 100 prizes.<sup>12</sup>

Hugo is more on the side of Homer, and not far from that of Rabelais. Nothing about the list that Halmalo is pretending (I hope) to remember is nonessential: the ensemble and amplitude of the counterrevolution, its rootedness in the land, hedges, villages, forests, and parishes. Hugo knows the ins and outs of lists, including the conviction (which Homer may have shared) that readers would never read the whole list (or that the *aedo*'s audience would have listened to it the way one listens to the rosary, surrendering to its enchanting mystique). I have no doubt Hugo knew that his readers would skip these pages, as Manzoni himself must have when, in violation of every narrative rule, he leaves us hanging at the moment when Don Abbondio faces the bravos, and proceeds to give us four pages of proclamations (actually, four in the 1840 edition but almost six in the 1827 edition). Readers skip these pages (perhaps they might dwell a little longer during a second or third reading) but they cannot ignore the fact that the list is right before their eyes, forcing them to skip it because it is unbearable, gaining

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<sup>12</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1934), 230.



strength from its very unbearability. Going back to Hugo, the insurrection is so widespread that in reading about it, we could not remember all the protagonists or even just the leaders if we tried. Our remorse over this deferred reading is what makes us feel the sublimity of the Vendée.

Sublime is the legitimist revolt, as must be the image of the Convention, the quintessence of the revolt. We come to book 3, entitled "To the Convention." The first three chapters describe the hall. The descriptive abundance of the writing in the first seven pages already leaves the reader dazed and without any sense of space. But then it continues, and for another fifteen pages, with the list of the members of the Convention, along the following general lines:

To the right, the Gironde,—a legion of thinkers; to the left, the Mountain,—a group of athletes. On one side Brissot, who had received the keys of the Bastille; Barbaroux, whom the Marseillais obeyed; Kervélégan, who had under his hand the battalion of Brest, garrisoned in the Faubourg Saint Marceau; Gensonné, who had established the supremacy of the Representatives over the generals . . . Sillery, the cripple of the Right, as Couthon was the paralytic of the Left. Lause-Duperret, who, having been called a scoundrel by a journalist, invited him to dinner, saying, "I know that by scoundrel you simply mean a man who does not think like yourself." Rabaut Saint-Etienne, who commenced his almanac for 1790 with this saying: "The Revolution is ended." . . . Vigée, who called himself a grenadier in the second battalion of Mayenne and Loire, and who, when menaced by the public tribunals, cried, "I demand that at the first murmur of the tribunals we all withdraw and march on Versailles, sabre in hand!" Buzot, reserved for death by famine; Valazé, destined to die by his own dagger; Condorcet, who was to perish at Bourg-la-Reine (become Bourg-Egalité), betrayed by the Horace which he had in his pocket; Pétion, whose destiny was to be adored by the crowd in 1792 and devoured by wolves in 1794: twenty others still,—Pontecoulant, Marboz, Lidon, Saint-Martin, Dussaulx, the translator of Juvenal, who had been in the Hanover campaign; Boileau, Bertrand, Lesterp-Beauvais, Lesage, Gomaire, Gardien, Mainville, Duplentier, Lacaze, Antiboul, and at their head a Barnave, who was styled Verginaud. (150–52)

And so on, for fifteen pages, like the litany for a Black Mass, Antonie-Louis-Léon Florelle de Saint-Just, Merlin de Thionville, Merkin de Douai, Billaud-Varenne, Fabre d'Englantine, Fréron-Thersite, Osselin, Garan-Coulon, Javogues, Camboulas, Collot, d'Herbois, Goupilleau, Laurent Lecointre, Léonard Bourdoin, Bourbotte, Levasseur de la Sarthe, Reverchon, Bernard de Saintres, Charles Richard, Châteauneuf-Randon, Lavicomterie,

Le Peletier de Saint-Fourgeau, as if Hugo were fully aware that in this mad catalog the reader would lose sight of the individual actors for the titanic dimensions of the single actant that he intended to put on stage: the revolution in all its glory and misery.

Yet Hugo seems (out of weakness, shyness, excess of excess?) to fear that the reader (who is nevertheless expected to skip this part) cannot truly grasp the dimensions of the monster that he wishes to represent and behold. In a new technique in the history of the list, different in every way from the description of the Vendée, the author's voice intervenes at the beginning, at the end, in the middle of the list, to continuously draw its moral:

It's the Convention. . . .

At the sight of this summit, one is dumbstruck

Nothing higher had ever appeared on the human horizon.

There are the Himalayas and there is the Convention. . . .

The Convention is the first avatar of the people. . . .

Taken as a whole it was violent, barbaric, normal. Respectability in ferocity: it was a little like the entire revolution. . . .

Nothing more chaotic and more sublime. A crowd of heroes; a mob of cowards. Fallow deer on a mountain; reptiles in a marsh. . . .

A convocation of Titans. . . .

Tragedies knotted by giants and untied by dwarfs. . . .

Spirits which were a prey of the wind. But this was a miracle-working wind. . . .

Such was the unmeasured and immeasurable Convention,—a camp cut off from the human race, attacked by all the powers of darkness at once; the night-fires of the besieged army of Ideas; a vast bivouac of minds upon the edge of a precipice. There is nothing in history comparable to this group, at the same time senate and populace, conclave and street-crossing, Arcopagus and public square, tribunal and the accused.

The Convention always bent to the wind; but that wind came from the mouth of the people, and was the breath of God. . . .

It would be impossible not to remain thoughtfully attentive before this grand procession of shadows. (150–68)

Unbearable? Unbearable. Magniloquent? Even worse. Sublime? Sublime. You can see that I am captivated by my author and have even begun to speak like him: but when the magniloquence overflows and breaks down the wall of sound of excessive excess, one begins to suspect the presence of poetry. *Hélas!*

An author (unless he or she is writing only for money, without hope of immortality, from a readership of seamstresses, salesmen, or pornophiles known for their tastes in one specific moment in one specific country) never writes for an empirical reader but rather tries to construct a model reader; in other words, a reader who, having accepted the textual rules proposed from the outset, will become the book's ideal reader, even a thousand years later. What model reader did Hugo have in mind? I believe he was thinking of two. The first was someone reading in 1874, eighty years after the fatal *Ninety-three*—someone who still recognized many of the names of the Convention: as if an Italian today were reading a book about the 1920s, and was not completely unprepared for the appearance of figures such as Mussolini, D'Annunzio, Marinetti, Facta, Corridoni, Matteotti, Papini, Boccioni, Carrà, Italo Balbo, or Turati. The second reader is the future reader (or even the foreign reader of Hugo's time), who—with the exception of a few names, such as Robespierre, Danton, and Marat—would be bewildered by such a medley of names. At the same time, however, this person would have the impression of overhearing an unstoppable gossip speaking of a village that the reader is visiting for the first time and where he or she is slowly learning to unravel a multitude of contradictory figures, sniff out the atmosphere, and gradually get used to moving through the crowded arena where every unknown face may be imagined as the mask of a story drenched in blood and, ultimately, one of the many masks of history.

As I have said, Hugo is not interested in the psychology of his wooden or stone characters. He is interested in the *antonomasia* to which we defer or, if you prefer, to their symbolic value. The same attitude applies to things: the forest of the Vendée or the Torgue, the immense "Tour Gauvain" where Lantenac is besieged by Gauvain—two men connected to the ancestral residence that both are seeking to destroy, the assailant from outside and the besieged from within, threatening a final holocaust. Much ink has been spilled on the symbolic value of the tower, also because another innocent symbolic gesture is consummated inside it, the destruction of a book by three children.

Hostages of Lantenac, who has threatened to blow them up if the republicans attempt to free them, locked in the library of the besieged tower, the children can do little more than destroy things, so they turn a precious book on St. Bartholomew into a flurry of torn paper. Their gesture has been universally interpreted as a negative imitation of the night of St. Bartholomew, the shame of the former monarchy, and therefore, perhaps, a historic revenge, a childish *antistrophe* of the annihilation in the past whose work would be concluded by the guillotine. For that matter, the chapter that

narrates this story within the story is entitled “The Massacre of St. Bartholomew,” because Hugo was always concerned that his readers were not trembling enough.

This gesture, too, takes on symbolic hues thanks to excess. The childish games are related in minute detail for fifteen pages. Through this excessiveness Hugo notifies us that here, too, we are dealing not with an individual story but with the tragedy of an actant who may not have been redemptive but was at least benevolent: Innocence. He could obviously have resolved everything through a fulminating epiphany. That he was capable of doing so can be seen in the last lines of book 3, chapter 6: little Georgette gathers by the handful the parts of the book assigned to the sacral *sparagmos*, throws them out the window, sees them soaring on the wind and says “papillons.” So the ingenuous massacre segues into butterflies vanishing into the sky. But Hugo could not fit this brief epiphany into a plot with so many other excesses, at the risk of its seeming imperceptible. If excess has reason to exist, even the most dazzling apparitions of the numinous (contrary to all mystic traditions) have to last for long periods. In *Ninety-three*, even grace has to appear in the form of murkiness, a bubbling of white-hot lava, waters overflowing, inundations of affects and effects. What is the use of asking Wagner to squeeze his entire tetralogy into the measures of a Chopin scherzo?

To shake loose of our author’s grasp, let us jump ahead, critically, to the ending. After a truly epic battle (Hugo would have been a great screenwriter!), Gauvain finally captures Lantenac. The duel is over. Cimourdain has no hesitations, and, even before the trial, gives orders to erect the guillotine. Killing Lantenac would be tantamount to killing the Vendée, and killing the Vendée would be tantamount to saving France.

But Lantenac, as I said at the beginning, gives himself up voluntarily to save the three children, who have risked being burned to death in the library to which he alone has the key. In the face of this humane gesture, Gauvain does not have the heart to send him to his death, so he rescues him. Hugo consumes other oratorical resources to compare the two worlds, first in the dialogue between Lantenac and Gauvain, and then in the dialogue between Cimourdain and Gauvain, who at that point is awaiting his death. In Lantenac’s first invective against Gauvain (before realizing that the latter means to save him), he deploys the full arrogance of the *ci-devant* before the representative who had guillotined the king. In the confrontation between Cimourdain and Gauvain an abyss emerges between the high priest of vengeance and the apostle of hope. I want the man of Euclid, Cimourdain says. Gauvain replies that he wants the man of Homer. The whole novel tells us (in stylistic terms) that Hugo would take Homer’s part, which is why he

fails to make us loathe his Homeric Vendée, but in ideological terms this particular Homer tried to tell us that to build the future we have to pass through the straight line of the guillotine.

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This is the story that the book tells us, the story of Hugo's stylistic choices, the story of a reading (my own—and others are possible). What can we say? That the historians have identified many anachronisms and unacceptable liberties in the book? What does it matter? Hugo was not trying to write history. He wanted us to feel the panting breath, the often stinking roar of history. To deceive us like Marx, who claimed that Hugo was more interested in the individual's moral conflicts than in understanding the class struggle?<sup>13</sup> If anything it was the opposite. Hugo carves out his psychology with a hatchet to make us feel the forces in conflict. While he may not have been thinking of the class struggle, he was certainly contemplating the ideals, as Lukács realized, of a “revolutionary democracy that indicates the way of the future.” Lukács later tempered his judgment with the severe admonition that “the real human and historical collisions of the aristocrat and the priest, who have aligned themselves with the Revolution, are turned into ingenious conflicts of duty based on this abstract humanism.”<sup>14</sup> For crying out loud, it has even been said that Hugo was not interested in the social classes but rather in the people and God. Typical of Lukács's mental inflexibility in his last works was the inability to understand that Hugo could not be Lenin (if anything, Lenin was a Cimourdain who did not kill himself) and that indeed the tragic and romantic magic of *Ninety-three* lies in bringing together on the same playing field the reasons of history and the reasons of various single morals, to measure the constant fracture between politics and utopia.

Nevertheless, to understand the deep movements both of the revolution and of its enemy, the Vendée—which is still today's ideology for the many people who are nostalgic for *la France profonde*—I believe there can be no better reading. To tell the story of two excesses, Hugo's only choice (faithful to his poetics) was the technique of excess taken to excess. It is only by accepting this convention that one can understand the Convention, and

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (New York: International Publishers, 1926).

<sup>14</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 257.

thereby become the model reader for whom Hugo yearned—constructed not with a wiry armature but rather with an *opus incertum* of barely blocked-out rock. If you enter into the spirit that animates this novel, however, you might come out dry-eyed but with your mind in tumult. *Hélas!*

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*Translated by Michael F. Moore*