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PARIS, MYTH AND DEMYSTIFICATION: POETIC AND POLITICAL HERMENEUTICS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

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Abstract

Numbers in square brackets refer to chapters

This dissertation studies the relation between myth and demystification in post-revolutionary France, notably in the literary depiction of Paris. I argue that, in this period, the functions of myth in society were being redefined by literature in the light of a new, 'secularised' conception of the sacred.

I begin by focusing on the social functions of myth (maintaining social cohesion and identity), particularly through the constitution of 'collective memory'; I also examine the downside of this need for social cohesion: alienation [1]. I then look at the framework of modern myth-making that combines poetics, politics, history and myth. I show how new forms of the sacred emerged in the century of rationalism and disenchantment, and how Michelet in particular contributed greatly to the construction of the myth of 1789 [2]. For it is indeed 1789 that explains Paris's unique status. I am focusing on Hugo in this regard to understand the sacralisation of Paris as the capital of the revolution [3]. Hugo also illustrates a general tendency in the post-revolutionary depiction of Paris: its darkness and claustrophobia seem to illustrate the condition of modern man. [4]. But beyond a material glance at the city, Hugo's vision sends a more disturbing message: in exile, the poet-seer redefines the march of history and offers new means of demystification [5]. This analysis then extends to looking at Hugo's central character, the *People*, and its difference from the equally mythical *populace*. In fact the confusion between the two will lead to the end of Paris as a myth, which coincides with the Commune and the *débâcle* of Paris [6]. That ultimate defeat will prompt Hugo to go back and seek the origins of modern France, focusing this time on 1793 in a last attempt to oppose the seer's *parole* to that of the state, with the very definition of the republic at stake [7].

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Notes on references

The following abbreviations will be used throughout when referring to Hugo and Michelet. See Bibliography for full bibliographical information.

HUGO

AT	*L'Année terrible*
Chât.	*Châtiments*
CV	*Choses vues*
Cont.	*Les Contemplations*
DJ	*Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné*
D	*Dieu*
FA	*Les Feuilles d'automne*
FS	*La Fin de Satan*
LS	*La Légende des siècles*
Mis.	*Les Misérables*
ND	*Notre-Dame de Paris*
OC	*Œuvres complètes* (Ed. Massin)
P	*Paris*
QT	*Quatrevingt-treize*
RO	*Les Rayons et les ombres*
RR	*Religions et religion*

MICHELET

HF	*Histoire de France* (préface de 1869)
RF	*Histoire de la Révolution française*
IHU	*Introduction à l'histoire universelle* (1831)
Pe	*Le Peuple*

Je vais parler de Paris, non de ses édifices, de ses temples, de ses monuments, de ses curiosités, etc. Assez d'autres ont écrit là-dessus. Je parlerai des mœurs publiques (...) des idées régnantes, de la situation actuelle des esprits, de tout ce qui m'a frappé dans cet amas bizarre de coutumes folles et raisonnables, mais toujours changeantes.

Mercier

Infatigablement, l'esprit humain ajoute à la vie ses gloses – des mythes –, infatigablement il cherche à "conférer un sens" à la réalité.

Bruno Schultz

Introduction

(i) Preface

There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting either.[1]

(a) The Tale of the Grand Inquisitor

In a digression in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky chooses to imagine a confrontation between Jesus Christ and a Fifteenth-Century Spanish Inquisitor. In this passage, Dostoevsky seems to demonstrate that, torn between his urge for freedom and the comfort of certainties, man ultimately chooses the latter. The scene is set 'in Seville, in the most horrible time of the Inquisition'. In this austere Catholic time, Christ has chosen to return; to walk 'once again among men' (p. 248), performing miracles, and attracting an ever-growing crowd. The Grand Inquisitor is quick to act and has the potential troublemaker arrested. He seems in little doubt that the man he has incarcerated is indeed Jesus. But this matters little to him: this miraculous return can bring nothing but distress to a people the Church has relentlessly brought together in a coherent, stable and long-lasting structure. And this is why the Grand Inquisitor sees no alternative but to condemn his prisoner to death:

> Why, then, have you come to interfere with us. [...] Tomorrow I shall condemn you and burn you at the stake as the most evil of heretics, and the very people who today kissed your feet [...] at a nod from me, will rush to heap the coals up around your stake (p. 250).

In the head to head between the two characters that follows the arrest, Dostoevsky opposes the message of freedom brought by Christ to its Catholic interpretation; the gap between the two could not be greater. What is at stake here – and on trial, for the Grand Inquisitor is essentially a prosecutor – is the very premise of Christ's legacy: to bring freedom to men.

The Grand Inquisitor has nothing but contempt for this offer: 'Was it not you who so often said then: "I want to make you free"? But now you have seen these "free" men' (p. 251). The Inquisitor points out what Jesus seems to have overlooked: this freedom

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[1]Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Everyman's Library, 1997), p. 254. Further references will be indicated in brackets in the main text.

brings nothing but torment. This is where the Church stepped in, overtaking that burden for them: 'Yes, this work has cost us dearly [...]. [The people] themselves have brought us their freedom and obediently laid it at our feet' (*Ibid.*). It is understandable enough: although rebellious by nature, man is uncomfortable in freedom. 'You overestimated mankind, for, of course, they are slaves, though they were created rebels' (p. 256).

The tragedy of Christ's mistake lies in his overestimation of human nature: 'Respecting him so much, you behaved as if you had ceased to be compassionate' (p. 256).[2] Holding men in too high esteem, he refused to operate miracles, requiring free faith that would not be based on the demonstration of divine power. Yet, in doing so, Christ overlooked a major flaw in human nature: 'you would have answered the universal and everlasting anguish of man as an individual being [...] namely: "before whom shall I bow down?" [...] He alone can take over the freedom of men who appeases their conscience' (p. 254). And if Christ is unwilling to oblige this human weakness, men will create their own miracles.[3]

The Inquisitor's pleading turns into an indictment: Christ is guilty of misunderstanding human nature, of having given men a burden too heavy to carry. In contrast, the Church has acknowledged the true nature of man, and brought him relief. The conclusion is bleak: all that man wants is 'someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience, and a means for uniting everyone at last into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill' (p. 257).

(b) From *servitude volontaire* to alienating myth

What Dostoevsky voices here is the tension within human nature between a rebellious nature and a deep need to be guided, to obey. Clearly, for the author, the latter has prevailed over the former. This pessimism is nothing new: Rousseau had already highlighted how a naturally free man ends up in slavery: 'L'homme est né libre, et cependant partout il est dans les fers', he famously argued.[4] Some two hundred years before him, La Boétie had explained this paradox by reference to habit and slackness: men are so used to being slaves that the strength, will and courage needed to allow them to break free are lacking. In their *servitude*, men are willing victims: 'receleurs du larron [...] et ainsi traîtres à vous-mêmes'.[5]

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[2]'Trop d'estime et trop peu de pitié', Maximilien Rubel summarises in his French translation, *La Légende du grand inquisiteur* (Paris: L'Insomniaque, 1999), p. 42.

[3]'Since man cannot bear to be left without miracles, he will go and create new miracles for himself' (p. 255).

[4]Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat social* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 111.

[5]Etienne de La Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1983), p. 139.

For La Boétie, three main reasons explain 'servitude volontaire': the habit of being enslaved; 'les appâts de la servitude' – which he also calls 'les drogueries' (spectacle, and generally every sort of distraction, in both senses);[6] and, finally, the pyramidal structure of power. Yet, although La Boétie suggests that the mere wish to be free would be enough to awaken and free ourselves, what Dostoevsky's tale implies is that we are fundamentally reluctant to take such a step: between the comfort of being guided and the shambles of doubt, the very will to be set free remains in question. It is from the starting point of such a pessimistic view that I wish to develop a discussion of myth and demystification.

This thesis is based on a tension between collective beliefs and the urge for freedom that is at the centre of western civilisation – particularly since Rousseau and Kant. Alongside a culture of scepticism (Descartes) and freedom (the Enlightenment), new forms of collective beliefs and modern myths developed. Myth can be regarded as one of the many forms this human need for certainties can take, a type of servitude illustrated by Dostoevsky's tale. As Alain Lagarde put it: 'Le mythe est bien un obstacle épistémologique ou mieux, une *servitude intellectuelle* puisque les hommes ne réfléchissent pas le sens du monde mais attendent passivement et souvent complaisamment de son autorité qu'elle le leur confère'.[7] This brings comfort, but at a cost:

> Le mythe a une dimension collective qui a valeur de mystification et d'aliénation dans la mesure où il a partie liée avec des pouvoirs qui doublent la servitude intellectuelle dont ils profitent, d'une servitude politique et sociale dont ils vivent.[8]

The pessimistic view of a human nature tempted by freedom, but even more so by the comfort of certainties, conformity and obedience, is at the heart of the constitution of a theologico-political model of which, as I plan to demonstrate, Paris was the capital. In the wake of 1789, the various, contradictory reactions generated by the revolutionary *tabula rasa* led to the constitution of collective memory and of modern history which – as we shall see – did not escape the temptation of myth, but which also redefined the very possibility of resisting it.

This dissertation aims to examine a set of circumstances when religious institutions were allocated a new, secondary role in society, and when people claimed to govern themselves rationally. No country pushed the experience further than France, with its

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[6]*Ibid.*, p. 151. Pascal talks of 'divertissements' which bears a similar double meaning (both entertainment and deviation). Pascal, *Pensées*, 139 (Paris: Editions de Cluny, 1941).

[7]Alain Lagarde, *Le Mythe, la science et la philosophie*, (Paris: Ellipses, 2001), p. 13. My emphasis.

[8]*Ibid.*

radical rejection of religion during the Revolution, the submission of the Church to the state with Napoleon, and the famous law on *laïcité* in 1905. At the same time, Europe put science, reason, and history at the heart of their civilisation. The nineteenth century remains known as the century of the secularisation of society; of science liberating itself from, and even, to a certain extent, replacing religion. It prolongs the unprecedented eighteenth-century drive to set the human mind free from illusion, superstition and fantasy. However the century of rationalism also demonstrated that adding an *-ism* to reason transformed the *servitude* of certainties but by no means suppressed it.

> The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.[9]

And we shall see in that regard how much the constitution of modern history in the nineteenth century owed to a mythic framework.

Today, the nineteenth-century rationalist programme and its certainties seem seriously undermined. Freud's and Jung's work, and the development of anthropology and ethnology all questioned the rationality of modern man and his willingness to choose knowledge and freedom over belief and authority. 'How can we expect people who are under the dominance of prohibitions of thought to attain the psychological ideal, the primacy of the intelligence?' Freud asked in 1927.[10] Indeed, what the modern human and social sciences seem to demonstrate is the constant, renewed temptation to follow some form of authority and belief. As Jean-François Revel reluctantly concedes: 'dès que l'homme a pu penser, il a eu peur de connaître. La capacité de l'homme de construire dans sa tête à peu près n'importe quelle théorie, de se la "prouver" et d'y croire, est illimitée'.[11]

What both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have demonstrated is that an increased understanding of how reason and knowledge could be used for ideological purposes does not necessarily prevent this from occurring. The ideologies which have dominated the twentieth century rationalised the discourse but remained mythical in nature. In fact their claim for rationality hides their illusionary foundation: 'si l'appareil

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[9]Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 11.

[10]Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI, trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 48.

[11]Jean-François Revel, *La Connaissance inutile*, (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1988), p. 255.

logique de l'idéologie est rationnel, les prémisses ne le sont pas'.[12] What is remarkable in this modern variation on myth, is how deep the renewed effort to free reason from beliefs keeps falling into new forms of mythical illusions, the scientific nature of the endeavour further helping in the elaboration of a new kind of hermeneutic violence that prevails to this day. This process is at the heart of the research underlying this thesis and an investigation of it constitutes its primary drive. But I also hope to demonstrate, with the dominant modern myth of Paris as a focus, that it is indeed through an understanding and an acceptance of myth, rather than in denying it, that we can hope to formulate valuable tools of demystification, without converting them into mythical certainties.

(ii) Paris: a Modern Myth

Comment faire une théorie vraie de l'imaginaire sans délirer avec raison?[13]

Dans ce déconcertant labyrinthe que constitue la réalité mythique, à celui qui a eu l'audace d'y pénétrer, elle apporte à tout le moins la promesse d'un fil conducteur. Toute la question est de savoir comment s'en servir, de savoir même comment le saisir.[14]

In his famous article, 'Paris, un mythe moderne', Roger Caillois highlights the complex interaction between urban imaginary and the real at work in nineteenth-century French literature. Both Romanticism and modernism expressed a deep unease with their time, but while the Romantic response favoured a form of escapism, boredom and melancholy, modernism, set in the city, reacted with defiance, spirit, and energy.[15] Hence the irony of the *flâneur*, whose attitude expresses the inner strength of the modern man in his refusal of the comfort of illusions. The poetics of the city that derived from this modern attitude represent an acceptance of the dramatic changes that were affecting France (demographic, political, urban, technological, social), and a decision to face them, here and now. The development of a specifically modern

[12]Daryush Shayegan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), p. 186.
[13]Hélène Védrine, *Les Grandes Conceptions de l'imaginaire*, (Paris: Librairie générale française, Le Livre de Poche, 1990), p. 10.
[14]Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1986), p. 18.
[15]Roger Caillois, *Le Mythe et l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 169.

esthetics – although owing much to a Romantic sensibility – took place in an attempt to seize the real where it was most manifest: in the city.[16]

Caillois argues that the main craftsmen of the myth of Paris, Balzac and Baudelaire, reconciled *imagination* with action:

> La tentative de Balzac et de Baudelaire [...] tend à *intégrer dans la vie* les postulations que les Romantiques se résignaient à satisfaire sur le seul plan de l'art et dont ils nourrissaient leurs poésies. Par là, cette entreprise signifie toujours un accroissement du rôle de l'imagination dans la vie, en tant que, par nature, il est susceptible de provoquer à l'acte.[17]

This will be essential in the formulation of a theory of the modern myth which forms the basis for this dissertation. Myth has little to do with a form of escapism: not only is its main function to provide meaning and an accurate reading of the real, it is also the basis for action. Hence the title of this dissertation is not meant to suggest that myth shall necessarily be considered in opposition to demystification, but rather I am trying to suggest a complex interaction between the two: if myth is perceived as holding some relation to the truth, some hermeneutic quality, then a modern gnosis could turn to myth itself in an attempt to demystify the many modern myths that pervade bourgeois century. For if the century of rationalism claimed to rid itself of the illusions brought by mere belief and superstition, the literary imaginary at work at the time demonstrates a willingness to engage with fantasy and the legendary rather than purely oppose them. This raises the question of the place and definition of myth in modern societies: 'qu'est-ce qui a pris la place *essentielle* que le mythe détenait dans les sociétés traditionnelles?' Eliade asks.[18] The question becomes central in a culture that claims precisely to remove myth and act rationally.[19]

There is a well known dichotomy of two apparently irreconcilable trends: rationalism, the sciences, technology, and industry on the one hand, romanticism, *rêverie*, the rediscovery of myth and legend on the other. However, beyond this opposition, there is a complex imaginary framework in the nineteenth century in France that mixes poetics, myth, history and politics. We shall see that one of the key features of this framework – what Claude Millet described as a *dispositif légendaire*[20] – was a shift in the sacred from the religious to the secular. In this regard, it will be essential to

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[16]*Ibid.*, pp. 163-9. See also Charles Baudelaire, 'De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne' in 'Salon de 1846', in in 'Salon de 1846', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, (Gallimard, "La Pléïade", 1976), pp. 493-96.

[17]*Ibid.*, p. 172.

[18]Mircea Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 23.

[19]Roger Caillois, *Instincts et société. Essais de sociologie contemporaine*, (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1964), p. 129.

[20]Claude Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle. Poésie, mythe et vérité* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

comprehend how this phenomenon was linked to a redefinition of what constitutes a place in history, how that generated new politico-religious models, and how this process was inscribed in a place, Paris.

(a) Paris: from semiotics of the city to *histoire des représentations*

> Penser PARIS?...
> Plus on y songe, plus se sent-on, tout au contraire, pensé par PARIS.[21]

To say that Paris achieved a unique status in the nineteenth century is an understatement. Since 1789, Paris had become something more than a geographic location and was attaining universal status. In literature too, the French capital became something more than a mere background or setting, as if the strong bonds which linked the capital of the revolution with its restless inhabitants had somehow modified the very nature of the city and literature alike. In the century of the novel, Paris became a literary character in its own right, developing its own personality, having a will of its own.

> La ville est un être social. Sa définition objective ne rend pas compte de sa totalité. Les contemporains projettent sur elle le faisceau déformant de leur culture et de leurs préjugés, et la conscience qu'ils en ont renvoie à une réalité qui est aussi du ressort de l'histoire.[22]

This illustrates well enough the new status of 'the capital of the nineteenth century'. Paris came to encapsulate its time. Conversely, the city became the locus of a modern gnosis, as if the main function of its cryptic labyrinthine streets was to be deciphered. Many have outlined the correspondence between the city and the mind:

> Le labyrinthe des immeubles dans la ville ressemble à la conscience pendant la journée; les passages (ce sont les galeries qui conduisent à son existence antérieure) débouchent le jour dans les rues, sans qu'on les remarque.[23]

The maze of streets, the shape, even, of the capital recalls a brain; and Paris, capital of its time, seems to be holding some epistemological key to human nature itself:

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[21]Paul Valéry, 'Présence de Paris', in *Regards sur le monde actuel et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 130.

[22]Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', in Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie (dir), *La Ville des temps modernes* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1998), p. 551.

[23]Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle. Le Livre des passages*, trans. by Jean Lacoste (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989), p. 109.

Il m'apparaît que penser Paris se compare, ou se confond, à penser l'esprit même. Je me représente le plan topographique de l'énorme cité, et rien ne me figure mieux le domaine de nos idées, le lieu mystérieux de l'aventure instantanée de la pensée, que ce labyrinthe de chemins, les uns, comme au hasard tracés, les autres, clairs et rectilignes.[24]

This unique status that links a geographic space to a form of modern hermeneutic explains why Paris is so constantly associated with semiology:

C'est dans la mesure où Paris est une structure à déchiffrer, dans la mesure où la ville a une lisibilité propre qu'elle se présente à travers un réseau de signes, que toute sa "matière" est "sémiotisée" et qu'elle se réfléchit naturellement dans des textes.[25]

A long tradition of semiotics attached to the French capital was recently prolonged with the publication of Karlheinz Stierle's *Mythos von Paris*.[26] The concept of the myth of Paris has become such a classic of French literary studies, that when Stierle translated his work into French, he changed the title into *La Capitale des signes. Paris et son discours*, arguing that an accurate translation of the title would sound too banal to a French audience.[27] But banal and well-covered as it is, I believe the myth of Paris is open to more perspectives than semiotics and literary studies only.

Essential to this thesis as this myth may be, it shall serve only as a case study here, and my main preoccupation is the analysis of myth in modern society and its relation to the real. I shall venture in the field of *l'imaginaire* as a historian as well as a literary historian and literary critic, and as such confess some unease with both the word *l'imaginaire* and the field.

I chose to use the French term *imaginaire* rather than its awkward English translation, the imaginary. As Wunenburger pointed out, the French noun has little or no equivalent in other languages: 'sans doute le signe d'une tentative de la langue et de la culture française d'isoler et de construire un objet cognitif spécifique, qui a sa consistance propre, à mi-chemin du sensible et de l'intelligible'.[28] However, the elasticity of the term causes its own problems and challenges. To meet them, Wunenburger proposes to take the three aspects of the term into account: *imagerie, imaginaire stricto sensu*, and

[24]Paul Valéry, 'Présence de Paris', in *Regards sur le monde actuel et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 127. See also Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 324-39.
[25]Laurence Giavarini, 'Paris, entre visible et invisible', <www.fabula.org/revue/cr/439.php>, 1 March 2006, p. 3.
[26]Karlheinz Stierle, *La Capitale des signes. Paris et son discours*, French trans. by Marianne Rocher-Jacquin (Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2001).
[27]Giavarini, 'Paris, entre visible et invisible', op. cit, p. 1.
[28]Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Imaginaires du politique* (Paris: Ellipses, 2001), p. 78.

représentations imaginales. The first simply refers to sets of images, imaged representations. The second, by opposition to the real, is defined as:

> Création d'irréalités, de contenus psychiques inventés de toutes pièces, c'est-à-dire ne correspondant à aucune donnée empiriquement constatable, observable [mais] ces représentations ont [...] l'efficace de certaines fictions, qui trouvent d'ailleurs dans leur caractère irréel leur force de persuasion.[29]

The third category refers to archetypes and symbolic prototypes. '[Ceux-ci] n'ont pas d'équivalent direct dans le réel, mais [...] jouent un rôle psychique ou intellectuel en servant à donner du sens, à conférer de la valeur'.[30] One can see from the last two categories the influence of *l'imaginaire* over the real which seems to go against a western philosophical tradition that has consisted in rejecting it as a sign of weakness or disorder of an otherwise rational and reasonable concept of man. From Pascal who regarded it as 'une puissance trompeuse' to Sartre who saw it as a deterioration of knowledge, the field of *l'imaginaire* suffers, still, from a relatively marginal position – Gilbert Durand ironically calls it the one per cent of rational, pragmatic, modern thought.[31] But what Durand and the growing field of *les sciences de l'imaginaire* invite us to do is to reintegrate it as a full and major element of the human sciences, and to reconcile it with the real. As Wunenburger explained:

> Cet intermonde de symboles et de mythes, loin d'être au seul service des passions et des pulsions, permet – à certaines conditions – de donner une consistance aux institutions, aux idéaux et aux valeurs, formulées en langages rationnels et raisonnables.[32]

We shall see in the course of the dissertation the importance of belief in that regard, in the sense given by Certeau: 'j'entends par "croyance" non l'objet du croire (un dogme, un programme, etc.), mais l'investissement des sujets dans une proposition, l'*acte* de l'énoncer en la tenant pour vraie'.[33] As we shall see, beliefs act as a bridge between the imaginary and the real, between a set of representations and the action in which they may result.

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[29]*Ibid.*, p. 79.

[30]*Ibid.*

[31]Allusion to the one per cent allocated in the budget of French public construction to architectural decoration. Gilbert Durand, *Introduction à la mythodologie. Mythes et sociétés* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), p. 22. See Pascal, *Pensées*, particularly 82, 131 and 133, and Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940). Durand considers the posititon of *l'imaginaire* in western culture as being the result of a long tradition of what he calls *iconoclasme* despite various resistances (from Plato to Surrealism). See Gilbert Durand, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Hatier, 1994) and *L'Imagination symbolique* (Paris: PUF, 1964).

[32]Wunenburger, *Imaginaires du politique*, p. 77.

[33]Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 260.

The increasing interest in *l'imaginaire* is nevertheless undermined by a problem of methodology and an unease felt particularly by historians, many of whom regard it as troubled waters:

> La profusion des ouvrages embrassant de tels sujets cache mal la timidité des historiens face à un objet aussi labile. Sociologues, ethnologues, anthropologues eurent plus d'audace. L'éparpillement des études historiques, nouveau symptôme de cet éclatement du savoir, a contrarié une réflexion d'ensemble.[34]

However, history in recent decades has turned its attention more and more to the field of the intangible: in the wake of *histoire des mentalités*, interest was stirred in the emotions, sensitivity, perceptions, and beliefs.[35] More attention was drawn to the way some events were understood at a particular juncture, why some reactions occurred within a particular context, how people's emotions – their attitude to death for instance[36] – could evolve. However ill-defined the phrase, *histoire des mentalités* opens new perspectives in that it focuses on perceptions and interpretations; it links a situation, past or present, with contemporary representations. And it is perhaps from this interest in representations and perceptions – a collective unconscious – that a better definition of *histoire des mentalités* can be found. As Roger Chartier explains:

> Les productions intellectuelles et esthétiques, les représentations mentales, les pratiques sociales sont toujours gouvernées par des mécanismes et des dépendances méconnues par les sujets eux-mêmes. [...] C'est à partir d'une telle perspective qu'il faut comprendre [...] l'importance reconquise, aux dépens des notions habituelles à l'histoire des mentalités, d'un concept comme celui des *représentations*.[37]

What modern historiography stresses is that an uprising, for example, is not caused only by an 'objectively' intolerable situation: people rebel because, at a certain time in their history, they start to *perceive* these conditions as intolerable. Therefore, the study of the objective conditions – although essential – is not enough to understand the motivation

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[34]Christophe Prochasson, 'De la culture des foules à la culture des masses', in André Burguière (dir), *Histoire de la France. Choix culturels et mémoire*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000), p. 185.

[35]Arlette Farge notes, however, that the study of emotions still remains almost taboo in social research. See *La Vie fragile. Violence, pouvoirs et solidarités à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, (Paris: Gallimard, Hachette, 1986), p. 10.

[36]See the work of Philippe Ariès, for instance *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident du Moyen-Age à nos jours* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1975), and *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1977), and Michel Vovelle, *La Mort et l'Occident. De 1303 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), and *Mourir autrefois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

[37]Roger Chartier, 'Le Temps des doutes', *Le Monde*, 18 March 1993.

of a group and the reasons for their action; one has to understand why this situation started to be lived as intolerable by those involved.[38]

I believe this emphasis on perceptions and interpretations to be essential to comprehend the place and function of myth in nineteenth-century France. I will be arguing that the French Revolution defined the following decades in terms of a modern cosmogony, thus forcing subsequent generations to engage in a process of interpretation of their origins as a modern nation. I hope to demonstrate that Paris was at the centre of this process and operated as the locus of modern myth-making and a new form of, and a new relation to, the sacred:

> C'est dans la mémoire [de la Révolution] que se forme le sentiment d'une rupture qui [...] fait surgir un mystère de l'histoire. Le sens religieux de cette rupture hante les esprits quel que soit le jugement formulé. On retrouve une même langue à la fois philosophique et religieuse.[39]

Therefore, the way in which the 'sons of the Revolution' constructed their mythical 'collective memory' (a highly problematic phrase, as we shall see) alongside a history considered as a science will be central to my argument.

The history of representations – 'histoire des attitudes mentales et des représentations de la psychologie collective' as Georges Duby put it[40] – enriched with what anthropology can teach us about myth in both traditional and modern societies will be essential, and yet insufficient in this work.[41] And since myth is central to my argument, one has to turn to those who wrote it: the poets and novelists who made the myth of Paris. And for the historian, literature may prove as challenging a field as *l'imaginaire* it illustrates so well.

(b) History and literature

In literature, the historian finds himself in an elusive field where aesthetics has an essential role to play, and where narratives are considered potentially deceptive:

> Alors que l'histoire conçue, comme l'histoire vécue, ordonne les événements sur l'axe du temps, attentive à leur enchaînement logique, le roman suit une ligne chaotique: brusques ruptures, retours

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[38]Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1986), p. 124.
[39]*Ibid.*, p. 82.
[40]Georges Duby, *L'An Mil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 36.
[41]'Il faut [...] tenter une approche du mythe qui tienne compte de ce qu'il fut dans les sociétés archaïques ou traditionnelles sans que pour autant il soit exclu des représentations collectives de nos sociétés, en particulier des représentations politiques'. Jean-Pierre Sironneau, 'Retour du mythe et imaginaire socio-politique', in *Le Retour du Mythe*, (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1980), pp. 13-4.

en arrière, ressauts imprévisibles, nouveaux départs relancent l'attente du lecteur et lui réservent de constantes surprises.[42]

The historian's response to literature remains ambiguous: on the one hand, it is tempting to regard literature as an illustration of historical trends. And indeed where else is the nineteenth century better depicted than in Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, Baudelaire or Zola? But, on the other hand, the historian remains aware of the constant inducement to take literary sources at face value, to see them as some form of transparent evidence. The importance of literature in history, and particularly in the history of the nineteenth-century is not – or should not – be limited to some sort of illustration of the events and evolution of history. The relation between the nineteenth-century novel and history goes well beyond this:

> Loin de se borner à faire voir les innombrables transactions d'une époque effervescente, le roman contribue lui-même à les accomplir: agent donc et non plus seulement interprète de la troublante richesse du monde issu de la Révolution.[43]

This brings us back to the relation between myth and the real outlined above, whilst it also reconciles *l'imaginaire* with politics. The nineteenth century was a special moment in history when religion was being redefined in its social role, when science and history predominated in an effort to function independently of belief, and when, nevertheless, myth made a comeback through Romanticism. It is from this combination of myth and history, politics and poetics that a reading of the French Revolution came to be made, and from that reading Hugo, both modernist and archeologist, politician and seer, would attempt to propose a way to demystification through the means of myth itself.

(c) Victor Hugo, a modern seer

One of the difficulties of studying Hugo lies – ironically enough – in the mythical status he achieved, notwithstanding what is often perceived as the simplicity and Manicheism of his thought: he is still better known for his beatific optimism than for his cryptic symbolism; more as a naive spokesman for progress than as a visionary poet of darkness warning us against the perversity of modernity; as one who sanctimoniously professed his genius, rather than as the humble brother of Job, afraid of darkness and light alike. If Hugo is now seen mainly as the apostle of the *sans-papiers*, a similar distortion awaits the historian:

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[42]Mona Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, (Paris: Fayard, 2001), pp. 23-4.
[43]*Ibid.*, pp. 341-2.

L'engagement de Victor Hugo n'a souvent pour les historiens qu'une valeur illustrative, intégré dans une construction linéaire et somme toute harmonieuse de la République, dont le XIXe n'aurait été que la progressive conquête.[44]

However, we shall see that Hugo's gnosis and philosophy undermine the convenient myth built up by the Third Republic; and that his taste for digressions and non-chronological narratives, alongside a deep scepticism towards material progress and history, challenged the mainstream use of his name in contemporary issues. Prophet he was, but also a brother to Goya and Baudelaire; his sombre, tormented imaginary reflects his time just as much as it attempts to shed light on it. For what Hugo actually, physically sees of the city soon provides the basis for a mental image and concept of the capital that is at the centre of this work: following Hugo in his chronological and urban maze allows us to reach the full scale of the myth of Paris; to seize beyond the appearance of the city, the social and political implications of modern myth.

(d) Final comments

The purpose of this study is to examine the alienating and potentially demystifying qualities of myth in a modern context. Traditionally the function of myth is to help social cohesion. However as modernity challenged the position of religion in society, the place of the sacred was the object of a socio-political shift. Within this framework, I will examine how the modern seer sees Paris, both as the cradle of modernity and the place of oppression and fate. Turning to Hugo's visions of Paris will help us understand how the alienating quality of myth can be compensated for by its inner demystifying potential. This is at the centre of the relation between myth and literature in the nineteenth century, but it is also at the heart of politics: Hugo's final plea for the resurrection of the Republican spirit in the aftermath of the Commune was in fact the expression of an acute vision of the Republic's institutions and their limitations. We shall see in that regard how institutions participate as well in the process of modern myth-making and the constitution of national identity.

I want to analyse the features and implications of mythic thinking within a given socio-political context, and to reconnect the political to *l'imaginaire*. I hope to deepen

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[44]Sylvie Aprile, 'Victor Hugo et la politique en exil – réflexions historiennes autour de *Napoléon le petit*", Groupe Hugo, 18 mai 2002, p. 1. Inevitably, the bicentenary of Hugo's birth in 2002 proved to be an occasion for the usual set of Hugolian stereotypes which were already dominant beforehand. See for instance *Le Nouvel Observateur*, dossier on 'Victor Hugo Superstar', 25 février-3 mars 1999. Recent popular adaptations of Hugo's work in France (the musical *Notre-Dame de Paris* and TF1's rather loose adaptation of *Les Misérables*) are recent examples of modern variations of these and did nothing to temper the myth of Hugo.

the understanding of the representation of the city, but also to gauge what Debray calls 'le mentir-vrai des croyances humaines'.[45] My aim is to define the modern myth of Paris which developed in nineteenth-century France as something more than a poetic and fantastic representation of the city. The urban imaginary which was being expressed in the literature of this period is not a matter of pure imagination, but rather the result of the most concrete, political, historical realities – realities made concrete in the ways they are perceived and expressed.

In order to understand what a modern myth is, we first need to focus on the social functions of myth: to strengthen social cohesion and identity. The process is highly efficient but comes at a price, alienation, when the power of rhetoric and belief takes precedence over everything else. Looking first at Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire*, then at Halbwachs's *cadres de la mémoire collective*, we shall examine the very concept of "collective memory", as modern anamnesis is central to the process of myth-making, particularly in a century defined by its mythic, revolutionary origins. We shall then consider various aspects of mythical alienation. René Girard's work will be essential in this regard, first because his theory of the scapegoat will serve as an example of the price to pay for social cohesion (this will also be illustrated by Stefan Zweig's *Erasmus of Rotterdam*), but also prepares for chapter 7 of the dissertation, when it will shed light on Hugo's often misunderstood politics.

Once the theoretical framework is established, we can contextualise it by looking at the century of *désenchantement* and what Claude Millet called *le dispositif légendaire* – the combination of politics, poetics, history and myth which was born from a moment in history when religion was no longer the sole provider of collective representations and identity. As a result, the sacred shifted from the religious to the political, and we shall examine this movement of the resacralisation of politics and history through literature. We will look at one of the main historical myth-makers of 1789, Michelet, and how he brought history (considered as a science) and legends together. It is within that context that Paris as a modern myth can be fully comprehended: a myth that started in 1789.

To explore the sacred status achieved by Paris further (as the cradle of the revolution), we will consider both literature and history, concentrating first on Victor Hugo, an author who shares many of Michelet's values and ideas. In *Paris*, Hugo underlines the strong bind that brings Paris and 1789 together – one cannot be understood without the other. But the association with the revolution has its dark side, and Paris also comes to embody more disturbing revolutionary legacies.

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[45]Régis Debray, *Le Feu sacré* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p. 21.

As Hugo helps us to understand the revelation that is embedded in a *lieu*, Paris, he also illustrates how the city of the revolution encapsulates contemporary fears, and how the post-revolutionary imaginary projects its dark fantasy onto the urban stage *par excellence*, Paris. We will first explore the dark side of the capital that dominates the century from Mercier to Zola through Balzac. We shall then concentrate on Hugo, particularly *Les Misérables* and *Notre-Dame de Paris*, to examine his dominant theme of claustrophobia: the city is not just dark and grim, it also illustrates the penitentiary condition of modern man.

But Hugo's vision goes beyond the physical act of seeing, particularly after 1851, when he is in exile. Hugo, then, positions himself as a seer whose visions aim to enlighten the people, and to deconstruct the mystification of Napoléon le Petit. In that sense Hugo proves an excellent illustration of the *dispositif légendaire* which sees myth as closely connected to the real, in fact as revealing it. His prose was already deeply poetic, now his poetry becomes explicitly political (*La Légende des siècles*, *Châtiments*). Paradoxical as it may seem, it is in exile that his meditation of Paris reaches its climax, and the vision of the city becomes a vision on history and the place of the People in it.

But the People, as a key feature of the myth of Paris, fail to respond to the seer. In fact, since the People were born in 1789, a clash developed between an idealised representation (Michelet and Hugo), and the perceived reality of actual barbarians and *populace*. These two opposed and yet complementary myths explain the almost unanimous rejection of the Commune. We shall see how Zola in *La Débâcle* interpreted the fall of 'Babylon' and its revolutionary mob, and how he illustrated a thirst for urban apocalypse that can be dated back to Mercier.

On its knees in 1871, Paris seems to have nothing more to offer in term of mythical hermeneutics. From 1789 to 1871, the legitimacy has moved from the revolutionary *parole* to the state's discourse – now the sole entity in charge of shaping the nation. However, for Hugo, the new regime is yet to throw off mythical illusion, and a genuine republic can certainly not grow from the ashes of the Commune. The seer decides to revisit 1793 in *Quatrevingt-treize* in order to solve the deadlock of 1871, and from this, hopes to offer a different form of republic, one true to the principle behind the myth of Paris. Going back to Girard's work will help us understand that there is more to his plea for charity and forgiveness than the outdated idealism of an old, romantic prophet. His plea for 'une république d'esprits' (echoing 'Paris lieu qui pense') can be seen as a last attempt at demystification of which Paris had thus far been the locus – before the voice of the prophet itself starts to serve the myth of the new regime.

Chapter 1

The Function of Myth. Social cohesion and alienation

Ne dénonçons pas la manipulation, tentons de comprendre l'acculturation.[1]

As we shall see, the very concept of myth is extremely vague, and at the same time regarded with suspicion. As an indulgence in the land of fairy tales, it seems an obstacle to reason, whilst as a powerful vehicle for rhetorical power and collective beliefs, it is associated with manipulation and alienation.

We shall first look at the history of the term itself, but this raises more problems than it solves, given the elasticity of the word. The attempt to define the term will therefore lead to an analysis of the social function of myth. We shall examine how it is perceived as true, but also sacred, whilst one of its main purposes (to make sense) makes it a very adaptable hermeneutic tool. This helps to explain that far from being expelled from modern thinking, myth adapts to this new framework very well. We shall see how the traditional functions and characteristics of myth were redefined so as to adapt to a modern setting, despite the effort and pretenses of science and positivism to claim otherwise.

Myth belongs to the field of the religious, and is developed alongside religion as its narrative. Many, like Durkheim, have argued that the main function of religion is to favour and strengthen the community, giving it a clear image of its identity and of the world around it. The key factor in this regard is faith and beliefs, which bind the group together and turn myths into a powerful tool to make sense of the outside world.

An essential element in that regard is the constitution and telling of the community's origins. We shall see how traditional and modern societies conceive their origins, how modern 'collective memory' is a modern variation of traditional anamnesis, and how this affects and determines a given community's present (rather than its past). The so called 'collective' reading of a group's origin is particularly important to analyse here, as the (re)construction and 'remembrance' of the Revolution proved to be France's most enduring and defining myth. But it will be equally important to discuss the extent to which 'collective memory' is actually a *collective* process of remembrance.

If myth-making is highly effective in terms of social cohesion and the definition of collective identity, it also comes at a price: the making of scapegoats and a form of

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[1] Régis Debray, 'L'Europe somnambule', *Le Monde*, 1st April 1999.

alienation. And this brings us back to the suspicion associated with myth. René Girard's theory of the scapegoat, supported by findings in social psychology (social conformity and obedience), underlines the alienation attached to the process. This brings traditional and modern myths together, as both cultures turn to social conformity to answer the need for comfort and certainties illustrated by Dostoevsky's tale – a drive that explains how myth is a key feature of the dominant discourse's rhetoric.

This chapter will close on a definition of what I mean by 'modern myth', which will serve as a summary of the theoretical framework and premises on which this dissertation is intended to be based.

The vagueness of the word 'myth' corresponds to the wider field of the religious: 'notion confuse et floue, comme le sont les vastitudes du sens commun', Debray says of 'le religieux'.[2] Myth and religion are concepts which are overused, and refer to the most diverse realities – 'emploi inflationniste ou cannibale', Debray notes '(la religion du drapeau, des grands hommes, du sport, du vin, de la vitesse, etc...)'.[3] Myth is associated with fantastic narratives (legends, fairy-tales, epic) and can take the form of illusion, fantasy, allegory, or aspirations to utopia. What seems to unify all the various uses of the term, though, lies in the domain of legend: myth can be rooted in reality, but it has acquired a quality that transposes the story into an epic. Hence, actual facts and real people can acquire the status of a myth so long as their narrative seems 'larger than life'.

This variety of meaning matches the richness of the word's etymology: the Greek *muthos*, meant things as diverse and even contradictory as speech, rumour, news, conversation, command, or purpose.[4] It is with Homer that the definitions entered more specifically the territory of fantasy: *muthos* came to be opposed to *logos* as a narrative which was not historical, true or verifiable. Other definitions convey a similar idea of fantasy and untrue narrative, and Bailly refers to the phrase *mutho plokos* which it translates as 'persuasif', literally meaning 'qui tresse des paroles', highlighting the potential power of words when artistically combined in order to convince. Myth moves from being a divine means of revelation – interpreting the word of the gods – to being seen as a human tool of falsification and manipulation.

As reason comes to dominate western philosophy, myth is increasingly regarded with suspicion, as the reverse side of rational thinking, twisting a truth that human sciences

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[2] Régis Debray, *Le Feu sacré*, p. 33.

[3] Régis Debray, *Les Communions humaines. Pour en finir avec 'la religion'* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2005), p. 15.

[4] See Liddel and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), and Bailly (Paris: Hachette, 1950), *Dictionnaire grec français*.

hope to rediscover. Myth is acceptable so long as it provides fantasy and distraction. But when it claims to explain the world and the place of man in it, it becomes a threat to reason. Aristotle expressed the need to draw a clear boundary between what he called the mythologists (i.e. myth-makers), and serious minds interested in serious knowledge.[5] The reliability of rational thought is opposed to the fantasy of myth which belongs to another sphere of understanding, a dangerous one for those in pursuit of the truth. Myth is presented as a dangerous rival to reason, in that it subjugates man, playing on his emotions, where he is vulnerable. Guilty of turning man away from truth and reason at the same time, myth opposes both the real (it is fictitious, fantastical) and the rational (it is absurd, illogical).[6] It is a sin against reason. But how does it actually work?

(i) The social function of myth

Vague, elusive and irrational, myth is probably best comprehended through the social function it fulfills, that is, for the impact it has on a group. For if myth naturally affects individuals, their beliefs, and their behaviour, it is essentially social. Its primary function is to facilitate and secure a cement that would bind the community together. In this sense, it illustrates the social function of religion, as developed by Bergson and Durkheim: 'Les croyances proprement religieuses sont toujours communes à une collectivité déterminée qui fait profession d'y adhérer et de pratiquer les rites qui en sont solidaires. [...] Elles sont la chose du groupe et elles en font l'unité'.[7] Perhaps not surprisingly, this link between religion and society was already highlighted by Christian etymology, which understood the Latin *religare* as to link (*relier* in French).[8] Social unity, guaranteed by religion, is then threatened by what divides, *diabolos*, in French 'le Diable'. What unites is thus seen as essentially good, what divides as evil: 'Le péché est éparpillement'.[9]

However, what makes myth so essential in the process of social cohesion, is not so much collective beliefs as such, as the sacred nature of these beliefs. Collective beliefs unite best when they gather people around something both greater than the group, and

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[5]'Into the subtleties of the mythologists it is not worth our while to inquire seriously'. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, Jonathan Barnes ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 1579-80.

[6]Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: La Découverte, 1974), p. 195.

[7]Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, (Paris: PUF, 1998), p. 60. See also Henri Bergson, *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion* (Paris: PUF, 1946), p. 5.

[8]'Fausse étymologie', Franck Laurent reminds us, 'en réalité, l'étymon est "relegere", relire, ou plutôt cueillir, rassembler... Le mot désigne la religion du livre'. 'Discussion', Groupe Hugo, 20 septembre 2003, p. 4.

[9]Debray, *Le Feu sacré*, p. 45.

unquestionable, in other words, something sacred: 'Est sacré l'être, la chose ou l'idée à quoi l'homme suspend toute sa conduite, ce qu'il n'accepte pas de mettre en discussion, de voir bafouer ou plaisanter, ce qu'il ne renierait ni ne trahirait à aucun prix', Caillois explains.[10] This sacredness commands total submission and guarantees social order and respect for the community's rules that form the cement of social cohesion:

> Une religion est un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées, c'est-à-dire séparées, interdites, croyances et pratiques qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelée Eglise, tous ceux qui y adhèrent.[11]

In other words, it is the strongest possible bond: '"l'union sacrée" ne serait-elle qu'un pléonasme?' Debray wonders.[12]

This means that religion is not to be reduced to a mere opinion or belief, a status it has achieved in modern, secular societies. Religion is what guarantees social cohesion best because it is not so much a social contract agreed upon by the members of the community as a pact with the gods. This sacred bond gives the community the confidence to understand the word of the gods, and so to live by their rules. Hence, the importance of protecting and transmitting this sacred word and the tradition that derives from it which guarantees the community's perennity.

Hence, too, the fact that, despite what a modern mentality would perceive as its fantastic quality, myth is perceived as a true story, as an expression of absolute truth: the message and revelation of the gods.[13] Truth in the modern sense of the word is secondary to the main function of myth. Myth serves to explain certain realities which are essential to the group's survival: the origins of humankind, of customs and taboos, of institutions and religious rites. And if myth is to be taken as a true story, it is precisely because it always refers to these realities; it always tells about what *really* happened which explains daily life observation. Cosmogony, for instance, is 'true' because the mere existence of the earth is there to prove it.[14]

Therefore, for traditional societies, myth is not to be opposed to truth, nor even to reality. The narrative may take liberties with the real, but the story-telling remains genuine in the sense that tradition vouches for the integrity of the story-teller. What is essential, and 'true' in the mythic sense, is tradition: 'la tradition était là et elle était la

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[10]Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), pp. 176-7. See also Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).

[11]Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, p. 65.

[12]Debray, *Le Feu sacré*, p. 35.

[13]Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, pp. 21-2.

[14]Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 16-7.

vérité'.[15] Although myth takes great liberties with factual truth, it is born of the real and aims to explain it in return. It belongs to the real as well as to *l'imaginaire*; it is a bridge built between facts and their representation; a *tertium quid*.[16]

The social function of this *tertium quid* is to facilitate a clear understanding of the group's identity, rules and mindset by its members. For Malinowski, myth expresses the codes a society forges to ensure its coherence and guarantee its functioning:

> Dans les civilisations primitives, le mythe remplit une fonction indispensable: il exprime, rehausse et codifie les croyances; il sauvegarde les principes moraux et les impose; il garantit l'efficacité des cérémonies rituelles et offre des règles pratiques à l'usage de l'homme.[17]

Myth epitomises the group's aspirations, beliefs, and identity. But this is not confined to mere representations: Malinowski, here, emphasises the link between a coherent and unified mental framework and a code of conduct, a collective behaviour; an aspect later outlined by Dumézil:

> La fonction de la classe particulière de récits que sont les mythes est [...] d'exprimer dramatiquement l'idéologie dont vit la société, de maintenir devant la conscience non seulement les valeurs qu'elle reconnaît et les idéaux qu'elle poursuit de génération en génération, mais d'abord son être et sa structure même, les éléments, les liaisons, les équilibres et les tensions qui la constituent, de justifier enfin les règles et les pratiques traditionnelles sans quoi tout en elle se disperserait.[18]

So myth provides the group with meaning and a *grille de lecture* that prevents social chaos.

What makes myth so effective in this regard is its extraordinary fluidity: it is adaptable, applicable to multiple levels of reality. It is in the very nature of myth to be paradoxical and polymorphous, and it is so for a simple reason: its language is symbolic, and it is precisely in the nature of symbols to be reversible.[19] In other words, as Lagarde puts it:

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[15]Paul Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes? Essai sur l'imagination constituante* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1983), p. 19. This is why religious studies often refer to religious societies as 'traditional' (i.e. as opposed to modern).

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 40.

[17]Bronislav Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, cited in Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, p. 34. Malinowski also emphasises that myth is grounded in reality: 'Le mythe est donc un élément essentiel de civilisation humaine; loin d'être une vaine affabulation, il est au contraire une réalité vivante, à laquelle on ne cesse de recourir'.

[18]Dumézil, *Heur et malheur du guerrier*, cited in Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 183, note 2.

[19]Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, pp. 15-6.

Le mythe joue sur la puissance métaphorique des images qui appelle à approfondir le jeu des analogies. [...] Le mythe dispose ainsi de ressources inépuisables de significations aussi ambivalentes qu'interchangeables qui lui permettent d'être un principe d'intelligibilité du réel.[20]

So, to sum up, myth serves its explanatory purpose despite its apparently paradoxical nature; the fluidity and dynamism of myth give the community a coherent and reassuring reading of a situation that would otherwise appear chaotic and confusing. Hence the importance of myth in times of crisis; hence, too, its contradictions: as myth's aim is not to be objective or to produce an accurate account of a situation, but to meet particular affective demands, it can absorb any intellectual contradiction: '[le mythe] se moque des contradictions pourvu qu'il installe une sécurité euphorique'.[21] And the capacity to overcome any inner contradictions is explained by the affective needs it meets:

La valeur du mythe tient à la coloration affective que l'imagination lui confère dès lors qu'elle lui accorde le pouvoir de nourrir ses espoirs ou de calmer ses craintes par des explications suffisamment globales pour que tout en procède et ou que tout en découle.[22]

This is where myth gets its persuasive value.

There is an interesting paradox here between the fluidity of myth and what Barthes confirms as its conservative quality: its aim is to secure the cohesion and coherence of a society.[23] Sacred tales help a group to face any fundamental change which might threaten its cohesion or challenge its references. However, sacredness is anything but a static wall erected against external threats. And if what is sacred claims to be immutable and settled – unwilling to accept changes –, the flexibility of myth suggests otherwise. As we shall see in more detail with the example of collective memory, myth holds the capacity to embody and make sense of any deep change; its fluidity and paradoxical quality ensure that it can fulfill its function of interpreting a situation, however radical the change and however threatening it may appear. For the main function of myth is not the pursuit of knowledge or truth, but *meaning*.

Myth gives an explanation of the whys and hows of the universe, and of the place of man in it.[24] 'Sa fonction est de révéler des modèles, et de fournir ainsi une signification

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[20]Lagarde, *Le Mythe, la science et la philosophie*, p. 8.

[21]Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1957), p. 93.

[22]Lagarde, *Le Mythe, la science et la philosophie*, p. 6.

[23]Barthes, *Mythologies*. This aspect is most particularly illustrated by his texts on justice ('Dominici', Le Procès Dupriez'). See also 'Jouets', 'Grammaire africaine' and 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', pp. 228-9 and 243-4.

[24]Jean Servier, *L'Homme et l'invisible* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1992), p. 206. See also Geneviève Droz, *Les Mythes platoniciens* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992), p. 12.

au Monde et à l'existence humaine. [...] Grâce au mythe, le Monde se laisse saisir en tant que Cosmos parfaitement articulé, intelligible et significatif.[25] Myth explains, narrates and founds a reality; it sheds light on a confusing world; it is the language that deciphers it. In other words, it is a promise made to mankind, that however cryptic and mysterious the world may seem, it remains *intelligible*.

This is not confined to religious societies: the modern world too develops its own myths, which, as Raoul Girardet reminds us in the case of political myths, perform the same function of providing meaning:

> Le mythe politique est bien fabulation, déformation ou interprétation objectivement récusable du réel. Mais récit légendaire, il est vrai qu'il exerce aussi une *fonction explicative*, fournissant un grand nombre de clefs pour la compréhension du présent, constituant une grille à travers laquelle peut sembler s'ordonner le chaos déconcertant des faits et des événements.[26]

Here, Girardet provides a first glimpse on the similarities that bring traditional and modern societies together in their relation to myth: meeting the group's uncertainties, anxiety and fears. Indeed, myth seems the most efficient answer to collective fears: not so much because it reassures but because it brings meaning to what can cause havoc if left unexplained.

> Myth is filled with the most violent emotions and the most frightful visions. But in myth man begins to learn a new and strange art: the art of expressing, and that means organizing, his most deeply rooted instincts, his hopes and fears.[27]

In other words, the lack of control over an environment is compensated for by an aspiration to control its representation. It is from this combination of fear and the power of interpretation that myth acquires its social force. And it also explains why myth is so enduring, even in modern settings: in that it gives its members an explanation of not only the human condition in general, but also of the present social order, and guidance for everyday life.

The fact that myth is enduring, even in secular modern societies, is at the same time obvious and hard to assess with precision: ancient myths are being replayed time and time again within new contexts, and their themes are relatively easy to recognise.[28] Looking at the nineteenth century, one can clearly see how a myth such as that of Prometheus was not only a Greek affair, but also best epitomised the century of

[25]Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, p. 19.
[26]Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, p. 13. My emphasis.
[27]Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), pp. 47-8.
[28]See Pierre Brunel (dir), *Dictionnaire des mythes d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1999).

modernity. However, myth can not be called 'modern' just because some contemporary narratives keep revisiting Greek mythology. More importantly, the ground on which myth grows – i.e. the need for meaning and social cohesion – also persists. What psychology, anthropology, paleontology, the history of religions and mythologies, and literary studies show, is the recurrence of the same themes, the same structures, the same rituals.[29] For that reason, it seems highly unlikely that myth should simply disappear in so-called rational societies. Indeed, as Eliade argues, some basic features of mythical behaviour are fundamentally human:

> Il faudra prendre conscience de ce qui reste encore de 'mythique' dans une existence moderne, et qui reste tel, justement parce que ce comportement est, lui aussi, consubstantiel à la condition humaine, en tant qu'il exprime l'angoisse devant le Temps.[30]

However, part of the adaptation of myth to modernity derives from the relegation of the field of *l'imaginaire* to a secondary level of importance: the arts and *rêverie*. In a modern setting, myth is being denied any explanatory, enlightening competence. As it is reduced to safe epistemological insignificance, its enduring social function goes underground: '[un mythe] change seulement d'aspect et camoufle ses fonctions. Mais il serait instructif de prolonger l'enquête et de démasquer le camouflage des mythes au *niveau social*'.[31] In that regard, one key example is provided by an essential myth in both traditional and modern societies: the myth of origins. 'C'est surtout en analysant l'attitude du moderne à l'égard du Temps qu'on peut découvrir le camouflage de son comportement mythologique', Eliade argues.[32] The interpretation of the past is essential because the group's identity depends on its collective reading of its origins. And in the period considered for this study, which is also the century of nationalism, this social urge is as crucial as ever.

(ii) Remembering origins

Myth, like history, is essentially the story of the past. My premise here, in line with Halbwachs's work, is that this story has probably less to do with the past it claims to remember, than with the time of the 'remembrance', the present. As a modern myth, collective memory meets the function of myth outlined above: facilitating the shaping of

[29]Gilbert Durand, *Science de l'homme et tradition. Le nouvel esprit anthropologique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), p. 17.
[30]Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, pp. 38-9. See also p. 31.
[31]*Ibid.*, p. 26. On the idea of epistemological insignificance, see Gilbert Durand, *Introduction à la mythodologie*, p. 22.
[32]Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, p. 34.

society's identity, and guaranteeing its perennity – all of which are present-day concerns. In this section, I propose to look at the concept of collective memory not as an effort actually to *remember* the group's origins, but as a way to compensate for a knowledge-gap – as a (re)construction of the past. I hope to demonstrate that the relation of a society to its past, rather than 'memory' as such, is crucial to understanding its present.

I will therefore examine the relation traditional and modern societies establish with their origins, or their idea of them. This will help to explain the apparently paradoxical coexistence of history and myth in modern societies. In this regard, it is worth remembering that nineteenth-century France saw two apparently contradictory, but in fact complementary drives: the return of myths and legends on the one hand, and the constitution of history as a science on the other.

But it will be equally important to look at the concept of collective memory itself as an answer to present-day needs, rather than a pursuit of truth about the past. The *collective* aspect of 'collective memory' needs also to be discussed, particularly as I will be arguing that myth-making depends largely – although not solely – on a limited number of myth-makers. The work of Nora and, most importantly, Halbwachs, will prove particularly relevant in understanding the construction of collective memory in relation to contemporary needs.

What is a myth? Eliade insists on the notions of origin and epiphany which are at the heart of myth-telling: 'Le mythe [...] relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des "commencements". [...] C'est donc toujours le récit d'une "création"'.[33] The problem of course is that this origin is by definition out of the reach of the actual memory of the community. In traditional, religious societies (as opposed to modern and secular ones), the birth of the Earth and the creation of the first man escape human remembrance and knowledge. So the society which relies so much on its origin in the constitution of its identity is fundamentally built on a knowledge-gap: there is an epistemological rupture between the community and its origin.

Hence, the importance of the constitution, narration and transmission of a 'memory' of this origin to compensate for this aporia: 'La méconnaissance constitue une dimension fondamentale du religieux'. [...] La mémoire a pour but de triompher de l'absence et c'est cette lutte contre l'absence qui caractérise la mémoire'.[34] It is precisely because origins cannot be remembered that their narration is so crucial.[35]

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[33]Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, pp. 16-7. See also René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), p. 139.

[34]Pierre Janet, *L'Évolution de la mémoire et de la notion du temps* (Paris: A. Chahine éditions, 1928), p. 221.

[35]Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 204.

Constantly turned to their past to organise their present, traditional societies reject a historical conception of time and the idea of linear progress. One has to get closer to the origin, not further away. Traditional man sees the distance that separates him from his origin as a fall which needs to be compensated for by constant references to, and remembrance of, these origins. This is illustrated by the Greek conception of the ages of Gold, Silver and Bronze, or the Hindu ages of Manvantara: the further away humans get from their origins, the further they are from the message of the gods. History, then, is the long story of a gradual loss of that message, a plunge into incomprehension and uncertainty. The anti-modern apostle of 'l'esprit traditionnel', René Guénon, argues:

> Le développement de toute manifestation implique nécessairement un éloignement de plus en plus grand du principe dont elle procède; partant du point le plus haut, elle tend forcément vers le bas, et, comme les corps pesants, elle y tend avec une vitesse sans cesse croissante. [...] Cette chute pourrait être caractérisée comme une matérialisation progressive, car l'expression du principe est pure spiritualité.[36]

Historical societies, on the other hand, see their origins as the starting point of a linear progress, a gradual gain of consciousness and understanding: the further we are from our origin, the more advanced we become. The present is no longer the repetition of a divine primal act, an eternal return; it is the result of a human past, an accumulation of actions and thought. In other words, traditional man goes back to his origin, whereas the modern goes forward from his. So if both traditional and modern societies refer to their origins, the way they approach and understand them could hardly be more opposed. Edgar Morin explains that the main difference in that regard lies in the very perception of time:

> L'opposition entre les temps historiques et les temps dits "préhistoriques" ou "mythologiques" n'est pas l'opposition *relative* propre à deux parties homogènes d'un même temps... c'est l'opposition entre des temps (des expériences du temps) qui ne sont effectivement pas de la même nature.[37]

What is interesting in this with regard to nineteenth-century France is an unlikely combination of the two relations to time. The revival of myth in the century of modernity suggests a more complex relation to France's past than the status of history would otherwise suggest. Modernity may define itself through the establishment of history as a science, but *together* with its need for myths, it also suggests a more

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[36]See René Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 22. We shall explore this conception further when looking at Hugo's conception of history in chapter 5.

[37]Edgar Morin, *Un Paradigme perdu?* cited by Durand, *Science de l'homme et tradition*, p. 233.

disturbed relation to the past: 'dégoût de sa propre histoire' as Eliade puts it.[38] The relation of modern man to his past – a key factor of modern myth-making – needs to be further explored, and anthropology gives some valuable insights into this.

In *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Eliade proposes a religious reading of the 'monstrous' fascination that modern man seems to feel for history. This reading is relevant for two main reasons.[39] Firstly, it reverses a general attitude – a modern one, that is – which explains the religious according to its own, non-religious (sometimes anti-religious) standards. Secondly, it attempts to provide a religious explanation of modern man's anxiety when confronted with the void; which is a way to explain that these anxieties and their expressions can be made sense of through a religious framework, even in a modern, secular environment.

With respect to religious symbolism, what the modern 'passion' for history expresses, is the imminence of death. A person about to die is said to remember his entire life within seconds. Similarly, the modern thirst for history and the need to collect and archive every possible aspect of both our present and past suggest a morbid unconscious feeling of our near demise. The anguish about death, Eliade argues, is a specifically modern phenomenon in that only modern societies see death as meaningless. In primitive thinking, in contrast, this is never the case:

> Elle est valorisée au plus haut degré. [...] La Mort est la Grande Initiation. Mais pour le monde moderne la Mort est vidée de son sens religieux, et c'est pour cela qu'elle est assimilée au Néant; et devant le Néant, l'homme moderne est paralysé (pp. 65-6).

Modern man finds himself the subject of an illusion that traditional man can very well explain: he believes in the reality of time and history, thus forgetting and despising eternity. Modern man falls for the illusion of present contingency and ends up in the terror of a time that has lost its meaning.

History and the desacralisation of origins lead to an anxiety specific to modernity: just like archaic man, modern man struggles to escape from temporality, a present time of which he feels prisoner. But this effort has lost the direction and explanation provided by mythic thinking. The heroism of nineteenth-century literature and the resurrection of myth are a valuable illustration of this phenomenon:

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[38]Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, p. 33. This shall be essential for my argument, and we will explore Hugo's conception of time and history in particular in chapter 6, when he turns to myth to oppose the grim reality of a present (post-1851 France) whose history is at fault.

[39]*Ibid.* Further references will be made in main text. See also his chapter 'anamnesis et historiographie', in *Aspects du mythe*, pp. 168-73.

Vivre l'aventure personnelle comme la réitération d'une saga mythique équivaut à escamoter le *présent*. Cette angoisse devant le temps historique, accompagnée du désir obscur de participer à un Temps glorieux [...] se trahit, chez les modernes, par un essai parfois désespéré [...] pour "sortir" de la durée et réintégrer un temps qualitativement différent de celui qui crée, en se consommant, leur propre "histoire" (p. 34).

In other words, the predilection for myths in modern time is an indication of a certain unease in society's actual relation to history, and Eliade suggests a very mythical drive to escape from local, historical time in favor of what he calls 'un "Grand Temps" quelconque' (p. 33). This 'sortie du temps' is probably the main function of myths in modern societies (pp. 33-4).[40] And if progressivist history dominates the nineteenth century, it seems to coexist very well with its opposite in an unlikely nostalgia for a mythic golden age, an eternal return, and archetypes: 'désir de retrouver l'*axis mundi* capable de résister au temps historique'.[41]

This contradiction and the anxieties of modern man – as a historical *and* mythical being – are expressed by recurrent features of nineteenth-century literature, notably on Paris; such as the fear of being swallowed which echos the myth of Cronos – time devouring us. One key feature of the post-revolutionary imaginary matches Eliade's anthropological view of modern man's fears:

Le monde moderne est dans la situation d'un homme englouti par un monstre et qui se débat dans les ténèbres de son ventre, [...] ou il est égaré dans un labyrinthe, qui symbolise, lui aussi, les Enfers, – et est angoissé, se croit déjà mort ou sur le point de mourir et ne voit autour de lui aucune issue que les ténèbres, la Mort et le Néant.[42]

I suggest that the nineteenth-century French urban, ghastly and tantalising imaginary was born from a complex and uneasy relation to the society's origin. In the case of modern France, I propose that the origin is more historical than cosmological, yet remains highly mythical: France was constructed from the making of a 'collective memory' of its origin as a modern nation, 1789, and the locus of this myth-making, Paris, transformed the capital into the ultimate *lieu de mémoire*. However, the concept of collective memory is not as straightforward as it seems. We need to examine what this convenient phrase actually means, and to what extent it does in fact refer to a collective experience.

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[40]See also Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, p. 234-5.

[41]Brombert, 'Ma Destinée: l'ordre c'est le délire', in Jacques Seebacher and Anne Ubersfeld (dir), *Hugo le Fabuleux* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1985), p. 230.

[42]Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, p. 67.

It is by now a commonplace to state that memory should not be understood as a simple recollection of facts, that it is in no way a frozen phenomenon and that human memory has little to do with computer memory. Memory builds a complex bridge between past and present: when remembering humans shape their representations of the past in accordance with their present. Therefore, the need for collective memory is an indication not so much of the domination of the present by the past as of the reverse – a past which is constantly re-read, re-interpreted in the light of present issues, questions and motivations. As Steiner put it,

> It is not the literal past that rules us. [...] It is images of the past. These are often as highly structured and selective as myths. Images and symbolic constructs of the past are imprinted, almost in the manner of genetic information, on our sensibility.[43]

It seems legitimate then, to question the motivations of a particular age's thirst for some aspects of its past: why do we remember (or forget) a particular past in the context of a particular present? What is the drive of the 'devoir de mémoire'?[44] And if 'memory' is essentially a present-day construction, to what extent can we then speak in terms of *memory*? One way to answer these questions is to turn to Nora's famous *Lieux de mémoire* and the debates it generated.

The aim of this collective work was to explore in one study the places in which French national memory is embodied. The motivation behind this enterprise was a pessimistic acknowledgement that memory is necessarily followed by oblivion: 'Il y a des lieux de mémoire parce qu'il n'y a plus de milieux de mémoire'[45] – a pessimistic, if not bitter disappointment about the limits of history that had been expressed by Halbwachs:

> Le besoin d'écrire l'histoire d'une période, d'une société et même d'une personne ne s'éveille [...] que lorsqu'elles sont déjà trop éloignées dans le passé. [...] Le seul moyen de sauver de tels souvenirs, c'est de les fixer par écrit en une narration puisque, tandis que les paroles et les pensées meurent, les écrits restent.[46]

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[43]George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle. Some notes towards a redefinition of culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 13.

[44]A particularly acute question in contemporary France where the recent urge to dig deep into the Vichy regime and, more recently, into the Algerian war, illustrates this 'devoir de mémoire'. Having his doubts about the outcome of a process that combines collective education, the need for justice, and history, Henry Rousso confesses his unease as a historian, and, in line with Ricœur, advocates a 'travail de mémoire' rather than an ambiguous 'devoir de mémoire'. See his interview, 'Le Tribunal de l'histoire a jugé Vichy depuis longtemps', *Le Monde*, 7 avril 1998.

[45]Pierre Nora, 'Entre mémoire et histoire', in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992), vol. 1, p. 23.

[46]Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), pp. 68-9.

Indeed, the link between the witness and the following generations is bound to fade away, and with it, genuine collective memory. It is the time when the death of the witnesses is being compensated for by archives and museums; when history succeeds memory; in other words, when the spontaneous need for memory felt by all is replaced by a 'devoir de mémoire' felt by some. Nora acknowledges this knowledge gap in a Halbwachsian way: 'Faire l'historiographie de la Révolution française, reconstituer ses mythes et ses interprétations signifie que nous ne nous identifions plus complètement avec son héritage'.[47] Thus, what we consider as memory is presented as 'la constitution gigantesque et vertigineuse du stock matériel de ce dont il nous est impossible de nous souvenir'.[48]

But what this seems to suggest, is that this 'devoir de mémoire' has little to do with real, accurate memory. In fact, Nora has been criticised for this negative notion of collective memory, and generally for his use of this problematic concept. It has been pointed out that the individual praxis of memory remains unexamined in his book, and that he tends to confuse popular memory and history: 'confusion entre ce qui est effectivement de l'ordre de la mémoire partagée par les membres du groupe, et ce que le savant désigne unilatéralement et a priori comme objet de mémoire d'un groupe'.[49] Indeed, Nora does not demonstrate that what *he* calls a *lieu de mémoire* is in any way lived as such by the members of the community (here, the French nation). Nor does he demonstrate any affective link between the support of memory (*lieu*) and the social agents.[50]

Since the work of Maurice Halbwachs, it has been argued that an important distinction ought to be made between collective memory, *real* and *authentic*, lived as such by the people on the one hand, and an official, academic artifact, reconstructed *a posteriori* by historians on the other; which is in fact to oppose popular memory to historical memory:

> Comment l'histoire serait-elle une mémoire? [...] Comment recréer des courants de pensée collective qui prenaient leur élan dans le passé, alors qu'on n'a prise que sur le présent?[51]

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[47]Nora, 'Entre mémoire et histoire', p. 26.

[48]*Ibid.*, p. 31.

[49]Philippe Marlière, *La Mémoire socialiste. Un cas d'étude sociologique de rapport au passé*, unpublished doctoral dissertation (Florence, 2000), p. 21.

[50]*Ibid.*, pp. 43-8.

[51]Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, p. 131.

Halbwachs highlights the primacy of memory over history which he regards as an external, artificial reconstruction of collective memory. Worse, a reconstruction made according to the elite's representation of history, and thus opposed to popular history.[52] This is particularly important in my argument, as I will be looking in the next chapter at Michelet's attempt to combine the two. Halbwachs's position is to oppose the social time of collective memory to external historical time, which he said created a synchronic tableau that abstracts events from the real time of their living context.[53]

To overcome this difficulty, Halbwachs developed his now famous concept of *cadre social*. Contesting Bergson's idea of a pure memory reactivated by the individual, Halbwachs proposed a model of memory that is reconstructed according to the present, and within a social framework. For Halbwachs, there is no pure individual memory; it is always inscribed within a social context: 'il existerait une mémoire collective et des cadres sociaux de la mémoire, et c'est dans la mesure où notre pensée individuelle se replace dans ces cadres et participe à cette mémoire qu'elle serait capable de se souvenir'.[54] These social frameworks and references are the external supports to the consciousness of the individual.[55] The emphasis is put on the need to establish the collective settings within which collective perceptions and representations take (and change) shape. This means that memory must be contextualised, embedded within a social and, I would add, affective framework, so that its internal logic can be established outside any external reconstruction made by our present standpoint. And this is precisely at the heart of Halbwachs' most overlooked work.

In *La Topographie légendaire des Evangiles en Terre Sainte*, Halbwachs focuses on what he saw as the driving force of religious memory: belief. It is here that the power of influence of myth and its social function of providing meaning meet the more modern concept of collective memory. Halbwachs's work is particularly relevant to my argument for three main reasons: firstly it demonstrates the primacy of the present over the past in the process of 'collective memory'.[56] It is a *reconstruction* of the past made by our *present*. Secondly, Halbwachs thinks in terms of collective psychology, and collective representations: 'une société est faite avant tout de représentations et de

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[52]Gérard Namer, 'Postface', in Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, p. 293.

[53]Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, pp. 164-5. For a similar criticism of a certain form of history, see Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris: Colin, 1992).

[54]Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), p. XVI.

[55] See Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, pp. 86 and 107.

[56]See also Annette Becker, 'Halbwachs, modernity, religion and memory, modernity in memory: from the *Social Frames of Memory* (1924), to *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land, a Study in Collective Memory*, (1941)', unpublished, and Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 53-4 for a similar idea. Le Goff refers to Piaget and Erikson to argue that memory is not an access to the past, but a reconstruction of the past made in the present.

tendances', he explains.[57] For Halbwachs, to understand human behaviour, we need to understand the system of representation in which individuals operate in order to give meaning to their conduct. As Mucchielli sums up:

> Les hommes agissent en conscience, et d'abord en fonction de la *signification* qu'ils donnent à leurs comportements et à ceux des autres. Or le contenu de ces significations, ce sens, est d'abord fourni par les conventions sociales, les habitudes et valeurs de la collectivité dont l'individu est membre.[58]

Thirdly – and particularly interesting here –, for Halbwachs the process of establishing and developing collective representations and memory is not based solely on the values of the group. Those need to be firmly attached to some form of tangible, material realities – places, for instance. Halbwachs looks at beliefs in their relation to the material traces and references in which the group embodies itself. Four decades before Nora, Halbwachs paved the way for the very notion of *lieu de mémoire*.[59] And this is essential if we bear in mind that Paris was the locus of mythical, post-revolutionary memory in the nineteenth century. Hugo in particular, will look at that materialisation of the revolutionary principle within a *lieu* (ambivalent as it may be): Paris.

In *La Topographie*, Halbwachs focused on the memory of Christianity, studying 'the intention of the social agents to reconstruct the past in the light of the present and to replace a real topography with an imaginary one'.[60] Halbwachs' aim is not to discuss the authenticity of the holy land – that is something for the believer to reflect upon. He is trying to understand how traditions are shaped and localised in these places. The relative steadiness of these *lieux* provides the group with a principle of stability. It facilitates and strengthens the identity of the group and the sense of belonging, again fulfilling the function of myth.

Halbwachs puts belief at the centre of the process of collective memory, and studies the projection of faith upon a *lieu* and the localisation of belief according to present needs as felt by a given group. Christian memory-making serves as an example of the principles and laws that drive collective memory, a privileged example, he says, as for

[57]Maurice Halbwachs, *Morphologie sociale*, p. 168, cited in the preface to *La Topographie légendaire des Evangiles en Terre Sainte* (Paris: PUF, 1941), p. vi.

[58]Jean-Christophe Marcel and Laurent Mucchielli, 'Un Fondement du lien social : la mémoire collective selon Maurice Halbwachs', *Technologies. Idéologies. Pratiques. Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances*, 13 (2), 1999, p. 63-88. Available on <laurent.mucchielli.free.fr/mémoire.htm>, p. 10.

[59]Didier Guivarc'h, 'La mémoire collective. De la recherche à l'enseignement', Groupe de recherche en histoire immédiate, Fall 2002, <w3.univ-tlse2.fr/grhi/cahier/select_articles/guivarch.htm>, p. 2.

[60]Namer, 'Postface', p. 258. My translation.

him Christianity is essentially shaped around the commemoration of the life of Christ: it is a religion-memory.[61]

Again, it is not a remembrance we are talking about here, but a *construction*. Halbwachs argues that the actual origin 'remembered' (in this instance the life and death of Jesus) matters less than the construction of its narrative made by the believers in their *present* time.[62] For Halbwachs, the origins are not relevant *per se* for two main reasons: firstly because we cannot access them, and secondly, because societies do not go back to their origins – even if they claim to do so; they create them, they imagine them.

> Si, comme nous le croyons, la mémoire collective est essentiellement une reconstruction du passé, si elle adapte l'image des faits anciens aux croyances et aux besoins spirituels du présent, la connaissance de ce qui était à l'origine est secondaire, sinon tout à fait inutile, puisque la réalité du passé n'est plus là, comme un modèle immuable auquel il faudrait se conformer (p. 7).

So the key idea here is the projection of beliefs onto a *lieu*, and the reinterpretation of the past in the light of present needs – in this instance, the constitution of a Church and the organisation of its tenets. Halbwachs shows how early Christians put the Passion at the centre of their faith, and therefore reinterpreted Jesus's whole life in the light of his sacrifice (pp. 150-1). Meanwhile, his human, historical life falls into oblivion (together with his Jewishness, Halbwachs points out). In other words, in order for the religious memory of a divine Christ to develop, the memory of Jesus as a historical figure and human being had to be erased. By selecting the various elements that meet present-day needs from the past, the very act of remembrance breaks off from its actual origin.[63] It becomes mythical.

Jerusalem is Christianity's *lieu de mémoire par excellence*. Halbwachs explains that an abstract idea such as the interpretations of Jesus's death (dying for our sins) is likely to vanish if it is not rooted in some form of materiality (p. 124). Hence the importance of the place of that death in Christian consciousness. This is a two-way process as the elaboration of a faith which is localised in a sacred place benefits from this materiality while the *lieu* cannot be sacred if there is no organised cult to project its faith on it. The place has to be filled with the beliefs of the community to become sacred and a place of memory:

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[61]Annette Becker, *Maurice Halbwachs. Un intellectuel en guerres mondiales 1914-1945* (Paris: Agnès Viénot Editions, 2003), p. 275.

[62]Halbwachs, *La Topographie légendaire des Evangiles en Terre Sainte*, p. 163. Further references will be indicated in main text.

[63]Gaetano Ciarcia, 'Notes autour de la mémoire dans les lieux ethnographiques', in *Ethnologies comparées*, n° 4, Printemps 2002, 'Mémoire des lieux', p. 2.

C'est du jour où un culte est organisé, du jour où ce lieu devient le point de ralliement de tout un groupe de croyants, qu'il se transforme en lieu saint, et que la force d'inertie qui est en lui se manifeste au dehors, dans le monde des consciences humaines (p. 126).

In return the place strengthens the community's faith as it illustrates and incarnates its tenets (p. 124). It is not the fact that Jesus dies in Jerusalem that makes it a 'lieu de mémoire' for the Christians. It is because Jesus' death acquired a central role in their dogma, and because that role can materialise in the stones of a city which people can visit, see, and touch.

It is not the place as such which matters but rather its image; the *projection* of an *imaginaire* onto the place. As in the case of Jesus, stripped from his Jewishness to embody the faith of later Christians, Jerusalem is emptied of its history and Jewishness, and gradually filled with the memory and *l'imaginaire* that developed later and in a different location. With the Crusades, a symbolic repossession of the holy land took place together with the material reconquest. The Crusaders opened Jerusalem to the forms of devotion that had developed in Europe and invested the city with their own cultural baggage:

Il y a peu d'exemples plus frappants d'un système de localisations constitué peu à peu après coup dans des conditions telles qu'un cadre apparemment logique (déterminé par un point de départ et un point d'arrivée posés ou supposés), et d'abord entièrement vide, se remplit peu à peu de souvenirs ou d'imaginations dispersés à distance et qui y sont portés comme s'ils descendaient irrésistiblement sur une pente (p. 89).

The childhood of Jesus, the life and death of Mary, the mystical meditation about the Cross, the mystery plays that reproduced the Passion 'live', the iconography of the cathedrals: these were the elements that the pilgrims wanted to see in Jerusalem; this is what they wanted to locate (p. 163). In other words the real oriental, Jewish city became the receptacle of its imaginary, medieval and Christian representation.

This confirms that memory is what remains from the past *as the community preserved and reinvented it*.[64] In other words, it is a reconstruction of the past which adapts the *image* of the past to the beliefs and needs of the moment; it is a projection of beliefs and reinterpretation of the past in the light of present needs. The perception of the past therefore depends on the understanding of the present: an *outillage mental*, a collective psyche, a social framework, in other words perceptions, representations and beliefs of the present.[65]

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[64]*Ibid.*, p. 3, my emphasis.

[65]The concept of *outillage mental* comes from Lucien Febvre. See *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle, La religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1942), p. 327.

Halbwachs's paradoxical account of collective memory lends weight to my earlier suggestion that myth is both sacred (i.e. unquestionable) and adaptable: religion is both something that preserves and innovates. Although tradition and the sacred are perceived as permanent, outside the realm of what can be discussed, criticised and opposed, they are in fact an object of history: they evolve. Neither fixed dates, nor fixed places (*lieux de mémoire*) create a fixed memory, however sacred and mythical they claim to be; they are deceptive in that they hide a process highlighted by Debray: 'Nous inventons d'infalsifiables origines pour donner du crédit à nos credo, car elles nous permettent d'oublier que nos points fixes se déplacent avec nous'.[66]

This shows that belief in its theorisation by Halbwachs goes beyond the field of religious studies. I believe this can successfully be applied to the study of the French Revolution and its role in the constitution of French national identity. As Furet noted: 'Dès l'origine, [la conscience révolutionnaire] est une perpétuelle surenchère de l'idée sur l'histoire réelle, comme si elle avait pour fonction de restructurer par l'imaginaire l'ensemble social en pièces'.[67] The collective memory of the French Revolution could then be factually wrong so long as it sounded authentic to the contemporaries that were writing it in accordance with their present, affective needs. Their narrative had therefore an inner strength capable of overcoming any contradictions, thus ensuring a coherent construction of national identity.

What needs to be taken into account is that we have to deal with a succession of present moments, and that collective memory – as a 'belief' embedded in a social framework – varies from one moment to another. The case of the French Revolution and the way it was 'remembered' throughout the nineteenth century show that this succession does not follow a causal developmental process, but consists rather of a series of discontinuous moments characterised by the concept of rupture, as we shall see in chapter 3: the memorialisation of the French Revolution as the rupture instituting modernity; and the rupture between the way in which the French Revolution was experienced by its agents and the way it was remembered subsequently.

This proposed change of perspective – from a retrospective, linear reading of collective memory to a contextualised and conceptualised one that treats history as a discontinuous succession of socially embedded moments – upsets a chronological explanation. To trace a chronological thread from the French Revolution to the nineteenth century may appear convincing *a priori*, but the existence of such a thread is not necessarily supported by evidence. As we shall see, it is one thing to demonstrate

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[66]Debray, *Le Feu sacré*, p. 16.

[67]François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 42.

that there was a change in sensibilities between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, illustrated by a change in the representation of Paris, and that this occurred at some point during the French Revolution; it is quite another to assert that these changes are *explained by* the French Revolution itself. The social framework has to be brought into the analysis: urbanisation, immigration from the provinces, bourgeois power and morality, among other things, and the various elements that facilitate Paris's myth-making will be examined in the following chapters, as these color the reading of France's past. The revolutionary *event* being 'remembered' matters less than the *value* derived from the perception of that event and projected on a 'lieu' – be it a place or a person.

Adopting such a perspective implies recognizing the importance, power and influence of representation over fact. This is not to say that representations are more important than facts, least of all that there are no facts but only representations. I believe this kind of excessive relativism leads to an impasse. More precisely, to quote Veyne: 'chaque fait [...] ne joue pas le même rôle, ou plutôt n'est pas la même chose d'une conjoncture à l'autre; il n'a de rôle et d'identité que de circonstance'.[68] In other words, there is no 'pure' fact, nor is there any 'pure' memory; each depends on a framework which constantly evolves.

So-called collective memory is itself an essential myth in traditional and modern societies alike, fulfilling the social function discussed above: it builds a strong system which gives a society its references and code of conduct. It is there for society to attenuate its threatening contradictions, to unify opposites, to provide meaning.

But as I have suggested above, this comes at a price, and if the making of collective memory and myth more generally helps social cohesion, we also have to look at the negative effect of this process. Myth is this paradoxical enterprise that keeps fear alive in order to reassure, and in this regard, the constitution of the figure of the other is often of prime importance. Beliefs unite best when they focus against a figure that will help the constitution of the community's identity *a contrario*. Indeed, this is not limited to times of crisis, but represents an essential part of the group's constitution of identity: 'intensément engagé dans la logique de *l'Alter*, l'homme du mythe repousse constamment les autres dieux, les autres peuples'.[69] A conflictual rhetoric serves to explain and define the threat posed by the outside. However monstrous and frightening it may be, at least it gains a face: anything is better than an unknown, featureless threat. Providing a definition is a way to regain power: the power of interpretation.

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[68]Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?*, p. 49.

[69]Claudie Bernard, *Le Chouan romanesque* (Paris: PUF, 1989), p. 41.

(iii) Social cohesion and the scapegoat

In *La Violence et le Sacré*, Girard famously argued that traditional, religious societies are based on a violence which is reoriented on to a 'victime émissaire': any inner tension incites the community to find a scapegoat to blame.[70] The expulsion or sacrifice is a condition for a community's cohesion as it allows its members to orientate their need for violence outside the group: 'La société cherche à détourner vers une victime relativement indifférente, une victime "sacrifiable", une violence qui risque de frapper ses propres membres, ceux qu'elle entend à tout prix protéger'.[71] In return, the collusion of the members in the sacrifice ensures the future cohesion of the group.

All this is well-known. The originality of Girard lies in his premise that violence is somehow natural to mankind; that it is necessary to, and sacred in, human societies. He rejects the idea that violence would be something external to humankind: 'illusion ancestrale qui pousse les hommes à poser la violence hors d'eux-mêmes, à en faire un dieu, un destin, ou un *instinct* dont ils ne sont plus responsables et qui les gouverne du dehors'.[72] For Girard, violence is consubstantial with human nature, a premise based on his theory of mimetic desire.

In a way that is reminiscent of Hobbes, Girard argues that internal violence is a constant threat to society, a threat that sprouts from mimetic desire and rivalry: if men desire the same things, they become rivals, and this rivalry can degenerate into never-ending conflict. This is illustrated by the myth of Cain and Abel: the original crime – one of rivalry – put humanity in danger of being caught up in a cycle of eternal revenge. 'La mort violente, le meurtre du prochain, surtout du frère de sang viennent déchirer le tissu social et fait planer sur la société et même l'humanité la menace d'une autodestruction'.[73] The main function of religion, then, is to prevent this from happening, and redirect the threat of inner violence to the outside: 'C'est la communauté entière que le sacrifice protège de *sa* propre violence, c'est la communauté entière qu'il détourne vers des victimes qui lui sont extérieures'.[74] One can see how social cohesion and victimisation are actually complementary.

What we have here is an example of the collective dynamism of myth: not just a discourse that makes sense, but one that generates a *unanimous action*. Myth is not

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[70]See also his other book on the subject, *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1982).
[71]Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, p. 13. See also p. 26: even if the 'victime émissaire' is picked from within the group, his marginal position makes him disposable without endangering the group's cohesion.
[72]*Ibid.*, p. 216.
[73]Wunenburger, *Imaginaires du politique*, p. 23.
[74]Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, p. 18.

limited to narratives, but has its own dynamic: not only does it describe things and provide meaning but it also 'tries to produce effects and to change the course of nature'.[75] It is myth that justifies the selection of scapegoats, explains what has to be done to them (ritual), and then justifies the collective murder; the social function of myth could not be more obvious: 'Le mythe est essentiellement le triomphe de ce mécanisme victimaire et le religieux mythique est avant tout un religieux social'.[76] In other words, Girard emphasises the illusory nature of myth in its relation to social order: myth's main function here is to hide the fact that society is founded on a violence which binds its members, and it is precisely because they are unaware of the process that it works. This is precisely what Girard names 'l'illusion mythologique'.[77]

This illusion depends on the group's unanimity in their beliefs and actions: 'L'abstention même d'un seul assistant rend le sacrifice pire qu'inutile, dangereux'.[78] The values of the community must be shared by all; its actions supported by each and everyone, as the community itself depends on this unanimity: 'Impossible de ne pas croire en Dieu dans le monde enchanté. Cette impossibilité est un fait social: la défense contre le mal suppose la solidarité nécessaire au maniement de cette force positive. L'abstention est trahison'.[79]

Therefore, the exclusiveness and violence of the discourse against a perceived threat or enemy makes any neutral position untenable. We shall see later in chapters 6 and 7 how relevant to post-Commune France this mechanism can be, and how crucial it is earlier in the thought of Victor Hugo. It is something that I will be referring to as the 'Erasmus syndrome' (in reference to Stefan Zweig's *Erasmus*) and which will help us to understand better the effectiveness of myth, and the consequence of mythic thinking for communities that rely on it for their cohesion.

Written in 1935, from his exile in London, Zweig's *Erasmus of Rotterdam* is a bitter reflection on the impotence of humanism when faced with the power of fanaticism and mythical thinking.[80] Trapped between the Church and Luther – both becoming

[75]Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, p. 283. See also Roger Caillois, *Le Mythe et l'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 173: '[le mythe] n'a rien de commun avec un goût du surnaturel qui agit à la manière d'un *dérivatif* et manifeste seulement une adaptation insuffisante à la société, au lieu d'en représenter une vision collective, exaltée et entraînante.'
[76]Girard, '2000 et le mythe de l'ère post-chrétienne', in Cyrille Michon (dir), *Christianisme. Héritages et destins* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2002), p. 331.
[77]René Girard, *Et je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair* (Paris: Grasset, 1999), p. 115.
[78]Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, p. 151.
[79]Charles Taylor, 'Les Anti-Lumières immanentes', in Cyrille Michon (dir) *Christianisme: héritages et destins*, pp. 159-60.
[80]Stefan Zweig, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans. by Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: The Viking Press). Further references will be indicated in brackets in the main text.

increasingly intransigent – Erasmus refuses to take sides, confident in a third way of moderation and mediation. Once the object of both sides' attention, in the hope of devoting his immense reputation to the service of the 'good' cause, Erasmus, in his stubborn neutrality, is soon rejected by both. There is no place for the measured in times of such religious passions and extremes; pulled in both directions, Erasmus, with his resistance, becomes a traitor to both (p. 233).

Zweig explains one of the reasons for such harsh treatment of once the most respected humanist of his time: 'the world of action was not his world. Erasmus could clarify but not shape, he could prepare the ground but not garner the harvest'. (pp. 96-7) This is essentially what explains the effectiveness of mythic thought as we have seen: it is not just a representation, it leads to action. Although Zweig cannot help but admire Erasmus' attitude, he also acknowledges his inadequacy; courageous, most certainly (pp. 15-6), and yet what influence did he have on events? Erasmus – like Zweig in his time – is weakened by his faith in humanism: 'The fundamental belief of the earlier humanists – and it was their beautiful though tragical error – was that the progress of their fellow-mortals could be achieved by means of enlightenment' (p. 9); yet faced with religious fanaticism and mythic thinking, the 'touching and devout trust in the capacity of human nature to become more noble by means of the unremitting cultivation of learning and of reading' is shattered (p. 10).

One major consequence of the 'Erasmus syndrome', is to highlight the impotence of rational thought confronted with mythic thinking. Ernst Cassirer has explained how the power and influence of myth reaches its peak in times of severe crisis or conflict: 'In all critical moments of man's social life, the rational forces that resist the rise of the old mythical conceptions are no longer sure of themselves. In these moments the time for myth has come again'.[81] An old answer in archaic and modern times alike, myth expresses society's aim to reach a secure representation of a threatening situation. The teratology of the adversary comes from a rhetoric of conspiracy which simplifies its image whilst overestimating the unity and power of the enemy. This follows the logic of mythical response to fear as we have seen earlier: what matters is not to diminish the threat posed, nor to assess the reality of the danger, but to give it words and images so it acquires a circumscribed definition. The violent nature of myth is above all an instinctive reaction to the perception of a threat – whatever its reality.[82]

The danger is therefore magnified by *l'imaginaire*, but it gains in explanatory power. The threat loses its mystery and contingency: things happen for a reason. The main

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[81]Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, pp. 278-80.
[82]Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, p. 53.

characteristic of conspiracy theories – which, as we shall see, are extremely popular in nineteenth-century *imaginaire* – is the belief in, and magnification of, the power of an external force. The process that combines the demonisation of the enemy and exorcism of evil allows the community to label what is feared, and thus consolidate a collective identity in opposition to what seems to threaten it. It seems paradoxical, yet logical then, that (symbolic) fear brings a sense of security in that it offers order, clarity and coherence in a combination of representations that derive from an imaginary which is, in its essence, anarchic, confusing, and contradictory: 'une certaine forme de rationalité, à tout le moins de cohérence, tend à se rétablir dans le cours déconcertant des choses'[83].

The essential need to build a coherent representation for a community at risk from within as well as from the outside, and the ambivalent attitude of mythic thought to fear, suggest a collective identity whose making is closely related to violence, which brings us back to Girard's thesis. On the one hand, we see the violence of the discourse and images which match the level of fear faced by the group: as the image of the threat is magnified, so too is the fear – so that the image never actually reflects the threat itself, but the fear felt within the community. On the other hand, we have the unanimous violence of the group's system of beliefs, and therefore of the *praxis* required by the group to protect its cohesion.

Original and controversial, Girard's thesis – recently developed further in *Et Je vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*[84] – matches the idea of the social, constitutive importance of myth, as the natural, human response to any potential threat (whether internal or external) to the group. The polemical Christian anthropologist comes surprisingly close to similar conclusions reached in a different field working on similar grounds: social psychology. Its many experiments on sacred authority and social conformity seem to support Girard's view and my own premise that myth serves the purpose of securing an absolute priority: social cohesion. But what these experiments also demonstrate and illustrate further, is the relation between myth and power; between collective beliefs and dominant discourse. This supports Zweig's and Cassirer's contention that reason is deficient before the power of myth.

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[83] *Ibid.*, pp. 54-5.

[84] *Op cit.* In this work, Girard claims the Passion can be interpreted as the revelation of this process: as it breaks the community's consensus about sacrifice and sheds light on the innocence of the scapegoat, it reveals the 'violence fondatrice', and the very function of myth, thus undermining the whole process.

(iv) Social conformity, sacred authority, hermeneutic violence

Not just to find something before which I or some other man can bow down, but to find something that everyone else will also believe in and bow down to.[85]

Social psychology – developed particularly in the United States in the twentieth century, and essentially based on experiments upon individuals and groups – focuses on the mechanism and condition of social influence which is itself a matter of representations.

A series of experiments was carried out in the wake of the shock provoked by the Second World War. Mass hypnosis and the easy influence of propaganda had shed new light on human behaviour and dealt a fatal blow to the humanist optimism of inevitable progress brought by culture and education.[86] The 1930s had been a decade of unprecedented political mass movements, and what was now perceived as political irrationality, including in democracies. A new reflection on the capacity of the individual to govern himself rationally and democratically seemed needed. Various experiments focused on social conformity and submission to authority, aiming to define the limits of man's obedience. Social psychology was returning to its roots when Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde sought to evaluate the extent to which the personality regressed in a crowd.

In 1952, Samuel Asch initiated an experiment where a group of people had to place three sticks projected on a screen in order of size. Only one person in the group is the actual object of the experiment, although he is not aware of this. At the beginning of the experiment, he has to give his answer before the others. But gradually, as more slides are projected, he is asked for his answer second and third, until he is the last to answer. The whole group is united in giving the same – but wrong – answer. By the time the subject answers last, he gives the same response as his group, although he cannot but be sure of what the right answer should be. What comes out of Asch's experiment is the difficulty of resisting peer pressure, *even if the group is wrong and the individual knows*

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[85]Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 254.

[86]The first blow had been felt in the wake of the First World War. See Paul Valéry, 'La Crise de l'esprit', in *Variété I et II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1924 and 1930), pp. 13-51: 'Il y a l'illusion perdue d'une culture européenne et la démonstration de l'impuissance de la connaissance à sauver quoi que ce soit' (p. 17). This defeat was perhaps best illustrated by the suicide of Stefan Zweig in 1942. Zweig had thus far epitomised what it was to be a European humanist.

it. This concurs with Girard's reading of Peter's repudiation of Christ: 'il est comme nous tous, il ne peut résister à la foule'.[87]

With social conformity, sacred authority was the other object of psycho-social experiments: the two pressures of the *pairs* and of the *père* combine as the conditions for a harmonious and strong community. In the 1960s and 1970s, Stanley Milgram developed Asch's experiment by working on submission to authority in a series of famous experiments of his own, also aimed at assessing the level of resistance of the individual, this time not to peer pressure but to authority.[88] Milgram wanted to prove a difference between passive submission (as in Asch's experiment) and an active one; that an individual would resist if asked to *do* something he would know to be morally reprehensible.

The experiment takes place in a laboratory, where the organisers are wearing white coats. The subject is no longer facing a group, but a few scientists. Unaware of the real object of the experiment, he believes himself to be participating in a study about the relation between memory and punishment. His task is to help a learner, whom he believes – wrongly – to be a volunteer like him. The learner is tied up in an electric chair; the teacher has to read him a series of words, linked in pairs, and check his memory afterwards. Inevitably, the learner fails to connect the words of the list correctly, in which case the teacher has to send him a light electric shock from a keyboard he is sitting at. Every mistake leads to a higher voltage.

Needless to say, the electric chair is a fake, and the memory of the learner who is acting in it of little importance. What is tested is the willingness of an individual to inflict pain on a person he knows nothing about, without any ideological drive, no monetary gain, and in a democratic country that allows him to walk out at any time. The only force on him is the authority of the white coat, who, at some point in the experiment, relieves the uncomfortable 'teacher' of any responsibility.

The results of the experiment were disturbing and surprising: two thirds of the subjects sent the maximum voltage, and none refused to take part. The experiment was reset many times with variations (introducing visual, verbal, physical contact between the learner and the teacher) and in different countries. However, the overall lesson drawn from the initial experiment remains: an individual is prone to follow the lead, not only of a group, but of any form of authority accepted as such by his society, so long as

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[87]René Girard, '2000 et le mythe de l'ère post-chrétienne' (in Cyrille Michon (dir), *Christianisme: héritages et destins*, p. 334.

[88]Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: an experimental view* (London: Pinter & Martin, 1997).

the burden of his individual responsibility is being taken care of, and assumed by, the holder or representative of this authority.

This experiment links traditional and modern societies together in their submission to an authority they regard as sacred (divine or scientific) – that is, that they will not question. In religious societies, authority acquires a level of sacredness: as man and cosmos are interrelated, rebelling against authority puts both the group and cosmic order in peril.

> C'est que l'ordre naturel continue l'ordre social et le réfléchit. Tous deux sont liés; ce qui trouble l'un dérange l'autre. Un crime de lèse-majesté est l'équivalent d'un crime contre nature et nuit de la même façon au bon fonctionnement de l'univers.[89]

But the sacredness of authority is not solely religious: it springs from a social need for cohesion. We have seen that the primary peril in this regard was inner violence and the cycle of eternal revenge: crimes break the social bond. The condition for social cohesion lies not solely on a 'victime émissaire' but more essentially on an agreed authority, well-considered enough (or sacred) to decide the punishments that will prevent murder, revenge, and their threat to social cohesion. It is an authority invested with the power to judge and to inflict death where needed. The sacredness of this position places the judge-executioner in an intermediate position between the world of gods and the world of man, and belonging to both: human, he has authority over terrestrial affairs; divine, he has the gods' power to take life. This does not prevent violence or crime, but by delegating the monopoly of legitimate violence in the hands of an indisputable authority, the future of the community's cohesion seems protected.[90]

Power – sacred and protective – operates because of this delegation. Power then is a domination that is accepted, not forced:

> Le pouvoir apparaît comme la réalisation d'une volonté. Il manifeste la toute puissance de la parole. [...] Il fait qu'un ordre est exécuté. Il se présente comme une vertu invisible, surajoutée, irrésistible, qui se manifeste dans le chef comme la source et le principe de son autorité.[91]

The combination of sacred authority and social conformity helps to explain the power of dominant discourse, however irrational it may sound, and the powerful influence of mythic discourse: 'Le propre de la pensée mythique est de croire au pouvoir des mots, à

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[89]Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, p. 32.

[90]See Wunenburger, *Imaginaires du politique*, pp. 24-5. On the legitimacy of authority, see also Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. by Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

[91]Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré*, p. 117.

leur magie, à leur efficacité ensorcelante', and faced with the magical power of words, reason shows its limits.[92]

This is eloquently illustrated by Caillois in his tale 'le crocodile ensorcelé'. A cursed person who, it is predicted, will end in a crocodile's stomach vainly proposes a rational explanation for the outcome of the curse, whatever it may be: if the accident predicted happens (real), it demonstrates the power of the spell (imaginary); but if the person does not end up in the crocodile, he will fail to prove the conceit: 'j'invite chacun à reconnaître l'impuissance de la magie. On ne reconnaît que celle du magicien: on m'affirme que ma survie prouve au contraire l'efficacité des charmes'. And Caillois concludes: 'On aperçoit l'artifice: il n'importe guère que je sois indemne ou mis en pièces. Dans les deux cas me voici preuve patente de cette réalité de la magie, qu'une aveugle obstination me pousse encore à nier. *Dès qu'on y croit, tout est résolu*'.[93]

The force of mythic thought, contrary to the rational mind, is that it is not reducible to intelligence, and is actually perfectly capable of existing outside and without it. Flexible enough, as we have seen, to adapt to any context, the symbolic refitting allows an interpretation compatible with any circumstance, even those that seem to deny its coherence. Analyses and conclusions made outside the inner logic of mythical thought, reasonably proving its inconsistency and incoherence, are doomed to fail: the truth of myth is not located in the coherence of the discourse, but in its 'puissance évocatrice'.[94] Girard and Cassirer, both in different ways, pointed out the relation of myth and violence: 'il existe une violence du mythe à l'égard du sens. [...] Le mythe étant, sous la forme d'un mensonge ou d'une affabulation, la transposition de la violence dans l'ordre de la culture'.[95]

I wanted to emphasise what traditional and modern societies have in common with regard to the way mythic thinking and dominant discourse operate to highlight the potential danger of modern, rational thought to fall in the same trap. And if Caillois' story of the crocodile illustrates an aspect of mythic thinking, he is quick to make the connection with his contemporaries' use of comparable rhetorical violence. The explanation given by modern science for human motives and behaviour may appear more rational; the rhetoric, however, may well be similar. Caillois refutes the use of the intellectual *panacea* that explains everything through a theoretical framework, but acknowledges the rhetorical efficiency of mythical thought in this context too; whatever

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[92]Bertrand Vergely, *Cassirer. La politique du juste* (Paris: Editions Michalon, 1998), p. 58.
[93]Roger Caillois, *Babel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), pp. 283-4. My emphasis.
[94]Lagarde, *Le Mythe, la science et la philosophie*, p. 9.
[95]Vergely, *Cassirer*, pp. 36-7.

assertion, however arbitrary the demonstration, it is potentially irrefutable: 'Pour les mêmes raisons qu'il est impossible de prouver que de telles affirmations sont vraies, il ne l'est pas moins de démontrer qu'elles sont fausses. Leur arbitraire même les protège et les rend irréfutables'.[96] The believer in witchcraft is the victim of the same kind of rhetorical violence that can be used in a seemingly more rational setting:

> Ces savants hommes ne se tiendront pas pour battus. Ils accuseront leur contradicteur d'être victime des apparences, de s'en tenir à la surface des choses et ils prétendront vite que dans le fond et en dernière analyse, comme ils se plaisent à dire, ce sont bien les déterminations qu'ils invoquent qui ont tout conduit.[97]

This way does not belong specifically to archaic societies, Caillois argues; 'En cette façon de raisonner réside sans doute une tentation permanente de l'esprit'.[98] In this way, mythical thought remains, and so does the rhetorical violence against the real, because when belief takes precedence, the fact that this belief is religious or scientific makes little or no difference. As Freud pointed out, belief is an illusion 'when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relations to reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification'.[99]

As Girard stated, 'la violence essentielle revient sur nous de façon spectaculaire, non seulement sur le plan de l'histoire mais sur le plan du savoir'.[100] We are not far from Barthes' concept of *doxa* here: the alienation facilitated by myth affects modern and traditional societies alike. Dominant discourse is essentially a discourse that sets the social norms. Its rhetoric aims to assert its authority and the submission of the individual to it, or, rather, his adhesion, as the whole process also aims to be hidden, making submission invisible.

I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief recapitulation of some essential points discussed thus far in order to provide a definition of the concept of modern myth. As Vergely rightly points out:

> Toutes les définitions du mythe sont réductrices. Aucune n'aperçoit ce qui est véritablement en jeu, en faisant du mythe une vision primitive des choses. Car ce qui est véritablement en jeu est autrement profond. [...] Tout et n'importe quoi peut devenir mythique. [...] Le mythe est cette méthode consistant à faire exploser la méthode.[101]

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[96]Caillois, *Babel*, p. 281.

[97]*Ibid.*, p. 282.

[98]*Ibid.*, p. 288.

[99]Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 31.

[100]Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, pp. 480-1.

[101]Vergely, *Cassirer*, pp. 62-3.

The nature of myth is paradoxical. Myth starts with a rupture with the past, as we shall see, but it establishes a social continuity; its narrative seems anarchic, but leads to social order; intellectually and epistemologically controversial (if not subversive), myth is also emotionally and socially conservative.

However, I would like to propose a short and convenient definition of myth as *a sacred story, perceived to be true, and telling a society of its origins, thus providing them with meaning and a sense of collective identity*. Stories of origins lead to the institution of rituals and beliefs; this emphasises the active, dynamic, social function of myth, compared to a simple tradition or story. Myth is a social system of representations which meets the needs of a society. But it is also a praxis as it provides the group with a code of conduct, particularly in times of crisis.

If a myth is a story, it is an exemplary one: born within a society, it gives it a set of rules, and explanations in return. It is a *religious, collective* phenomenon, adaptable, flexible and socially necessary, which makes it highly influential and powerful. Because myth is the telling of origins, because the anamnesis is a guarantee of the perennity of the society, myth is also sacred and unquestionable. It is never doubted that a society is founded in primal time. But myth is flexible enough to adapt to changes and provide a necessary reading of events in tune with the moment's *zeitgeist*.

I wish to insist particularly on the political implications of the influence of modern myth, its rhetorical power, control over representations, and capacity to lead to action. As we have seen, the constitution of 'collective memory' is a reinterpretation of the past according to the needs of the present. This is particularly true in the case of France which, in the wake of the French Revolution, has to (re)constitute a collective identity based on a rupture. France shares with the United States the specificity of having created 'modern' origins (almost at the same time) in a rare attempt to bind mythical anamnesis and modern history.

The problem of the study of the French Revolution lies in its unique status in French historiography: since it is still widely considered to be the origin of modern France, it is largely read as an explanation of the present. After 'the French revolution substituted prophecy for teleology',[102] the post-revolutionary construction of a collective memory, the *devoir de mémoire*, takes up the greater part of a century that would see both its present and future as functions of its past. In this way, the nineteenth century recreated its past as much as it was constructed by it. Or perhaps one could say that it was

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[102]Priscilla Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution. Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1994), p. 224.

constructed by the past it created. The nineteenth century is notoriously the century of memory and history, but also of ruptures and repetitions; of accelerations of time and sudden standstills; a time of secularisation, myth and a revival of Christianity that constantly sought to define the relation between the religious and modernity. The myth of Paris springs from this contradictory, fragmented framework. 'Une société fondée dans une action commune [...] a besoin d'une définition commune ancrée dans l'imaginaire social', Taylor notes.[103] It is this *imaginaire* that I now wish to explore.

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[103] Charles Taylor, 'Les anti-Lumières immanentes' in Cyrille Michon, *Christianisme: héritages et destins*, pp. 162-3.

Chapter 2

Dispositif Légendaire: Michelet and the remapping of myth in the nineteenth-century literary imaginary

> *Le légendaire n'est pas un genre; c'est un dispositif poétique de [...] soudure du mythe et de l'Histoire, de la religion et de la politique, avec pour horizon la fondation de la communauté dans son unité.*[1]

The century of modernity is often regarded as a turning point in the secularisation of western – and particularly French – society; a time that seems to have established an inexorable link between Voltaire and 1905; a time that saw the triumph of the scientific values of objectivity and reason over the superstition and illusory comfort brought by an obscurantist Church. The relatively rapid process of secularisation that affected France since the late eighteenth century is central to the theme of modern myth in that it brought a new, more political system of belief, which had the future for its horizon rather than the past for its model; and which, at the same time, had the representation of the past at its heart. We have seen in the first chapter that, in modern societies, the chronological conception of time heads for the future whereas religious ones keep returning to origins. However, nineteenth-century France largely constructed its identity on the basis of modern origins: 1789. After the French Revolution, the traditional fear of social disintegration combined with a contemporary need to rebuild a national identity within a new, modern and secularised framework.

However, as crucial as secularisation may be, it does not mean that the importance of the sacred recedes. In fact the nineteenth century shows more of a shift *of* the sacred from the Church to science and politics. The trend is well known that saw a new sacredness applied to the Nation, for example. Science also seems to become a new God, 'our God logos',[2] and even positivism – a *faith* in scientific approach – falls to the temptation of myth:

> Parce que le positivisme renvoie tout entier à la croyance qu'il suffit de constater les faits pour pouvoir connaître. Ce qui est une vision mythique de la réalité consistant à avoir une croyance religieuse dans la vérité des faits constatables. [...] Mythe et positivisme ne diffèrent que dans la forme pour arriver au même point, à savoir *la confusion entre les mots et les choses*.[3]

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[1] Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 5.

[2] Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 54.

[3] Vergely, *Cassirer*, pp. 41-2. My emphasis.

This seems to suggest that a religious framework remains essential to social cohesion, only it is no longer encapsulated by the Church.

Rather than using 'secularisation', it may prove more accurate to speak in terms of *désenchantement*,[4] and to focus on a situation by which the sacred shifts from religious institutions to politics during the French revolution, and later to history, with the attempts to build a revolutionary memory. We shall see the remarkable repercussions of this for the place and status of history in modern, post-revolutionary consciousness: the rejection of religious thinking in the private sphere leaves a new scientific discipline with a mission to tell society about its origins, attempting to reconcile the power of myth and the reliability of science, in an unprecedented goal to create a modern, man-made, theologico-political system. And this is precisely the mission Michelet set out to accomplish.

It is therefore by looking at the production and reading of history that we can best comprehend the combination of mythic and rational thinking which is the trademark of nineteenth-century France. We shall see that modern myth stems from what Millet called a *dispositif légendaire*, mixing history and legends to reach the best understanding of the revelation of 1789.[5] As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter as well, 1789 came to symbolise the dawn of a new era, the sacred origin of modern France. It then fell on historians, particularly those of the 1820s and 1830s to explain this 'mythe fondateur', to solve the contradictions of the revolutionary legacy and to build a collective identity on these new foundations. If the French Revolution can be understood as a modern cosmogony, its narration had to bear a crucial social dimension of myth: to keep the memory of this origin alive and to form a living bond between the past and the present. We shall see that Michelet passionately endorsed that agenda, and paved the way for the model of the prophet-historian (in much the same way as Hugo will as a prophet-poet – both seers in modern times).

Michelet positioned himself as a 'prophète de la mémoire', which will be crucial to the understanding of modern myth. We shall see how he set himself the task to resuscitate a past that he could not bear to see dying, and give their voices back to a *Peuple* the past of whom had been neglected for too long. The first historian to give such prominent role to the masses, Michelet set himself the mission to be their voice and to bring their memory to life, initiating a process of revolutionary anamnesis, and

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[4]See Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). 'Désenchantement' is usually used to translate Weber's 'Entzauberung', although 'démagification' would be more literal. See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. by Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

[5]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*.

bringing mythic and modern thinking together. There is something religious in Michelet's mission as he attempted to demystify the official history of kings and battles, and to resort to the legendary in order to resuscitate the long-forgotten memory of the People.

(i) The century of secularisation and *désenchantement*

The revolution operated by the Enlightenment – most notably by Voltaire – challenged the authority and supremacy of Catholicism, and, without necessarily rejecting the concept of God as such, contested the sole divine explanation given by the Church on terrestrial matters. France remained Catholic, but society started a process of secularisation whereby religion was becoming a matter of personal belief rather than the sole holder of transcendental, external truth. The secularisation of France was closely related to this religious relativism – religion becoming just one among many opinions. They can all be tolerated as long as they are confined in the private sphere, but their incursion in politics is increasingly regarded as awkward and dangerous – 'un vestige du passé, un défi pour la raison, une menace pour la liberté et la démocratie'.[6]

The study of nature and the exercise of reason were now viewed as the best means to apprehend the world. And this process of rationalisation leads *ipso facto* to a movement of return to the human, to a certain form of anthropocentrism. The refusal to believe in any principle superior to man reduces every field of knowledge to human criteria. History, then, ceased to be the story of the people of God to become the gradual revelation and possession of reason by men. God was expelled from historiography: the agents of history are all men. The rationalisation and secularisation of society goes alongside this emergence of a new historical consciousness – 'réappropriation de cette puissance de se faire'.[7]

Such dramatic change takes time to permeate a society, yet, where Paris is concerned, the process was strikingly rapid: between the 1760s and the 1770s, the city that had backed the *Ligue* became almost indifferent in religious matters. 'En dix/quinze ans, tout s'ébranle; avec l'expulsion des Jésuites... ce sont les réseaux de la piété encadrée qui sont cassés; le rapport de beaucoup de Parisiens change, puis s'estompe'.[8]

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[6]René Rémond, *Religion et société. La sécularisation aux XIXe et XXe siècles, 1780-2000*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 2001), p. 107.

[7]Marcel Gauchet, 'Croyances religieuses, croyances politiques', in *Le Pouvoir, l'Etat, la politique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), p. 263.

[8]Pierre Chaunu, 'Avant-Propos', in Pierre Chaunu, Madeleine Foisil and Françoise de Noirfontaine, *Le Basculement religieux de Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), p. 16. Chaunu sees this turn as decisive, 'le point de départ, la crise anticipatrice, le détonateur peut-être de l'un des plus importants tournants de l'histoire religieuse des hommes' (p. 18).

C'est la faute à Voltaire, naturally. But not only, Chaunu showed how Louis XV's own personal crisis played its part in the process as he distanced himself from the traditional sacred attributes of the monarch:

> Le moralisme rigoriste des clercs gallicans, en alignant la conduite privée du roi sur les normes communes [...] a réussi à casser en Louis XV [...] le ressort de la royauté sacrée auquel le peuple tient. Un roi qui ne touche plus les scrofuleux, qui ne guérit plus les malades est un roi qui a abdiqué sa légitimité profonde.[9]

This *désenchantement* is affecting the 'Fille aînée de l'Eglise' at its highest level – the 'Lieutenant de Dieu sur terre' – and in its heart, Paris. This crisis was felt deeply by the Parisians: within a decade, half of them stopped regular practice.[10] This religious indifference explains, Chaunu argues, the success of Voltaire's blows against *l'infâme* (namely religious fanaticism): 'ils atteignent celui qui a abdiqué l'essence de son pouvoir et de son être'.[11] The *désenchantement*, however, does not mean that the need for sacredness and miracles diminishes. Quite the opposite: if the Church is weakened in that regard, and so is the king, there is a vacuum ready to be filled.[12]

But the nineteenth century proceeded on the path of secularisation and rationalisation, many being convinced that these would push religion aside and eventually defeat it. From Feuerbach to Nietzsche, the nineteenth century was the time of a fierce battle not so much against *l'infâme*, as against *amentia*: 'a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion' that religion seemed to be reduced to.[13] The century of science perceived religion as the long history of reason's hibernation: 'in religion man denies his reason. [...] Man, in relation to God denies his own knowledge, his own thoughts, that he may place them in God', Feuerbach wrote.[14] If God was a creation of man, then worshipping God was in a sense worshipping oneself, he further argued: 'what was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something *human*. [...] Man is seen to have adored his own nature [Wesen]'.[15]

If religion is an empty shell, and this is all that man worships, this indicates a certain degree of archaism in modern man but also, and more importantly, the sign of the

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[9]Chaunu, 'Le Défi du Siècle', in *Le Basculement religieux de Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, p. 442.
[10]*Ibid.*
[11]*Ibid.*, p. 442-3.
[12]On this religious vacuum, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 242-47.
[13]Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 43.
[14]Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 27.
[15]*Ibid.*, p. 13.

submission of his reason to the irrational and obedience alike. The mission of rational men was therefore to shed light on man's indulgence, creating a new, secular science of man that was essentially anti-religious. In that respect, Guénon is right when he points out that 'l'esprit moderne est anti-chrétien parce qu'il est essentiellement anti-religieux'.[16]

This is the reason for the unprecedented attacks against the Middle Ages, where the Church had control over minds and abused its position. In the wake of Voltaire, the Church – personified in the sinister figure of Torquemada – was identified with the Inquisition; perceived as intolerant and obscurantist; responsible for the preposterous medieval belief in a flat earth.[17] Freud criticises a system that forbids doubts and facilitates the submission to authority; in other words, the ascendancy of religion at the expense of the capacity to think independently and rationally.

Modern man, on the other hand, attempted to free himself from the dangers of illusions and the comfort of irrational beliefs, compared to a drug by Marx and Freud alike.[18] The possibility of such alienation lies within each of us: the need to believe. '[Religious representations] are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind'.[19] This enterprise was fundamentally anti-mythic: a reaction against the illusions of *pensée magique*.

> To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. [...] *The task of history*, therefore, once the *world beyond the truth* has disappeared, is to establish the *truth of this world*. The immediate *task of philosophy*, which is at the service of history, [...] is to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms*.[20]

Hence, the secularisation of French society was being seen as a movement of liberation. For the first time, a society envisaged functioning on a secular basis. No country pushed that experience further than France.

This disengagement from Christianity came to a head in the second part of the nineteenth century, following the Romantic period. The positivists were continuing the struggle initiated by the Enlightenment, but in a much more violent, anti-religious

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[16]Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne*, p. 165.

[17]Jeffrey Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth. Colombus and Modern Historians* (New York: Wesport, 1991). Russell argues that this so-called medieval belief-system was in fact a myth elaborated in the nineteenth century.

[18]Freud, *The Future of an illusion*, p. 49: 'the effect of religious consolations [are] likened to that of a narcotic'.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 30.

[20]Karl Marx, 'Introduction', in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophie of Law'*, in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), p. 176.

mode. Science sets itself free from theology.[21] And if the Eighteenth century had accepted a certain form of religiosity – deism for instance – in their battle against the Church, the target now moved to encompass faith as such. Two conceptions of the world were perceived as mutually exclusive:

> C'est une opposition raisonnée, qui se fonde sur l'affirmation d'une *incompatibilité de nature* entre la société moderne et le catholicisme. Deux systèmes se dressent ainsi l'un en face de l'autre qui s'opposent terme à terme: enseignement par voie d'autorité contre esprit critique, obéissance inconditionnelle contre liberté, soumission à la loi du groupe contre la volonté individuelle, dogme contre raison, égalité contre légalité, tradition contre progrès, conservation ou réaction contre démocratie.[22]

Modernity can be defined as a moment of emancipation from the religious and the sacred (social autonomy: independence from an non-human order), and the transfer of temporal power into the hands of secular institutions: 's'affirme un nouvel état d'esprit, une disposition à concevoir [...] l'Etat comme entité indépendante et à reléguer la religion dans le domaine des croyances privées'.[23] And if religion remains, if the French remain Catholic, the position of religion in society is radically modified: 'Les croyances, si elles perdurent, ne font plus système, elles ne sont plus partagées par tout le monde'.[24] The Enlightenment had ultimately challenged the Church as the sole principle of social organisation – initiating the end of a theologico-political model that had prevailed in France thus far.

The decline of religion in favour of *religiosité* is not a matter of practice only, not even of belief, but one of social function: 'Historiquement, l'âge des religions en tant qu'ordre politique est révolu. La religion peut encore contribuer à la richesse spirituelle de l'homme, mais ne peut revendiquer la direction de l'ordre social'.[25] Gauchet notes that a society can very well be constituted with believers and yet be secular.

> Car la religion, ce fut d'abord une économie générale du fait humain, structurant indissolublement la vie matérielle, la vie sociale et la vie mentale. C'est aujourd'hui qu'il n'en reste plus que des expériences singulières et des systèmes de convictions, tandis que l'action sur les choses, le lien entre les êtres et les catégories organisatrices de l'intellect fonctionnent de fait et dans tous les cas

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[21]Madeleine Rebérioux, 'L'Héritage révolutionnaire', in André Burguière (dir), *Histoire de la France. Choix culturels et mémoire* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000), p. 163.

[22]Rémond, *Religion et société en Europe*, p. 189. My emphasis.

[23]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 276.

[24]Taylor, 'Les Anti-Lumières immanentes', p. 158. In which case, Guénon argues, we can no longer speak in terms of religion. He uses the word 'religiosité' instead to refer to 'vagues aspirations sentimentales qui ne se justifient par aucune connaissance réelle', a combination of philosophical and religious decline (*La Crise du monde moderne*, pp. 111-2).

[25]Shayegan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?*, p. 244.

aux antipodes de la logique de la dépendance qui fut leur règle constitutive depuis le commencement.[26]

The triumph of the anti-Church lobby in 1905 suggests a gradual dechristianisation and the inexorable secularisation of France that would have started in the few decades preceding the French Revolution: an important dechristianised Parisian population would then logically facilitate a Revolution that hit hard on the Church, creating a favourable context for secularisation in the nineteenth century which would grow alongside the progress of an equally secularised science. The reality of the French relation to the Church and religion in general is more complex though, as the radical politics of secularisation also find their origins in a system *régalien*: *laïcité* and *gallicanisme* remain inextricably combined as the trademark of France's religious specificity. I will be arguing that the renewed Gallicanism of the French revolution and the Napoleonic regime pushed the Church away from public affairs. Meanwhile the void of sacredness that resulted was ready to be filled by the missionary call of the revolutionary: religious forms of representation could spread to social institutions, filling them with a certain degree of mysticism.[27] This would lead to an unprecedented framework where the place of the sacred was still essential to social cohesion but was no longer embedded into traditional, ecclesiastic institutions, but in secular ones.

(ii) The shift of the sacred

The relation between the Church and the French State had long been characterised by Gallicanism, an attempt by the latter to control the former. This policy culminated with the revocation of the *Edit de Nantes* in 1685 which, in short, reinstated the principle of *Cujus regio ejus religio*: the king's religion was meant to be followed by all his loyal subjects.

Contrary to a belief in a Revolution that would turn against the Church and the king alike, the anti-Church policy of the revolutionaries actually partook of this tradition. What really initiated the religious crisis, and the first Christian schism in centuries, was the attempted continuation of the Gallican system of submission of the Church to the state. Following the nationalisation of Church belongings, Catholic priests became civil servants: the state had to provide for them. In return, they, just like any civil servant, now had to take an oath. The *Constitution civile du clergé*, was adopted on 12 July 1790

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[26]Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, p. 133. See also his presentation, pp. I-III.

[27]See Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 326.

by the *Constituante*, that is by a non-Catholic authority, an authority that held its legitimacy from *souveraineté populaire*, not from God.

Not surprisingly, Pope Pius VI resented this further step of Gallicanism, and opposed the Constitution. Too late for the king, who had already signed it, thus creating a deep crisis between the *prêtres assermentés*, who followed the *Constituante*, and the *réfractaires*, who followed the Pope in his increasingly radical condemnation of revolutionary principles. The anti-religious policy that followed was thus more a matter of politics than religion: it was a matter of consolidating the higher authority of civil institutions. The *réfractaires* faced deportation, and although the *Convention* – like the *Législative* before it – counted a majority of believers who did not necessarily support the anti-religious movement that was taking hold of France, they found themselves drawn by the *Commune* into its mission of dechristianisation.[28] The already dechristianised Paris led the rest of the country into a forced secularisation, that reached its climax with the Terror – particularly the second one which started 2 June 1793 – and the Vendée war (3 March 1793).[29]

As religion was under siege, churches and statues destroyed, priests and nuns executed, saints, relics and kings' tombs profaned, new temples and saints replaced them, in a new cult to the Republic and its values. Marat in particular was raised to the status of a saint – 'super-saint du catéchisme républicain'.[30] The Revolution was then caught in a symbolic struggle to fight every aspect of the Church's influence over the French. On 24 November 1793, a new, Republican, calendar was adopted, hoping to throw the Christian one and its references to saints into oblivion, but also developing a new religion to replace the old: '[la révolution] est devenue elle-même une sorte de religion nouvelle', Tocqueville famously observed.[31] In other words, the revolutionaries were caught up in a symbolic contest with what they were trying to eliminate: the political agenda, the will to regenerate society and create a new type of humanity all acquired a religious quality: politics became sacred; and the religious imaginary shifted to the new annunciation of a terrestrial, human salvation. The religious vacuum left by dechristianisation was filled with politics. A notable difference remained though, as the new religion was man made and no longer had God at its heart: 'cette régénération n'a

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[28]See Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 545.

[29]The Vendée war similarly started on economic and political grounds, as a reaction against those who most profited from the Revolution in Britanny: the urban petty bourgeoisie. The insurrection started after the Convention decided to raise 300 000 troups. The demands of king and Church came as an opposition to the values of the Revolution. See Jean Tulard, Jean-François Fayard, Alfred Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française* (Robert Laffont, 1987), p. 1135.

[30]Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 546.

[31]Tocqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*, p. 71.

plus aucun fondement transcendant. [...] Elle prétend, au contraire, se substituer à toute transcendance'.[32] Hence the sacred nature that Paris will acquire, as the 'lieu de la révélation révolutionnaire' (which we will examine in the next chapter).

In *La Révolution en débat*, François Furet explains the French specificity of this politico-religious transformation. In countries like England or the United States, revolutions and political transformations followed a religious tradition, if only to try and go back to a pure, original Christian message. But given the process of secularisation well in place in 1789 Paris and the clash with the Church, the French Revolution found itself in the position of refusing any pre-established religious frame; no golden age to be restored; no original message to rediscover and live by; 'l'esprit nouveau doit être inventé comme religion'. Furet concludes:

> Le paradoxe de l'histoire de la France consiste à ne retrouver l'esprit du christianisme qu'à travers la démocratie révolutionnaire. Ou encore: la Révolution française renouvelle la parole religieuse sans jamais accéder au religieux. Les Français ont divinisé la liberté et l'égalité modernes sans donner aux principes nouveaux d'autres supports que l'aventure historique d'un peuple resté catholique.[33]

Politics replaced the Church in its eschatological enterprise; it did not undermine the eschatological nature of that enterprise, which is to facilitate the emergence of a new man, in a frame that remained Christian, but oriented against the Church. Religious authority found itself secularised, being transfered from Catholicism to the state.

The revolutionary anti-Christian digression may have ended with Napoleon, who paved the way for the Christian revival of the early nineteenth century. But here again, we have a new attempt, this time successful, to work with the Church in the ultimate interest of the state: 'La restauration des cultes en 1801-1802 par le Concordat et les Articles organiques relève du même esprit et représente le triomphe de l'inspiration régalienne: c'est le modèle du catholicisme administratif'.[34] Napoleon combined typically Gallican willingness to have the Church under the control of the state together with a clear awareness of how religion could facilitate social order: 'L'enrôlement de la tradition catholique [devient] sous Bonaparte un calcul de manipulation des masses'.[35]

Secular societies – and which is more secular than France? – may be misleading: the religious remains influential, even if religious institutions weaken. Debray contests the perception that the religious has become something marginal and insignificant:

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[32]François Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 73.
[33]*Ibid.*, pp. 120-1.
[34]Rémond, *Religion et Société en Europe*, p. 109.
[35]Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, p. 124.

> Plût au Ciel que les sciences religieuses fussent rétrogrades et folkloriques. Tout porte à croire qu'elles dénichent ce que les sociétés contemporaines qui se croient naïvement protégées par l'individualisme démocratique ont de plus résistant et de moins dicible.[36]

Homo religiosus seems to survive very well in modernity, changing his religions, his gods, his idols, yet remaining essentially a believer: 'l'idolâtre se montre mille fois plus résistant que ses idoles', Debray ironically points out.[37]

Indeed, modern anthropology has demonstrated the continuity and validity of 'la pensée sauvage' in modern societies. The consequence of expelling the divine from consciousness is – paradoxically enough – to reintegrate God among men: '[La] construction d'un Dieu moral et la projection d'un être suprême par l'homme ont pour conséquence la disparition de Dieu dans son extériorité, sa résorption dans la communauté humaine qui l'a produit'.[38]

But more importantly, on an epistemological level, the permanence of myth and of mythical structures makes mythology one of the most valuable fields in which to explore the human because it explores what persists in humanity. History varies, so does science; but somehow myth holds the key to what Durand calls the 'figure traditionnelle de l'homme': 'cette pensée sauvage est plus universalisable, est plus universalisée dans l'espèce humaine que ne l'est le perpétuel bouleversement des théories et des méthodes scientifiques', he argues before adding – aptly, yet quite controversially – 'c'est le poète ou le sorcier qui demeure, et c'est le savant qui vieillit'.[39]

We should therefore resist the positivist image of a France divided between an *arrière-garde* of bigots led by the Church on the one side, and a progressive, modern science committed to the triumph of reason on the other. The French Revolution blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the secular rather than establishing a clear-cut opposition. This created a new theologico-political framework developing on the ruins of the one it claim to replace.

> Ne peut-on admettre qu'en dépit des changements advenus, le religieux se conserve sous les traits de nouvelles croyance, de nouvelles représentations, de telle sorte qu'il puisse faire retour à la surface, sous des formes traditionnelles ou inédites, lorsque les conflits sont assez aigus pour faire craquer l'édifice de l'Etat?[40]

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[36]Debray, *Le Feu sacré*, p. 21.
[37]*Ibid.*, p. 16.
[38]Boulnois & Michon, 'L'Agonie du christianisme?', in Cyrille Michon (dir), *Christianisme: héritages et destins*, pp. 20-1.
[39]Durand, *Science de l'Homme et tradition*, pp. 55-7.
[40]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 278.

It further demonstrates that the sacred persists in a different, secular mask, investing politics. As Sironneau argues: 'l'activité politique, bien loin d'être définitivement désacralisée a été, en notre temps, le support d'une nouvelle expérience du sacré'.[41]

The violence of the attacks against the Church can be misleading in a society which remains in its huge majority deeply and actively Catholic. It is also misleading as it tends to suggest that this rejection of religion would favour rational attitudes. Yet the nineteenth century constantly emphasised that positivism seemed to go hand in hand with its opposite, 'our God Logos': 'C'est juste au moment où le positivisme bat son plein, que le mysticisme s'éveille et que les folies de l'occulte commencent', Huysmans ironically remarked.[42] As Nietzsche put it, 'one has given up religion but not the enhancement of feeling and exaltations one has acquired from it'.[43]

The mythical process of social cohesion finds, here, a valuable illustration: if the social bond of religion is desacralised, the community is in peril. The collusion of religion and politics during the French Revolution is at the heart of the major political division – which is also a religious one – of modern France: 'Avec la Révolution française, le religieux est absorbé par le politique. Mais inversement quand il refuse de s'y perdre, il est constitutif de la Contre-révolution'.[44] The sons of the Revolution – Michelet for instance – will see 1789 was the dawn of a new, progressive age whilst the counter-revolutionaries like Maistre will interpret it as divine warning capable of shaking society and bringing it back to God. Overall, the questions around Christianity and the French Revolution are not only inextricable, they are also crucial in terms of political mythology: two discourses are confronted with each other, one of tradition, the other of progress; both highly religious. The question of a godless man, governed by his reason alone, is at the centre of the choices made by nineteenth-century thinkers in the constitution of an identity and of an image of the human condition. Michelet and the winners of history; those who were going to narrate that history in the nineteenth century were operating in a theologico-political framework whose prime function was to keep the community together as well as found a new society. And this, again, is exactly in line with mythic thinking: 'Il s'agit de refaire, par un légendaire nouveau, l'unité de la communauté'.[45] In order to explore further the framework in which the

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[41] Sironneau, 'Retour du mythe et imaginaire socio-politique', p. 17.

[42] Huysmans, *Là-Bas* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 238.

[43] Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 105.

[44] Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, p. 73.

[45] Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, pp. 182-3.

chief apostle of these thinkers, Michelet, will operate, we now need to turn to Millet and his concept of *dispositif légendaire*.

(iii) *Dispositif légendaire*

L'histoire a sa vérité, la légende a la sienne.[46]

The concept of *dispositif* comes from Foucault who developed it as a way of complementing the notion of *episteme*. Foucault was trying to define the system of domination within society – 'mailles du pouvoir'.[47] Whereas *episteme* focuses essentially on dominant discourse, the concept of *dispositif* allows the picture to be broadened, so as to encapsulate not only the discourse, but equally the practices and institutions which he viewed as an integral part of the mechanism of power and domination: how social norms are accepted and integrated by its members; how they are put into practice.

This question of practice is essential: as we have seen, mythic thinking requires the active participation of the community. This is not solely a matter of adhesion, but equally, and more importantly, a question of investment and practice. It is the participation of the community, their personal engagement in it, which gives beliefs their social importance. The system of belief is the foundation on which a system of domination can operate.

With regard to the nineteenth century, the system of belief found itself transformed by the unprecedented changes that affected the religious and political spheres. Claude Millet uses the phrase *dispositif légendaire* to refer to a framework that brought myth and history, religion and politics together in the hope of bringing the community together and guarantee its cohesion and unity.[48] In his *Légendaire au XIXe siècle,* Claude Millet shows how the nineteenth century had been the century of both history and mythical revival, and how both trends did more than coexist: they fused in a Romantic messianism – 'Double mouvement d'historicisation des mythes et de mythification de l'histoire', he writes (p. 118). Legends and myths were seen as the repository of some human truth, thus far overlooked by the contingencies of history. Myth here was seen – by a remarkable inversion – as being the tool that could allow history to be freed from its own myths, a mythification allowing a demystification: 'la

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[46]Hugo, QT, p. 181.

[47]Michel Foucault, 'Les Mailles du pouvoir', in *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), vol. IV, pp. 182-201.

[48]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, pp. 5-6. Further references will be indicated in main text.

mythification de l'Histoire, pour être une fondation libératrice, et non mystificatrice, est solidaire d'une conception de l'Histoire comme démythification' (p. 136). This constitutes a radical turn if we consider the suspicion myth was held in during the Enlightenment:

> Myth had been a barbarous thing. [...] A mere monstrosity. [...] This view undergoes a radical change as soon as we pass to the romantic philosophers. [...] Myth becomes not only a subject of the highest intellectual interest but also a subject of awe and veneration. It is regarded as the mainspring of human culture.[49]

The language of this revolution is poetry. Not because of its esthetic quality, but because its rhetorical precision makes it possible to encapsulate the new theologico-political agenda, and give meaning to a history that had thus far been meaningless: 'révolution poétique qui [est], dans le même mouvement, politique et religieuse. [...] Cette mythologie nouvelle [...] n'est pas hors Histoire, mais la comprend – en même temps qu'elle est destinée à la produire' (pp. 9-10). Myth is no longer seen as opposed to history; by a remarkable inversion, it now gives it its meaning.

This, again, undermines the conception of an inexorable secularisation. Despite the increasing distinction between private religion and public politics, the shift of the sacred – which had accelerated during the Revolution – and the framework in which the thinkers of the first half of the nineteenth century operated contest such a clear-cut dichotomy: for them, religion and politics could not be thought of separately, for politics had acquired a mystical quality: 'institution symbolique du lien social, à la fois immanent et transcendant' (pp. 181-2). The political sphere in the nineteenth century, just as it was during the Revolution, remained the place of this transfer of the sacred.

God is far from absent from this enterprise: the opposition of scientific history and religion is yet to come. Until 1848, a Romantic conception of history dominates:

> Elle suppose que soit reconnu dans l'Histoire un ordre providentiel et un sens eschatologique – l'Histoire est en marche vers Dieu. Elle est liée à une conception théologico-politique du pouvoir (même et surtout chez ces farouches anticléricaux que sont Michelet, Quinet, Hugo). Elle destine l'Histoire à l'usage du peuple. [...] Une *relligio* – un lien sublime qui fonde la communauté dans son unité, et sa solidarité, qui institue les rapports entre les hommes de cette communauté, et leur rapport à Dieu, principe ultime du sens historique (p. 135).

But it now fell to historians and no longer the priests to produce social meaning: 'principe d'intégration et d'intelligibilité. [...] C'est donc l'Histoire qui doit désormais justifier, sur le mode profane, les institutions, les valeurs, les tabous du groupe', Bernard

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[49]Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, pp. 182-3.

writes, and she adds, quite aptly: 'On pourrait même [faire de l'historien] un "prêtre" chargé d'intercéder auprès du passé disparu, voire un prophète tourné vers ce passé, qu'il lui incombe de faire être'.[50] History takes charge of a thus far religious social function and acquires a crucial influence on the making of collective memory, combining a scientific method and a religious mission: 'La légitimité du message de Dieu est remplacée par la fiabilité accordée à une science qui s'élabore uniquement sur la base du raisonnement, et de la reconnaissance de valeurs universelles et progressives'.[51] In a society in need of reconstruction, history appeared as the best tool to meet the collective need for meaning:

> Le siècle tout entier vit de la certitude que l'être humain ne se saisit que chargé d'histoire. Cette révérence pour l'Histoire, nouvelle manière de déchiffrer les destinées, recèle une invitation à réunir les grandes sources de la fierté nationale, [...] à raccorder les calendriers, à célébrer une continuité patrimoniale.[52]

After the revolution, France, traditionally 'fille aînée de l'Eglise' became 'fille aînée de l'Histoire'. The sacred nature of the revolution in French consciousness spread to the field in charge of making sense of the radical turn in its history. Nineteenth-century France was the century that recognised the sacredness of history.

If, as I shall try to show in more details in the next chapter, the French Revolution can be understood as a modern cosmogony, its narration had to involve a crucial social dimension: to keep the memory of this myth and to form a living bond between past and present. One historian in particular epitomises the mission of the historian in post-revolutionary France: Michelet. Between memory and history, Michelet set himself a double mission: to bring the past back to life, and to give the People a voice that had thus far been ignored.

(iv) Michelet, 'prophète de la mémoire'

> *Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge.*[53]

Michelet successfully built a bridge between memory and history, combining his own personal memory with the nation's history. Not only did he tell the story of the

[50]Bernard, *Le Chouan romanesque*, p. 38. She later adds 'on pourra alors qualifier l'historien de "scientific myth-maker"', p. 58.
[51]*Ibid.*, p. 39.
[52]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 326.
[53]Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 251.

Revolution, but his personal story proceeded from it. For Michelet was not just any historian, he was a son of the People and the Revolution: national history and personal memory blurred.

Michelet is a Parisian – 'J'étais né, comme une herbe au soleil entre deux pavés de Paris' (Pe, p. 68) – and a son of the Revolution. Born in 1798, Michelet grew up in a deconsecrated church, used as a printing house by his father, a contemporary of the Revolution: 'Je naquis en 1798, dans le chœur d'une église de religieuses, occupée alors par notre imprimerie, occupée et non profanée; qu'est-ce que la Presse, au temps moderne, sinon l'arche sainte?' (Pe, p. 65). There is little doubt that the Romantic sensitivity of young Michelet was nurtured by this religious building, where the word of God seemed to have been expelled the better to receive a second advent, the People. Michelet, like his generation, grew up in the shadow of the Revolution: 'La Révolution est en nous, dans nos âmes', he would later say (RF, p. 31). His generation was one dominated by the memory of these few dense years told by the parents who transmitted to their offspring the nostalgia of a time when they were part of history. Better even: when they had made history; 'L'acteur principal est le peuple', he said (RF, p. 37). It is their story that Michelet will attempt to bring back to life.

With regard to collective memory too, 1789 had been revolutionary, creating a need for memory among those who had been denied any such thing as a past. The *Ancien Régime* was a time of constant oblivion of the People. History focused on kings, the nobility. No real interest was shown in the 'masses obscures', decimated by wars, disease and malnutrition. Oblivion awaited the infinite number of destinies as if both the bodies of the deceased and the memory of their past lives were meant to be buried together. Michelet criticised this collective amnesia, denouncing for instance the destructions made by the Inquisition:

> Brûler les livres, les hommes ,les traces mêmes de leurs forfaits. La plus grande partie de ces destructions ne peut plus être racontée. [...] Quand retrouverai-je l'histoire des Vaudois, des Albigeois par exemple ? [...] Qu'ils triomphent, nos ennemis, de l'impuissance qu'ils nous ont faite, et d'avoir été si barbares qu'on ne peut avec certitude raconter leur barbarie!... (RF p. 62).

In contrast, 1789 is the year when the People entered the scene of history. From then on, they would have a past to transmit; a glorious history which owed much to the People themselves, and which could defeat oblivion at last. However, in 1815, history seemed to resume its dull and bleak path. The *Ancien Régime* was back, and this meant resuming the swallowing up of these multiple destinies. Hence the shock of the revolution of 1830 – yet another revolution of the People, with no hero and no leader, Michelet noted: 'Ce que la révolution de Juillet offre de singulier, c'est de présenter le

premier modèle d'une révolution sans héros, sans nom propre; point d'individu en qui la gloire ait pu se localiser. La société a tout fait' (IHU, p. 326). This was the moment that determined his life and work: 1789 had been the moment of an awakening: the People too had a memory, and a generation later, in 1830, Michelet set himself the mission to be its voice.

We have seen the importance of "collective" memory in myth-making, and of both a traditional and a modern relation to the past. Michelet belongs to both. Michelet viewed history as an effort of anamnesis of popular memory which had thus far been ignored. But he also believed that this memory needed to be articulated and made sense of. The role of the historian, therefore, is one of interpretation. Michelet believed that history's meaning escaped its agents, and that the historian could decipher and translate it for them: 'Il leur faut un Œdipe qui leur explique leur propre énigme dont ils n'ont pas eu le sens, qui leur apprenne ce que voulaient dire leurs paroles, leurs actes, qu'ils n'ont pas compris'.[54] If history is to be anything else than an account of the powerful, if it is to be the living memory of the people, its production cannot be a collective one; it first needs to be processed by the interpreter before being given back to the people.

> Michelet not only claimed to speak on behalf of large numbers of anonymous dead people, but insisted, with poignant authority, that he could say what they 'really' meant and 'really' wanted, since they themselves 'did not understand'. From then on, the silence of the dead was no obstacle to the exhumation of their deepest desires.[55]

However, Michelet is aware of the temptation to steal that memory away from the collective; aware of the danger of hermeneutic violence that goes with his position. He therefore refuses to consider himself an author: 'Je n'étais pas auteur', he argues, 'j'aspirais, j'écrivais cette âme du tragique passé' (RF, p. 45). And if he speaks for the people, he is often aware of the instrumentalisation of that idea and critical of those who speak in its name.[56]

One reason why he is so sensitive to such instrumentalisation is that Michelet belongs to the people: 'moi aussi [...] j'ai travaillé de mes mains', he said in Le Peuple; 'J'en ai gardé un sentiment profond du peuple' (Pe, p. 58). His vivid experience, makes him one of them: 'Les épreuves de mon enfance me sont toujours présentes, j'ai gardé l'impression du travail, d'une vie âpre et laborieuse, je suis resté peuple' (Pe, pp. 71-2).

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[54]Cited by Roland Barthes (ed.), Michelet par lui-même, (Paris: Le Seuil, 1954), p. 92.

[55]Anderson, Imagined Communities, p. 198.

[56]See Lefort, Essais sur le politique, p. 130, and Michelet, La Révolution française, in particular, chapter 9, where he notes the public indifference that characterise Paris at the end of 1792 and in the following year – an indifference that grew allongside the increasing role of the Jacobins.

But again, this experience is alive. It does not belong to a past, more or less forgotten now that he has become a respectable historian; Michelet claims that he still feels a profound feeling and solidarity with the people. This living bond gives him the legitimacy of talking in their name: 'Et moi, qui en suis sorti, moi qui ai vécu avec lui, travaillé, souffert avec lui, qui plus qu'un autre ai acheté le droit de dire que je le connais' (Pe, p. 63).

The mission Michelet set himself is more than a mere narration of the past: 'raconter leur combat, me placer dans leurs rangs [...]? Ce n'était pas assez. Je repris tout de fond en comble pour leur rendre leur vie, leurs arts, surtout leur droit' (HF, p. 354). The vivid memory of his own upbringing urges him to consider his work as an act of justice. Reflecting upon the position he had reached in society, Michelet's sense of solidarity with the people makes it morally uncomfortable: 'Oh! qui me soulagera de la dure inégalité?' (Pe, p. 70). No longer living in their ranks, Michelet still feels their pain, and his own social position is of little comfort. However, he can still do something for them:

> Alors, regardant celle de mes mains qui a gardé la trace du froid, je me dis pour me consoler: 'Si tu travaillais avec le peuple, tu ne travaillerais pas pour lui... Va donc, si tu donnes à la patrie son histoire, je t'absoudrai d'être heureux' (*Ibid.*).

Telling the story of the people is therefore more than a profession. It is a mission inextricably linked to a sense of justice. The oblivion of the people's destiny up until 1789 is the mark of a history that disdained the country's misery for too long. Four hundred years of this misery now await to be voiced: 'Les souffrances lointaines de tant d'âmes étouffées dans ces vieux âges se plaignaient à voix basse' (*Ibid.*). In the Archives, Michelet can hear their feeble voices, pleading for the historian to acknowledge them:

> Sais-tu que nos martyrs depuis quatre cents ans t'attendent? [...] C'est dans la ferme foi, l'espoir en la justice qu'ils ont donné leur vie. Ils auraient droit de dire: 'Histoire! compte avec nous. Tes créanciers te somment! Nous avons accepté la mort pour une ligne de toi' (HF, pp. 354-5).

Giving the people back their voice, is to give back their rights and a history that is rightfully theirs. Michelet's sense of solidarity with the people ultimately sets him to consider history as a way of expressing their truth: 'j'éprouve, quand on me parle de lui [le peuple], un besoin exigeant de vérité' (Pe, p. 58).

Michelet's conception of history is one of a struggle: 'celle de l'homme contre la nature, de l'esprit contre la matière, de la liberté contre la fatalité. L'histoire n'est pas autre chose que le récit de cette interminable lutte' (IHU, p. 307). The birth of the people

is a direct result of the tension between fate and liberty, resulting from man's attempt to be the architect of his own destiny. Michelet played a central part in the secularisation of history, considering it as the work of man: 'Dans le progrès humain, la part essentielle est à la force vive, qu'on appelle homme. *L'homme est son propre Prométhée*' (HF, p. 337), an idea found in Vico.[57] For Michelet, 1789 is the decisive moment in human history when man takes possession of his history; it is the moment that reveals that history is man-made.

This explains his strong criticism of the Church. Michelet had no words harsh enough for the perverse role of the Church in that struggle between fate and liberty: 'éducation qui surprend les âmes et les chloroformise' (HF, p. 339). But his reaction against religion goes beyond his anticlericalism. If Michelet was glad he was spared any formal religious education, benefiting from a Parisian, revolutionary, secular upbringing – 'Je n'avais reçu encore aucune idée religieuse' (Pe, p. 67) –, he was far from immune to religious feeling. The reading of *l'Imitation* in particular served him as catechism: 'La religion reçue ainsi, sans intermédiaire humain, fut très forte en moi'. But it is a religion free from dogma, and which encapsulates all aspects of his life: 'Elle me resta comme chose libre, vivante, si bien mêlée à ma vie qu'elle s'alimenta de tout, se fortifiant sur la route [...] dans l'art et dans la poésie, qu'à tort on lui croit étrangères' (Pe, p. 67). The religious nature of his mission as a historian is therefore of little surprise. When recalling the time when that mission appeared vividly to him, he writes: 'Telle fut ma foi du moins, et cet acte de foi, quelle que fût ma faiblesse, agit' (HF, p. 335). For if Michelet is happy to believe that the Church is progressing fast to its near demise, it is because it has been replaced by a new religion.

Michelet saw in the Revolution the emergence of a new religion, radically antagonistic to the old one whose salvation depended on the arbitrariness of divine grace. The new religion he announced would be one of justice; a decisive step in man's struggle against fate, '*travail de soi sur soi*' (HF, p. 336). Michelet perceived the history of civilisation as the materialisation of a divine order which had man at its heart; the emergence of a 'Dieu social': 'ce dernier pas loin de l'ordre fatal et naturel [...] en est un vers le Dieu social qui doit se révéler peu à peu dans notre liberté même' (IHU, p. 327). This is directly in the line of the Enlightenment for Michelet: 'ce siècle a fondé la liberté sur l'affranchissement de l'esprit, jusque-là lié par la chair, lié par le principe matériel de la double incarnation théologique et politique, sacerdotale et royale' (RF, p. 33).

Logically enough, this task calls for a new *form* of history. Michelet's method is in this regard unique, as he combines the most serious analysis of new material – he

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[57]'Je n'eus de maître que Vico', Michelet claimed (HF, p. 339).

describes his method and sources in RF (pp. 43-4) – with his vision of the past: science and imagination, the work on archives and the vision of the prophet merge. Michelet famously reported how he conceived the project of his *Histoire de France*; that is, as a revelation: 'Cette œuvre laborieuse d'environ quarante ans fut conçue d'un moment, de l'éclair de Juillet. Dans ces jours mémorables, une grande lumière se fit, et j'aperçus la France' (p. 333).[58] What he sees in this vision is more a persona, and he sets himself the task of transcribing its soul: 'J'avais posé le premier la France comme une personne', he claims (HF, p. 345), and the history he is going to tell is not one of a country as such, but of this person: 'pour la première fois paraît l'âme de la France en sa vive personnalité' (*Ibid.*, p. 341).

The sources are viewed as the starting point in an exploration of this collective soul. Michelet's use of archives does not aim to recount the past, but to bring it back to life, as a resurrection (HF, p. 350) – '*résurrection de la vie intégrale*', as he puts it (HF, p. 334). Telling stories is no longer enough: the duty of the historian is to go beyond that history and to search for anamnesis: '*évoquer, refaire, ressusciter* les âges' (HF, p. 339). This is the aim of history (Pe, p. 73).

Director of the Archives since 1831, Michelet refuses to see the tons of archives for which he is now responsible as the carcasses of a dried, dead history. For Michelet, one has to listen – beyond the illusion of death associated with archives – to the life which is inscribed on these documents.

> La poussière du temps reste. Il est bon de la respirer, d'aller, venir, à travers ces papiers, ces dossiers, ces registres. Ils ne sont pas muets, et tout cela n'est pas si mort qu'il semble. Je n'y touchais jamais sans que certaine chose en sortît, s'éveillât... C'est l'âme' (RF, p. 45).

Beyond the illusion of death associated with archives, beyond the silence of the place some life remains which asks to be heard, to be listened to: 'Dans les solitaires des Archives [...], dans ce profond silence, des murmures cependant venaient à mon oreille' (HF, p. 353).

(v) History, myth and demystification; a revolutionary method

The historian is regarded as a medium who can communicate with the dead, who can tell their word to the living. In the company of the dead, he brings their story to life: 'Refaisant leur légende, je réveillais en eux mille choses évanouies' (HF, p. 343). This is more magical than scientific, but it is what Michelet is after if he is to succeed in his mission to transform history: if his mission is one of resuscitation – 'Ressusciter par

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[58]'L'éclair de juillet' refers to the revolution of 1830.

l'imagination le mouvement même de la vie, reconstituer la passion éteinte qui anima les saisons disparues'[59] – then this calls for an almost magical process to take place: 'Cette magie naïve avait une efficacité d'évocation presque infaillible' (HF, p. 343) he claims. The process is close to alchemy, whereby the alchemist himself is transformed and regenerated:

> Cela me fit un autre homme. Une transformation étrange s'opéra en moi ; il me semblait que, jusque-là âpre et subtil, j'étais vieux, et que peu à peu, sous l'influence de la jeune humanité, moi aussi je devenais jeune. Rafraîchi des eaux vives. [...] Quelle santé cela fit en moi, après les dessèchements de ma subtilité mystique! (HF, p. 346).

Not surprisingly, such a radical change in the mission and method of history attracted much criticism: 'C'est un écrivain, un poète, un homme d'imagination,' he recalls hearing from the right (HF, p. 347). Michelet answers by recalling what serious history owes to him: 'C'est la première fois que l'histoire eut une base si sérieuse' (HF, p. 348) he claims, referring to his *Histoire de France*. He dismisses these critics as no proper historians for they are concerned with superficial history: 'le premier, sortant l'histoire du vague dont ils se contentaient, je la fondai sur les actes, les manuscrits, l'enquête immense de mille documents variés' (HF, p. 347-8).

He also notes that the taste for a dry, unimaginative history is the mark of seriousness only in appearance. When confronting his memory and the history books he read when he started to be interested in history, he notices that they contradict each other. (Pe, p. 58). And when he started to research history, he, again, discovered information that had been dismissed by historians thus far: 'Mes études variées d'histoire m'avaient révélé des faits du plus grand intérêt que taisent les historiens' (Pe, p. 59).

What he points out is how narrow his critics' conception of history can be, how it fails to comprehend the past: 'On ne donnait guère que l'histoire politique. [...] On ne tenait nul compte de ce qui accompagne, explique, fonde en partie cette histoire politique, les circonstances sociales, économiques, industrielles, celles de la littérature et de l'idée' (HF, p. 349). A century before l'Ecole des Annales, Michelet is paving the way for a broader picture, and for *histoire des mentalités*. Again, he aims for a living history, to encapsulate the life of the past that 'serious history' had thus far condemned to death: 'si l'histoire fût venue dans sa sévérité critique [...] je ne sais si ces morts auraient osé revivre. Ils se seraient plutôt cachés dans leurs tombeaux' (HF, p. 342).

Michelet does not deny his poetry and use of imagination, but he refuses to see these as a mark of 'artistic history' (where art is associated to distraction and fantasy).

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[59]Claude Mettra, 'Présentation' in Michelet, RF, p. 10.

Michelet does not consider the resurrection of the dead souls and legends to be a matter of literary artefact. This magical process is aimed at grasping 'la vie intégrale', and the historian-alchemist who walks in the world of the dead, resurrects their souls, also remains fully lucid: 'l'art garde en lui sa lucidité toute entière' (HF, p. 344). So he makes a very clear distinction between literature and history, distancing himself from Walter Scott (HF, p. 353):

> La *méthode historique* est souvent l'opposé de l'*art proprement littéraire*. L'écrivain occupé d'augmenter les effets, de mettre les choses en saillies, presque toujours aime à surprendre. [...] L'historien a pour spéciale mission d'expliquer ce qui paraît miracle, de l'entourer des précédents, des circonstances qui l'amènent, de le ramener à la nature (HF, p. 353).

Myth and history combine, are complementary even, in that both the historian's vision and his analysis of material are integral parts of the process. And this corresponds to myth in its modern sense. Myth is here opposed to the mystification it is sometimes associated with. On the contrary, myth is viewed as offering the opportunity to access the past in its totality and life. Myth is perceived as the repository of a human truth that transcends history's events. Legend and history coexist and even combine in such attempts, as the historian relies on documents just as much as his own visionary imagination.

> Cette synthèse transforme radicalement l'imagination, qui n'est plus une puissance d'affabulation plus ou moins mensongère, mais la puissance même de la compassion, qui permet à l'Histoire de se faire résurrection du passé, de faire vivre les morts, et de peupler le présent des fantômes du passé.[60]

This is clearly a mythical enterprise, but the meaning of this has changed radically to oppose itself to mystification. Michelet is one of those who – like Hugo in poetics – attempted this reconciliation of myth and history in the profound belief that a whole understanding of the historical being was within reach. They both set out to create a modern mythology; a historical one, one that has man at its heart. Romantic history sees itself as an anamnesis and a politico-religious myth; a myth born from 1789 and telling the story of a freed People who are at the same time its agent and driving force. Since 1789, France finds itself at the heart of the process of civilisation. It is a religious process, but in a radically different way from the role the Church had thus far played. It is a revelation – a social one this time:

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[60]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 123. See Michelet's 1833 Preface to *L'Histoire de France*, where he recalls his first impression in the *section historique des archives*, and the dialogue with the dead that followed.

> Si le sens social doit nous ramener à la religion, l'organe de cette révélation nouvelle, l'interprète entre Dieu et l'homme, doit être le peuple social entre tous. Le monde moral eut son Verbe dans le Christianisme. [...] La France expliquera le Verbe du monde social que nous voyons commencer (IHU, p. 329).

Michelet places France specifically in the line of the great revelation from Israel to Greece 'mère du mythe'. The process of listening and understanding the *Verbe* goes on, this time it is France's turn and her mission to explain this new, social revelation (IHU, p. 330).

I believe that Michelet allowed a first step to be taken in drawing the distinction between official memory and authentic collective memory. He managed to bridge the two, just as he bridged the People and the elite – belonging to both. One could regret the position of Michelet in French historiography: not objective enough, not critical enough, too romantic, too biased, too literary to be a serious historian. Michelet's legacy resembles his friend Hugo's in many respects; one the post-modern tend to sneer at. However, Michelet combined erudition and a very modern effort to comprehend what is now called *histoire des mentalités*.

But what matters most here, is that Michelet proved a major architect in the *dispositif légendaire*, combining the seriousness of history as a science with the resurgence of mythic thinking; politics with poetics: ' cette critique [de l'Ancien Régime] réexploite au service d'une apologie de la modernité les catégories théologico-politiques apparemment discréditées'.[61] A unique moment where the return of myth favoured by the Romantics was used for demystification. The revolutionary legacy, as a religious, modern revelation would be lost if left to rational thought only: the epic dimension of the message can only be comprehended by the legendary. This is a new, unprecedented framework where history and myth, the secular and the sacred coexist, where politics and history are both sacralised, and collective memory redefined, still highly mythical in its function.

This exploration of the religious imaginary highlights both the process of the elaboration of myth and the evolution of its social function in an ostensibly secular society. Once the religious framework of the nineteenth century – and the importance of history in it – are established (*dispositif légendaire*), one can turn to the sacred origins it will constantly refer to. As nineteenth-century France lived in the shadow of the French Revolution, the next chapter will be essential to understand how Paris achieved the

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[61]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 306.

status of a myth. We have seen that Paris played an important role in the secularisation of France. In fact it is at the heart of the *dispositif légendaire*: 'Paris, mystérieux déplacement du pouvoir spirituel' Hugo wrote in *Paris* (p. 85). For the *dispositif légendaire* is in fact embedded in a *lieu*, the cradle of the French Revolution, which is also a date: 1789.

Chapter 3
'Paris, Lieu de la Révélation Révolutionnaire':
the making of "collective memory" and myth in Hugo

SUPRÉMATIE DE PARIS
1789. Depuis un siècle bientôt, ce nombre est la
préoccupation du genre humain. Tout le phénomène
moderne y est contenu.[1]

In this quotation, Hugo explains Paris's unique status in the history of mankind through the prism of 1789. To say that the French Revolution had deep repercussions on the process of Parisian myth-making is an understatement. Not only had Paris taken the political, ideological and cultural lead over the whole country; it was also deeply transformed by the idea of rupture. The idea that the revolution acted as a *tabula rasa*, that a clear cut was then made between *Ancien Régime* and the dawn of new, modern era of liberty would put its mark on the way the capital was perceived in the following century.

The premise here is that the French Revolution was regarded by the nineteenth century as the sacred origin of a new, modern, urban era. In parallel, one cannot help but notice the profound changes in the sensibility of post-revolutionary France, expressed in both urban policy and literature, as we shall see in the next chapter. One could explain those changes by reference to the Revolution; the whole nineteenth century could be explained through the prism of the Revolution. Yet we have seen the limits of such a teleological approach. So the focus here will consist of assessing readings of the Revolution made in nineteenth-century France, and the impact not so much of the Revolution itself, but of the way it was interpreted by subsequent generations. The ambivalent legacy of the Revolution, the importance of fear in particular, and some aspects of the Terror, will be crucial to understand how Paris became the place that held the keys to the post-revolutionary psyche.

I will start by looking at the sacralisation of Paris by 1789, which is essential to comprehending the unique status achieved by the French capital. This process started with the Revolution itself: as Paris came to be identified with the revolution, and with the fall of the Bastille in particular, it became a universal capital of the mind ('capitale de l'esprit'). 1789 had been a 'délivrance' (in its double sense of giving birth to and freedom from) for humanity. In the following years, the universal capital came to be

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[1]Hugo, P, p. 80. 'Paris lieu de la révélation révolutionnaire' comes from the same page.

seen as a place of epistemological significance, an urban palimpsest awaiting to be deciphered.

The destruction that took place in revolutionary Paris, following the idea of the *tabula rasa*, and the more constructive re-appropriation of the city by the state operated by Napoleon, would both soon turn the still medieval town into a modern city according to the new values of the bourgeois order. Although Haussmann is usually blamed for having destroyed the charm of an old town during the second Empire, it was the French Revolution (including its Napoleonic outcome) which discovered that a city could be transformed according to the values and ideals it was to convey; that it could evolve according to politics other than merely urban. In this sense, one can talk of a revolution in the city as well as a revolution *of* the city.[2]

This is an essential aspect in the narration of the memory of the revolution. If 1789 was the dawn of a new age, then France would repeatedly turn to it to make sense of its present. We shall see how Paris came to be a sacred *lieu de mémoire* – not just the cradle of modernity, but also the locus of a modern affective system, arising from the new system of beliefs explored in Chapter 2.

As a *mythe fondateur*, the Revolution was lived in the present, in the moment of its telling, haunting the nineteenth century, contaminating the present with the past: it 'was contemporary in nineteenth-century France not only because of the recurrent political conflict and the repeated changes of regime but also because so many texts supplied a continuous social frame and literary narrative for the revolutionary tradition'.[3] In that regard, we shall see how the *tabula rasa* generated a complex relation to the past, made of *attempted* erasure *and* remembrance of the *Ancien Régime*; and how the ambivalence of the process of revolutionary memory made it all the more essential to find a way to reunify a community in danger of being divided over the 1789 legacy.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, collective memory, and more generally myth-making, are a response to affective, present-day needs. One social function of myth is to represent the fears of the community in some meaningful way. Looking at the revolution and its reception in nineteenth-century France will illustrate this process. We shall see how fear was instrumentalised by the *gouvernement révolutionnaire*, and how the policy of Terror is connected to two trademarks of the nineteenth-century French literary imaginary: conspiracy and publicity.

Far from being the cry of Romantic poets and historians, the sacralisation of Paris as the cradle of 1789 illustrates the social function of myth: to make sense, to secure social

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[2]See Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution.*
[3]*Ibid.*, p. 6.

cohesion and to provide the community with a framework to label its fears. We will look at Michelet again, and most particularly at Hugo, who dedicated his work *Paris* to the capital, summing up what it had thus far symbolised, what its function ought to be in spite of the new regime of Napoleon III. But we will also look at *histoire des mentalités*, so that the word of the prophets and its collective framework are brought together, for they are both essential to the process of myth-making.

(i) Paris, 'capitale de l'esprit', sacralised by 1789

Since Louis XIV, Paris had been abandoned by its Kings and had thus lost the privilege of being the seat of French power. The beginning of the Revolution meant that Paris could resume its historic function as a capital: the fall of the Bastille, the constitution of the *commune de Paris*, and Louis XVI accepting the *cocarde tricolore* (Paris's colours combining with the white of the royalty), all showed the increasing preeminence of Paris in the revolutionary process. On 6 October, the Parisians brought the royal family back to Paris, followed by the *Assemblée* ('inséparable de la personne du roi'). The first few months of the Revolution seemed to emphasise that political power and Paris could no longer be separated. As Michelet put it: 'le siège de la révolution se place à Paris' (RF, p. 127). Furthermore, the process of centralisation of power initiated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries profited Paris, now the sole seat of political national power.

Certainly, the Revolution was not entirely Parisian: the *cahiers de doléance*, the political revolution of the assembly, showed that at its beginning at least, the Revolution's momentum was national. But on 14 July 1789, the fall of the Bastille turned Paris into the capital of the Revolution of the People,[4] and as such, the centre of history. Not only was Paris back in its historical function as the country's capital, leading politics for the rest of France, it also assumed the model of revolutionary virtues and ideas. Paris was to pave the way for the whole country and to lead France on the path to a new beginning.

Therefore the relation between Paris and the Revolution goes beyond a mere identification between a place and the events that shook it. If 1789 was regarded as the sacred origins of modern France, then Paris was its sacred cradle: 'La période de la révolution a instauré la sacralité de la ville capitale, berceau de la liberté'.[5] Given the magnitude of the event, not just for France, but for humanity – as a turning point in the history of civilisation –, Paris came to encapsulate the universal, revolutionary project.

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[4]Michel Vovelle, *La Chute de la monarchie* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1972), p. 123.

[5]Alain Corbin, 'Paris-Province', in Pierre Nora (ed.) *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2, p. 2860.

More than just a city, Paris was *the* city, in the double meaning of *cité* and *polis*; the cradle of modern civilisation, the birth place of a universal community.

Hence its mission of civilisation at that point in history. In *Paris*, at a time when this mission seems compromised by Napoleon III's regime, Hugo recalls what the role of the capital once was, and what it should, still, be: 'Paris a la pensée. [...] Paris est le point vélique de la civilisation. L'effort partout dispersé se concentre sur ce point unique' (pp. 64-5). Hugo associates Paris with the activity of the mind itself – 'lieu qui pense' – to explain the unique status achieved by the French capital. For Hugo Paris's function is linked to the arts, philosophy, science; in other words to the progress of civilisation: 'c'est la dispersion de l'idée' (p. 81), 'épanouissement de la raison' (p. 82), 'foyer du beau et du vrai, de la raison et de l'art, de la vie réelle et de la vie idéale' (p. 86). Paris is the ultimate city, because it is now the beacon of humanity: 'le genre humain a besoin d'un point de repère universel' (p. 78) he says, and in 1789, Paris became precisely this. Hugo reminds us of the importance of the city in the history of civilisation: no civilisation can flourish without the city, 'endroit cérébral, le générateur de l'initiative, l'organe de volonté et de liberté, qui fait les actes quand le genre humain est éveillé, et, quand le genre humain dort, les rêves' (p. 78). After 1789, Paris encapsulated the quality of a great capital as summed up by Valéry:

> Etre à soi seul la capitale politique, littéraire, scientifique, financière, commerciale, voluptuaire et somptuaire d'un grand pays; en représenter toute l'histoire; en absorber et en concentrer toute la substance pensante aussi bien que tout le crédit.[6]

But the capital is no longer French only, Hugo suggested, and its leading role in modern civilisation spreads to the whole world. In the line of those great cities that were the benchmarks of civilisation – Athens, Jerusalem, Rome – it now falls to Paris to lead humanity on a new chapter of its history – 'Paris, lieu de la révélation révolutionnaire, est la Jérusalem terrestre' (p. 80). As the place of 1789, Paris is a place with unique revelatory quality.

Hugo has repeatedly emphasised the unique status of Paris: 'rien de plus fantasque, rien de plus tragique, rien de plus superbe' (p. 38). Everything, every aspect of human life is to be found in the French capital: 'cette vieille terre parisienne est un gisement d'événements, de mœurs, de lois, de coutumes ; tout y est minerai pour le philosophe' (p. 48). Paris, if observed carefully, holds the key of some urban epistemology. 'Contemplez au hasard', Hugo advocates (p. 44), and you will realise that Paris is a

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[6]Valéry, *Regards sur le monde actuel*, p. 123.

historical palimpsest; that each present place reveals a past event. Hugo embarks on a historico-geographic journey that everyone can follow (pp. 45-8).

The urban, epistemological palimpsest corresponds to the logic of *correspondances*. Paris may seem mysterious, but for whoever can decipher its code, it also holds the promise of meaning. Indeed, at first, nothing seems to make sense in this urban mystery: 'Au milieu de ces énigmes on croit entendre derrière soi, en aparté, l'éclat de rire bas du sphinx' (p. 51). At the crossroad of the past and the present, of paths mysteriously meeting, Paris is identified with some immense recipient, piling up ideas, fanaticism, customs, and, most importantly, suffering (p. 60). Associated with the mind, Paris does indeed give the impression of someone wandering: 'Partout des contrastes ou des parallélismes qui ressemblent à de la pensée dans le hasard' (p. 51). But 'hasard' here is only apparent, and the palimpsest can be read. Beyond the apparent coincidences, this urban web of people, events and ideas hides the promise of a revelation. And this is precisely the function of 1789: 'Tout dans cette ville, si longtemps en mal de révolution, a un sens' (p. 44).

For if Paris is the palimpsest of history, 1789 is the key to make sense of it. As the opening quotation of this chapter suggests, 1789 is more a result for Hugo than a date. It is the sum of events that accumulated in Paris's streets, adding up, amid an apparent chaos, to a total that gives those events their meaning. The palimpsest in all its mysterious quality casts its shadow over the city. Its result, 1789, makes this accumulation comprehensible (p. 61). In reverse, the accumulation explains the sacralisation of Paris in the aftermath of 1789: 'sans eux [les faits rappelés par Hugo], et sans leur résultat, 89, la suprématie de Paris est une énigme' (p. 64). It is the revolution of 1789 that gives Paris its unique status in the history of civilisation; it is why Paris is now, for Hugo, its *point vélique*: 'Paris est la ville pivot sur laquelle, à un jour donné, l'histoire a tourné' (p. 64).

Even more than a turn in history, for authors such as Hugo and Michelet 1789 is a new beginning. Both authors insist on 1789 as the origin of modern France: 'Il semble que la France commence', Hugo says (P, p. 65)'; 'la France naît et se lève au canon de la Bastille', Michelet famously wrote. As opposed to the 'ténèbres de la barbarie', 1789 is the birth, the year zero of a new world based on equality: it is a matter of restoring the 'true' and legitimate origin of the nation.[7] In so doing, the very word 'revolution' acquires its modern meaning of a radical change, one that cuts history in two, rather than the traditional idea of an eternal return. 1789 is an epiphany; the dawn of a new era – a sacred dawn, that is: 'L'année 1789 sera dans l'histoire de l'humanité une année

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[7]Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, pp. 14-5.

sainte. [...] Le lieu où l'humanité s'est proclamée, le Jeu de Paume sera un jour un Temple; on y viendra comme à Jérusalem'.[8] The idea here, is that a new phase of human history has started in 1789, enough to change not just history, but human nature itself: 'un nouveau genre humain, c'est quelque chose' (P, p. 70). This new beginning is assimilated to both a birth and an opening up. Hugo plays with the word 'délivrance' to suggest that the birth of this new humanity is equally a movement of freedom. This, again, is in tune with Michelet's conception of history as a struggle between fate and liberty (see previous chapter). For the key event that sums up 1789 is the 14 July, the fall of the symbol of all prisons, the Bastille.

What the Bastille came to encapsulate is a movement initiated by the Enlightenment. Michelet reminds his contemporaries of what they owe to 'le grand XVIIIe': 'ce siècle a fondé la liberté sur l'affranchissement de l'esprit, jusque-là lié par la chair, lié par le principe matériel de la double incarnation théologique et politique, sacerdotale et royale' (RF, p. 33). For Michelet, the Enlightenment paved the way to a liberation that is more than purely physical or political. This is not just a change of regime that 1789 allowed, it is the liberation of the mind itself. What Michelet sees in the much hated symbol of la Bastille, is a prison of the mind (RF, pp. 89 and 146). The actual prisoners matter relatively little in face of the importance of the symbol: 'il y avait bien d'autres prisons, mais celle-ci, c'était celle de l'arbitraire capricieux, du despotisme fantasque, de l'inquisition ecclésiastique et bureaucratique' (RF, p. 146).

The Bastille symbolises the penitentiary nature of the city, which, although it is, and because it is a place of liberation, needs to be controlled and secured by the power in place. And if the history of Paris leads naturally to the great liberation of 1789, Hugo reminds us of the many attempts to imprison the city. The whole history of Paris is one of expansion in spite of its walls, out of the multiple layers of *enceintes* that eventually failed to contain its ever-growing population (P, p. 73). All but in vain: 'autour de cette ville, la monarchie a passé son temps à construire des enceintes, et la philosophie à les détruire. Comment? Par la simple irradiation de la pensée. Pas de plus irrésistible puissance. Un rayonnement est plus fort qu'une muraille' (p. 72). In 1789, these attempts are crushed once and for all: 'le fait fatal, le fait brutal a tout déjoué' (p. 73). The fall of the Bastille is the *délivrance* of Paris: '[Paris] prend sa clef dans sa poche. La clef de la Bastille' (p. 83). Once Paris is freed, the impulse of social progress can affect the whole world.

[8]Ernest Renan, *L'Avenir de la science* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1910), p. 494.

(ii) Decoding the modern city

The mythic foundation of Paris in 1789 as the birthplace of a new era, if not a new humanity, turns the capital into this vast riddle awaiting to be deciphered. The attempt to explain the French Revolution went alongside a growing interest in the city in which it took place and with which it came to be identified. Trying to know the city and the Revolution were viewed as part of the same process: 'sorting out the signs of revolution meant ordering the city in a complex interaction of political identity, social setting, and cultural practice'.[9] Alongside historical work, there was growing interest in guides and *physiologies* about the city, and, however elusive the city seemed, many were convinced of, and obsessed by the legibility of the city.[10] The question was whether to play with the sphinx's enigma or to to try and decipher it. In this regard, one trademark of such growing interest in 'la Ville monstrueuse et inintelligible'[11] is the confrontation of two radically antagonistic approaches: the state's, and the poet's.

The success of *physiologies* was a sign of a growing interest in every aspect of urban life; a social curiosity felt by urban society for itself. This was no mere academic interest. As we will see in the next chapter, the city holds dark corners – places that escape knowledge – and looks extremely threatening. The fear generated by the many urban dangers triggered a need to know the city better. Hence, the growing interest shown by the state through countless surveys:

> L'enquête sociale est d'abord un moyen de produire de la visibilité, de dissiper pour l'Etat l'opacité du social, de dévoiler ce qui est souterrain, caché dans les replis les plus intimes de la société. En lançant ces enquêtes, l'Etat reconnaît implicitement que la société lui reste étrangère.[12]

Compensating for this lack of knowledge, the state develops an unprecedented thirst for urban knowledge that grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century as the state wanted to know more, and more precisely what its nation was made of: 'par-delà la simple préoccupation de dénombrement, ces comptes visent à reconstituer l'itinéraire d'une population, à cerner son niveau intellectuel, ses caractéristiques physiques et morales, son origine professionnelle.'[13] Balzac was not the only one interested in the

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[9]Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution*, p. 2.

[10]Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), p. 2.

[11]Gaston Bachelard – referring to Hugo here – in *La Terre et les rêveries du repos* (Paris: Corti, 1958), p. 250.

[12]Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1990), p. 43.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 40. Rosanvallon refers to the publication of the first *Comptes de justice criminelle* in 1820.

relation between 'espèces sociales' and 'milieu'. The state too shared a similar taste for classification and categorisation of 'its' population.

Very different was the motivation of the poet who, particularly under Haussmann, explored Paris at the very moment of its disintegration. The *flâneur* – a product of urbanity in its most elusive and untamable quality – went hand in hand with his city, in a colluding indulgence for urban ambiguity and unintelligibility. The poet of the nineteenth century was walking in the footsteps of Mercier, who had already understood that there was no urban writing without an acceptance of *l'aléatoire*.[14] The official enemy of the idea of progress, Baudelaire encapsulated the idea of the decadence with which his time was obsessed, and resisted the arid set of bourgeois moral principles his society had built up against its anxiety. His irony and the principle of uncertainty and incoherence challenged the very possibility of urban knowability. The poet was sending a disturbing message to the ruling class and state alike: no matter how sophisticated state knowledge would get, be it through history (making sense of the Revolution) or urbanity (bringing order and light in a place of chaos and darkness), nothing would allow the elite to fully comprehend the city.

> The clearer, cleaner and more uniform the city came to appear physically, the more opaque and mysterious it came to seem socially, as governed by a contingent and chaotic play of forces, transactions and interests, to which one could not attach a correspondingly clear description.[15]

The Poet's promise of enduring urban mystery deconstructed the myth of security the bourgeoisie wanted to believe in. Nothing, it seemed, would ease their fears of the city.

The ambivalent, unknowable, unpredictable identity of the city was at the heart of the social constitution of nineteenth-century myth-making. And again, myth being a matter of political influence, the choice to learn the city or to accept its unknowability was a matter of politics. The full impact of this on the representation of Paris in literature will be discussed further in the next chapter. First, I believe the relation between Paris and the revolution must be explored further. As we have seen, the making of 'collective memory' is crucial in the process of myth-making. And in 'collective memory', the emphasis is on the way the construction of past events can serve present-day concerns. As we have also seen, one of those concerns is to deal with collective fear, and, if the perceived danger cannot be expelled, to deal with those fears with the appropriate narrative.

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[14]Michel Delon, 'Louis-Sébastien Mercier, le premier piéton de Paris', *Magazine littéraire* n° 332 (*Paris des écrivains*), p. 26.

[15]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 11.

(iii) Modern myth-making: the collective memory of the Revolution

From the beginning, the French Revolution was represented and understood as a radical break with the past, regardless of the facts that might have contradicted this. The notion that 1789 marked a rupture was called into question first by Tocqueville, and later by historians such as Furet who have argued that, if there was such a rupture, it was at the level of the collective consciousness rather than of facts.[16] But, as far as the study of collective memory is concerned, whether 1789 was in fact a rupture or not hardly matters. The point is that revolutionary discourse and its collective representation emphasised this break. This is how the Revolution was to be seen, and this is how almost all major nineteenth-century historians would explain it. Whether they supported or opposed the revolutionary ideal, whatever their political allegiance, they would not question the *tabula rasa* as such, thus subscribing to the collective reading of the revolution's agents.

To claim that the French Revolution is the origin of modern France is also to accept the notion of *tabula rasa* it claimed to bring about. The success of the phrase *Ancien Régime* illustrates the idea of a 'before' and an 'after' well enough: simultaneously old and *dépassé*, pre-revolutionary France was presented as corrupted by usurpation and irrationality, and consequently relegated to 'les ténèbres de la barbarie'.[17] The French revolution saw itself as a unique attempt to eradicate a past perceived as the exact opposite of the new society and order. The perception of the Revolution as a dramatic rupture with the past found its climax with the execution of Louis Capet. His death, as Saint-Just famously pointed out, was the sign of a no turning back: the Republic could only be founded on Louis Capet's execution.

The Revolution's *tabula rasa* resulted in the urge to destroy the various signs of the *Ancien Régime*: 'the age of slavery', which had fallen with the Bastille and later with the king's head, was to be erased from people's view and memory. Places and streets were renamed, churches destroyed, damaged, or their function altered: the new church of Sainte-Geneviève (traditionally the patron saint of Paris) was turned into a pantheon. The new calendar was introduced together with a new set of references aimed at defining the new era which the Revolution was instituting.

However, the relation of the Revolution to its hated and rejected past is not free from ambiguity, and although the Bastille was promptly demolished, a few of its stones were carefully preserved, carved into mini-Bastilles and sent to the 83 newly born *départements* as a reminder of the arbitrary nature of the *Ancien Régime*. Rupture

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[16]Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, p. 29.

[17]François Furet, *La Révolution, 1770-1880* (Paris: Hachette, 1988), vol. 1, p. 15.

involves an attempt to remember what needs to be eradicated: the memory of the *Ancien Régime* survives its physical defeat. The past could be eradicated, but its memory needed to be kept alive as a constant reminder of what the 'ténèbres de la barbarie' had once brought to France. The constitution of a new era depends on the constitution of a memory of what it is rejected. Equally, the foundation of a new era also raises the problem of the meaning to be given to those founding moments and events. And in that regard, the mythical origin of 1789 is anything but unifying.

Founded on a rupture, but with no clear ending, and even less of a clear legacy, the perception of the French Revolution as the sacred origin of modern times poses many problems to the nineteenth century in France. The *tabula rasa* forbids reference to a golden age, to any model. The very ending of the Revolution was not even clear, and as for the Revolution itself, there was no consensus on its meaning, its message and the type of society it should found. The perception of 1789 as the sacred origins of modern France was all that could be agreed upon, yet this very consensus presented insuperable difficulties to the sons of the Revolution who wanted to tell its story and decipher its meaning. And in the century of unprecedented historical repetitions – tragic and farcical for Marx; progressivist and grotesque for Hugo – this is not simply an intellectual matter, but one of political action. The absence of closure and consensus on the legacy led to a continuing attempt to find an end to the Revolution. In that sense too, the Revolution spread its shadow over the next century:

> Le drame qui commence en 1789 ne cesse de se rejouer, génération après génération, autour des mêmes enjeux et des mêmes symboles, dans une continuité du souvenir transformé en objet de culte ou d'horreur.[18]

The specificity of the French Revolution in the constitution of collective memory and national identity has been described by Furet: as France turned its back on its past – condemned as *Ancien Régime* – it had to establish new principles, and yet until Napoleon, failed to inscribe them into institutions. France was thus caught in a struggle not only between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, but between the revolutionaries themselves and their various readings and interpretations of the Revolution; 'traditions antagonistes nées de la révolution elle-même: 1789 et 1793, les droits de l'homme et le salut public, la liberté et l'égalité, le gouvernement représentatif et le bonapartisme'.[19] The problem started as early as Thermidor, which for many sounded the death-knell of the Revolution. The *Convention* attempted to finish the

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[18]Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, p. 19.
[19]Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, p. 114.

Revolution and defend its legacy at the same time, while Babeuf tried to start it again, convinced that its promises had yet to be fulfilled. Although Prairial won a political victory in giving the legal power to the *Convention*, the ideological influence of *Babouvisme* was to spread, and gain much influence over the nineteenth century. To a great extent, the struggle of June 1848 had started half a century earlier, with the battle between what remained of the *sans-culotterie* and the bourgeoisie. The class struggle was yet to be formulated in these terms, but the struggle had indeed already started.[20] As we shall see in chapter 6, the myth of the People – unified and progressivist – would hide that antagonism for at least the next half century.

The second inner ambiguity of the Revolution and its legacy, is its relation to the Terror. Robespierre was defeated by some of his former allies: Tallien, Collot d'Herbois, Carrier, Fouché, Barrère and the like; those who were victorious in Thermidor ended the Terror having supported it. Overthrowing Robespierre as a tyrant allowed them to remain faithful to the Revolution. The time was now set to institutionalise the Revolution, to inscribe its legacy in political and social structures. But in fact the very attempt to end the Revolution made the ambiguity of its legacy all too clear, opening up a conflict between its many different, antagonistic interpretations. Torn between those who saw 1789 as a promise broken by the Terror, and those who perceived 1793 as some genuine Republican opposition to the bourgeois hijacking of an essentially popular movement, the legacy of the Revolution failed to unite France. It was, on the contrary, an instrument of national division which prolonged the antagonism that had started in 1789; this time between revolutionaries themselves.

(iv) History and myth-making: the affective framework of collective memory

As we have seen, it is a major function of myth to protect the community from inner divisions. The construction of a revolutionary memory, crucial for a country that viewed 1789 as its sacred origin, was aimed at such reconciliation. The memory of the revolution is not simply a recall of what happened since 1789. The main goal was to piece a revolutionary France together. The discourse on the revolution, the 'travail de mémoire' undertaken by many nineteenth-century historians constitutes modern France's identity. If 1789 was to be understood as the mythic origin of a new era, and was not to be challenged as such, then the history of the French Revolution written by later generations was meant to have a key social function: that of keeping the remembrance

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[20]The theory of class struggle was originally formulated by the liberals, Thiers and Guizot, who saw in 1789 the consecration of the middle class. It is after 1830 that the revolutionary tradition focuses on 1793, and reinterprets the class struggle in terms of an opposition between the working class and the bourgeoisie.

of these origins alive. We have seen how Michelet made it his mission not only to explain the Revolution, but equally to revive it: to bring back to life what the people at that time thought and felt. If the nineteenth century was the century of history *par excellence*, it is also because historians made it their duty to highlight and explain this original crisis; to make sense of this dramatic rupture from the past; to tell a coherent story of potentially contradictory events, and, in so doing, to build a coherent identity for modern society.[21] The quest for the origin of a specifically 'modern' era remained as mythic as ever:

> If the story of Genesis tells us that in the beginning God made the world and made man in his own image, Michelet is telling us that 14 July 1789 is the moment of a second Historical Coming, the moment when man can remake the world in the image of the Revolution.[22]

This is where the bridge between past and present constituted by collective memory finds its full social function, for to tell the story of origins is to tell present-day society about its identity; more precisely, it is to create a present identity through the remembrance and (re)construction of the past. But, again, memory here is to be understood in the wider sense, involving emotional response generally, and trauma particularly.

Collective memory can generally be traced in the visible and the spoken: monuments, commemorations, accounts left by witnesses; but is equally to be found in the invisible and the unspoken: in what is not represented or said, whether because societies spontaneously or willingly forget parts of their past, or because the collective – like the individual – psyche is driven by an 'unconscious remembrance.'[23] These can take the form of psychological traces, and sometimes scars, such as traumas, fears, obsessions and phobias – unspoken memory. To understand the process by which collective memory is constituted, one has to take into account not only the memory of events, but equally the more subtle traces which they leave: that is, the affective framework within which collective memory will take shape, and according to which it is interpreted, lived, sometimes re-enacted. We shall see how the myth of Paris was born out of trauma and how the construction of the revolutionary moment in the consciousness influenced the urban imaginary as well as politics itself.

To see how the process of revolutionary remembrance and the constitution of trauma began, I shall focus on three main stages which I believe left their mark on subsequent

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[21]See Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution*, p. 224.

[22]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 109.

[23]Michel Vovelle uses the phrase 'souvenir inconscient', in *Idéologies et mentalités* (Paris: Maspero, 1982), p. 264.

generations, and affected Paris particularly. The first goes back to the early days of September 1792, in a frantic atmosphere of panic, rumours of conspiracy and treason, which ultimately led groups of Parisians to enter the prisons where those suspected of counter-revolutionary sympathies had been incarcerated, and to kill virtually everyone they found there. Of these, 72% were common-law criminals; only 5% of the victims were actual political prisoners.[24] The September Massacres, as these events came to be known, would weigh heavily on the future of Paris,[25] as the capital came to inspire fear and disgust. The image of Parisians leading the whole country into a bloodbath would come to be both a nightmarish memory and a terrifying prospect for nineteenth-century France.

The second stage is the Terror as such. After the election of Robespierre at the all powerful 'Comité de Salut public' (27 July 1793), the Convention tried to take the monopoly of violence back into its hands. Under the pressure of the *sans-culottes* – who proved they could impose their will when they considered the regime to be failing their revolutionary aspirations –the Convention made terror official, remaining within that logic, though attempting to control it. The emblematic guillotine was meant to forbid the chaotic irruption of death: '[la guillotine] substitue en effet le supplice sérialisé et concentré à l'abattage disséminé qui constitue le massacre'.[26] This allowed a distancing process to begin, since the main protagonists of the Revolution hitherto – the people – found themselves in a new, more passive role as spectators.

The third and last stage is Thermidor and the fall of Robespierre. As if France had suddenly awakened from a nightmare, a rhetoric stigmatising the blood and violence of the Terror, denouncing its 'cannibals', now attempted, with little success, to root out the terrifying images that, for years to come, would link the Revolution with bloodshed.

What is interesting in this process is how quickly the memory of the Revolution distanced itself from the logic within which the Revolution had once been perceived. Post-revolutionary reaction insisted on reinterpreting the Revolution in terms of bloodthirsty savagery, without appreciating the gap that existed between this sort of discourse and the perception of the events by their agents. Gustave Le Bon relates the

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[24]Tulard, Fayard, Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de la Révolution française*, p. 106.

[25]Jean Tulard, *Le Consulat et l'Empire. Nouvelle Histoire de Paris* (Paris: Association pour la publication d'une histoire de Paris, diffusion Hachette, 1983), p. 218. To be accurate, these massacres were by no means a specifically Parisian phenomenon: the killing actually started in the provinces (the Orne department for example) then, from Paris, spread to many other cities. Historians disagree on the responsibility of the *Comité de surveillance de la Commune de Paris*. But whether it was initiated or spontaneous, the scale of the massacres in the capital certainly seems to bear out Tulard's point.

[26]Alain Corbin, *Le Temps, le désir et l'horreur. Essais sur le XIXe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 217.

famous example of the killing of the governor of the Bastille, the Marquis de Launay.[27] Shortly after the fall of the Bastille, the governor – who had been promised before he surrendered that his life would be spared – found himself surrounded by a threatening crowd. After he inadvertently kicked one of those present, it was decided that the 'victim' should cut off the governor's head, which he did 'out of patriotism' – as Le Bon put it: 'il juge que, puisque tel est l'avis général, l'action est patriotique' – first using an ill-sharpened sword he was lent for the occasion, then, to finish him off, his own knife (demonstrating his skills as a cook, as Le Bon ironically reports): all this without questioning the moral value of his act, without describing as savage an act that *he did not perceive as such*.[28] In other words, post-revolutionary generations distanced themselves from the Revolution's logic. The logic of participating, acting, performing, which had been that of the revolutionaries, gives way in the long term to that more passive position of spectatorship.

This is not to say that violence and massacres disappeared during the nineteenth century, but they simply became – at least officially – intolerable. As Corbin notes: 'Entre la liesse de la foule massacreuse et l'horreur éprouvée par l'âme sensible, la clarté du partage favorise la lisibilité des comportements sensoriels'.[29] In other words, distance produced a new relation to violence and an attitude which was afraid of, and hostile to, what had previously been tolerated but which would from now on be considered animal, bestial, abnormal.

One can conclude from this that collective memory bears strong emotions which emerge indirectly in the present-day imaginary. As we have seen, these emotions should not be confused with those that were felt in the past that is being remembered. The logic of some of the excesses of the French Revolution came to be considered excessive by subsequent generations, who expressed their deep unease toward the Terror. If the logic of what was now called revolutionary cruelty had rapidly faded away, the image of the bloodthirsty capital remained. The memory of events still largely depended on the interpretation given by their agents and witnesses; in other words, the French Revolution remained a break in history for these next generations, who did not question the interpretation given by their forefathers but failed to understand fully how they had

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[27]Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Retz-CEPL, 1975), pp. 155-6.

[28]This contrasts sharply with the reaction of a non-revolutionary witness of the early days of the Revolution, Chateaubriand, who recalls the sight of two bloody heads before his window, and how this horrid scene changed his perception of the Revolution. See *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1973), vol. I, pp. 219-20.

[29]Corbin, *Le Temps, le désir et l'horreur*, p. 234.

arrived at the excesses of the Terror. And yet it is precisely these few months that I believe explain much about the nineteenth-century psyche.

(v) The social function of myth: providing meaning and labeling fears

Although the victims of the Vendée civil war and the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars outnumbered those of the Terror, its impact on *l'imaginaire* was dramatic: 'Elle créa une atmosphère de peur, une dramatisation aux profonds retentissements psychologiques et d'incroyables tensions'.[30] The acceleration of the number of executions and their geographic concentration in Paris generated a reaction of panic in the few weeks that led to Thermidor; and it was indeed in the nature of the regime to provoke fear. During the Terror itself, the *gouvernement révolutionnaire* justified its action – the legal regime of terror – as the sole way to protect the Revolution's achievement and to defeat its enemies, particularly those from within.

To achieve this, but also in order to be viewed as speaking in the name of the people, the government sought to monitor and influence public opinion. The *Bureau d'esprit public* was created in August 1792: the first institution responsible for propaganda in modern times.[31] The terrorist propaganda was based on the construction and spread of politico-religious myths. While the press propagated and defined the revolutionary credo, ceremonies and demonstrations ensured the active participation of the newly created citizens. Mona Ozouf has shown how these activities were founded on a renewed sense of sacredness, and were aimed at helping the people to realise the strength of their cohesion.[32]

But beyond propaganda, fear was one of the key political and psychological elements of revolutionary myths. The fear that was intended to spread through every layer of the society had the mythical function of magnifying the threat and defining the community at once. Robespierre excelled at mastering this ambivalence, arousing suspicion in everyone, while at the same time making fear illegitimate: 'je dis que quiconque tremble en ce moment est coupable; car jamais l'innocence ne redoute la surveillance publique'.[33] Whoever felt frightened was already guilty. The tone was set that encouraged a general and constant surveillance of all by everyone. The power of the government here lay in its ability to delegate general surveillance to the citizens themselves.

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[30]Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 531.

[31]See Jacques Ellul, *Histoire des institutions* (Paris: PUF, 1979), vol. 5, pp. 102-3.

[32]Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

[33]Robespierre, cited by Lefort in *Essais sur le politique*, p. 88.

Claude Lefort has eloquently deciphered this extraordinary process of global surveillance and the myth of conspiracy. The revolutionaries found it legitimate to monitor the nation because the nation was itself being scrutinised by some evil power; 'une puissance invisible, [...] une puissance qui n'a pas d'existence empirique: la malveillance. Celle-ci est partout, ou, ce qui revient au même, nulle part. Et, cependant, invisible, elle est un œil, elle épie sans cesse'.[34] This myth of conspiracy justifies a similar surveillance: 'soulevons le voile qui cache les complots; épions les discours, les gestes, l'esprit de suite de chacun'.[35] The people's exercise of this global surveillance takes the form of interpretation. Their capacity to see depends on their revolutionary virtue; their power and will to expose the enemy: 'le révolutionnaire ne se signale aux autres et lui-même que par le témoignage de sa connaissance de l'ennemi. Ou bien, autant dire que l'identité du révolutionnaire lui est donnée par l'ennemi'.[36] This antagonistic view of the revolution forbids any neutral position – the Erasmus syndrome is here at work and those who are afraid are immediately suspected, as honest revolutionaries know no fear.

The figure of the public enemy is central to the discourse of the Terror. In a context perceived as threatening, the existence of enemies from within justifies the exceptional nature of the government and the superiority of its actions over normal institutions. The public enemy is anything but public: he is hidden, acting in the shadow, thus opposing everything the Revolution stands for. The struggle is one between the Revolution which is public, transparent, open, and the secrecy and plot of its enemies. We have here a further example of the social function of myth seen in chapter 1: to label, to make sense, to explain.

> Il faut mettre un nom sur ce que l'on redoute, on expulse ainsi le Mal du mystère dont il s'enveloppe. On peut alors le dénoncer et l'affronter. Le complot répond à une fonction sociale qui est de l'ordre de l'explication.[37]

This process enables the failures of the Revolution to be explained as the result of some treason. Everything can be reinterpreted in the light of conspiracy in an antagonistic situation where what is not public is necessarily a threat.

I believe that those two trademarks of the revolutionary imaginary – secrecy (if not conspiracy) and publicity – deeply influenced post-revolutionary literature.[38]

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[34]Lefort, *Ibid.*, p. 108.

[35]Saint-Just, cited by Lefort, *Ibid.*, p. 109.

[36]Lefort, *Ibid.*

[37]Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, p. 54.

(vi) The revolutionary legacy: conspiracy and publicity

*Je vous défie de faire deux pas dans Paris sans
rencontrer des manigances infernales.*[39]

Le Mal est une société secrète.[40]

A striking example of how the rhetoric of the Terror's discourse struck sensitive chords in the nineteenth century is found in the way the theme of conspiracy and mystery developed in post-revolutionary literature. In 1797, l'abbé Barruel started to publish his *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, in which he proposed a masonic conspiracy theory to explain the inexplicable: 1789. The omnipotence and power of the conspirators, their meticulous preparation, the overall sense of mystery orchestrated by the author, pave the way for less politicised yet equally chilling narratives in the following century.[41] Barruel described the magnified power of the conspirators, their extraordinary intelligence, their flawless preparation: 'tout a été prévu, médité, combiné, résolu, statué'.[42] Barruel's thesis sounds like an opening of Balzac or Sue:

> Vers le milieu du siècle où nous vivons, trois hommes se rencontrèrent [Voltaire, d'Alembert and Frédéric II]. [...] Un grand nombre d'adeptes furent, dans la suite, entraînés dans cette conspiration. [...] Le jour de l'insurrection générale fut fixée au 14 juillet 1789. [...] La chaîne des correspondances du Code illuminé a si bien réussi qu'au même instant tous les brigands et tous les frères sont en insurrection.[43]

This image rapidly spreads in the nineteenth-century: it affects history, politics and literature alike. The three main myths of Jewish, Masonic and Jesuit conspiracies are magnified by the literary fascination for those themes. After Barruel, conspiracy evolved: the already uneasy phantasm of seeing institutional power being conquered led to the even more chilling prospect of the conspirators succeeding in controlling the very minds of each and everyone: 'l'appareil politique et administratif ne constitue plus son

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[38]I shall use the term in the sense of 'the quality and condition of being open to public observation and knowledge' (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

[39]Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 152.

[40]Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), p. 10.

[41]Barruel's influence can be found most obviously in Alexandre Dumas' *Joseph Balsamo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990), but the theme of conspiracy is recurrent in French literature of that period: see Balzac's *Histoire des Treize* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1892) and Eugène Sue's *Juif errant* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1983) whose first episode was published in 1844, just a year after Michelet and Quinet's *Des Jésuites* (Paris: Hachette, Paulin, 1843).

[42]Abbé Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (Hambourg: P. Fauche, 1798), p. xi.

[43]*Ibid.*, pp. 1-3. Barruel adds a fourth leader, Diderot, 'l'enfant perdu' of this conspiracy (p. 2).

seul enjeu. Celle-ci s'élargit à tous les domaines de la vie collective, qu'il s'agisse des mœurs, de l'organisation familiale aussi bien que du système éducatif ou des mécanismes économiques'.[44]

The post-revolutionary imaginary bears the double mark of the Terror's experience: not just the trauma, but also the power devolved to a central state and its police. This increasing power of the state apparatus generated an increasing awareness of the limits of individual sovereignty. The fascination for secrecy and conspiracy reflects the fear of an individualistic and modern society in the making, a fear also connected to the theme of the crowd where individuality is diluted: 'la masse des affidés n'apparaît plus que comme un immense mécanisme, aux rouages strictement agencés, où la personnalité se dissout, l'individu se perd'.[45] The apparently chaotic nature of the crowd is deceptive: in reality masses operate like a machine. The theme of conspiracy paradoxically reconciles reason with the irrational: chance and contingency are being expelled from history. Everything can be explained by a superior – yet human and logical – power operating in the dark.

But, as I briefly outlined above, and parallel to this sense of secrecy and fascination for conspiracy theories, there is an important public element in the Revolution which is reflected in a theatricality of politics. Paris was the stage, and the Parisians the actors; 'La Révolution est un théâtre où se rejoue sans cesse dans la rue l'air du peuple souverain'.[46] The capital of the Revolution turned into a vast theatre where each and everyone performed in front of an audience. Everything was then public: from the clubs to the *tribunal révolutionnaire*; from the streets to the assemblies.

> La Révolution est pour beaucoup une fête permanente, une gigantesque scène des vertus patriotiques et civiques. [...] L'échafaud lui-même est un théâtre. [...] Tout est théâtral dans cette Terreur dominée par la liturgie publique du sang versé et le verbe fascinant.[47]

Michelet remarked that the power of the *Jacobins*, and their apparent unity were due precisely to the oral communication of their message. While the press gave countless numbers of individual perspectives, an assembly in front of which issues were presented and interpreted gave a much more favourable context: 'les Jacobins procèdent par l'association et la prédication, comme les ordres mendiants du Moyen-Age: dès lors, ce

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[44]Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, p. 31.
[45]*Ibid.*, p. 35.
[46]Furet, *La Révolution française*, vol. 1, p. 229.
[47]Jean Favier, *Paris. Deux mille ans d'histoire* (Paris: Fayard, 1997) p. 856.

qui importe c'est l'interprétation orale des textes devant des assemblées, exercice qui permet de plier n'importe quelle situation à leur canon'.[48]

The public nature of politics is an essential aspect of the popular aspect of the Revolution and of the *sans-culotte*'s psychology: the *sans-culotterie* is not so much a social class as a political attitude.[49] The *sans-culotte* stands out and speaks up; he has participated in the great revolutionary *journées* – 'la participation aux "journées" révolutionnaires est ici un test et un passeport'.[50] The Revolution is identified with the people who make it: *protagonisme* became a fundamental idea of the Revolution. The true revolutionary is defined by his actions, and those actions are public.

The inherent public character of the French Revolution – putting politics on display – connected revolutionary Paris with modernity.[51] As we will see in the final chapter, politics soon returned into the hands of the state, and *protagonisme* gave way to spectacle: the revolutionary crowds participated in the events, whereas the elite of the nineteenth century watched them. This in turn created a distance, analogous to the one I mentioned between the memory of the Terror and its reality as lived by its agents. As Chateaubriand noted, 'les forfaits n'inspirent d'horreur que dans les société au repos; dans les révolutions, ils font partie de ces révolutions mêmes, desquelles ils sont la trame et le spectacle'[52]. The passage from *protagonisme* to spectatorship allows this distance, and with it, a dissociation from an event; the capacity to watch it, to analyse it. It is this 'mécanique du regard'[53] that generates a feeling of horror.

With the end of the Revolution, Paris, its main protagonist, became 'spectateur de l'histoire'.[54] Having been the stage of the French Revolution, Paris is still a living theatre, although the nature of the separation between actors and spectators has evolved from *protagonisme* to reification. On stage, still, Paris remains 'le seul théâtre du sacre de la modernité'.[55] Since the Revolution, man and politics are on display: 'tout y est spectacle'.[56] And yet, beyond the spectacle, post-revolutionary unease is growing, in exactly the same setting, Paris.

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[48]Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, p. 68.

[49]Albert Soboul, *Les Sans-culottes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), pp. 40-1.

[50]Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 538. See also Sylvie Garnier and Jacques Guilhaumou, 'Les "Conduites politiques" en l'an II', in Béatrice Didier and Jacques Neefs (eds.), *Sortir de la révolu*tion (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1994), pp. 13-31.

[51]See Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution*, p. 2.

[52]Cited by Jean-Claude Chesnais, *Histoire de la violence* (Paris: Laffont, 1981), p. 27.

[53]Corbin, *Le Temps, le désir et l'horreur*, p. 234.

[54]Favier, *Paris*, p. 871.

[55]Corbin, 'Paris-Province' in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2, p. 2872.

[56]Balzac, *Illusions perdues*, p. 185.

To speak of nineteenth-century France as living in 'the shadow of the guillotine'[57] is to use an appropriate metaphor to express a form of collective haunting: despite the dominant discourses of progress, modernity and science, the period was characterised by deep social anxieties and phobias, which it is tempting to explain by the trauma of the French Revolution. Not only did revolutionary excesses generate an obsession with violence and blood, but the Revolution itself left an ambiguous political legacy of which the antagonism 1789 / 1793, the Rights of man vs. the Terror was probably the most acute. In trying to make sense of its origins, to reconstruct its *anamnesis*, the nineteenth century – the century of history – would get caught up in its own contradictions, moral and political, thus remaining in a state of ongoing anxiety.

And here, we reach the full scale of Paris' function as a myth: Paris is the place where the real and imagination meet through the writer who is already regarded if not as a seer, certainly as a *visionnaire*. Balzac paves the Parisian way for Hugo who later wrote:

> Paris éclaire dans les deux sens ; d'un côté la vie réelle, de l'autre la vie idéale. [...] Fond et forme, idée et image sont, dans l'art complet, des identités. La vérité donne la lumière blanche ; en traversant ce milieu étrange qu'on nomme le poète, elle reste lumière et devient couleur. [...] Elle reste réalité et devient imagination (P, p. 86).

Again, imagination here has little to do with trivial distraction. As Durand put it,

> L'Imagination n'est pas la fantaisie; elle n'est pas non plus la sensibilité. [...] L'Imagination est une faculté quasi divine qui perçoit tout d'abord, en dehors des méthodes philosophiques, les rapports intimes et secrets des choses, les correspondances et les analogies.[58]

This is certainly how Michelet and Hugo viewed it, and it is that imagination, projected on Paris, that I now wish to explore – Paris's darkness and claustrophobia having much more to tell than the actual colour of its streets.

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[57]An image notably used by David Bindman, *The Shadow of the Guillotine* (London: British Museum Publications, 1989). It is also a very Hugolian image, given his obsession with the guillotine, the French Revolution and Paris. See also Daniel Arasse, *La Guillotine et l'imaginaire de la Terreur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987).

[58]Charles Baudelaire, 'Notes nouvelles sur Egar Poe', in Allan Poe, *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 37.

Chapter 4

Paris-Monstre: darkness and claustrophobia

*Questa palude che 'l gran puzzo spira cigne
dintorno la città dolente, u' non potemo intrare omai
sanz'ira.*[1]

If Paris generally remains known as the urban incarnation of the nineteenth century's ideals of progress and modernity, the city of lights also bears a darker side as a city of mystery and evil – a new Babylon. 'Classic Janus face of modernity',[2] the myth of Paris bears two opposing, antagonistic faces. On the one hand, the bright, positive side glorifies the capital of progress, of modernity; the city of lights, magnificence, prosperity and power. And as we have seen, the city of 1789 transformed Paris into a universal capital. On the other hand, literature shows a dark, negative side, representing Paris as dirty, murky, unhealthy, and dangerous.

These two apparently contradictory sets of representations are in fact complementary, for if the city encapsulates the very idea of progress and civilisation, it is also the locus of the fear they generate; the fear of what lies ahead.[3] The main characteristic of the representation of Paris in nineteenth-century French literature is therefore expressed through the constant use of the oxymoron: both inferno and paradise, city of luxury and misery, of darkness and light. As Chaussinand-Nogaret summarized:

> Paris, somptueux et sordide, sublime, monstrueux, partie or et partie fange: des monuments admirables qui font la gloire des rois [...] et tout autour, des ruelles, des verrues, des enchevêtrements d'édifices, d'impasses, de rues étroites où la circulation est une aventure souvent dangereuse, des coupe-gorge, des dépotoirs infâmes [...].[4]

Since Mercier, and throughout the nineteenth century, the figure of oxymoron remains central to the discourse on Paris and translates the ambivalence of the different feelings aroused by a city that fascinates and repulses alike. Flamboyant and dominant, the urban persona of Paris is equally elusive, restless and threatening.

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[1]Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. by Robert M. Durling (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 142.'This swamp that breathes forth the great stench, girds the grieving city all about, where now we cannot enter without wrath' (p. 143).

[2]Max Silverman, *Facing Postmodernity: Contemporary Thought on Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 67.

[3]Chesnais, *Histoire de la violence*, p. 433.

[4]Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 564. On the representation of Paris in literature, see Pierre Citron, *La Poésie de Paris dans la littérature française de Rousseau à Baudelaire*, 2 vols (Paris: Minuit, 1961).

It is the dark side of the myth of Paris that I will be discussing in this chapter, a quality that predominates in nineteenth-century novels on Paris, and which expresses the other side of modernity: fears, obsessions and sombre phantasms. As Paris served as a symbol for humanity in general, the choice to depict it in the most gruesome and dark manner reveals the fears and obsessions of a new, modern, urban society; it reflects the moral concerns of both a bourgeois society and of those who sought to undermine its comforting values. We have seen that fear is essential to myth-making, and I will show how Paris came to be the locus of a specifically modern fear. I will be looking at some major themes of the literary imaginary of Paris, expressed by authors such as Balzac, Huysmans, and above all, Hugo.

Roger Caillois famously argued that a new literary representation of Paris arose in the 1840s with such a powerful effect that its truth was never challenged.[5] Paris became, then, a central figure: as soon as Paris was mentioned, lyricism, adventure, heroism, and mystery were evoked. A dark and mysterious Paris was presented as the 'real' Paris, the Paris that normal people, in their everyday routines, might not see, but which was 'real' precisely because it went beyond its surface appearance – 'all is true'.[6] The images of, and references to the urban nightmare of nineteenth-century France are especially powerful as they find their roots in the reality of daily life. The detailed description of the city in literature implicitly tells the reader that, however fictional what he reads seems to be, it dwells on a mysterious side of the city which is very real:

> Comment [...] ne se développerait-il pas en chaque lecteur la conviction intime [...] que le Paris qu'il connaît n'est pas le seul, n'est pas même le véritable, n'est qu'un décor brillamment éclairé, mais trop *normal*, [...] et qui dissimule un autre Paris, le Paris réel [...] d'autant plus puissant qu'il est secret, et qui vient à tout endroit et à tout moment se mêler dangereusement à l'autre?[7]

After examining the importance of the past and notions of origin in myth-making, this chapter will focus on the contemporaries' present experience – a rather grim one. I will be looking at the relation between reality and fiction that led to such a sombre representation of the capital of modernity. The radical demographic expansion for instance, the fact that Paris was changing too fast at a time when history seemed to be slowing down greatly contributed to shape the urban imaginary. 'Modern Babylon' – 'on ne nomme plus Paris autrement'[8] – may have been the capital of modernity, it also encapsulated new fears and an obsession with blood, unhealthiness, disease and evil –

[5]Caillois, *Le Mythe et l'homme*, pp. 152-75.
[6]Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*, p. 22.
[7]Caillois, *Le Mythe et l'homme*, p. 160.
[8]*Ibid.* p. 158.

all leading to an organic representation of the city: a literary monster. This will lead me to focus more directly on Hugo. I will be looking at *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables* in particular to further explore some major themes of urban and modern anxiety: claustrophobia, the question of fate and the representation of an organic city, all illustrating modern man's new, post-revolutionary fear and receptiveness to new forms of mythic thinking as we shall see.

(i) Paris, the locus of modern fears

The mythical representation of Paris stems from a very tangible aspect of its reality: the demographic revolution that was taking place in the first half of the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, Paris counted around half a million inhabitants. This followed a period of relative demographic stability when the population had grown steadily, although in relative anarchy.[9] From the Empire up until the Restoration, urban development was remarkably slow, and, despite what amounted to pure speculation, virtually nothing was planned, let alone put in practice, to prepare Paris for the massive demographic explosion then in the making: within half a century, the population doubled to reach a million in the 1840s. Regular censuses informed the authorities of the scale of the problem. Although the techniques were still rudimentary, and the results not always reliable (particularly to include the seasonal workers), the overall trend was abundantly clear from the period's figures.[10]

However, despite this demographic ticking bomb, no large-scale, coherent plan was implemented before Haussmann. Some buildings were constructed, and new areas developed, but these concerned mostly residential areas and next to nothing was done in the poorest *quartiers*, except for occasional demolitions after the cholera outbreak of 1832. One can only imagine the effect of such inertia on some of the *quartiers* already overcrowded in Mercier's time. The overpopulated slums were close to breaking point.

Equally concerning for the authorities was the change that was occurring within the population itself which was transformed by a massive immigration from the provinces. Paris had lost a significant proportion of its population since the Revolution: the emigration and the wars had cost Paris an estimated 150 000 men. And yet the figures show that the Parisian population had been stable during this period. The losses were compensated for by a new, unsettled population, made up essentially of seasonal workers, and *misérables*. 'Cette population neuve est d'autant plus fragile et instable

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[9]Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 574.

[10]See Alfred Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de Paris* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1996), p. 279 for the seventeen censuses of the nineteenth century.

qu'elle est plus récemment immigrée. [...] Elle campe plus qu'elle ne s'établit.'[11] The unsteady identity of the new 'Parisians' was a major source of concern for Haussmann who feared their rootless nature: 'véritables nomades au sein de la société parisienne, absolument dépourvus du sentiment municipal'.[12]

The population of Paris was therefore undergoing some serious and profound changes: less Parisian (as more *Provinciaux* flocked in), more masculine (this type of immigration involving essentially single men), and with a higher proportion of adults (with fewer children and elderly people). Characteristically enough, this new population was also poorer: if we follow Adeline Daumard's argument, almost three quarters of Parisians who died in 1847 were too poor to leave any inheritance.[13] The newcomers who flocked to the capital to find a job often found none, or a seasonal one. Once jobless again, they stayed in the city, swelling the ranks of those already concentrated in the many blocks of poverty in the capital – those unhealthy and overcrowded places where epidemics spread rampantly and that Hugo described as *le bas-fond*. Not only was Paris overcrowded, it was overcrowded with the poor.

But perhaps more important for the urban imaginary, the growing population of the poor in a city unprepared to cope with their number and needs, made them more visible. In Mercier's time, the Faubourg Saint-Marcel was safely contained geographically, and only the *décrotteur* would go and see for himself the existence of such a slum.[14] Parisians were unaware of it. At the time, the people and the bourgeois were out in the open air of the boulevards; the *misérables* were confined in their ghetto, like the medieval underworld of the *Cour des Miracles*.[15] The nineteenth-century *bas-fond*, in contrast, was in motion: the *gueux* were coming out as they became more numerous, and *misérables* like the Thénardiers knew no more geographical boundaries than Marius.[16] Needless to say, the bourgeois were becoming concerned.

The bourgeoisie was the dominant force after 1789, and to a large extent, Paris was their capital. After Thermidor, and particularly after Prairial, the return of the *notables* at the forefront of politics and society had pushed the lower classes into a social ghetto:

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[11]*Ibid.*, p. 577.

[12]Haussmann, cited in Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle*, p. 152.

[13]Adeline Daumard, *La Bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1848* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963). Daumard studied inheritance: in 1847, 73% of the deceased left none.

[14]See Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 'Le Faubourg Saint-Marcel', in *Tableau de Paris*, in *Paris le jour, Paris la nuit* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990), pp. 72-4.

[15]In ND, the *Cour des Miracles* is presented as the *bas-fond* of the Middle Ages, yet the space was circumscribed in a specific location; a closed labyrinth. It was forced by heavy military forces in 1668, its *gueux* dispersed and its slums razed to the ground.

[16]Marius' noble grand-father, on the other hand, is one of the few characters of the novel confined at home.

Tous ces notables imposent à la société urbaine leur influence et le prestige de leur fortune, sinon de leur culture, et repousse le peuple, privé désormais de ses possibilités d'expression spontanée et de toute initiative, dans un ghetto silencieux et les précaires conditions d'existence qui caractérisent la société urbaine du premier tiers du XIXe siècle.[17]

The bourgeois had taken hold of Paris once and for all. After all, the city had been the place of their gradual self-affirmation at the expense of the aristocracy. Yet they failed to master it fully, feeling increasingly uneasy about the hidden recesses that resisted them. The common representation of Paris as a modern Babylon, the contradictions of modernity, the bloody reminiscence inscribed in the capital, social unrest, and unhealthiness, made Paris the city of all dangers in the very setting of bourgeois domination.

Dealing with a profound and massive urban fear, bourgeois society was keen to bring light, order and calm into what they viewed as a world of darkness, anarchy and violence. Striving against the hideous face of the underworld – its mud, blood, diseases – was seen as a major need resulting from the bourgeois perception of the modern city.[18] But in doing so, the bourgeoisie was creating the very condition of a massive phantasmagoria, expressing in various ways, consciously or not, an urban phobia of darkness, both material (how the city looked) and moral (what kind of perversion it generated) that came to encapsulate the nineteenth-century imaginary.

When we look at the representation of Paris in the literature of the time, the dominant picture is a gloomy, mysterious, dangerous, unhealthy and – above all – evil place; a place where the pure and the innocent are not just ruined and crushed, but also demonised when they are ultimately exposed bearing the very sins of their tormentors, whose own reputation remains untarnished.[19] It is where the most evil and perverse characters are certain to succeed despite, or rather thanks to, the judiciary system; where conspiracy is rife and where power is in the hands of the unknown; where fate weighs heavily on individuals. In other words, a major trend of literature on Paris offers the exact opposite of the model that the bourgeoisie claims to offer: darkness, iniquity, irrationality. In a century well-known for its ostentatious confidence and morality, for its faith in progress, science and rationalism, the representation of the city as immoral, sinister, dark, and tormented is strikingly pessimistic.

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[17]Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 550.

[18]See Alain Corbin, *Le Miasme et la Jonquille. L'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986).

[19]Among many examples, see Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* and Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons*.

The perception of the city as evil is nothing new, and there was a preexisting Rousseauian tradition of suspicion towards the city in general, which was opposed to an idealistic vision of the rural. But the tradition of perversion by urban society of an otherwise naturally good man reaches new highs as Paris becomes the centre of literary attention. Never before the nineteenth century had the city been the focus of such strong imagery of darkness and evil. From Balzac, Hugo and Sue to Zola, authors seemed to indulge in the spectacle of urban evil and human degradation.[20]

Particularly prone to end up the victim of the city's many threats is the *provincial*. The young and naive *provincial* is easily destabilised by the frantic pace of the city; both fascinated and frightened by the capital. Their innocence helps to build the image of an all-powerful, ruthless city, and gives a vivid representation of the capital of modernity. Everything is new, everything happens at breakneck speed: 'la vie y est d'une effrayante rapidité', notes Balzac's new-comer Lucien de Rubempré.[21] As opposed to the provinces, Paris is a world of complexity, fluidity, and mobility, giving an impression of chaos, resembling a modern *Capharnaum*, a new *inferno*. The capital is another world to its newcomer, who has to adapt fast. Dragged into the city's many temptations and dangers, he cuts himself off from his past, his traditions and his social group, which makes him even more vulnerable.[22] Isolated, but also dazzled by the city, the migrant faces a new game the rules of which he seems unable ever to master, and thus he ends up as the city's next *dupe*.

The speed and frenzy of the city that dazzles Lucien will be even more of a Parisian trademark with the Haussmannisation of Paris: an urban policy which aimed to facilitate the new taste for speed and mobility, and be in tune with a pace of life that was perceived to be accelerating. The old Paris of the *flâneur* disappeared fast under the policy of urban rationalisation. As we have seen, the scale of the demographic explosion and related housing problems demanded dramatic actions. And how dramatic these actions were: 117,000 lodgings were destroyed between 1853 and 1870, 215,000 were built in the same period. However, the immediate effect of Haussmannian policy on Paris was not to solve the housing problem (as construction did not keep up with the speed of destruction),[23] but to ease urban circulation. The new Haussmannian straight avenues allowed light and order; they could be cleaned and the 'abnormal' easily spotted

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[20]Interestingly, the city is often compared to nature in its most disturbing aspect: dark woods, wild vegetation, savage populations. The violence found in nature seems to contaminate the city but loses its innocence: man retains his violent nature, but his humanity seems inexorably perverted by urbanity. Among many examples, see Hugo, *Mis.*, I, p. 112 or Balzac, *Le Père Goriot,* p. 156.

[21]Balzac, *Illusions perdues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 185.

[22]Corbin, 'Paris-Province', pp. 2852-3.

[23]Favier, *Paris*, p. 209.

and contained by the police; they were designed as major weapons against all the evils of the city:

> De nouvelles artères [...] participeraient au combat engagé contre la misère et la révolution; elles seraient des voies stratégiques, perçant les foyers d'épidémies, les centres d'émeute, permettant, avec la venue d'un air vivifiant, l'arrivée de la force armée [...].[24]

In this extraordinary passage, health and order hope to defeat misery and revolution alike; the military carries out a cleaning-up process which is also a political one, without ever saying so. 'Haussmann détruit parce que le Paris ancien s'oppose à la circulation rapide, à la manœuvre des régiments de cavalerie, à l'assainissement', Favier sums up.[25] The circulation of the bourgeois was facilitated, but so, too, was the circulation of the military against any potential revolutionary uprising. Similarly, the prostitute, the ragman, the jobless migrant became central figures and a preoccupation of the authorities, as they were perceived to be an obstacle to the slogan of the regime: *circulez*!

> L'attention de la police des mœurs va se focaliser sur *la surveillance de la rue*; faire circuler, assurer le passage, dégager la chaussée devient un objectif primordial. [...] Jusqu'à la première guerre mondiale, la *moralisation de la rue* restera un thème majeur du discours bourgeois.[26]

The above-mentioned social outcasts represented disease, the night and nomadism; restless and unpredictable, they were viewed as an aberration in the social order, the archaic signs of a hideous past.

One way to eradicate this past and facilitate urban circulation was to transform the notion and reality of the city's centre. Haussmann's first 'boulevard' was initially named the *boulevard du Centre* (before being renamed boulevard de Sébastopol after the Franco-English victory of 1855). The centre of the capital would now be associated with an idea of passage, and not with a spider's web dragging its prey to its middle. Symbolically, the historical and geographic centre of Paris underwent major reshaping: the old *île de la cité* (described in Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*) was almost entirely destroyed and rebuilt, its population reduced by two-thirds.[27] Rationalised, the city could now expand (from 12 to 20 *arrondissements* in 1860), without the disturbing prospect of some unknown territory at its geographical heart. From now on, the urban

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[24]Georges Laronze, *Le Baron Haussmann*, cited by Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle*, p. 153.
[25]Favier, p. 205.
[26]Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de noce. Misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982), p. 303.
[27]Favier, *Paris*, p. 208.

threat and disturbing elements would be redirected in the outskirts. The inner city was to welcome a more 'urbane' population – civilised and urban at once – with light, order and prestige. The subtext of this urban revolution was the creation of a new urban setting facilitating the display of commodity and the motion of consumers.

Alongside the second Empire's urban policy, the first modern department stores made their appearance: the new temples of modernity, the shrine of exuberant frenzy in response to the new in all its forms. In this regard, Huysmans' condemnation of *Le Bon Marché* later in the century remains the apt illustration of the new, perverse, alienating religion of the commodity.[28] It is located in a place long known for its convents and congregations; but for how long? The whole place is perverted, 'diabolisé par le Bon Marché', and the religious places which alone could resist the progress of evil (p. 39) seem to live their final days.

Huysmans describes the fascination of petty bourgeois and working class women alike (p. 31) and the continual temptation aroused by the department store: 'c'est une obsession continue du mal; c'est l'adultère pour les unes, la kleptomanie, le vol, irrésistible, pour les autres' (p. 31), 'des idées d'emprunt, de prostitution, de vol, leur traversent la cervelle' (pp. 32-3). Huysmans vehemently denounces the 'féodalité financière et commerciale' (p. 35) which survives very well in a supposedly modern era; 'le courant de lucre et de dol qui circule aussi bien chez les oppresseurs que chez les opprimés' (p. 36). 'Usine à péchés' (p. 30), 'entrepôt du mal' (p. 32) ruled by 'l'Esprit des Ténèbres' (p. 33), *Le Bon Marché* – one of whose entrances is situated, aptly enough, rue de Babylone – seems to encapsulate all the evil and perilous temptations of a modern capital.

This vision of modern frenzy and evil is not the trademark of a reactionary Catholic only. In fact, one finds a similar picture of the very same department store in Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*. Radically different political sides agreed on the illusion and the consequent alienation of the bourgeois phantasmagoria, and an unlikely alliance of Catholics and socialists join in a common protest against what Paris had come to symbolise: the century of Prometheus – 'progressiste, mercantiliste, industriel, urbanistique', as Durand sums it up.[29]

Blanqui echoed this concern, reaching a conclusion later summarised by Benjamin: 'l'humanité sera en proie à une angoisse mythique tant que la fantasmagorie y occupera une place'.[30] What was criticized in the fascination for the constant spectacle provided

[28]Huysmans, *Paris* (Paris: L'Herne, 1994). Further references will be indicated in the main text.
[29]Durand, *Science de l'homme et tradition*, p. 226.
[30]Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle*, p. 48.

by the city was its depoliticised status, its emptiness combined with its fake sacredness that operated as an ersatz of religion, the religion of illusion. By a remarkable inversion, those cheap illusions have reached a sacred quality in the century of modernity:

> Certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence. [...] For in these days *illusion* only is *sacred, truth profane.* Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.[31]

In the vast dreamland of modernity, the people were seen as reified. What prevailed was the integration of man to the economic organisation of society and his conformity to the community's set of rules. Modernity, its speed and frenzy were deceptive. As Walter Benjamin observed, the hypnotic fascination for the new and speed hides the fact that everything always stays the same. The 'effrayante rapidité' is senseless, as Huysmans denounced:

> Ces rues, tirées au cordeau, où l'on ne flâne plus, où tout le monde court. [...] Et il n'est malheureusement plus un quartier où les automobilistes, les motocyclettes, les vélocipèdes, toutes les montures d'une racaille pressée ne sévissent.[32]

This counter-discourse aimed to undermine the confidence of bourgeois discourse and policy by contesting the increasing identification of the capital as a bourgeois city, and claiming that, on the contrary, it is the city's dark corners which reveal its true essence. Haussmann's enterprise of modernisation faced the hostility of the poet, as his urban policy was perceived to undermine the very nature of the city itself. Ambiguous, dark and unknowable in essence, Paris was now being reshaped, and its authenticity therefore destroyed, according to a bourgeois agenda facilitating circulation and trade.

This cult of speed was at odds with a sense of deceleration also felt by nineteenth-century contemporaries. The nineteenth century was caught up in a deceleration of history for which it tried to compensate by the acceleration of modernity. The real acceleration of time had happened with the Revolution and the Napoleonic regime which 'literally quickened the pace of felt time. [...] The whole enterprise of consciousness had formidably accelerated'.[33] The extraordinary density of this period was then followed by a similarly extraordinary emptiness: in 1815, France woke up with a hangover and immense boredom – as Balzac perfectly summed up: 'Cette vie creuse,

[31]Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p. xix.
[32]Huysmans, *Paris*, 1994), p. 27.
[33]Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, p. 18.

cette attente continuelle d'un plaisir qui n'arrive jamais, cet ennui permanent, cette inanité d'esprit, de cœur et de cervelle, cette lassitude du grand raout parisien [...]'.[34]

In a century dominated by bourgeois values, what place was left to the surviving sense of heroism? What was the use of the romantic memory of the Great Army, except to torture some nostalgic officer in his provincial *garnison*? 'The past drove rat's teeth into the grey pulp of the present; it exasperated, it sowed wild dreams. [...] Moreover the city itself, once festive with the tocsin of revolution, had become a prison'.[35] In this context, the frantic life of Paris appeared dangerously inadequate, acting as a drug to escape from a deceptive memory made of glory that no longer had any place in a bourgeois city.

Both discourses contributed to the representation of a dark Paris: whilst the poet explored the slums to find the authenticity of his capital, the bourgeois dived deeper into the belief that some urban evil not only resisted his values, but more worryingly was spreading. As the city is the place where the norm is set, it also serves to define deviancy and abnormality, and if the city is the historic setting of bourgeois political domination, it is equally the instrument of a cultural, artistic, and political expression of dissidence. Both contributed to, and reflected an immense anxiety that derived from both the reality of the situation (demography, urban policy) and the change of perceptions that followed the Revolution; making the sombre perception of the city intolerable and yet dominant at the same time.

(ii) Paris, darkness, urban teratology

As I have argued earlier, the representation of Paris owes much to the French revolution and its socio-psychological impact on later generations. For instance the sensitivity to blood changed after the Revolution, with important consequences for the urban imaginary. We have seen how the post-Thermidor generation dissociated themselves from the bloodshed of the Terror, how a distance developed between post-revolutionary France and the affective framework of the Revolution. Alain Corbin famously showed how new urban attitudes subsequently developed. It seemed that the bourgeoisie could no longer bear the vision and smell of blood within the city. Hence, its obsession with hygiene, an important part of which consisted in eradicating blood from the capital. As we have seen, a new era, modernity, was dawning, and violence was no longer welcome on the public stage: something else was now being put on display, namely, the commodity. And this called for some serious mopping-up:

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[34]Balzac, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 263.
[35]Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, p. 22.

La netteté de l'espace public, nettoyé, désodorisé, protégé de toutes sortes d'épanchements, de stagnations et de fermentations, le déferlement des lumières, la circulation salutaire des produits et des êtres vulgivagues préparent le temps de l'extraversion, de l'ostentation, de l'exposition, la prolifération de la vitrine et le règne de la marchandise. Pour que la lisibilité de l'argent s'impose, pour que le luxe se déploie, il faut qu'ait été évacué le spectacle du sang, exorcisé la peur sociale.[36]

It was therefore essential to ensure that whatever was on display would not be likely to trigger the 'animal senses' that had previously been unleashed during the worst moments of the Revolution.

Thus, a certain number of practices common in the Paris of the eighteenth century came to be perceived as an object of horror in the next. The concern with blood and cruelty was at the centre of urban legislation: the transportation of both corpses and meat was regulated requiring it to take place in closed carriages; the killing of cattle was separated from the selling of meat, and expelled from the city centre to its outskirts.[37] The aim was to exorcise violence and ensure that Paris would no longer be marked by blood. The emblematic guillotine itself was put in a semi-clandestine place, barrière St Jacques. But this attempt to purge the city of the traumatic source of anxiety made it worse. As Corbin puts it in a striking phrase, 'le sang effacé des pierres de la capitale s'est incrusté dans les mémoires'.[38]

Blood was by no means the sole trigger for this need to clean up the city. In fact it illustrates a wider concern about Paris, both moral and pathological: on the one hand, the city appeared as evil, damned, the new Babylon, the anti-Jerusalem, the anti-Rome. On the other hand, the city was also represented as ill, *lépreuse*, falling apart, decaying, rotten. Both these aspects illustrate an idea of urban depravity but generated two different types of discourse: whilst the *misère* could be cured as a disease, criminality was to be eradicated as evil.

The range of vocabulary used in nineteenth-century France to describe the *bas-fond* focused on its unhealthiness. The richness and variety of a vocabulary of illness and pathology highlight a horrid fascination for mud: the recurrence in literature of *fange*, *cloaque, bourbier, sentine, pestilence, remugle* underline the ugliness of the city of mud. The city itself seems to be ill: 'le cloaque est la maladie de Paris. L'égout est la maladie que la ville a dans le sang', Hugo writes, 'la pierre elle-même semblait malade dans ce milieu irrespirable' (*Mis.*, III, pp. 302 and 294).

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[36]Corbin, *Le Temps, le désir et l'horreur*, p. 222.
[37]*Ibid.*, p. 219.
[38]*Ibid.*, p. 218.

The symptoms are abundantly clear and all too visible: misery, overcrowded slums, lack of air, fear, and criminality. The city is infected, gangrenous, poisonous, purulent. 'L'apoplexie n'est plus à craindre, mais la phtisie est là', Hugo diagnoses (*Mis.*, III, p. 25).[39] The doctors are at the city's bedside, watching its temperature, concerned with its unhealthiness. The diagnosis requires a close examination.

There is therefore a need to descend into the *fange* – for the urban organism needs to be purged – but this promises to be horrific as well as potentially dangerous. When talking about the need to know *l'argot*, Hugo describes this dreadful journey:

> Certes, aller dans les bas-fonds de l'ordre social, là où la terre finit et où la boue commence, fouiller dans ces vagues épaisses, poursuivre, saisir et jeter tout palpitant sur le pavé cet idiome abject qui ruisselle de fange ainsi tiré au jour, ce vocabulaire pustuleux dont chaque mot semble être un anneau immonde d'un monstre de la vase et des ténèbres, ce n'est ni une tâche attrayante, ni une tâche aisée (*Mis.*, III, p. 7).

This prolongs the urban explorer's approach as initiated by Restif and Mercier in the previous century. Refusing to let any aspect or part of the capital pass him by, Mercier initiated the model of the urban traveller, exploring the darkest recesses of his beloved and untamable Paris; he was the one who dared to go as deep in misery and danger as the Faubourg Saint-Marcel – 'ce foyer de la misère obscure' –, so deep indeed, that he wondered if this was still Paris at all:

> Si l'on fait un voyage dans ce pays-là, c'est par curiosité; rien ne vous y appelle; il n'y a pas un seul monument à voir; c'est un peuple qui n'a aucun rapport avec les Parisiens, habitants polis des bords de la Seine.[40]

Mercier does not only express a new need to explore the city; he also sets the appropriate way to do it: to walk, and to walk deep in mud: 'Lutetia, la ville de boue' (*Mis.*, III, p. 287) requires the skills of the *décrotteur*[41] and a willingness and heart to plunge deep into the repulsive darkness, as ragmen do, for only they can claim to know the city's soul.

This exploration of urban mud leads to a further diagnosis – a social one. For if *fange* undermines the city's health, it also undermines its order: 'la boue ne peut jamais être bien famée', Hugo says (*Mis.*, III, p. 292), 'la boue est synonyme de honte' (*Mis.*, III, p. 322); it is the lair of rats, themselves a sort of bestial brother to the *gamin*: 'Là apparaît

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[39]'La phtisie sociale s'appelle misère', Hugo adds. At the end of the century, Huysmans shows that this representation of urban disease is still vivid in its appeal: 'Tout n'est que Syphilis', he exclaims. Huysmans, *A rebours* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 37.

[40]Mercier, 'Le Faubourg Saint-Marcel', in *Tableau de Paris*, pp. 72-3.

[41]Mercier, 'Décrotteurs', *Ibid.*, p. 199.

dans la brume humide, le rat, qui semble le produit de l'accouchement de Paris' (*Mis.*, III, p. 287).[42] This is equally the lair of convicts, con men, thieves, murderers, as Sue recalls in the opening chapter of *Les Mystères de Paris* (also – inevitably it seems – reminiscent of Mercier): 's'il [le lecteur] y consent, il pénétrera dans des régions horribles, inconnues; des types hideux, effrayants, fourmilleront dans ces cloaques impurs comme les reptiles dans les marais'.[43]

This interest in the appalling condition of life in the *bas-fond* of the city is not only one of genuine philanthropic concern or philosophic curiosity. The misery of the city's *bas-fond* may trigger pity, but it is also generates an uneasy feeling arising from dangers associated with it. It is hardly possible to separate the sufferering *misérables* from menacing criminals, as the example of the Thénardiers – both victims of *misère* and a threat to society – illustrates.

Such moral depravation is revealed in the physiology of Paris according to which darkness is not only the city's prevalent tone, it also reveals its moral depravation. Hugo's representation continues a tradition initiated by Balzac, which combined the fantastic and the realistic, the sublime and the horrific, and indulged in representing Paris as a dark, and *consequently* evil place: 'Le vrai Paris est naturellement une cité noire, boueuse, *maleolens*, étriquée dans ses rues étroites... fourmillant d'impasses, de culs-de-sac, d'allées mystérieuses, de labyrinthes qui vous mènent chez le diable'.[44] Paris and its inhabitants share the same gloomy and infernal physiology: 'Peu de mots suffiront pour justifier physiologiquement la teinte presque infernale des figures parisiennes, car ce n'est pas seulement par plaisanterie que Paris a été nommé un enfer'.[45]

Balzac's Paris can be particularly dark but his representation also contains elements of the fantastic: describing the tiny streets by night, Balzac – as will Hugo in *Les Misérables* – creates suggestive images of dust, dampness and mud. Paris is depicted as a dirty and miserable place with narrow and tortuous streets leading to dark courts and impasses. The walls are grey, dark, and yellowish. Paris bears the stigma of misery on the verge of decay. The city is crumbling away, metaphorically exuding its misfortune:

[42]This seems to echo the 'c'est mon petit' (II, p. 105), by which Paris recognises the *gamin* as its own. It is suggestive in that regard, that Gavroche sleeps surrounded by rats.
[43]Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris*, p. 31.
[44]Paul-Ernest de Ratier, *Paris n'existe pas*, cited in Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle*, p. 540.
[45]Balzac, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, p. 246. Both Balzac and Hugo compare Paris with Dante's *inferno*: the *milieu des affaires* is a 'troisième cercle de cet enfer' (*La Fille aux yeux d'or*, p. 256); the *bas-fond* is the place of the 'Ugolin social' (*Mis.*, II, p. 249).

'illustre vallée de plâtras incessamment près de tomber et de ruisseaux noirs de boue'.[46] Balzac evokes a sordid reality but his vision transforms the abject into something grandiose and powerful: 'Alors apparaît un Paris obscur en surface, redoutable en profondeur [...]. Tel est le Paris de Balzac, *réellement et fantastiquement* noire, violente et ténébreuse gravure'.[47]

The dreadful vision given by the literature of Paris lies largely in the nocturnal quality of its representation: Paris is never as thrilling, phantasmagoric and evil as at night, the moment *par excellence* of crime and conspiracy. A literature influenced by the success of the *roman noir* encapsulated a nightmarish vision of Paris, blending all the dangers of the nocturnal city into a very potent recipe: the Paris of dangers and darkness was enriched by another idiosyncratic ingredient, its underworld.

Paris as the capital of crime became a recurring image in nineteenth-century French literature: the anonymity of the big city protects and hides the criminals while it blocks police efficiency. A specifically urban imaginary develops in literature, turning the "realistic" threat of petty con men into the far more emblematic image of master criminals. Paris becomes the capital of mystery and crime, the city of the 30,000 criminals, notwithstanding most of the workers, 'occasional criminals'.[48] The picture of a hideous and threatening Paris reached its climax with the phenomenal success of Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, in 1842. Like Victor Hugo a few years later in *Les Misérables*, Sue delighted in depicting the worst parts of the city, dominated by the *classes dangereuses*: a Paris of mud, disease, criminality and social unrest. Socio-political concerns about a city that was growing too fast converged with a literature fascinated by its darkness and crimes. The myth of Paris combined fear, mystery and conspiracy: the very same ingredients that had turned the French Revolution into a powerful and threatening myth. Years after the Terror, Paris remained a large-scale threat: if not for the same reasons, with very similar ingredients nonetheless.

As we have seen, the theme of conspiracy was prepared for by the French Revolution. Literary Paris as both the capital of crime and a revolutionary city became the ultimate place of conspiracy: the place where mysterious characters gather at night, for some obscure purpose, in a Paris they have learned to tame perfectly well; all-powerful men, dressed in black, conspiring at night, and disappearing into secret passages. The

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[46]Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*, p. 22. This picture of Paris 'lépreux' is in turn reflected in the 'teint hâve, jaune et tanné' of the Parisians (*La Fille aux yeux d'or*, pp. 245-6).

[47]Geneviève Poncin-Bar, 'Aspects du fantastique dans les romans réalistes de Balzac', in *L'Année balzacienne*, 1974, p. 240. My emphasis.

[48]See Philippe Vigier, *Nouvelle histoire de Paris. Paris pendant la Monarchie de Juillet (1830-1848)* (Paris: Association pour la publication d'une histoire de Paris, diffusion Hachette, 1983), p. 273. In fact half of the 'crimes' concerned begging and vagrancy. See Fierro, *Histoire et dictionnaire de Paris*, p. 442.

nineteenth century is literally obsessed with the city's secrecy as illustrated by the recurring allusions to its underground: sewers, tunnels, passages, cellars, galleries; the city rests on a maze of darkness and holes where evil is growing.[49] 'Note the prophetic images of subterranean danger, of destructive agencies ready to rise from sewerage and cellar, that obsess the literary imagination [...]'.[50] The underworld is all the more dangerous as it constitutes the shaky and elusive foundations of a city and a society that recklessly ignores it; 'immense fourmillement inconnu. La société se doute à peine de ce creusement qui lui laisse sa surface et lui change les entrailles' (Mis., II, p. 248). Behind the comfort of the rationalised politics of the modern city, the feeling of some underlying peril threatens to undermine the bourgeois dream and the dreamer alike.

Not surprisingly then, there is in all the literature about dark Paris a strange fascination with, and long-repressed desire to see Paris reduced to ruins. In the late eighteenth century, Mercier recalled how the spectacle of Paris from the towers of Notre-Dame initiated a strange vision in him. Watching the city from above, Mercier contemplates an already overcrowded and confined place; 'cette enceinte peuplée'.[51] Interestingly enough what he sees brings him to wonder about what he cannot directly see, yet adds to the reality of Paris: the stones Paris is made of. And what Mercier does not see but is fully aware of is that Paris was built with the material which is now lacking below: 'tout ce qu'on voit en-dehors, manque essentiellement dans la terre aux fondements de la ville. [...] Ce que nous voyons en l'air manque sous nos pieds.'[52] In other words, this huge city, these heavy buildings have galleries – holes – for foundations. And as if this was not enough, Mercier reminds us of the rather brittle material Paris is made of: 'elle est bâtie de craie, et [...] repose sur la craie.'[53]

A glance at the city from above then combines with this knowledge and also the fragility of Paris – exciting and vibrant, but too heavy: the idol with feet of clay is in a Venice-like position. Mercier cannot help but be dragged from what he sees to a fantastic vision of prophetic quality: what if Paris collapsed like a house of cards? In the nineteenth century, this actual, concrete vulnerability of the city combined with the socio-political metaphor attached to the polis: concretely as well as metaphorically, the galleries of the underworld threaten the upper world literally with collapse.

The unpredictability, restlessness, and unknowability of the city is once again epitomised by the bas-fond, which appears as a city within the city, a different world

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[49]See Poncin-Bar, 'Aspects du fantastique dans les romans réalistes de Balzac', p. 239.
[50]Steiner, In Bluebeard's Castle, p. 27.
[51]Mercier, 'A vue d'oiseau', in Tableau parisien, p. 328.
[52]Ibid., 'Les carrières', p. 36.
[53]Ibid., 'Physionomie de la grande ville', p. 34.

emerging from depravation. The *bas-fond* and the underworld of conspiracy are the exact opposite of the bourgeois model of the *cité idéale*, but when it comes to denouncing it, the dominant discourse tends to abandon its taste for rationality to adopt an apocalyptic tone more in tune with the perceived monstrosity and abnormality the city's recesses. An image of evil develops which highlights this: the Leviathan. This religious rhetoric leads to a new, modern crusade against the eternal enemy of Progress: the spectre of Chaos. This is when rational concerns about the city's unhealthiness meet urban teratology; when Paris becomes 'Cette cité-monstre' (P, p. 72).

The identification of Paris with a monster is a recurring picture in nineteenth-century literature: 'Cité tentaculaire', gigantic *pieuvre*, spider, hideous Gorgon, 'physionomie grimaçante',[54] all these images recall the child's fears and their residue in the adult's psyche:

> Peur des réduits ténébreux, des murs sans issue qui se referment, des fosses d'ombre d'où l'on ne remonte pas; peur d'être livré à des mains inconnues, volé, vendu ou abandonné; peur enfin de l'ogre, des dents carnassières des bêtes de proie, de tout ce qui broie, déchire et engloutit.[55]

The dark corners of the city suggest some hideous and threatening creature hiding in it. Throughout the nineteenth century, one image stands out in the abundant literature on Paris: an enormous mouth, ready to suck, chew and swallow all those too naive, too green, too kind or too provincial to master its elusive rules – ' gouffre énorme qui ingurgite tout'.[56]

> Cette terrifiante accumulation de références animales: celle d'une bouche monstrueuse, toujours avide, toujours dévorante. Une bouche mâchoire qui broie, transperce et déchire, mais aussi une bouche ventouse qui suce et qui aspire.[57]

The constant references to an ugly, hideous, and dangerous Paris transfigures the whole city into something which is monstrously organic. Not only does Paris swallow its victims; we are also informed about the whole process of digestion and even urban sickness: 'cet estomac de la civilisation digérait mal, le cloaque refluait dans le gosier de la ville, et Paris avait l'arrière goût de sa fange' (*Mis.*, III, p. 291). Nothing is spared about the city's guts, and the theme of the *ventre* is found throughout the literature of the period: Hugo refers to Paris' sewers as 'l'intestin du Léviathan';[58] Valjean, like a

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[54]Balzac, *Illusions perdues*, p. 248.

[55]Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, p. 56.

[56]Balzac, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, p. 372.

[57]Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, p. 44.

[58]Title given to part II, livre cinquième.

modern Jonah, is said to be 'dans le ventre du monstre' (*Mis.*, III, p. 308); Zola talks of *Le Ventre de Paris*, and Balzac also indulges in this gruesome metaphor: 'espèce de ventre parisien, où se digèrent les intérêts de la ville et où ils se condensent sous la forme dite *affaires*, se remue et s'agite, par un âcre et fielleux mouvement intestinal, la foule [...]'.[59] The reference to the *ventre* combines the interest of the urban doctors in the diseases of the city and their fear of urban evil. As the city's *ventre* is animated by an ugly life of its own, the labyrinth-intestine becomes animated, the sewers are alive,[60] which suggests that the Leviathan is not so much the personification of the city's belly, as a foreign body, a parasite growing in it. Leviathan is traditionally the monster of primal chaos. Although temporarily dormant, it remains a threat which can awaken at any time. It is a constant danger hanging over (or, rather, in this instance, under) the bourgeois attempt to rationalise the city and its inhabitants. Its image combines the symbols of the snake and the labyrinth. Demoniac monster *par excellence*, the Leviathan is the power of evil that resists God. It is also, quite aptly in the case of the new Babylon, the personification of a mortal sin: pride. It is a creature of darkness, hiding in the depths of the sea... in this case the urban sea.

The association of Paris with a modern Leviathan encapsulates the various fears generated by the capital. Violent and sordid for Balzac, equivocally attractive for Baudelaire, mysterious and criminal for Sue, bestial for Zola or decadent for Huysmans, literary Paris appears as a voracious monster, a new Babylon, a modern Leviathan. The inherent corruption of the city's underworld spreads amongst the rest of society, like a disease. Babylon above, Leviathan below, the image of the city is grim, despite its magnificence. Behind the bright facades, under the large avenues, one has the ill-defined feeling of rampant and monstrous threats: the city bears too many dark corners, hides too many suspicious activities, gives refuge to too much irrationality.

Through the numerous allusions to Dante, to the 'égouts sociaux', the fascination for the figure of the convict, the interest in the underworld of Paris, one forms the image of a 'penitentiary' Paris. Strong affinities bring the capital and the cell together: the sense of oppression, sweating walls, the predominance of grey, black and yellowish; the darkness and confinement is common to both. And if we recall Valéry's metaphorical association of Paris with *l'esprit*, who more than Baudelaire expressed the carceral nature of the Parisian's boredom and imprisonment within oneself?

> Quand la terre est changée en un cachot humide,
> Où l'Espérance, comme une chauve-souris,

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[59]Balzac, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, p. 256.
[60]Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 1992), p. 130.

S'en va battant les murs de son aile timide
Et se cognant la tête à des plafonds pourris;

Quand la pluie étalant ses immenses traînées
D'une vaste prison imite les barreaux,
Et qu'un peuple muet d'infâmes araignées
Vient tendre ses filets au fonds de nos cerveaux [...].

Paris and the brain seem to merge in a picture of the penitentiary condition of modern man. In this regard, no one did more than Hugo for the claustrophobic depiction of the 'capitale of the nineteenth century'; and if Paris is the promise of a better future, it also serves as the allegory of the contemporary, urban, human condition; a sombre and oppressive one. In order to appreciate fully Hugo's contribution as a myth-maker, we need to look both at his dark representation of Paris and some major features of his tormented imaginary (claustrophobia, fate, matter, the organic); each complements the other.

(iii) Hugo's dark representation of Paris

Fear, and the pit, and the snare, shall be upon thee, O inhabitant of Moab, saith the Lord. He that fleeth from the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that getteth up out of the pit shall be taken in the snare.[61]

Although Hugo is undoubtedly one of the main contributors to the elaboration of the bright side of the myth of Paris – its revolutionary revelation in particular – and although he probably remains more well-known as the idealist 'prophet' of Paris, an equally important aspect of this representation of the capital is its darkness, materiality and depravation. Hugo's work both aptly illustrates his century's anxiety and actively contributes to the process of myth-making: anguished, oppressive, and fearsome, the Hugolian Parisian imaginary enhances the fears of his time and encapsulates the dark side of a phantasmagoria where, as Walter Benjamin famously wrote, 'l'humanité [...] fait figure de damné'.[62] Hugo is often seen as a brother to Goya,[63] transcribing his bleak and sombre visions into words as well as on canvas.[64] And if Hugo dreams of a

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[61]*Jeremiah* 48, 43-4.

[62]Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle*, p. 47.

[63]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 5.

[64]Hugo left an impressive collection of drawings which denotes an obsession with ruins, towers, and black skies. See Odile Blanchette (coord.), *Du Chaos dans le pinceau...*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Maison de Victor Hugo, Paris, 2000-2001.

new Jerusalem in the future, what he sees in the present focuses his attention more on the lower depths of the city, its depravation and misery (both economic and spiritual).

One feature dominates Hugo's work: claustrophobia. The image of the prison, the metaphors and allusions related to imprisonment, are omnipresent in his poetry and prose.[65] It is, in fact, an obsession. References to caves, cages, tombs, cells, dungeons, chains, keys, locks and bars are countless, and we shall see how various metaphors (the spider, the bat, the labyrinth) further enhance the suffocating tone of Hugolian production. One significant example of this is the scene from *Les Misérables* which narrates the arrival of Jean Valjean in Paris.[66]

Valjean is a convict on the run. He is in charge of Cosette, a young girl whose mother has just died and whom he is trying to protect. On his arrival in Paris, he had found refuge in the 'masure Gorbeau', in a sinister area ('plus morne qu'un cimetière', I, p. 462) between the Paris wall, the guillotine and the Salpêtrière: closure, death penalty and madness enhance a gruesome place which seems to be quintessentially criminal – 'innombrables traditions patibulaires du lieu', Hugo notes (I, p. 466). The dark place is a promise of the 'traps' yet to come: 'On croyait pressentir des pièges dans cette obscurité, toutes les formes confuses de l'ombre paraissaient suspectes' (I, p. 466).[67] Soon after, inspector Javert – who incidentally was born in a prison –, believing he had recognised the convict, starts the chase again. For it is properly a chase that pits a pack of dogs ('les limiers de meutes', I, p. 510) and their leader ('chien fils d'une louve', I, p. 198) against their prey. Valjean tries to find his way into the labyrinth of the streets. He finally finds himself trapped in an impasse: the 'cul-de-sac Genrot'. 'Là, barrage [...] Jean Valjean se sentait pris comme dans un filet qui se resserrait lentement' (I, p. 486). He manages to escape by climbing over a wall, and lands in a convent, 'le Petit-Picpus'.[68] In order to take refuge in this convent, he first has to leave it without being noticed. And the solution arranged by Valjean's friend Fauchelevent, is to hide him in a coffin.[69] Valjean is buried alive in the cimetière Vaugirard, the cemetery where religious victims of the

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[65]See Victor Brombert, *La Prison romantique. Essai sur l'imaginaire* (Paris: Corti, 1975).

[66]See 'A Chasse noire, meute muette' (I, pp. 479-510), and 'Les cimetières prennent ce qu'on leur donne' (II, pp. 52-91).

[67]'La Masure Gorbeau' will be a recurrent threat in Valjean's life: firstly, when he lives there, his generosity makes the *concierge* suspicious of him, which eventually brings Javert to investigate, and, secondly, when the Thénardiers, having recognised him, prepare a deadly trap with their gang, trying to get Cosette involved as well. The trap then turns against the Thénardiers themselves, under the close surveillance of Marius and Javert.

[68]Hugo, in one of his many digressions, stresses the carceral nature of the convent. Like the prison, it is an aberration which underlines the spiritual darkness, ignorance and weakness that endures in contemporary society. See Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 129.

[69]Valjean takes the place of the body of a nun who is about to be buried – illegally – within the convent.

September Massacres were interred and which, then, was used to bury the beheaded.[70] Unfortunately, there is a new guardian there who undermines Fauchelevent's attempts to deliver his friend. Ultimately Valjean is saved but only moments before he would have died in his coffin; Hugo plays with the nineteenth-century phobia of being buried alive. The coffin recalls the image of the *cachot*, mingling in a common sense of oppression the lack of freedom suffered by the prisoner and the lack of air of the run-away buried alive.[71]

This significant passage illustrates a constant tendency in *Les Misérables*: the numerous mentions of the guillotine, prisons and convicts are enhanced by more secondary allusions such as Gavroche sleeping under a wire-netting (protecting him from being bitten by rats) or the Thénardier daughters' 'toy' – 'une grosse chaîne digne de Goliath forçat' (I, 173).[72] Moreover, this scene will be echoed further on in the novel, in the famous episode of the sewers: the locked grille that seems to be a dead-end recalls the *barrage* mentioned above, whilst Valjean renews the near-death experience when about to be drowned in the mud, gathering 'the phantasms of being blinded, drowned and buried alive':[73] 'inexprimable horreur de mourir ainsi !' (III, p. 322). The suffocating tests set by Hugo remind us that the penitentiary condition is not limited to confinement: it is first and foremost a torture.[74]

In his escapes in the maze of streets and later in the labyrinthine sewers, Valjean, like the *forçat* he once was, carries another form of ball-and-chain, an innocent victim he is trying to protect: young Cosette in the streets, Marius in the sewers.[75] There again, he only succeeds in escaping from one prison to another: he had escaped from Javert by finding refuge in a convent; he now escapes the military by hiding in the sewers. 'Jean Valjean était tombé d'un cercle de l'enfer dans l'autre' (III, p. 305). And when the sewers' exit turns out to be closed by bars, Hugo makes the analogy clear: 'On n'avait réussi qu'à s'évader dans une prison' (III, p. 328).

Although the Hugolian obsession for prison-symbols is everywhere in his work, I believe *Les Misérables* holds a special place in this regard, particularly if we place the

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[70]Emile Tersen, 'Le Paris des *Misérables*', *Europe* 394-395, 1962, pp. 102-3.

[71]See Séverine Jouve, *Obsessions et perversions* (Paris: Hermann Editeur, 1996), p. 155. The phobia of being buried alive is a recurring theme in Poe, who was known in France through Baudelaire's translations.

[72]Fantine fails to see the threatening symbol, blinded with the sight of 'deux roses dans la ferraille' (p. 174). This will lead to the ill-fated decision to leave her daughter Cosette under the 'care' of the Thénardiers.

[73]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 93.

[74]Jouve, *Obsessions et perversions*, p. 158.

[75]Hugo makes the connection between the two situations (III, p. 283).

novel in the perspective of his poetic work during the time of his writing:[76] Before completing *Les Misérables*, Hugo had worked on *La Fin de Satan*. In the poem three forms of evil were born from Cain's crime: the first one – the nail – turned into the sword, the second one – the stick – into the gibbet and the last one – the stone ('le caillou') – into the prison. But this third and final part was left unfinished under the suggestive title of 'La Prison'. Instead, Hugo started to work again on his old manuscript then entitled *Les Misères*, the story of a convict.[77] Satan-*forçat* leads the way to Jean Valjean:

> [...] Quoiqu'il eût horreur des ailes de la bête,
> Quoique ce fut pour lui l'habit de la prison,
> [...]
> Hideux, il prit son vol de montagne en montagne,
> Et ce forçat se mit à courir dans ce bagne. (FS, p. 5)

The figure of evil in *La Fin de Satan*, once a beautiful rebellious angel, falls into a never-ending increasingly dark void whilst being transformed into a bat-shaped creature. Similarly, the Baudelairian image of this 'chauve-souris du cachot éternel' (FS, p. 6)[78] is to be found throughout *Les Misérables*. In fact, the bat is one of many metaphors used by Hugo: Quasimodo and Frollo in *Notre-Dame*; Eponine in *Les Misérables* are all identified with a bat which symbolises abnormality (seeing in the dark, living by night, blinded by light) and monstrosity (both bird and rat). In *Les Misérables*, it also refers to the *bas-fond* and the people living in 'la grande caverne du mal' (*Mis.*, II, p. 250). The *bas-fond* is this place of monstrosity; its evil comes from the inherent abnormality of these non-human places peopled by barely human creatures: the place is abnormal because of its dark, sick, claustrophobic, and evil quality, when human nature requires light, health, freedom and God. The creatures leaving there too are abnormal as they are trapped within urban materiality like in a cell: 'La pierre est une cave où rêve un criminel' (D, p. 208). Their monstrosity is thus related to their carceral condition: 'Le monstre a le carcan, l'homme a la liberté' (*Cont.*, 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', p. 398).

In *Notre-Dame*, Hugo had already drawn on an elaborate series of variations on the themes of oppression and incarceration – themes symbolised by the recurrent image of

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[76]The novel was written within a period that goes from 1845 to 1862 (with a long interruption from 1848 to 1860).

[77]Hugo stopped *La Fin de Satan* on 11 April 1860 and started re-reading *Les Misères* (he had abandoned it on 14 February 1848) two weeks later, the 26th. He starts writing later the same year, on 30 December, from his exile in Guernesey. Baudelaire noticed the poetry of Hugo's prose in the novel: 'C'est un roman construit en manière de poème'. Baudelaire, '*Les Misérables* par Victor Hugo', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 200.

[78]See Baudelaire's 'Spleen' (Quand le ciel bas et lourd...) in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, pp. 147-8.

the spider. The spider (*arachne*) serves as a symbol of Fate (*ananke*) throughout the novel. This symbolism culminates in two famous scenes: the first one shows Maître Jacques attempting to save a fly from being eaten by a spider. He is then stopped by Frollo, shouting in anguish 'laissez-faire la fatalité !' before comparing himself both to the spider and the fly (ND, p. 360). Frollo here symbolises man's belief in fate, rather than fate itself: the belief that human action is fundamentally irrelevant. It is this belief – this renunciation – that weighs like a burden on man's shoulders.[79]

The second scene emphasises more obviously the link between the spider and the prison by focusing on Louis XI – 'l'Universelle *Aragne*' – descending into the depths of the Bastille to admire his new and costly cage whilst ignoring – or pretending to ignore – the victim inside, who has spent the past fourteen years agonising in a tiny cell (ND, pp. 564-8). The relation between the prison and the spider developed by Hugo enhances the oppressive claustrophobia of the city and stresses the idea of the power of Fate over an individual isolated in it.

Paradoxically though, this carceral condition is also an invitation to escape. If *Les Misérables* can be read as a prose variation on the unfinished chapter of *La Fin de Satan* entitled 'La Prison', it can equally be read as a novel on the theme of liberation. The Bastille itself in *Notre-Dame*, the ultimate stone turned into the symbol of prison, was also a promise of liberation through its demolition in 1789. The poetics of confinement and the image of the wall developed by Hugo suggest something behind the obstacle, the existence of a mystery to be unveiled:[80] the wall prepares for a revelation, it suggests the possibility of being set free.

Still the question remains as to where to escape; for Valjean keeps going forward without ever knowing his destination, and this is more particularly the case in the sewers, just as it was in the labyrinthine streets of Paris. Like the metaphors of the spider and the bat, the labyrinth is, in Hugo, yet another claustrophobic theme. Although it allows some movement that a prison does not, the motion is a difficult and agonising one.[81] The use of this symbol in nineteenth-century literature, particularly to define Paris' maze of streets, emphasises a specific urban perception of space, consisting of an excess of both vastness and oppression: 'labyrinthe immense où l'on n'aperçoit dans les

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[79]Again, Hugo shares with Michelet the conception of life as a struggle. Renouncing it weighs man down:
> Ceux qui vivent ce sont ceux qui luttent [...]
> [...] les autres, je les plains.
> [...]
> Car le plus lourd fardeau, c'est d'exister sans vivre. (*Chât.*, p. 162)

[80]Brombert, *La Prison romantique*, p. 119.

[81]'L'imagination du mouvement *difficile*, du mouvement *angoissant*', Bachelard explains in *La Terre et les rêveries du repos*, p. 185.

ténèbres que des lieux de perdition, comme si le chaos n'était qu'un vaste désert fait de bruit, de fumée et de boue'.[82] The labyrinth combines the idea of being lost in an everlasting wandering and the fear of confinement, of never finding a way out. It can be related to the image of the void, with which Hugo is fascinated. Both traps reflect the same fantastic imaginary of urban space, whether it is horizontal (being lost in the streets of Paris) or vertical (falling into the depths of the city). And, of course, as soon as the labyrinth is beneath the city, it is identified with the Leviathan and its digestive system.

This image of the city's intestine is a good illustration of the seer's journey down into hell. Valjean is compared to a modern Jonah, moving around in the belly of the urban monster – 'l'intestin du Leviathan'. Valjean's incursion recalls, of course, Orpheus' journey into the underworld. The myth prepares for the figure of the monster that the hero will have to defeat in order to be allowed to return. As always in Hugo's work, this is not a mere poetic embellishment but a transfiguration of the evil essence of the underworld into the organic: the dark recesses of Paris, the *bas-fond* is the place where 'la protestation de la matière' (*Mis.*, II, p. 250) crawls like a hideous snake-shaped monster.

The evil of the city is closely linked in Hugo to his concern for matter, and part of his personification of matter comes from the cabalistic tradition – darkness being seen as the materialisation of evil.[83] In 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', Hugo refers to the apparition of matter as a fall; the weight brought the angel down: 'Il [le poids] tomba, traînant l'ange éperdu dans sa chute. Le mal était fait'. And Hugo concludes: 'Le mal, c'est la matière' (*Cont.*, 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', p. 388). The mud which is so closely linked to Paris as we have seen, is a further image of urban evil: 'La matière, le bloc, la fange, la géhenne' are closely connected in Hugo's mind (*Cont.*, 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', p. 402). *Fange* suggest inertia, immobility, lifeless weight, like the *forçat*'s ball-and-chain, dragging humanity down – matière sans mouvement, résistant au souffle, à *l'anima*, à l'âme.[84] Matter is the prison walls of the modern human condition.

What is striking in the process of the condemnation of matter is the discourse and *l'imaginaire* which it produces. Criticising the materiality of urban civilisation, Hugo, amongst others, describes it as very much *alive*; as a monster. 'Paris-matière' is not

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[82]Giovanni Macchia, *Paris en ruines* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), p. 172.

[83]See Léon Cellier, *L'Epopée humanitaire et les grands mythes romantiques* (Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1971), p. 298.

[84]Claude Millet, 'Bloc, événement - une représentation de l'Histoire dans l'œuvre de Victor Hugo', Groupe Hugo, 6 avril 2002, p. 3, and the following discussion.

made of cold stones; it is a monster of flesh and blood in the purest biblical tradition: gigantic, voracious, pitiless, bloodthirsty, powerful; but most importantly, it is actually alive.

Jean Gaudon notes a Hugolian phobia of immobility and mineralisation.[85] However, the horror of immobility is only the apparent surface of an equally horrific underlying crawling reality: matter may be still, but not lifeless. And if the exploration of darkness ends in a cell, it is tempting to develop the connection Hugo establishes between a cell and a coffin (as the example of Valjean's escape mentioned earlier suggests): 'Hermétiquement clos, le sépulcre retient prisonnière la matière, qui, lentement, se désagrège. Il est le lieu de la décomposition et de la putréfaction.[86] There, in the 'stagnation de la tombe' (*Mis.*, III, p. 304), the human condition slowly decays. This is the place of immobility, confinement and putrefaction.

The urban monster is characterised by its 'vie morte et terrible' (*Mis.*, III, 48). The apparent paradox of a living death stresses the specificity of materiality as being alive but not humanly alive. It is a sort of 'death-in-life' which is being evoked in these urban tombs, a very Baudelairian image, if we think of 'Une Charogne':

> Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,
> Ou s'élançait en pétillant;
> On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,
> Vivait en se multipliant.[87]

It is within its very decay, in the wriggling of the worms, that an illusion of life is created, although it is anarchic, hideous, non-human and eventually threatening: 'L'imagination matérielle, qui trouvait son repos dans l'image d'une substance fixe, enferme une sorte de bataille dans la substance agitée'.[88]

The image of the *fourmillement* appears as a major aspect of the tormented Hugolian imaginary. Although he tends to secure the comforting image of the dead forever protected in marble (and this is particularly the case when referring to his daughter Léopoldine), Hugo is willing to open his eyes to the more gruesome reality of decay and *fourmillement* : 'sur l'homme figé dans l'horreur immobile, sans défense, pèse la menace du fourmillement'.[89] Like the restlessness of the *cloaque* (place of both death and life), the *fourmillement* emphasises an abnormal, disturbing motion: 'ce qui bouge sans

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[85]Jean Gaudon, *Le Temps de la contemplation* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), p. 348.

[86]Jouve, *Obsessions et perversions*, p. 154.

[87]*Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 66.

[88]Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries du repos*, p. 62.

[89]Gaudon, *Le Temps de la contemplation*, p. 356.

avancer'.[90] They both represent 'ce monde inférieur où tout rampe et s'altère' (*Cont.*, 'Cérigo', p. 279), the place where the only life one can guess at in the dark is a monstrous and evil one. The very act of crawling recalls Satan who, after being transformed into a creature of darkness (the bat) achieves his logical evolution at the bottom of the funnel, crawling first like a snake, then like a worm:

> Il se traînait, visqueux, blême, éclipsé, terni,
> Reptile colossal du cloaque infini
> [...] il semblait nécessaire
> Qu'au fond de cette tombe on vît ramper ce ver. (FS, p. 136)

The image of worms operates on different levels: it suggests the weakness and deprivation of those who find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. It is also associated with death in an ambiguous way: the imagination is repelled by the idea of the corpse being eaten by worms. On the other hand, this process is part of the cycle of life, and however horrific the image may be for Hugo, he willingly emphasises this aspect of a voracious nature: man in his materiality ends up rotting, being no more than part of nature's cycle.[91]

More threatening, though, is this very idea of rot with which worms are associated. The image insists on the unnoticeable menace that crawls uncontrollably in the underworld, ready to spread amongst the upper world as well. Like worms spoiling the fruit, an evil material is threatening to infiltrate the whole of society and lead it to decay.[92] The image of the devouring monster is reversed: the huge mouth awaiting its prey is only one aspect of an equally disturbing prospect of worms and rot. Still, the same menacing idea prevails in an even more repellent mode: the ingestion and digestion of a paralysed victim – this time, eaten away from within.

The destructive power of the worm is developed in *La Légende des siècles*: 'La Mort d'en bas, la Mort sans transfiguration qui travaille au pourrissement grotesque des corps, et à l'effondrement dérisoire des merveilles du monde'.[93] The most glorious construction calls for the greatest fall, the worm's promise of annihilation:

> Ne vous arrêtez pas. Montez! montez encore!
> Moi je rampe, et j'attends. [...]

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[90]*Ibid.*, p. 358.

[91]See *Cont.*, 'Pleurs dans la nuit', p. 317.

[92]See Bachelard, who recalls the relation beteween the original sin and human death: 'Le péché originel a mis le ver dans la pomme, et tous les fruits du monde, dans leur réalité et dans leur métaphores, en ont été gâtés'. *La Terre et les rêveries du repos*, pp. 72-3.

[93]Millet, 'Bloc, événement', p. 5.

La ruine est promise à tout ce qui s'élève.
Vous ne faites, palais qui croissez comme un rêve,
Fronton au dur ciment,
Que mettre un peu plus haut mon tas de nourriture,
Et que rendre plus grand, par plus d'architecture,
Le sombre écroulement. (LS, 'Les Sept Merveilles du monde', p. 224)

(iv) Hugo and the myth of Paris

This analysis of the city's darkness and claustrophobia confirms that relation between literary representation and social concerns which is at the core of modern myth-making. The myth of Paris uses key images to deal with the fears and uncertainties faced by a community. And yet, the question of whether Hugo did develop a myth of Paris, particularly in *Les Misérables*, can and has been challenged, notably by Emile Tersen.[94] This, I believe, remains a fair point; Tersen rightly questioned the fashionable – although vaguely poetic – idea of a myth of Paris, particularly in that novel. The author argues that the detailed and realistic description of the capital denied any mythical essence to it. I will respond to Tersen's point and argue that there is indeed a myth of Paris in Hugo, and a vibrant one. But my argument is that the main feature of that myth – paradoxically as it may seem – is its demystifying potential.

I would argue that Hugo was probably one of the chief architects of the myth of Paris. This, of course, if we accept the definition of myth and of its social function I have given. Indeed, Tersen's notion of myth as a mere fantasy, opposed to 'reality' does not seem to be supported by Hugo's obsession with providing a detailed and accurate portrayal of the city. However, if we consider myth as the means to transcribe the main emotions of a society, and to try to provide meaning from them, then the accuracy of the description of Paris can very well favour modern myth. As we have seen, myth stems from a combination of fiction and reality, it is rooted in daily-life reality.

In fact, I would argue the importance of Hugo in the myth-making of the capital is fundamental – and particularly in *Les Misérables* – in many regards. Beyond his passion for the capital   (Paris was 'la grande affaire de sa vie')[95], his sense of the epic, together with his use of symbolism and his 'metaphysics', make him a major contributor to the *dispositif légendaire* of nineteenth-century France. Furthermore, it can be argued that Hugo was characteristic of a period in French history which produced a rather optimistic discourse while being, at the same time, submerged by a dark, specifically

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[94]Tersen, 'Le Paris des Misérables', pp. 92-4.

[95]Hugo, 'J'ai eu deux affaires dans ma vie: Paris et l'océan', in *Carnets*, 1872, cited by Jean Massin, in his introduction to Hugo's *Paris* ('Présentation', in OC, XIII, p. 563). Both elements are of course deeply connected, as emphasized many times by Hugo himself: 'ressemblance de plus de Paris avec la mer. Comme dans l'océan, le plongeur peut y disparaître' (*Mis.*, III, p. 304).

urban, *imaginaire*. As Massin rightly pointed out, 'Pour reprendre le vocabulaire hugolien même, la 'fonction de Paris', c'est d'être un mythe'[96] – it is the locus where the seer can make sense of his visions and provide meaning to the community he is in charge of deciphering the world for.

And yet turning to Hugo to study the myth of Paris presents major difficulties which may explain why he remains an author many tend to sneer at. His apparent seriousness and idealism seem at odds with post-modernity whilst the lack of psychological depth and Manicheism of his characters cast him as 'simplistic'. Hugo is therefore one writer particularly prone to misreading and misinterpretations. Christopher Prendergast warned against the risk of describing *Les Misérables* 'condescendingly, from the assumption of our own superiority, in the way the novel itself so often describes what, in the nineteenth-century social world, it sees as lying 'beneath' it. In brief, it is to reproduce the patronizing view *de haut en bas*'.[97] In this regard, it is worth remembering the deeply ironic and subversive quality of Hugo's production: 'une lecture littérale, non ironique de Hugo ne saurait tenir compte ni des éléments de parodie et de fantaisie, ni des subversions plus profondes de son art'.[98]

Reading Hugo presents the major difficulty of mythic thinking: it is highly ambivalent and flexible, using symbols whose signification is reversible. Just like myth, Hugolian texts resist ready-made systems, and to some extent interpretation itself:

> Le fonctionnement du texte hugolien échappe, d'une certaine façon, à ce que chacun peut en dévoiler. Que toute critique assume donc ses présupposés: il s'agit de voir en quoi le texte hugolien, toujours, résiste à son inscription dans un discours.[99]

The paradoxes, contradictions, twists and turns of Hugo's work are something to work with, not against, as Bénichou advocates: 'Il ne faut pas essayer de les atténuer [les contradictions] pour les résoudre: c'est au plus fort d'un contraste apparent que se révèle le mouvement profond d'un esprit.[100]

As Brombert argued, Hugo's Paris has the ambivalence, flexibility and adaptability which characterise mythic tales:

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[96]Massin, 'Présentation', in Hugo, *Paris*, OC, vol. XIII p. 563.

[97]Prendergast, *Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 97.

[98]Victor Brombert, 'Ma Destinée: l'ordre c'est le délire', in Jacques Seebacher and Anne Ubersfeld (dir), *Hugo le fabuleux* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1985), p. 227.

[99]Jean-Claude Fizaine, *Le Christ dans l'imaginaire de Victor Hugo, 1848-1869*, unpublished doctoral thesis (1979), p. 713.

[100]Bénichou, 'Victor Hugo et le Dieu caché', in Seebacher and Ubersfeld, *Hugo le fabuleux*, p. 159.

> Tout est polyvalent, notamment la vertu civilisatrice et corruptrice de Paris, ville absente et irréelle (à la fois Babylone et Jérusalem terrestre). [...] A la limite, cette rhétorique de contraste et de conflit est conçue comme une imitation des procédés créateurs de Dieu.[101]

Paris is the place of the fears, but it is also the locus of an urban epistemology, the promise to make sense and provide meaning. If Hugo – like all writers of Paris – plays with oxymoron and the ambivalence of the capital, it is because it is in the nature of mythic tale. But it is also because, as a seer operating in the nineteenth- century *dispositif légendaire*, those rhetorical contradictions help to defeat the myth of modernity:

> Le système des antithèses, le réseau complexe des oxymorons qui invitent à la transcendance, les structures métaphoriques avec leur principe inhérent d'inversion et de conversion, un ludisme langagier qui subvertit le langage de toutes les idéologies, le caractère polysémique des descriptions de la nature, les figures d'effacements impliquant l'écriture elle-même – toutes ces caractéristiques et tous ces procédés suggèrent que les structures sous-jacentes sont mobiles, voire instables; que les textes de Hugo éludent leur sens premier.[102]

If we are to demonstrate that Hugo was a major initiator of the myth of Paris, we can only do so by looking at his work within the context of *dispositif légendaire,* because it is precisely this combination of politics and poetics, legend and history which allows mythic and modern thinking to be articulated: 'la disparition des "personnages" conventionnels au profit d'une voix poétique, rattache les textes de Hugo aux valeurs tragiques, tout en leur conférant une surprenante qualité moderne'.[103] But more essentially, we need to remember that this combination has one aim in mind: to use myth to demystify. Here again, Hugo and his myth of Paris is of prime importance: 'Valjean's underground journey does not so much produce as challenge a 'myth'. [...] The myth of the modern city.[104] Turning to legends in the century of modernity is an attempt to deconstruct its myth. Interestingly enough, it also suggests a clear understanding of the process of myth-making.

Modern criticism, when influenced by psychoanalysis, is not always prepared for the symbolic logic of his work. The character of Hugolian novels is a legendary one; it constitutes a psycho-social unity which does not follow a psychological logic, but a moral one. 'Les personnages légendaires ne sont pas des personnalités riches, profondes complexes, ils ne construisent pas des individualités idiosyncratiques, mais sont des

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[101]Brombert, 'Ma Destinée : l'ordre, c'est le délire', in Seebacher and Ubersfeld, *Hugo le fabuleux,* p. 227.
[102]*Ibid.*
[103]*Ibid.*
[104]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century,* p. 98.

types'.[105]. Thus, a purely psychoanalytical perspective can fail to see that Hugo's world is hardly a conceptual one: 'la contemplation ni le naturalisme hugolien ne sont des faits de pensée, mais des faits de *poésie*'.[106]

Hugo chooses his metaphors with great care, repeats them throughout his work, blurring boundaries between his poetry and his prose and creating a complex symbolic system which has images at its core: 'l'image convainc, l'image démontre; l'image a sa vérité.'[107] Hugo sees his imagination as a revelation of reality, and, thus, tends to identify the expression with what is being expressed: 'comprenez que les mots sont des choses' (*Cont.*, 'Suite', p. 49). As Denis Saurat explained, 'Les images, les métaphores même tendent à être, non pas des ornements appliqués extérieurement à l'objet, mais l'expression même de son essence'.[108]

Hugo's symbolism, his sense of contrast, deep concern with Evil and Fate, and obsessive claustrophobia, have made him a major contributor to the myth of Paris. Using the classical labyrinthine representation of the city, Hugo turns the capital into a gigantic spider's web that symbolises the power of Fate upon the individual and stresses the carceral oppression of the city. Hugo's phantasmagoric darkness does not only echo the blackness and gloom of the city, but also illustrates the blindness and ignorance of a civilisation trapped in its materiality.

The vision of Paris in Hugo is related, inevitably, to his metaphysics and to his religious concerns. The dark side of his *imaginaire*, which, I have argued, is prevalent in his literary and poetic representation of Paris, depicts the capital as oppressive, suffocating, claustrophobic, dark, ugly, and, most of all, evil. Although typically Hugolian, this representation corresponds to the dominant urban imaginary and discourses of that time: the belief in a monstrous Paris. Moreover, the obsessive images of ingesting, swallowing, digesting, can be interpreted as literal counter-images of the consumer society: it is as if the very presence of the *bas-fond* was not only a threat in itself, but equally a warning that the new, modern society above it could very well be eaten away by its own matter; that the *marchandise* which the bourgeois so passionately wanted to consume could eventually devour them. But more importantly for Hugo, Paris,

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[105]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 32. See pp. 32-4. A similar point can be found in Baudelaire writing about *Les Misérables*: 'c'est un roman [...] où chaque personnage n'est *exception* que par la manière hyperbolique dont il représente une *généralité*, in '*Les Misérables* par Victor Hugo', p. 220.

[106]Gaudon, *Le Temps de la contemplation*, pp. 406-7. My emphasis. Having said that, psychoanalysis can be profitable when applied to Hugo's *imaginaire*. See Charles Baudouin, *Psychanalyse de Victor Hugo* (Genève: Mont-Blanc, 1943).

[107]Pierre Albouy, *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo* (Paris: Corti, 1963), p. 147.

[108]Denis Saurat, *La Religion de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Hachette, 1929), p. 13.

as the capital of 'revolutionary revelation'[109] and a potential new Jerusalem, was the natural setting of the poet's visions; the place for his revelations, and thus the encounter of the 'poëte-mage [and the] ville-mage'.[110] Hugo sees his work as a redefinition of religion; his hermeneutics is a theology. To understand the first, we need to examine the second.

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[109]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 113.

[110]Claudette Combes, *Paris dans Les Misérables* (Nantes: CID Editions, 1981), p. 281. She refers to *Les Misérables* here.

Chapter 5

Hugo's Vision of Paris: the seer's promise of demystification

Les villes sont des bibles de pierre.[1]

As we have seen, the *dispositif légendaire* places the year 1789 and Paris at the heart of a 'révolution de l'esprit'. Sacralised by this mythical origin, the capital becomes the locus of the century's contradictory feelings in response to the revolution's legacy, but also constitutes the promise of a modern epistemology in the nineteenth century to come. However the poetico-political framework was shattered by the interpretation of Louis Napoléon's coup as moving history backwards: the whole conception of history developed by Hugo and Michelet takes a formidable blow in 1851, forcing them to redefine their conception of history, and with it, the whole of that *dispositif légendaire*.

Condemned to an exile he will stubbornly endure after the amnesty of 1859, Hugo assumes the position of a modern prophet, in the hope of demystifying the new myth of 'Napoléon Le Petit'. In exile, Hugo develops his vision of the capital. But the vision here is not to be reduced to a representation of the city's poetic quality. *Les Misérables* was written in the wake of some of Hugo's major poetic work, and this relation needs to be examined if we are to understand the full implication of the myth of Paris. In his solitude, the seer listens to the word of God and projects his vision over a capital that is out of sight. This brings a political as well as poetic result in the logic of the *dispositif légendaire*. The work of Hugo shows us how the *dispositif légendaire* can be the framework of 'la sortie du mythe': 'en ce qu'il croit en la force fondatrice du mythe [... Hugo croit] en la nécessité de sortir le mythe de la mythologie'.[2] Hugo, as a modern seer, engages in a theological framework, using Paris to see beyond appearance, not only to look at the penitentiary condition of modern man, but also his historical condition.

Paris is the location where the prophet can see beyond appearance and tell his society what escapes their eyes. We have seen how a claustrophobic depiction of the city symbolises the penitentiary condition of modern man. The understanding of what is at stake in the myth of Paris for Hugo requires us to go beyond his description of the oppressive prison of humankind, and to put his vision of the capital in the perspective of his theologico-political framework. I will therefore examine further Hugo's function as

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[1] Hugo, P, p. 104.
[2] Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 161.

'poète-voyant', his status as a seer in the century of modernity, before looking at his vision of the city's depth. While in exile, Hugo developed a particular interest in Paris, and I will examine his fearsome vision of the city – a city he can only imagine. Plunging into the urban abyss, Hugo uses the myth he elaborates as the groundwork of a modern, political and poetic gnosis.

The message the seer brings back from his visionary exploration of the city's depth aims to restore the meaning of history, at fault since 1851. The vision of the city needs the wider understanding of history to make sense, and fulfill the function of myth. As an illustration of this process, I will explore the image of the sewers further, because for Hugo, it symbolises the accumulation of events and misery in the form of matter. It will be essential to understand the political implication of Hugo's poetic image of the filthy heap of history. The awakening of the people in 1789 is the moment when this heap collapses in a revolution made possible when the people finally hear the word of God and act accordingly. In Hugo's time, this revelation is still there to be acted upon, although the people seem eerily asleep.

(i) Paris from exile

> O Paris, je t'ai fui comme le noir prophète
> Fuyait Tyr.[3]

Hugo was not in Paris when he wrote *Les Misérables*: he had been living in exile ever since Louis Napoléon's coup. So the novel relies mainly on Hugo's memory, which he complements with friends' accounts and verifications. The Paris of *Les Misérables* is therefore at odds with contemporary events, as Paris was then being transformed under the direction of a regime Hugo loathed. A parallel can be drawn between Hugo in exile and his character Fantine, as Combes points out: 'tous deux ne voient pas l'enfant grandir'.[4] This absence from his beloved capital is emphasised further by Hugo who chooses to ignore the Paris of his time which he cannot see, but which is also perverted by the new regime, to turn to the early 1830s. Moreover, he is projecting his more recent memory of 1848 back onto the uprising of 1832.

This is reflected in the narrative's own resistance to chronological continuity. The literature of Paris has been, ever since Mercier, that of the *promeneur*, and therefore resists chronology: 'illusoire l'ordre chronologique. Les événements sont brouillés et le

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[3]Hugo, *Chât.*, 'Au Moment de rentrer en France 31 Août 1870', p. 359.
[4]Combes, *Paris dans les Misérables* (unpublished doctoral thesis), pp. 208-9.

point de vue reste celui du promenenur attentif à voir ce que les autres ne voient pas'.[5]
Moreover, and as we shall see later in this chapter, the novel aims to undermine the very
belief in chronological coherence and continuity. Mona Ozouf recently showed how
Marius operated as a 'passeur' between all the various episodes of recent history,
allowing Hugo 'désinvolte et sûr de lui, et au mépris de toute chronologie, de tenter la
comparaison entre l'émeute de 1832 où s'illustre son héros, et celle de juin 1848 qu'il a
si sévèrement jugée'.[6]

Just like chronology, the description of Paris, although accurate and strongly
documented, is secondary for the poet, who articulates his vision according to his
imagination.[7] There are no fundamental differences in Hugo's world between what he
remembers and what he imagines, nor is there any difference between what he imagines,
and what he sees: 'impossible de distinguer chez Hugo la part du souvenir de celle de
l'imagination. Tout souvenir est immédiatement recouvert par le déploiement des
images'.[8] Hugo accepts that he ignores the new Paris; he explains that 'il écrit avec le
Paris ancien *devant les yeux dans une illusion qui lui est précieuse'*.

> Tous ces lieux qu'on ne voit plus, qu'on ne reverra peut-être jamais plus, et dont on a gardé l'image,
> prennent un charme douloureux, vous reviennent avec la mélancolie d'une apparition [...]; et on les
> aime et on les évoque tels qu'ils sont, tels qu'ils étaient, et l'on s'obstine, et l'on n'y peut rien
> changer, car on tient à la figure de la patrie comme au visage de sa mère (*Mis.*, I, pp. 479-80, my
> emphasis).

This distorted and increasingly mythified memory has been explored by Julien Green
who describes how Paris can be imagined and magnified from afar:

> Je ne prenais pas garde qu'avec le temps, ce Paris transposé risquait de devenir un peu plus abstrait
> chaque jour. [...] Que ces choses sont difficiles à dire! C'était un Paris de visions dans lequel je me
> promenais maintenant, un Paris *d'une réalité intense, mais qui émigrait imperceptiblement de la
> chair à l'esprit.*[9]

In exile, and while the old Paris disappears under Haussmannisation, Hugo becomes the
'poet of memory'.[10] In fact, I would argue that it is probably his exile that turns him into
one of the major contributors to the myth of Paris. As a 'seer' and a passionate devotee
of the capital of revelation – a place that he is not certain he will ever see again – he

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[5]Delon, 'Louis-Sébastien Mercier, le premier piéton de Paris', p. 28.
[6]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 164. Not just judged actually, as he participated in the repression of the
June movement.
[7]Gaudon, *Le Temps de la contemplation*, p. 286.
[8]Georges Poulet, *Etudes sur le temps humain* (Paris: Plon, 1952), vol. 2, pp. 205 and 313.
[9]Julien Green, *Paris* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1983), pp. 17-8. My emphasis.
[10]Gaudon, *Le Temps de la contemplation*, p. 21.

magnifies in his imagination the absent object of his dream. As Grillet noted, 'les circonstances de l'exil, la solitude, le bannissement, les rêveries spirites, développèrent en Victor Hugo le visionnaire apocalyptique et le prophète rhéteur'.[11] The seer's visions combine with the memory of Paris in such a way as to shape the myth of Paris – 'Et cela au moment où l'exil permet à la mémoire d'opérer la transmutation indispensable. D'où la présence de Paris dans *Les Misérables*, son intense degré de réalité poétique'.[12]

Hugo reacted to his exile in two contrasting ways: at first, *Le Proscrit satisfait*[13] felt a certain pride in his position, but soon the isolation would start to affect the poet negatively. The first moment of exile led to a jubilant mode: for Hugo, the fact of being condemned to exile by one of the people he despised most was almost worthy of celebration; there is an exaltation and pride associated with this sort of persecution – 'cela le grandit à ses propres yeux'.[14] Year after year, he would confront the Second Empire – his defiant attitude made all the more prestigious by the popular success of his work (*Les Contemplations*, *La Légende des siècles*, *Les Misérables*).

The first moments of exaltation gone, however, Hugo started to suffer from his isolation: 'l'histoire de son acte fut celle d'un continuel assombrissement', Rosa explains, 'être exilé, c'était vivre une vie réduite à elle-même, autant dire n'être rien'.[15] His morbid imagination was quick to see his condition as a social – almost actual – death. He then wrote 'l'exil ne m'a pas seulement détaché de la France, il m'a presque détaché de la terre et il y a des moments où je me sens comme mort et où il me semble que je vis déjà de la grande et sublime vie ultérieure'.[16]

Yet this solitary suffering enhanced his vision and stimulated his vocation as a seer. Solitude is seen by Hugo as a sign of divine election. Prophets are aloof. So too are visionaries. Why not turn this solitude into an instrument of revelation? On his isolated rock, Hugo now turns to Paris again, in an attempt to redefine the *dispositif légendaire* challenged by the events of 1851. Hugo builds a mythical shell, away from the representation of Paris that is being developed by those poets and writers who are in the capital. By contrast,

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[11]Claudius Grillet, *La Bible dans Victor Hugo*, 2 vols (Lyon: Librairie catholique E. Vitte, 1910), vol. 1, p. 128. See also Citron, 'Le Paris du poète exilé: Hugo après 1852' in *La Poésie de Paris*, vol. 2, pp. 267-307.

[12]Massin, 'Présentation', in OC, XIII, p. 565.

[13]As Hugo sees himself in a letter to his wife on 19 January 1852.

[14]Grillet, *La Bible dans Victor Hugo*, vol. 1, p. 130.

[15]Guy Rosa, 'Ce que c'est que l'exil de Victor Hugo', Groupe Hugo, 20 octobre 2001, pp. 1-2.

[16]Letter to Villemain, dated 9 Mai 1856, cited by Rosa, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Hugo continue seul sur la lancée ancienne du mythe. [...] Prisonnier du mythe de Paris tel qu'il existait dans sa diversité sous la monarchie de Juillet, Hugo dans sa solitude va dégager, et réaliser enfin son propre Paris poétique.[17]

But what is essential here, again in relation to the theory of mythic thinking, is that this poetry is not only visionary but political, for such is the language and mission of the seer.

(ii) The seer's vision

Le voyeur veut plus que voir, il veut pénétrer le secret de la vie en mouvement.[18]

Much has been said about Hugo the seer, the *visionnaire*; his exile probably conferred on him the status of a modern prophet. Grillet shows how the poet positioned himself as an heir to the prophets of Israel: solitary and exiled, and like them inspired by the word of God. And yet this prophet is a modern one, talking to the sons of the Revolution.[19] Hugo is that poet who makes the leap from traditional, prophetic religion to a modern, political message in an attempt to merge the two. The common goal is for the seer, modern and traditional, to deliver to his people a message that he will have to fight for. A seer has the mission to unveil the word of God, something not to be attempted by the common man, but which, in the esoteric tradition, is reserved for an initiated elite: only a few poets, geniuses, thinkers can receive the sacred mission to unveil the word of God – 'forcer Dieu à se découvrir'.[20] And Hugo's mission is precisely that: 'les paroles secrètes, je les dévoile,' he says; 'les influences cachées, je les démasque: c'est mon devoir' (*Actes et Paroles I. Avant l'exil*, in OC, VII, p. 208).

This religious process requires the poet-seer to start with the contemplation of the real, then to leave the world of appearance and go beyond the level of the object to rise to God. It is by this act of contemplation that the seer is granted by God the privilege of becoming a prophet, 'le grand interlocuteur de Dieu'.[21] He will thus be able to see what ordinary men cannot. This itself isolates the poet-seer by raising him within God's hierarchy: 'il voit, quand les peuples végètent' (RO, 'Fonction du poète', p. 138).

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[17]Citron, *La Poésie de Paris*, vol. 2, p. 271.

[18]Alberto Moravia, 'Entretien', *Magazine littéraire*, n° 229, avril 1986, p. 95.

[19]Grillet, *La Bible dans Victor Hugo*, vol. 1, p. 136 and vol. 2, p. 89*.

[20]Paul Bénichou, 'Victor Hugo et le Dieu caché', in Seebacher and Ubersfeld, *Hugo le fabuleux*, p. 161.

[21]Marc Eigeldinger, 'La Voyance avant Hugo', in Rimbaud, *Lettres du voyant*, Gérard Shaeffer (ed) (Paris: Minaud and Genève: Droz, 1975), p. 65.

However, the 'poète-voyant' cannot become detached from common daily life if he wants to fulfill his mission. Quite the opposite: the poet's deeper visionary tendencies are determined by social and historical realities, by 'the need to relate private phantasms to the thrust of external events'.[22] Hugo understands the need to keep a firm grip on the real to avoid the risk of being doomed by one's *rêverie*: 'ne craignez pas de vous surcharger d'humanité. Lestez votre raison de réalité', he advises, so that 'le songeur soit plus fort que le songe' (*Promontorium Somnii*, II, pp. 31-3). What the *poète-voyant* aims to achieve is an intermediate position between God and man; to operate as a bridge between the real and the ideal:

> J'appartiens à Dieu comme esprit et l'humanité comme force. Pourtant l'excès de généralisation mène à s'abstraire, en poésie, et à se dénationaliser, en politique. On finit par ne plus adhérer à sa vie et par ne plus tenir à sa patrie. Double écueil que je tâche d'éviter. Je cherche l'idéal, mais en touchant toujours du bout du pied le réel. Je ne veux ni perdre terre comme poète, ni perdre France comme homme politique (CV, 2, p. 805).

The seer belongs to a superior place of consciousness while, at the same time, keeping a plunging vision over terrestrial life. The seer does not cut himself off from humanity; neither does he detach himself from matter, which is the place for revelation.[23] As a *révélateur*, capable of shedding light on deeper truth, he assumes a moral and social function; again, his mission is not to contemplate a vague infinity but to reach what Hugo thought to be eternal: moral truth. The divine gift of *seeing* is given to the poet-seer to serve humanity: his *regard* is partly divine and allows him to bring back part of the light that he was allowed to see, literally to enlighten the *Peuple*.

In Hugo, the theme of the eye is crucial: in the Preface to *Les Feuilles d'automne*, he compares the ideal poet with an eye: 'un œil, *ophthalmos*, comme dit admirablement la métaphore grecque' (FA, 'Préface', p. 13). It is a theme that he will repeat throughout his work: 'Deviens le grand œil fixe ouvert sur le grand tout' (*Cont.*, 'A celle qui est restée en France', p. 418);

> Je suis le regardeur formidable du puits;
> Je suis celui qui veut savoir pourquoi; je suis
> L'œil [...] (D, 'Le Hibou', p. 22).

The 'regard' of Hugo is by no means a comforting one. 'Le poète est le premier effrayé de ses propres images',[24] and the theme of the eye remains particularly distressing in his

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[22]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 11.

[23]Eigeldinger, 'La Voyance avant Hugo', pp. 63-7.

[24]Grillet, *La Bible dans Victor Hugo*, vol. 1, p. 162.

work and life: Hugo was affected by ophthalmia and seems to have been prone to psychosomatic problems affecting his eyes, notably after the loss of his brother and later of his daughter, Léopoldine.[25]

On a symbolic level, we have seen that deciphering the word of God, which means unveiling, is the function of the poet-seer, and yet it remains a transgression. It is deeply dangerous to raise one's eyes to divinity; since *voir* leads directly to *savoir*, looking directly at God or at God's truth – whether willingly or not – has always been the promise of certain death, unless God permits it. Death in this case punishes both the rashness of man and the human inability to bear divine light. Only the seer can be allowed to survive his visions. But this does not go without risks, and visions are associated with madness: fever, illusion and hallucination await the reckless *voyeur*.

Hugo is not only afraid of what he might see, or to see what he might not be allowed to see; he is equally afraid of the very act of looking: 'peur de la libido oculaire, la difficulté de séparer l'agression du *voyeur* de la révélation du *voyant*'.[26] The danger does not come only from the vision itself, but equally from the sensuous visual addiction that might interfere with true vision. As Victor Brombert noted, Hugo compares the eyes to 'windows opening on the spectacle of obscenity and cruelty. [They] are dangerous invitations not only to *rêverie*, but to voyeurism of all sorts';[27] just as Frollo in *Notre-Dame* can no longer see God, having been blinded by his repeated, desperate looks at Esmeralda, Hugo feels a similar inclination to what I might call 'la pente du voyeurisme'.[28] To thwart this, Hugo feels the need to rely on his inner eye. He is constantly aware that the world is not only made of what he can see, but also of what he can imagine, and consequently of what his imagination really displays to his eyes.[29] So Hugo will constantly use his imagination to articulate his visions in order to prevent himself from being taken over and eventually doomed by the physical act of seeing.

Hugo's fascination with the spectacle given by the underworld is rather ambiguous: it highlights both the temptation of the *voyeur* faced with the ugliness of what he sees and the duty of the seer to find redemption and salvation where humanity itself seems to be denied. In both cases, the poet is attracted by the abyss, by darkness, in other words by evil. Inevitably, if he wants to become a *visionnaire*, he first has to be a *voyeur*, which

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[25]Jacques Seebacher and Anne Ubersfeld, 'Discussion avec Jean-Marc Hovasse à propos de sa biographie *Victor Hugo - Avant l'exil* parue chez Fayard', Groupe Hugo, 19 janvier 2002, p. 9.

[26]Brombert, 'Ma Destinée : l'ordre, c'est le délire', p. 231.

[27]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 78.

[28]In reference to 'La Pente de la rêverie' (FA, pp. 80-4) and to Hugo's tendency to voyeurism. See Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, pp. 76-8.

[29]Poulet, *Etudes sur le temps humain*, p. 209.

itself is likely to distract the seer from his mission. And indeed, evil soon appears to be even more dangerous to look at than God: instead of risking just one's life, one faces the more perverse danger of being seduced and doomed by Satan's illusions.

I would like to explore Hugo's attraction to abysses further, as it is an essential part of his urban *imaginaire*, one that links the void to vision. The seer's visionary imagination starts with a global view from above:

> Oh! qui m'emportera sur quelque tour sublime
> D'où la cité sous moi s'ouvre comme un abîme ! (FA, 'Soleils couchants', p. 99).

Similarly, the poet sees himself in a Christ-like position in 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre' (*Cont.*, p. 386), where he finds himself on top of a cliff ('sur le haut du rocher'), overlooking the world in order to be offered a better perspective, a plunging view, reminiscent of Baudelaire:

> [...] je suis monté sur la montagne
> D'où l'on peut contempler la ville en son ampleur,
> Hôpital, lupanars, purgatoire, enfer, bagne,
> Où toute énormité fleurit comme une fleur.[30]

For the prophet does not climb a mountain to be closer to God, to look up at the sky, but to see the depths of the earth, and from there to start a journey downward. Hugo answers a prophetic calling that first implies a plunging into mud and putrefaction because, paradoxically, God, for Hugo, emerges from subterranean darkness, from chaotic and dynamic human suffering and human becoming.[31] And just as Baudelaire is certain to find Satan on his way back to the evil city, Hugo is equally convinced of meeting God in the darkness of the social hell, namely, the *bas-fond*.

This need to gain high ground in order to get a better look at the everyday is not new. Since Mercier, the *marcheur-décrotteur* has felt the need to take some distance, allowing the eye to take in the whole picture: 'Montez sur les tours de Notre-Dame', Mercier advocates,[32] describing the picture 'à vue d'oiseau'. In both *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Misérables*, Hugo proposes a similar view of Paris from above.[33] In both novels, what appears from this flight over the capital is a web of streets, a maze of passages, courtyards and impasses, a labyrinth. In this regard, it is worth noting that even a horizontal symbol like the labyrinth is described by Hugo as vertical. And if, as

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[30]Charles Baudelaire, 'Epilogue', in *Petits poèmes en prose* (Paris: Corti, 1969).
[31]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 114.
[32]Mercier, 'Physionomie de la grande ville', in *Tableau de Paris*, p. 34.
[33]'Paris à vol d'oiseau' in *Notre-Dame*, 'Paris à vol de hibou' in *Les Misérables*.

Hugo stated in *Dieu*, 'il faut bien un axe à ce qu'on voit' (D, 'Le Hibou', p. 35), then clearly, his preference will be a vertical one: the prophet starts his journey from above, plunging into the abyss, the 'gouffre universel' (*Cont.*, 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', p. 386); and entering the 'immenses profondeurs de Paris' (*Mis.*, II, p. 299).

Hugolian verticality tends to insist on depth rather than height.[34] The maze of streets appears not merely as a surface labyrinth but as a depth – 'profond labyrinthe' (D, 'Le Hibou', p. 18) – to be plumbed, a nether region filled with mysteries and revelations.[35] Hugo's vertical *imaginaire* leads to an idea of 'surface trompeuse' which hides a secret depth which the seer cannot resist. Entering the maze is clearly for Hugo a journey downward. It is significant in *Notre-Dame* to see 'l'Universelle Aragne' going *down* in the depth of the Bastille, visiting a prison within a prison. The spider's web then takes the shape of a funnel that seems to swallow the above city: 'églises, palais, bastilles avaient de la terre à mi-corps' (ND, p. 413). Similarly, *Les Misérables* evolves around images of falling and descent: Fantine's fall from the status of a *grisette* to the worst destitution; the Thénardiers' decline from the poverty of an inn to the *misère* of their *galetas*.[36] The titles of many chapters and sections convey this idea: 'la chute', 'la descente', 'les mines et les mineurs', 'le bas-fond', and 'la décroissance crépusculaire' are the more obvious. This adds to the author's own descent into the 'immenses profondeurs de Paris' (*Mis.*, II, p. 299); and of course to the fact that the sewer itself descends: 'labyrinthe qui a pour fil sa pente' (III, p. 287), 'l'intestin de Paris est un précipice' (p. 308), and Hugo mentions a proverb according to which 'descendre dans l'égout, c'est entrer dans la fosse' (p. 302). The image of sinking (*enlisement*) mentioned earlier also suggests that this frontier between the above and the underworld is neither strict nor immobile: 'ces puissantes bâtisses n'avaient pas simplement des fondations, mais, pour ainsi dire, des racines qui allaient en se ramifiant dans le sol en chambre, en galeries, en escaliers comme la construction d'en haut' (ND, p. 413). As for sinking, it is not sure whether it is the victim that goes down, or the mud that rises: 'L'enlisement, c'est le sépulcre qui se fait marée et qui monte du fond de la terre vers un vivant' (*Mis.*, III, p. 321). This journey downward is very much reminiscent of Dante:

> [...] Ei son tra l'anime più nere;
> diverse colpe giù li grava al fondo:

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[34]Gaudon, *Le Temps de la contemplation*, pp. 282-3.

[35]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 79.

[36]The fall is also physical: both Frollo and Javert die in a fatal plunge while Satan's fall opens *La Fin de Satan*.

se tanto scendi, là i potrai vedere.[37]

Hugo describes the dangers that await the seer who undertakes such a journey:

> [...] 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 en s'élargissant,
> Et pour avoir touché quelque énigme fatale,
> De ce voyage obscur souvent on revient pâle ! (FA, 'La Pente de la rêverie', pp. 80-1).

The Hugolian obsession with falling and the abyss combines his vertigo with his fear of darkness: going down is to wander away from the light; it is a journey towards spiritual darkness. The monster, hiding in the dark, is at the wrong end of a line that leads to God and to Light. *Les Misérables* evolves according to a rhetoric which opposes Evil to God, Light to Darkness, and thus sees Evil *within* the urban space. The novel emphasises that only the city contains places where light no longer penetrates; 'où la lumière s'éteint' (*Mis.*, II, p. 249). A similar journey into darkness is to be found in the opening of *La Fin de Satan*, where Satan starts his never-ending fall:

> 'Depuis quatre mille ans il tombait dans l'abîme
> [...]
> Les ténèbres sans bruit croissaient dans le néant.
> [...]
> Et déjà le soleil n'était plus qu'une étoile.
> [...]
> L'étoile maintenant n'était qu'une étincelle
> [...]
> 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 (FS, pp. 3-8).

Thus, claustrophobia and vertigo are not so much contradictory as complementary, and the fall here is closely linked to the image of the prison: 'abîme, gouffre, trou et chute suggèrent sans doute l'espace, mais ne sont pas étrangers au sentiment de clôture. [...] Satan après tout, est *prisonnier de l'infini*'.[38] For as much as he develops an oppressive urban atmosphere, Hugo also surrenders to a the appeal of the void,[39] developing what Seebacher called '[une] construction en abîme'.[40]

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[37]Dante, *Inferno*, p. 104. 'They are among the blacker souls; various sins weigh them toward the bottom: if you descend so far, you can see them there' (p. 105).

[38]Brombert, *La Prison romantique*, p. 105. My emphasis.

[39]*Ibid.*

[40]Jacques Seebacher, *Victor Hugo ou le Calcul des profondeurs* (Paris: PUF, 1993), p. 181.

Abîme reste un terme ambivalent, connotant la misère aussi bien que le potentiel révolutionnaire des bas-fonds, mais aussi la descente du poète dans le monde dangereux et exaltant de la rêverie et de la contemplation. Dans cette exploration intime, l'axe de la verticalité signale souffrance et proximité de la folie. D'où l'importance des images carcérales (prison de l'espace, geôles de l'esprit) et de la tour de Babel renversée, symbole de perspectives vertigineuses.[41]

But this verticality suggests yet another disturbing vision. Since Hugo follows an 'axe vertical', what he sees at the lowest levels soon appears as a reflection of the upperworld. In *Les Misérables*, the reflection is architectural, the sewers mapping the streets of the upper city: 'Paris underground is seen as an extension of Paris overground'.[42] As Hugo describes the sewers as the 'succursale de la Cour des Miracles' (*Mis.*, III, p. 289), he thus echoes a previous attempt to plunge into the urban underworld, the city's evil twin: in *Notre-Dame*, the reflection of Paris in the Seine as in a mirror reflects the counter-society that lives below. Yet this reflection soon turns out to be deceptive, offering anyone daring to go any deeper a misleading and distorted image of the upperworld and its rules, as Gringoire experienced: lost in his *rêverie*, the jaunty character goes from dream to nightmare, failing to realise that he is going beyond the 'surface trompeuse'. He then finds himself in a scene reminiscent of what he saw previously, although something has been monstrously perverted: at the opening of the novel, Gringoire is an ironic spectator waiting for a mystery play to be given at the Palais de Justice. No trial there. Only once he has got lost in the *Cour des Miracles* is he to attend one: his own. If the upperworld has transformed a Court of Justice into a theatre, similarly the underworld transforms a never-ending show (the *Cour des Miracles* itself) into a parodic trial. 'The inverted society turns law upside down',[43] the *Cour des Miracles* reflects the Court of Justice in both an ironic and grotesque way. Although the general tone is humorous, Gringoire puts his life at risk by the very fact that, coming from above, he fails to respond in an appropriately grotesque manner to the leader ('the king') of the *Cour des Miracles*.

The mission of the 'poète-voyant' brings him back to the surface with a political message. Hugo sees the dangerous absurdity of a city that prides itself on being powerful, superb and modern, while hiding a perverse inverted image. 'Paris-Matière' is absurd because it means relying on what one can see with one's eyes, and therefore being duped by appearance. It is a tragic mistake because it does not follow the model set by the prophet. From his exile, Hugo denounced the deviation from the

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[41]Brombert, 'Ma Destinée : l'ordre, c'est le délire', p. 230.

[42]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 89.

[43]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 80.

revolutionary ideal of the 'Jérusalem céleste'. In *Paris-Guide* (1867), he vilified the doomed materialism of the Second Empire that betrayed the sacred mission of Paris as a leader of the 'Peuple universel' in its march towards progress, which is a spiritual and moral one.

Hugo made a striking statement in *Les Contemplations*: 'Voir, c'est rejeter' (*Cont.*, 'Magnitudo parvi', p. 196). The very act of contemplation ultimately requires that the poet-seer free himself from the concrete object that had initiated the vision in the first place. No longer useful, the 'chose vue' is now an obstacle to the poet's ultimate vision.

> Car, des effets allant aux causes,
> L'œil perce et franchit le miroir,
> Enfant; et contempler les choses,
> C'est finir par ne plus les voir.
> La matière tombe détruite
> Devant l'esprit aux yeux de lynx;
> Voir, c'est rejeter; la poursuite
> De l'énigme est l'oubli du sphinx (*Cont.*, 'Magnitudo parvi', p. 196).

'La pente de la rêverie' ultimately leads to the erasure of the 'chose vue' from the poet's visual field, to the point where there is nothing left to be seen – at least physically:

> *Rejeter* l'objet perçu comme un support inutile à l'élancement de la vision, se détacher des contingences de la chose vue pour atteindre à la vision de l'absolu de Dieu, au-delà de toute frontière, dans un temps et un espace éclatés qui ne peuvent être vus que par le regard intérieur de l'âme.[44]

Valjean himself disappears, first from the life of the newlyweds Marius and Cosette, with a stunning lack of interest on the part of his adoptive daughter; but then his memory itself disappears from the earth. Valjean requires a nameless tomb: 'pas de nom sur la pierre' (*Mis.*, III, p. 488). And even the few lines that were written by a mysterious hand on his tomb are said to be probably erased by now. 'Jean Valjean, en dépit de ses prodiges, n'a fait que passer, astre sombre qui illustre la condition humaine tout entière'.[45] A novel of Parisian memory, written in exile, *Les Misérables* is equally a novel of amnesia: Valjean had spent most of his life hiding, assuming false identities, keeping silence, burying his past, when not himself. It is no coincidence that he faces

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[44]Eigeldinger, 'La Voyance avant Hugo', p. 68.

[45]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 180. Interestingly enough, only the beheaded had nameless tombs in the nineteenth century. See Guy Rosa, 'Du Moi-Je au mage: individu et sujet dans le romantisme et chez Victor Hugo', in Seebacher and Ubersfeld, *Hugo le fabuleux*, p. 272. This is the second allusion to the guillotinés after Valjean's first burial (alive) in a cemetery known for its section for the beheaded.

being buried so often and particularly in the mud of the sewers: 'sinistre effacement d'un homme' (*Mis.*, III, p. 321). It seems to sum up his whole life.

Hugo's erasure of both the 'chose vue' and the visionary journey bear two powerful, poetically revolutionary and politically subversive consequences. The vertical visions developed by Hugo combine with the ultimate contemplation of nothingness. In 'Magnitudo Parvi', the poet develops the theme of erasure to the point where the *voyant* himself disappears: only the eye remains. The total erasure of both the poet and his visual field brings Hugo to develop images of abysses and voids, inviting us to a poetics of emptiness.

> Viens, si tu l'oses!
> Regarde dans ce puits morne et vertigineux (*Cont.*, 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', p. 393).

For if Hugo's *imaginaire* is well known for its richness, he is probably just as powerful when he explores the symbol of nothingness. 'Hugo atteint la plus haute poésie [...] quand il réussit à exprimer la réalité même du vide. Avant Mallarmé, Hugo avait découvert la poésie négative'.[46] The following extract illustrates this well:

> Nuée en bas, nuée en haut, nuée au centre;
> Nuit et nuit; rien devant, rien derrière; rien entre.
> Par moments, des essaims d'atomes vains et fous
> Qui flottent; ce qu'on voit de plus réel, c'est vous,
> Mort, tombe, obscurité des blêmes sépultures,
> Cimetières, de Dieu ténébreuses cultures (D, 'Le Hibou', p. 35).

One could then wonder whether this might not contradict the seer's prerequisite to hold a firm grip on the real. Can the divine eye with which the poet identifies still communicate with 'la foule blême'? (*Cont.*, 'Les Mages', p. 382). Can the new Hugolian gospel find any echo in the century of revolutions? Does a seer have any place in modernity? But despite this poetics of emptiness, the seer's message remains embedded within a specific social framework which is both the starting point of the visions and the context in which they can reach their full meaning. Hugo blurs the boundaries between the real and fantasy, drawing a 'Goyaesque' picture of modern, urban society, and revealing his century's deepest anxieties. The distortions he sees in the city's depths have the visionary power of dreams, or rather, nightmares. Yet with the accuracy of his poetic language, he manages to master those visions and express them, voicing his contemporaries' disquiet behind the bright façade of both modernity and bourgeois morality.

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[46]Poulet, *Etudes sur le temps humain*, p. 225.

If we bear in mind that imagination assumes the role of reason in Hugo's thought,[47] and if we subscribe to Gérard Schaeffer's view that 'la modernité [consiste] bien à *faire voir* l'invisible, l'essentiel, selon ses propres données intérieures',[48] then it becomes possible to consider Hugo as a 'modern seer', who in a century of rationalism and progressivist history indeed makes the archaic choice of imagination and myth, but only to give an account of 'la réalité totale', beyond the physical appearance accounted for by history.

Hugo's vision and interpretation of Paris go deeper than a mere conflict with 'Napoléon le Petit' and reveal a more subtle, although equally political, orientation. As Victor Brombert rightly noted, 'la pente de la rêverie' – consisting in a downward movement associated with pure contemplation – aims to transcend chronological and historical time: the vertical insight corresponds to the transhistorical vision of the prophet, whose *intemporelle* perception is radically alien to the chronological, linear, progressive time of history:[49] 'sur la mouvance universelle, le poète pose un regard immobile'.[50] This vision of history will be developed later in this chapter, but it cannot be analysed properly without a deeper look at the seer's religion and gnosis; for Hugo, just like Michelet, does not accept a secular conception of history.

(iii) Between God's Word and human history: Hugo's gnosis

Hugo writes as a Christian: 'La Bible est son livre' he famously wrote (RO, p. 134). But if he is a Christian, he is certainly no Catholic.[51] I would even label him as a Christian heretic. Indeed he manifests a great degree of scepticism, if not distrust, for any official religion. His Christianity is deeply critical of the Church, in fact the more biblical he sounds, the more he is perceived as anti-Christian,[52] which I do not think he ever was. But he certainly embarked on developing his own conception of Christianity – one that had as little to do as possible with the Church.

In *Les Misérables*, Valjean dies without a priest, but in the respectful remembrance of Monseigneur Myriel – a saint rather than a Churchman, for Hugo; 'un juste', who had bought Valjean's soul (Mis., I, p. 134).[53] When about to die, Valjean declines the offer to bring in a priest: 'j'en ai un', he answers, as though he saw Myriel in the room. A

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[47]Albouy, *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo*, p. 497.

[48]Gérald Schaeffer, 'Commentaires', in Rimbaud, *Lettres du voyant*, p. 176.

[49]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, pp. 81-2.

[50]Gaudon, *Le Temps de la Contemplation*, p. 316.

[51]Jean-Marc Hovasse, *Victor Hugo* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), vol. 1, p. 1067.

[52]Grillet, *La Bible dans Victor Hugo*, vol. 2, p. 89*.

[53]'Un juste' is the title of the opening chapter of the novel.

moment before, he had used his last strength to take down a little crucifix. But this gesture is not to be mistaken: 'le geste de Jean Valjean vers le crucifix signifie seulement son amour du condamné sublime qui ouvre ses bras au monde; il n'implique pas une croyance chrétienne dogmatique'.[54] Similarly, Hugo, when thinking about his own death, resents the prospect of rites and official prayers, preferring simple, individual prayers, delivered from the heart by simple people.

As a heretical, anticlerical Christian, Hugo opposes the Christian message to the power of the Church and its *trahison des clercs*: 'la collusion des prêtres avec le pouvoir'.[55] In a trend similar to Dostoevsky's, Hugo defends man against Christian mythology. For Hugo, there is something fundamentally perverse in the word of God when frozen by dogma.

> Aux religions instituées qui se figent nécessairement dans la forme sclérosante des rites et du dogme, Hugo oppose [...] un argument poétique de poids: si 'le ciel se défend' [...] cela tient à la nature même du langage, toujours rebelle à l'homme qui le pétrit pour donner forme à l'indicible. La poésie a ceci de supérieur à la religion, c'est que non seulement elle connaît ses limites, mais qu'elle travaille précisément *à* la limite, *sur* la limite, à la jointure du connu et de l'inconnu.[56]

Every religion attempts to end the quest for God, to freeze his word, to end the effort of interpretation of his message. Yet, for Hugo, this message is alive, and should remain so: '[Il] ne se lasse pas de dénoncer la pétrification spirituelle qu'implique tout dogme: accorder la priorité aux idéologies, c'est trahir le mystère de la vie'.[57]

Hugo's religion is based on a deistic approach: if he denounces the authority of established religions, it is because none of them can pretend to access God's knowledge. The very concept of God escapes man's capabilities. And there is a certain arrogance in man when he pretends to establish rules and rituals that are supposedly required by God; 'supercherie et superstitions se cachent derrière cette arrogance humaine'.[58] Hugo rejects dogma and rituals as essentially barriers that prevent access to the word of God instead of facilitating it. Opposing spiritual truth to religious lies, Hugo uses his own reading of the Bible to create his own religion, one free from dogma, and intrinsically linked to his poetics. 'Il s'attache [...] à la création de sa propre mythologie, et, avec elle, de sa propre

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[54]Raoul Simaika, *L'Inspiration épique dans les romans de Victor Hugo* (Genève: Droz, 1962), p. 109.

[55]Dufiez-Sanchez, 'La Religion hugolienne dans la Première Série de *La Légende des siècles*. De la prière au salut par la poésie', in André Guyaux and Bertrand Marchal (eds.), *Victor Hugo, 'La Légende des siècles' (Première Série)*, (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), p. 81.

[56]*Ibid.*, p. 82. See Hugo, RR.

[57]Brombert, 'Ma Destinée : l'ordre, c'est le délire', p. 226.

[58]Bénichou, 'Victor Hugo et le Dieu caché', p. 149.

théologie, qui s'exprime en vers, par la métaphore, et non dans le discours ordinaire de la théologie'.[59]

Poetics and mythology here are not to be understood as mere loopholes and, as we have seen with regard to his poetics, one of the main characteristics of Hugo's religion is the duty to be rooted in political and historical meditation. Like Michelet, 'Hugo situates God in history'.[60] In his new religion, Hugo aims to reconcile the political with the spiritual, and to bring the word of God and historical progress into one philosophy.[61] This is the purpose of *La Légende des siècles*: 'tracer l'histoire de la création éclairée par le visage du Créateur, histoire donc à la fois du progrès et de la religion. Hugo tremble devant l'histoire car dans l'histoire il voit "les grandes lois du sort"'.[62] Hugo, then, combines spiritual and political meditation, by thinking about progress in a religious mode, using traditional thought to think the modern. It is a specifically Hugolian singularity: 'avoir mis au service d'une idéologie du progrès un système de représentations du sacré à l'origine dirigé contre elle'.[63]

Let us look at this theologico-historical philosophy further. Hugo's epistemological hierarchy[64] consists of three ways and levels to apprehend the world: observation or intelligence would be at the bottom of the ladder, too dependent on what one can see, on causality, too precise to seize the real. Then comes imagination, which allows more freedom, more choice, but which is still too passive to have much influence on one's destiny. Finally, the best way to approach the real for Hugo is intuition, which is given by action. Intuition corresponds to what Hugo calls *surnaturalisme*: 'prodige immanent, la nature en ce qu'elle est ouverte à l'illimité, à cet infini qui a un moi et dont l'autre nom est Dieu. L'intuition, c'est l'ouverture du regard à cette illimitation'.[65]

Now if we apply this to Hugo's literary work, one striking feature is the distance that separates his characters from this 'ouverture du regard'. The fate of Hugo's characters, their lack of control over their destiny, all point out to a rather modest place on this epistemological ladder. Again, the famous scene of the sewers in *Les Misérables* provides a highly relevant illustration of this, combining the symbolism of the labyrinth, the sense of oppression felt by the reader, and Valjean's fate. In that scene, three levels of knowledge are at work, recalling Hugo's epistemological hierarchy (intelligence,

[59]Frank Paul Bowman, 'Le Système de Dieu', in Seebacher and Ubersfeld, *Hugo le fabuleux*, p. 174.
[60]*Ibid.*, p. 169. This in itself is very Christian as God was incarnated in man, Christ, and thus in human time: history.
[61]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 325.
[62]Bowman, 'Le Système de Dieu', p. 171.
[63]Fizaine, *Le Christ dans l'imaginaire de Victor Hugo*, p. 585.
[64]See Saurat, *La Religion de Victor Hugo*, p. 58, and Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, pp. 165-6.
[65]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, pp. 165-6.

imagination, intuition).[66] The first degree is basic knowledge: how to find one's way, which Valjean does not possess, but which is given to the reader. If Valjean is lost and takes the wrong direction, the author tells his reader exactly where he is, in what way he is getting things wrong, and how dangerous his mistakes may be. Then there is the enigma represented by the labyrinth of the sewers: the outcome of the story. At this point, the author is less willing to share his knowledge with the reader, subjecting him instead to a series of questions that all come down to: will Valjean and Marius get out alive and safe? Yet this outcome is not an end in itself, as Valjean's fate follows God's plan. This is the last level of knowledge, known to God only; 'Heurts et ruptures de la destinée, hasardeux en apparence, nécessaires en réalité'.[67] Valjean may be unaware of the test to which he is submitted, yet 'Hugo detects in what Valjean mistakes for pure chaos the shape of a providential design'.[68]

In this framework, the labyrinth is no longer a simple metaphor for oppression. Hugo's use of this symbol is extremely rich: 'On n'en finirait jamais de se promener dans les méandres plus labyrinthiques qu'on ne croit des *Misérables* [...] d'interroger cette sagesse d'une étonnante complexité'.[69] As we have seen, Hugo blurs the boundaries between the construction of the novel and the symbolism of the narrative, the symbol of the labyrinth belonging to both. The numerous digressions of the novel constantly seem to undermine the sustained development of the plot, leaving the reader disconcerted. However, and although acknowledging that few readers are prepared to make the effort, Fizaine advocates following the thread of the narrative too: 'Il faut suivre patiemment les anneaux d'une longue spirale. [...] Peu de lecteurs des *Misérables* [...] ont consenti à suivre les détours d'une temporalité non linéaire, parce qu'elle enferme l'infini'.[70]

The labyrinth may be deceptive, but it also contains the promise of a path. As a modern variation on initiation, it serves to define the complexity of urban knowledge and the risks of venturing into these deceptive territories without an Ariadne's thread.[71] As we have seen, the labyrinth is the ultimate test: it symbolises the need either to master the set of rules imposed by the city, or else to be swallowed by its monster.

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[66]See Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 93-4 and *Mis.*, III, pp. 307-9.
[67]Millet, 'Bloc, événement', Groupe Hugo, p. 1.
[68]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 94.
[69]Georges Piroué, *Victor Hugo romancier ou les dessous de l'inconnu* (Paris: Denoël, 1964), pp. 20-1.
[70]Fizaine, *Le Christ dans l'imaginaire de Victor Hugo*, p. 584. See also Brombert: 'La linéarité de l'intrigue est constamment minée par le symbolisme d'une descente en spirale et les récurrences cycliques' in 'Ma Destinée : l'ordre, c'est le délire', p. 230.
[71]See Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*, p. 117.

Surviving in the city requires an urban epistemology,[72] to master 'les zigzags de la stratégie', to borrow Hugo's phrase (*Mis.*, I, pp. 479-82).[73] Balzac distinguished between the neophytes and those who mastered the urban code: Vautrin tries to save Rastignac from becoming Paris's next victim, which is very likely to happen if he refuses to see 'la vie telle qu'elle est'.[74]

But Hugo's characters often do not understand this code. They are described as being trapped in a destiny in which they are blind and defenceless. Whereas the fall of Balzac's characters is explained by their lack of adaptation to the city's rules, Hugo's maladaptations find their logic in the idea of fate: his characters cannot be anything else but what they are; they are put into a situation they cannot master; their room for manœuvre is extremely limited. In the sewers, Valjean is clearly described as being 'in the dark': both blind and ignorant. If the labyrinth operates as an initiation for Valjean, it is an unconscious one. Only the author knows the path through the sewers and his character's destiny.

The labyrinthine sewers appear therefore not so much as a classical ritual of initiation that would require a proper epistemology, as a test of faith. The intelligence which is given to the reader (through detailed descriptions of the sewers), but denied to Valjean, only serves as a way to trigger the reader's sense of suspense. It is irrelevant to the escape of Valjean, who relies on his total submission to his fate despite, or rather thanks to, his blindness and ignorance: 'il valait mieux s'enfoncer dans ce dédale, se fier à cette noirceur, et s'en remettre à la providence quant à l'issue' (*Mis.*, III, p. 306). The important thing is to emerge from the labyrinth (to the light of God), to give oneself over to providence, not to understand how it works. And to get out depends on acting according to providence, which is to be found through intuition, not factual knowledge.

This does not mean the character is incapable of evolving or reacting. Quite the opposite: he will have to be active in order to overcome obstacles, but his actions are carried out in the dark, in an intellectual blindness where he is denied the possibility of evolving *consciously* towards a higher understanding of his situation.[75] The tension between the burden of man and his call to the word of God is typical of Hugo's thought:

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[72]See Michèle Hannoosh, 'La Femme, la ville, le réalisme: fondements épistémologiques dans le Paris de Balzac', *Romanic Review*, LXXXII, 1991, pp. 127-45.

[73]This is the title of the first chapter of the 'Livre cinquième'.

[74]Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*, p. 153.

[75]This accounts for the numerous deaths of both those who attempt to rebel or who are in the process of changing their very nature, and of those who surrender to their *Ananke-Arachne*: Javert's suicide is a well-known example of the first category, which can be added to the killings of Eponine (unable to achieve the transformation operated by Marius) and Gavroche (who has to remain a child). The second category can be illustrated by the deaths of Fantine and Mabœuf, the logical end of a previous death of the soul (Fantine becoming a prostitute; Mabœuf having to separate from his cherished books).

Hugo a introduit, à un pôle, une exagération tragique de l'occultation divine qui fait songer aux théologies les plus sombres, et, au pôle opposé, un glorieux défi humain, une sorte de messianisme de l'homme qui rejette toute entrave et toute humilité.[76]

This offers an interesting insight into the often sadistic treatment suffered by Hugolian characters. To understand this tension, we need to understand Hugo's conception of the human calling: a Promethean revolt which may seem too much to carry out, but which remains man's calling nonetheless.

Just as Hugo's religion is rooted in historical realities, human history is to be understood as the slow, gradual revealing of God's will. But the process is linked to a fundamental contradiction: God may be hidden, but man's calling is to unveil Him nonetheless. And this is a violent act of defiance and rebellion:

L'homme [...]
Doit faire comme Prométhée
Et comme Adam

Il doit ravir au ciel austère
L'éternel feu,
Conquérir son propre mystère
Et voler Dieu

[...]

Pourquoi cacher ces lois profondes?
Rien n'est muré.
Dans vos flammes et dans vos ondes
Je passerai (*Cont.*, 'Ibo', pp. 300-2).

But this rebellion is itself a fundamental obedience to God – a *deus absconditus* who only hides so as to be found: 'Le grand obscur se dérobe mais veut être poursuivi. L'énigme [...] vous regarde et veut être vue' ('Contemplation suprême' in OC, XII, p. 122). This paradoxical enterprise that sanctifies man's boldness recalls Jacob's struggle against the angel near Jabbok;[77] 'la transgression de l'interdit est bénie de celui qui l'a édicté.[78] If we keep the example of Valjean in mind, 'La grande révolte obéissante à Dieu' (LS, 'Plein ciel', p. 839) seems to summarise the convict's life; a fight Valjean often appears too weak to undertake. But, as Bénichou argues:

Hugo exagère l'impuissance de l'esprit humain, il l'accable sous un défi obsédant, pour l'exciter à dresser devant le Dieu impénétrable et muet l'élan d'une recherche inlassable. L'esprit part en

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[76]Bénichou, 'Victor Hugo et le Dieu caché', p. 164.
[77]*Genesis*, 32, 24-33.
[78]Bénichou, 'Victor Hugo et le Dieu caché', p. 160.

quelque sorte à l'assaut de Dieu, mais il faut entendre que ce combat est à la gloire des deux combattants.[79]

For Hugo – and it will be important to remember this point when we come to his conception of the People of Paris – what makes man's greatness is his ability and willingness to dare, *oser*: 'Tenter, braver, persister, persévérer, être fidèle à soi-même, prendre corps à corps le destin [...] tenir bon, tenir tête' (*Mis.*, II, 121). And with Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's coup, this is more urgent than ever.

(iv) History after 1851: myth and demystification

> *C'est de l'histoire écoutée aux portes de la légende.*[80]
>
> *L'Histoire que voit l'œil prophétique est tendue entre deux aveuglements, l'éblouissement de l'avenir et l'obscurcissement du passé.*[81]

The difficulty in grasping Hugo's conception of history derives from the fact that he himself constantly explored and experimented.[82] We have seen that his characters often seem to be in an untenable position. Fate seems to drive human action more than men make history. But what the episode of Frollo's 'Laissez-faire la fatalité' mentioned earlier suggests, is that fate here is not a super-natural force that men have to live by. 'Il ne s'agit pas alors de matérialisme historique: l'histoire reste soumise à une loi "physico-divine": Dieu sait où il va, il y a une conscience qui préside à l'emportement'.[83] For Hugo, 'le progrès [...] n'est pas seulement l'aspiration de l'homme mais la loi de Dieu'.[84] Hence, Hugo's scepticism regarding history: as a series of human events, history is valuable only in so far as it follows God's principles.

Hugo famously denied ever having written historical fiction or drama,[85] preferring the novel to history; '[il] préfère la vérité morale à la vérité historique' ('Sur Walter Scott', *Littérature et philosophie mêlées*, OC, V, p. 1834). Historical attention to details and facts can be distracting for Hugo, who keeps his focus on spiritual truth. This historical pessimism is not solely explained by the seer's philosophy, but also by his

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[79]*Ibid.*, p. 159.

[80]Hugo, 'Préface' in LS, p. 23.

[81]Millet, 'Bloc, événement', p. 2.

[82]Millet, discussion following 'Bloc, événement', p. 5.

[83]*Ibid.*

[84]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 176.

[85]Hovasse, *Victor Hugo*, p. 388.

perception that 'history's march forward is a chancy affair, that faith in horizontal, linear progress does not necessarily correspond to the most probing vision'.[86] In 1830, just one year after publishing *Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné*, a text arguing against the death penalty, Hugo had to bear the spectacle of demonstrations in the streets of Paris opposing the abolition of the death penalty for political crimes. The revolution of 1830 had raised great expectations and Hugo was convinced that the time to condemn the guillotine once and for all had finally come. Although he blamed the government for squandering this historic opportunity, the popular reaction left him deeply disenchanted; 'ne demandez pas de droits pour le peuple tant que le peuple demandera des têtes', he even wrote (CV, I, p. 112).

> Il faut donc s'y résigner: le progrès n'est ni continu ni linéaire; les conquêtes de l'homme ne viennent pas docilement s'ordonner sur l'axe du temps, l'humanité n'en a pas fini avec l'épuisante succession des destructions, des germinations, des nouvelles destructions.[87]

According to Christopher Prendergast, Hugo, after the experience of 1830, started to distance himself from a history that was too submissive to facts and too indifferent to principles: 'Hugo's way with the intractable in history is finally to move out of history altogether'.[88] The experience of 1830 seemed to comfort him in not allowing 'the pressures of history and politics to take precedence over the deeper commitments of art'.[89] No doubt the bitter disillusion of 1848-1851 felt by many writers affected him also. Fizaine speaks of his reaction as 'un désespoir à l'égard de l'histoire, et [...] une colère dont la poésie aura à remplir le programme d'action'.[90] The 2 December in particular forced Hugo and a whole generation with him to redefine the relation history to progress.

Michelet and Hugo shared a common, moral interpretation of 1851 as a takeover by an evil power: history has started to regress. The awakening of the People in 1789, the whole legacy of the French Revolution is undermined by Napoleon le Petit's coup. Hence a political reorientation and rethinking of history:

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[86]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 77.

[87]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 176. Discussing *Les Misérables*, she does not refer specifically to the events of 1830 in this remark which applies to Hugo's conception of history in general.

[88]Prendergast, *Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 97.

[89]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 12.

[90]Fizaine, *Le Christ dans l'imaginaire de Victor Hugo*, pp. 556-7.

> Il s'agit pour eux d'élaborer un rapport au monde qui ne soit pas démenti par la réalité. Cette réalité, celle du Second Empire, est ignoble, plus encore elle est scandaleuse, parce qu'elle implique que l'histoire pourrait ne pas être en progrès.[91]

Both, then, have a similar attitude of refusal, reaction, and denunciation against this power; 'selon des modes différents mais selon une même voie, celle de l'histoire': Hugo writes *Histoire d'un crime*, *Napoléon-le-Petit* and *Châtiments* while Michelet continues his *Histoire de la Révolution française*.[92]

In this regard, *Châtiments* is particularly significant in Hugo's meditation on history. It is a poetic work that has history, or, rather its aim and meaning, as its main theme. Since 1851, history is perverted, blind, having lost touch with any sense of moral, spiritual progress. 'Mais si elle a perdu son sens, l'histoire sous le second Empire n'est pas dénuée de signification, c'est du reste toute la portée du recueil que de dégager une inversion'.[93] Against the contingency of historical downturn and inversion, Hugo chooses the principle set by the Revolution to bring back some form of sense in post-1851 France:

> Faire 'la preuve de la révolution' (formule de Hugo) c'est-à-dire montrer qu'elle est le principe d'organisation de l'histoire, ce principe fût-il en défaut. Résultat: une histoire chimérique qui s'instaure contre la réalité au nom du réel, et qui travaille à mettre au jour un monde accordé à cette chimère.[94]

If the principle of history is momentarily at fault, then it falls to legend to highlight its meaning and direction (or lack of it): 'La légende donne le sens: c'est en fonction d'elle que l'histoire signifie. [...] L'histoire historique si l'on peut dire est mise en congé; une autre histoire se met en place dans l'ailleurs de la légende'.[95] This also applies to *La Légende des siècles*, another attempt to find the principle of history through legend, to compensate for the flaws in history as it was being told: 'la mémoire légendaire apparaît ainsi comme le conservatoire de la possibilité même de progrès historique dans les temps catastrophiques où celui-ci s'éclipse'.[96] Napoleon III owes his power to the illusion of an epic of which he claims to be the continuation. Hugo deconstructs this

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[91]Pierre Laforgue, 'Hugo et Michelet entre 1853 et 1859, ou révolution et histoire', in André Guyaux and Bertrand Marchal (eds.), *Victor Hugo, 'La Légende des siècles' (Première Série)*, p. 157.

[92]*Ibid.*, p. 153. However, Hugo's concern for history as such will come later: 'ce n'est qu'à l'automne 1857 que la pensée de l'histoire l'occupera totalement, comme si à l'énigme de dieu s'était substitué l'énigme de la révolution' (p. 154).

[93]Pierre Laforgue, 'Epopée et histoire chez Hugo (1852-1862)', Groupe Hugo, 26 octobre 1996, p. 3.

[94]Laforgue, 'Hugo et Michelet entre 1853 et 1859', p. 160.

[95]*Ibid.*, , p. 157.

[96]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 121.

myth and turns epic back to the originator, thus unveiling the perversion of modern history: the neo-Napoleonian epic is bleak, and the new emperor nothing more than a *faquin*: 'cette gloire est ton trou, ta bauge, ta demeure !' (*Chât.*, 'Napoléon III', pp. 215-6).

Not surprisingly, the conception of history as an epic collapses in *Les Misérables*: 'Waterloo et la barricade de la rue Saint-Denis s'achèvent en désastre. Hugo dénonce comme anachronique et dépourvue de prise sur la réalité toute conception de l'histoire relevant de l'épopée'.[97] Hugo the seer uses historical events to de-historicise them: 'perspective herméneutique et visionnaire de l'histoire', Brombert argues; 'en fait le mode prophétique au même titre que le mode mythique, dé-historise l'histoire'.[98] *Les Misérables* echoes the hiccups of history – well-known trademark of the nineteenth century, a time of repetition and gaps, 'époque instable de transition, de confusion, d'alliages saugrenus'.[99] The 'super saint' of the Revolution rots in the sewers, the *misérables* have preposterous names such as Eponine or Azelma; bishops ask for *Conventionnels*' benediction; convicts are saints; prostitutes not necessarily perverse: 'Dans *Les Misérables*, le déterminisme historique trébuche à chaque tournant'.[100]

One example of such deconstruction of history is the way Hugo uses the grotesque in his work. It seems to me that its use in both *Châtiments* and *Les Misérables* provides the key to fully understanding Hugo's relation to myth and history. Hugo had started from a perversion of values in the first instance to make a different use of the grotesque in his novel: negative in *Châtiments*, it acquires a positive quality in *Les Misérables*. Millet showed how the poem operated this 'sortie du mythe' with the very material of myth:

> Il s'agit de sortir du mythe, et de mythifier cette sortie du mythe, afin qu'elle ne soit pas, comme dans la parodie burlesque, la chute déceptive dans une réalité dérisoire, mais la renaissance même du réel, en sa grandeur sacrée.[101]

Millet highlighted the importance of 'Le Satyre' in this regard: 'il est orienté (dès son titre) vers le dépassement du mythe et l'accès à une vérité supérieure, d'ordre ontologique et théologique, qui rend l'adhésion au mythe impossible'.[102]

In *Les Misérables*, the use of the grotesque is similarly opposed to mystification, but is presented as the condition of a reversibility that would reconcile history and the real:

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[97]Laforgue, 'Epopée et histoire chez Hugo', p. 8.
[98]Brombert, 'Ma Destinée: l'ordre c'est le délire', p. 229.
[99]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 165.
[100]*Ibid.*
[101]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 138.
[102]*Ibid.*

> Cela tient à ce [que le grotesque] n'est plus pensé comme l'objet de la satire (le pouvoir s'affublant des dépouilles de l'épopée), mais qu'il est constitué en sujet transcendantal de l'histoire (le peuple accédant à la conscience de son destin épique). En 1862, le grotesque cesse d'être le signe d'une perversion des valeurs, mais désigne tout ce qui doit, un jour, rendre possible l'avènement de l'histoire 'réelle'.[103]

The full impact of Hugo's philosophy of history is to be understood only if we remember the importance of matter for him, his identification of history with matter – and thus with evil. Hence the importance of the sewers in his work, an apt illustration of his religious conception of history. We need to explore this image further here, this time in direct relation to Hugo's conception of history. The sewers have a history, narrated by Hugo in *Les Misérables*; but more importantly, they *are* history. The answer to why the *bas-fond* can be a principle of human regeneration and how the grotesque can trigger a reversibility of history can be found there.

(v) The metaphor of the sewers: history, accumulation and reversibility

> *Le sous-sol de Paris est un receleur: il cache l'histoire.*[104]

> *Pour un homme du XIXe siècle, l'anankè suprême est évidemment historique.*[105]

The sewers are yet another obsession of Hugo's: the metaphor of the sewers as historical accumulation is developed in *Paris*, and most famously in *Les Misérables* and *Châtiments*:

> Tous les vices de Rome, égout du genre humain,
> Suintent, comme en un crible, à travers cette voûte,
> Et l'immonde univers y filtre goutte à goutte (*Chât.*, 'L'Egout de Rome', p. 275).

The sewers and the city are identified in that they are the place of accumulation of history, filtering actions and time alike:

> [Des villes comme Paris] sont des entonnoirs où viennent aboutir tous les versants géographiques, politiques, moraux, intellectuels d'un pays, toutes les pentes naturelles d'un peuple; des puits de civilisation, pour ainsi dire, et aussi des égouts, où commerce, industrie, intelligence, population,

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[103]Laforgue, 'Epopée et histoire chez Hugo', p. 9.

[104]Hugo, P, p. 44.

[105]Christophe Calame, '"Anankè" narrative et fatalité philosophique', in Seebacher and Ubersfeld, *Hugo le fabuleux*, p. 117.

tout ce qui est sève, tout ce qui est vie, tout ce qui est âme dans une nation filtre et s'amasse sans cesse goutte à goutte, siècle à siècle (ND, 146).

Hugo articulates all the resources of his most sombre and disturbing *imaginaire*: teratology, darkness, evil, unhealthiness, all serving to suggest the horror of such places;

[...] lieu monstrueux
Enfer d'ombre et de boue [...]
Où les murs ont la lèpre, où, parmi les pustules
Glissent les scorpions mêlés aux tarentules.
Morne abîme ! (*Chât.*, 'L'Egout de Rome', p. 273).

The pavement exudes blood, the ponds are filled with the most horrendous objects and animals; it is the place of 'la vieille hydre chaos'; 'tout est fétide, informe, abject, terrible à voir' (*Chât.*, 'L'Egout de Rome', pp. 274-5).

However, Paris's sewers had been rationalised by Bruneseau and by the time Hugo wrote *Les Misérables*, he acknowledged that it was almost a monument worth visiting: 'L'égout actuel est un bel égout; le style pur y règne'. 'L'appareil digestif de Babylone' (*Mis.*, III, p. 297) belongs to the past now. And yet it is the sewers of this past that Hugo describes (*Mis.*, III, p. 301). Why Hugo is so interested in the sewers of the capital is because they constitute the perfect metaphor of post-1851 France: 'L'Histoire a pour égout des temps comme les nôtres...' (*Chât.*, III, XIII, p. 134).

For Hugo, history is agglutination, aggravation, and the accumulation of weight. If history does not follow a principle of divine progress, then it can be no more than the gradual filling of the city's sewers or well.[106]

Or, la première faute
Fut le premier poids,
[...]
Le Mal était fait. Puis tout alla en s'aggravant (*Cont.*, 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', p. 388).

If history is identified with matter and evil in Hugo, it is precisely because it fails to be a transformation, being reduced to mere aggregation instead; and if the seer goes down to the lowest part of the city, it is because history follows the law of gravity, just like matter does: 'Quel précipice que ce passé! Descente lugubre! Dante y hésiterait. La vraie catacombe de Paris, c'est cela. L'histoire n'a pas de sape plus noire' (P, p. 60). Hugo goes on to identify the past with a corpse; the past is gone, its bones alone remain.

What is interesting about this vision of history is that it combines matter with movement: the piling up of past events eventually reaches saturation and then collapses.

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[106]'Paris est un puits perdu' Hugo says in P, p. 36.

This is 1789, which for Hugo is not so much a date as a number; the figure of this accumulation, the addition of past centuries and misery in the city's underground: 'cette ombre avait un total' (P, p. 61); and when the filter is saturated, the moment has come for revolution. The story of this accumulation is symbolised in the vision of 'le mur des siècles'; a vision of petrifaction of humanity and history alike:

> C'était de la chair vive avec du granit brut
> [...]
> C'était une muraille et c'était une foule (LS, pp. 9-10).

And if this accumulation goes up – 'muraille, bloc d'obscurité funèbre, Montait dans l'infini' (p. 13) –, it also goes deep down, along that vertical axis mentioned earlier:

> J'entendais sous mes pieds, dans le gouffre,
> Sangloter la misère aux gémissements sourds (p. 12).

Michelet shares with Hugo this vision of history as the long accumulation of misery and suffering: 'ce qui m'a percé le cœur, c'est cette longue résignation, cette douceur, cette patience, c'est l'effort que fit l'humanité pour aimer ce monde de haine et de malédiction sous lequel on l'accablait'.[107] Michelet opposes this *longue durée* to the sudden acceleration of time during the Revolution: 'brusque condensation dans le "jour", "l'heure" de l'événement, la Révolution'.[108] This moment is, for them, the moment of saturation. Michelet describes the 14 July as the result of centuries of history accumulating in the People's consciousness: 'l'histoire revint cette nuit-là, une longue histoire de souffrances, dans l'instinct vengeur du peuple. L'âme des pères qui, tant de siècles souffrirent, moururent en silence revint dans les fils et parla' (RF, p. 145).

Earlier in the same work, Michelet had described a very Hugolian vision of historical accumulation, deriving from a glance at a dark peak. 'Ce solitaire, noir et chauve, était trop visiblement le fils des profondes entrailles du globe'. The peak serves as a starting point for Michelet's meditation: 'sombre témoin des tortures du monde intérieur. [...] Quelles convulsions, quelles tortures arrachèrent du fond du globe ce prodigieux soupir!'. The disturbing vision of the peak triggers a form of *anamnesis* for Michelet, as if the past misery had been encapsulated in its substance, much in the same way as the celtic belief recalled by Proust which sees the souls of the lost ones being imprisoned in objects, waiting to be freed by our remembrance of them:[109]

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[107]Michelet, *La Révolution française*, p. 59.

[108]Millet, 'Bloc, événement', p. 6.

[109]See the passage that immediately precedes the famous episode of 'la madeleine'. Marcel Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 49.

La nature m'avait trop rappelé l'histoire. Ce chaos de monts entassés m'opprimaient du même poids qui, pendant tout le Moyen-Age, pesa sur le cœur de l'homme, et dans ce pic désolé, que du fond de ses entrailles la terre lançait contre le ciel, je retrouvais le désespoir et le cri du genre humain (RF, p. 58).

Hence 1793: the excess of this misery explains why 14 July fails fully to absorb it. The bloodshed that follows comes after centuries of accumulated horrors. In *Les Misérables* this is exactly the defence presented by the *Conventionnel* when Myriel brings up the infamous date of 1793: 'un nuage s'est formé pendant quinze cents ans. Au bout de quinze siècles, il a crevé. Vous faites le procès au coup de tonnerre' (*Mis.*, I, p. 65). It is also a theme developed in *Les Contemplations*:

Alors subitement, un jour, debout, debout !
Les réclamations de l'ombre misérable,
La géante douleur, spectre incommensurable,
Sortent du gouffre. [...]
Tout est dit. C'est ainsi que les vieux mondes croulent
Oh ! l'heure vient toujours ! (*Cont.*, 'Ecrit en 1846', IV, p. 248).

But if 1793 was inexorable, the moment of revolution is not in the hands of the People: while Michelet is touched by the People's long resignation, Hugo suggests that it is God who triggers the revolutionary moment. Again, Hugo does not have a vision of a bloodthirsty God, eager for human suffering. Misery is piling up in spite of God's will, not with his blessing. 'Dieu est le grand impatient, dont la colère et l'amour font un révolutionnaire, pour briser l'immuabilité des tyrans, et arracher l'Humanité à sa lenteur, à sa patience, sa trop grande endurance à la douleur'.[110]

Revolution is this moment when God announces that this point of saturation has been reached, and puts history back in motion, and when this word is finally heard and acted upon: 'Dieu dit au Peuple: Va !' (*Cont.*, 'Ecrit en 1846', IV, p. 248. The livre cinquième is headed 'En Marche').[111] The main actor of Michelet's *L'Histoire de la Révolution Française* – indeed more important than the usual heroes, leaders and well-known agents of history (RF, p. 113)[112] – the People finally put history (back) in motion when their action and the word of God finally meet.

The action is bound to be painful, but this is, again, Prometheus's calling: 'ce n'est pas sans un cruel effort, sans un douloureux déchirement qu'il s'arrache à la fatalité au

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[110]Millet, 'Bloc, événement', p. 8.

[111]L'avenir et le passé faisaient tous deux même réponse; tous deux ils dirent: "Va!"' Michelet wrote (RF, p. 145).

[112]'Seul le 14 juillet fut le jour du peuple tout entier' (RF, p. 145).

sein de laquelle il est resté si longtemps suspendu' (HU, p. 327). The mission of the People is this divine fight with their creator; when, driven by the seer, they start their march again. Since 1789, the command has been given and the people were born in Paris; Paris, the sacred location of this divine fight – the holy mission of the Parisians consisting in fighting: 'la pensée de Paris conduit au combat'.[113] And from 1789 to 1871, had the Parisians risen to it. Yet in 1851 it seems that the people fail to hear the divine command, let alone to move. The impulse given to history in 1789 reaches a surprising halt in 1851. How would the poet of the people react to his flock's remarkable passivity?

Hugo was and would remain the poet of the People, choosing his heroes among the crowd and addressing it in his titles; 'premier grand poète qui ait donné à des œuvres littéraires des titres communs'.[114] The relation was strong between the poet and the people of Paris, particularly poignant when he buried his son Charles during the siege of 1871.[115] Moreover Hugo was and continued to be read by the working class. Hugo gave an identity to the People of the nineteenth century, narrated their story. At a time where urban teratology saw the *misérables* with horror and disgust, Hugo turned them into heroes; when the responsibility of society for criminality was hardly envisaged, Hugo highlighted the injustice of the condemnations endured by Valjean and Fantine.

> J'ai, dans le livre, avec le drame, en prose, en vers,
> Plaidé pour les petits et les misérables;
> [...]
> J'ai réhabilité le bouffon, l'histrion,
> Tous les damnés humains, Triboulet, Marion,
> Le laquais, le forçat et la prostituée (*Cont.*, 'En marche', p. 249).

Having Valjean the *forçat* – 'tout à la fois une victime sociale et un proscrit politique'[116] – as the hero of his novel was scandalous at the time. In an openly religious novel, it operated a symbolic inversion, a Christian revolution:

> Car sur cette croix des prêtres c'est aussi un de ces hors-la-loi qui est 'figuré'. [...] C'est même le hors-la-loi par excellence, celui qui est venu, à un moment unique de l'Histoire, récuser, au nom de l'amour, tout l'appareil symbolique où un peuple avait laissé se pétrifier les valeurs et les vérités lentement conquises au cours de son histoire.[117]

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[113]Combes, *Paris dans les Misérables*, (unpublished doctoral dissertation), p. 253.

[114]Cited by Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle*, p. 771. See also Walter Bejamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 162. Benjamin refers to *Les Misérables* and *Les Travailleurs de la mer*. *Les Misérables* eventually replaced the initial title *Les Misères*.

[115]See CV, II, p. 627 and AT, pp. 139-43.

[116]Brombert, *La Prison romantique*, p. 112.

[117]Fizaine, *Le Christ dans l'imaginaire de Victor Hugo*, p. 203.

Identified with a modern Christ, the masses of *misérables* can operate this inversion because it is in the recesses of the deepest misery that human salvation is to come:

– Le sublime est en bas. Le grand choix,
     C'est bien de choisir l'affront. De même que parfois
     La pourpre est déshonneur, souvent la fange est lustre.
     La boue imméritée atteignant l'âme illustre,
     L'opprobre, ce cachot d'où l'auréole sort,
     Le fond noir de l'épreuve où le malheur nous traîne,
     Sont le comble éclatant de la grandeur sereine.
     [...]
     La Laideur de l'épreuve en devient la beauté.
     [...]
     L'abjection du sort fait la gloire de l'homme (*Cont.*, 'Les Malheureux', p. 291).

However, faced with the most radical blow to the march of progress, the people show remarkable passivity. And as if this was not worrying enough, Napoleon III seemed to be supported by public opinion through his numerous plebiscites. The people, who were given a voice in 1848, use it to support the *faquin*, producing consternation in the ranks of the exiled:

     Mais qui donc a voté? [...]
     Où donc [était] la nation ? Où donc la liberté ?
     Ils ont voté !
             Troupeau que la peur mène
     Entre le sacristain et le garde-champêtre (*Chât.*, III, IV, p. 109).

Hugo encapsulates perfectly what the plebiscites will be throughout Napoleon III's reign. His surprise, though, is tainted with growing resentment about a People that are letting history down. The People are asleep and Hugo attempts to awaken them: 'Ô France, quoique tu sommeilles' (*Chât.*, 'Luna', p. 232). Hugo urges Paris to resume their historical mission: 'redevenez le grand Paris !' (*Chât.*, 'A ceux qui dorment', pp. 230-1).[118] As a seer, he tries to raise the alarm:

     Lazare ! Lazare ! Lazare !
     Lève-toi ! (*Chât.*, 'Au Peuple', pp. 80-2).

But the people do not move and the deception turns sour: Hugo has no words harsh enough to vilify the submission of what he can no longer call 'le Peuple', but sees as a

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[118]'Etre Paris, c'est marcher' Hugo says in P, p. 97.

'herd' – 'le bas du genre humain qui s'écroule en troupeau' (*Chât.*, IV, IX, p. 162 – again an image of fall):

> Et j'aimerais mieux être, ô fourmis des cités,
> Tourbe, foule, hommes faux, cœurs morts, races déchues
> Un arbre dans les bois qu'une âme en vos cohues ! (*Chât.*, IV, IX, p. 163).

Châtiments denounces a people that turn their back on their historical, revolutionary mission. 'La colère du poète n'est pas passagère: Hugo se méfie du populaire. La populace est une force aveugle'.[119]

And this is why the 1851 coup is a catastrophe: not so much because the *faquin* is on the throne, but because the People let it be. Hugo does not see what the people's passivity of 1851 owes to June 1848. For him, it was illegitimate then to fight the Republic, it is legitimate now to rise against 'Napoleon le Petit'. The working class, however, makes a very different reading: legitimate in June 48, an insurrection seemed pointless in December 51. Meanwhile, Hugo is left with a distant disenchantment from his exile. The People seem satisfied with the new regime and indulges in its 'values':

> O faubourien, le salaire a doublé. Les journées sont bonnes; [...] on t'a alloué une grasse liste civile de travaux; Paris s'est endetté, l'Empire s'est endetté; on t'a donné à manger sur le pain du deux décembre un cervelas de deux cent cinquante millions; et avec le pain, le cirque, les fêtes, les hippodromes, les feux d'artifice, les illuminations, les Te Deum, les parades, le grand spectacle gratis du tréteau impérial (CV, II, p. 286).[120]

Panem et circenses; the *faubourien* is being transformed into a Daumier-like bourgeois: 'te voilà florissant, repu, dodu, brossé, lustré, peigné, te voilà gros et gras, faubourien'. Like the dog of La Fontaine's fable, he has renounced his freedom for a miserable 'pitance': 'Vive l'empereur, tout est bien. La carrosserie va, le bâtiment marche. Le Peuple est content' Hugo observes with contempt; 'J'aimais mieux le loup maigre', he bitterly concludes (CV, II, p. 286). But the promise of demystification survives 'le peuple en panne', and awaits a decision by the People to listen to the Word of God – that, for Hugo, is their historical calling.

As the mythical figure of the People develops, so does the disenchantment about the actual Parisians and their attitude. Not much progress has been made, it seems, since they actively supported the guillotine in 1830. One of the main consequences of the

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[119]Brombert, 'Ma Destinée: l'ordre, c'est le délire', p. 228.

[120]Hugo identifies *faubouriens* and Parisians: 'C'est surtout dans les faubourgs [...] que la race parisienne apparaît' (*Mis.*, III, 121); 'Paris est surtout son faubourg' (P, p. 83).

constitution of the myth of the People, is to make its mythical opposite – the counter myth of *populace* and barbarians – all the more acute. The horror grows in the face of the ticking social bomb: after June 1848, popular violence becomes the focus of all urban and social fears.

Chapter 6

From the Myth of the People to the Nightmare of the *Populace*: Paris's *débâcle*

> *Fantasmagorie terrible [...]. Nul ne résisterait à une telle épreuve. Cette manie singulière de se dénigrer soi-même, d'étaler ses plaies, et comme d'aller chercher la honte, serait mortelle à la longue.*[1]

As we have seen, the change of perception that affected post-revolutionary France favoured new forms of fear, and particularly urban fear. In this chapter, I will be looking at these further, as myth depends on the affective framework it sprouts from. I will be looking in particular at the obsession with the People's violence in an urban context – be it criminal or political – with reference to various texts, historical (Corbin) and literary (Sue, Hugo), before focusing on the Parisian episode in Zola's *La Débâcle*, which I believe illustrates the outcome of such an *imaginaire*, as well as the end of Paris as a myth.

In the century of progress and rationality, the permanent outbursts of violence carried out by the *classes dangereuses* (in the form of petty crimes or revolutionary riots) echo the monstrous nature of Paris described in chapter 4. I will return to the Hugolian image of the *bas-fond*, this time focusing on its inhabitants – scarcely human creatures that crawl in Paris's worst and darkest recesses. An urban phantasmagoria derives from this dreadful representation which confuses the representation of the people with that of the city in a global, teratologic image of evil. Just like the representation of the city itself, the image of its *populace* is not to be reduced to mere metaphors or some literary thrill. In this instance, it helps to understand the framework in which the dominant discourse can deny popular revolts any legitimacy, or even any form of political justification. This framework of representations helps the dominant discourse to delegitimise any form of violent protest as essentially a mark of urban abnormality and monstrosity. Alongside the 'cité idéale', the ideals of progress and the myth of the People, the survival of bloody and criminal excesses seems to undermine the very foundation of the 'century of modernity'.

In that regard, it will be important to draw a parallel between the myth of the People and that of the *populace*. Hugo in particular tried to draw a clear line between the two. But contrary to the path of progress initiated by 1789, *jacquerie* seems to survive the

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[1]Michelet, Pe. p. 61. Michelet refers to the literary representation of the people and its phantasmagoric quality which is being confused with the reality of France. 'Prenez garde, he warns, ce jeu-là est dangereux' (p. 63).

myth of the People in the very location where the latter was born. The afterglow of the image of *jacquerie* in urban settings illustrates the growing fears that increasingly focus on the working class, as though the *ouvriers* were following in the footsteps of their rural forefathers to become bloodthirsty savages themselves. The ill-defined image of criminal mobs denies any legitimacy to their revolt and radicalises a discourse that stigmatises any form of violent protest as a scourge, rejecting it as barbarous and bestial. One illustration of this is to be found in Zola's *La Débâcle*. We shall see that in the final part of the novel, a revolutionary Parisian comes to articulate the dominant discourse and abide by it in a pathetic confession, and in repentance of his city's wrongdoings. The spectacle of urban expiation (sprouting from a long desire to see the proud capital on its knees, as I shall argue) brings the feverish agony of a Parisian revolutionary, and the fire that is threatening the capital of greed, together in a single picture of hopeful and depoliticised regeneration.

(i) *La Bête... humaine*? From the bestialisation to the demonisation of the People

The perception of violence has evolved since the eighteenth century when it seemed – although regrettably – part of human nature, the inevitable price to pay for the *contrat social*,[2] the dark side of this awkward human creature, half way between animal and God. It seemed, then, that human beings, either as imperfect creatures unworthy of their creator or as victims of the social compromise, were somehow 'naturally violent'. In the nineteenth century in France, by contrast, violence tended to be more clearly assimilated to animality than humanity; considered not so much as man's natural bestial side, as the exact opposite of what human nature should be – a 'nature' which was very much modern, urban, and civilised. This evolution in the perception of violence affected social and artistic discourses, even in those who voiced a strong empathy for the suffering of the poor; self-proclaimed socialist writers too participated in the elaboration of a collective phantasmagoria that confused 'classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses'.[3]

I would like to explore further the change of perceptions analysed by Alain Corbin and mentioned in Chapter 3. Corbin argues that such a change occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, when the two most public types of violence – physical punishment and massacres – gradually disappeared: in the eighteenth century, street violence and

[2]See Pierre Saint-Amand, *Les Lois de l'hostilité. La politique à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992).
[3]The much quoted phrase is from Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses* (Paris: Plon, 1958). See also Honoré Antoine Frégier, *Des Classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes et des moyens de les rendre meilleures* (Paris: Baillère, 1840).

massacres were relatively familiar events.[4] But the end of the century saw what Corbin refers to as 'l'avènement de "l'âme sensible"': 'la discordance engendre des discours d'horreur vis-à-vis d'une violence désormais tenue par certains comme intolérable'.[5] It is the moment when the horrified reaction of Chateaubriand mentioned in Chapter 3 clashed with the sensitivity (or lack of it) of the revolutionary mob. As the reality of violence decreased throughout the nineteenth century, the sensitivity to its manifestation became more acute, as if the urban imaginary became the receptacle of a violence that was gradually leaving the stage of everyday reality. Violence became a major theme, an urban obsession alongside the others discussed in Chapter 4. The city's chaotic nature was perceived as generating abnormal (i.e. non-human) types of behaviour. A whole section of the population of Paris was seen as an aberration. As Sue perfectly summed it up: 'ces hommes ont des mœurs à eux, des femmes à eux, un langage à eux, langage mystérieux, rempli d'images funestes, de métaphores dégouttantes de sang'.[6] So what set these creatures aside? The most obvious sign of their abnormality was that they seemed to have been stripped from their human shell.

One first step in sketching violence as abnormal is to associate it with bestiality. Violent individuals or masses were equally 'bestialised'. At the end of the century, phrenology successfully claimed to demonstrate scientifically that the shape of the skull indicated a person's criminal tendencies. It followed physiognomy, a similar attempt at scientific classification which claimed a connection between physical appearance (the face in particular) and morality. Phrenology was popularised in 1876 by Cesare Lombroso who proposed a theory of the natural-born criminal.[7] The portrait drawn – hardly surprisingly – seems closer to that of an animal than a human: the long, monkey-type arms, big canines and ears, prominent brow-ridges, and small eyes, combined with little intelligence (but unquestionable cunning) and physical strength, paint the perfect picture of animality: at best, the criminal looks like a primate, at worst, a wolf. Science here aims to underline the biological inadaptability of violent criminals, by presenting them as primitive and savage beings.[8]

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[4]Farge, *La Vie fragile*, p. 310.

[5]Corbin, 'La Violence est-elle un accident: Approches philosophique, historique, sociologique de la violence', conference held in Paris, 20-21 novembre 1997, <cindynics.org/iec-violence2.pdf>, p. 14.

[6]Sue, *Les Mystère de Paris*, p. 31. A similar language is to be found in the famous chapter on 'l'argot' by Hugo in *Mis.* ('idiome abject qui ruisselle de fange', III, p. 7): some words seem to be born from the underworld and thus appear not so much as mere metaphors, but literally soaked in blood or mud, the two most idiosyncratic elements of the *bas-fond*.

[7]Cesare Lombroso, *L'Homme criminel, criminel né, fou moral, épileptique: étude anthropologique et médico-légale*, trans. by M. Bournet (Paris: F. Alcan, 1887).

[8]This rhetoric draws on the themes of the 'two races' which had served to justify the domination of the nobility (issued from the Francs) over the *roturiers* (descendants of the defeated Gallo-Romains). In the

The very idea of progress, which ran so high at the time, was meant to highlight the archaism of any element resisting the dominant pattern of evolution. Any such resistance labeled 'primitive' could then promptly be seen as a deviancy, an anomalous reversion that seemed to contradict its modern context. The anachronism of the human beast is the first sign of his abnormality. Furthermore, the animality of the savage individual rapidly combines with that of the mob. Authors as diverse as Taine, Le Bon and Zola all pointed out that individual (human) consciousness dissolves in an (animal) crowd, leading otherwise 'normal' people to the worst excesses – 'le déferlement de la Bête humaine'.

I would like to insist particularly on the close link between the city and the *bêtes humaines* which is key to this urban phantasmagoria. This elusive, dangerous population is particularly frightening as they live in the recesses of a city which is itself daunting. We need to take the full scale of this process of confusion, as it is a major factor in this system of representations: the worker and the city form an ambiguous, tenebrous and chaotic relation, proper to develop all sorts of phantasms. The collective and the individual, the criminal and the revolutionary are closely intermingled so as to suggest, in their very confusion, the chaotic and elusive nature of the city. The urban metaphors of the *pieuvre*, the spider, the image of the 'cité tentaculaire', convey and develop the hideous figure of social chaos, of the 'hydre de l'anarchie' that threatens the upper world. The people are easily confused with the image of the city-monster – the Leviathan as we have seen – which seems to protect those primitive beings. It is as if Mercier's faubourg Saint Marcel (mentioned in chapter 4) had spread to the entire capital.

'Barbares', 'sauvages', 'nomades', ces expressions généralement employées par Sue et par Hugo et qui évoquent les unes et les autres une race primitive, vivant à l'écart des gens civilisés, ne désignent pas seulement les habitants des bas-fonds [...], mais un pourcentage élevé de la population parisienne.[9]

This blurred image of urban monstrosity, blending the representation of the city with that of its restless working (or non-working) class finds a perfect illustration in the *bas-fond*: 'the *bas-fond* is the place of regressive reduction to the animal and the primitive', Prendergast notes.[10] Everything coming from the *bas-fond* bears the mark of the evil

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nineteenth century, it tends to oppose the rich to the poor, weakened by misery and suspected of being criminals, révolutionaries and spreaders of disease. See Bernard Marchand, *Paris, histoire d'une ville*, pp. 65-6.

[9]Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, p. 10.

[10]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 87.

Beast: the people, the buildings and the city are confused in one single hideous monstrous figure. The *galetas* of the Thénardiers corresponds to this monstrosity; a hideous slum with dark corners which could hide terrible creatures:

> De là d'affreux coins insondables où il semblait que devaient se blottir des araignées grosses comme le poing, des cloportes larges comme le pied, et peut-être même on ne sait quels êtres humains monstrueux (*Mis.*, II, p. 274).

But perhaps worse than the *bas-fond* itself, are the people who live in there, as if the phantasmagoria of the place had spread to its half-human creatures. In *Les Misérables*, Hugo describes the gang of conmen and criminals, *la bande à Patron-Minette*, as 'un mystérieux voleur à quatre têtes, [...] le polype monstrueux du mal habitant la crypte de la société' (*Mis.*, II, p. 253). The people of the *bas-fond*, like the people of the *Cour des Miracles*, are repeatedly compared to every possible infernal creature, not only animal (spiders, bats) but also supernatural (demons, devils, ghouls, vampires, ghosts, spectres). They are described in a bestial and fantastic way: the escape of Claquesous is described as a *féerie* (II, p. 394 – although Hugo also suggests that the police may have let him go), whilst Eponine is seen as 'une envoyée des ténèbres' by Marius (II, p. 272) and as a goblin by Mabeuf (II, p. 401). For the animality of these creatures is not the worst aspect of their abnormality: worst of all is the urban evil that seems to invade their soul – if they still have one. This image of bestiality underlines the double abnormality of the 'people of the abyss', both animal (biological beast) and evil (the Biblical Beast). The figures of animality and the Beast intermingle in an extremely powerful way, mixing bestiality and demonisation and linking animality to pure evil. Hence the discourse of order and peace which seeks to protect society from being overwhelmed by waves of wild and primitive savagery.[11] 'Order and peace', the powerful political message of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, matches its time, reassuring rural France and the bourgeois elite alike, both of which are terrorised by the resurgence of the red spectre of *sans-culotterie*. By that time, the myth of the People fails to compensate for the equally powerful myth of the *populace*.

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[11]Dolf Oehler, *Le Spleen contre l'oubli. Juin 1848. Baudelaire, Flaubert, Heine, Herzen* (Paris: Payot, 1996), p. 37-8.

(ii) From the People to the *populace*: the illegitimacy of popular revolt

> *Il y a sous toutes les grandes villes des fosses aux lions,*
> *des cavernes fermées d'épais barreaux. [...] Des cages*
> *ouvertes, s'élancent les hyènes de 93 et les gorilles de*
> *la Commune.*[12]

This clash between the myth of an enlightened, revolutionary People and that of reckless, mob-like barbarians is one of many aspects of the mythical framework of nineteenth-century France. Both because of their violence (the People degenerating into the mob) and their resignation (accepting Napoleon III's regime), the people are not fulfilling their promise. How can one explain this deviancy when it is said time and time again that the People as such are good and benefit from a reliable instinct? Michelet in particular – who sees himself as one of them – insists on this point:

> Le trait éminent, capital, qui m'a toujours frappé le plus, dans ma longue étude du peuple, c'est que, parmi les désordres de l'abandon, les vices de la misère, j'y trouvais une richesse de sentiment et une bonté de cœur. [...] ils suivent un instinct de bonté, l'aveugle élan d'un bon cœur (Pe, p. 64).

If they are so good and perceptive, then how can they turn their back on their revolutionary ideals? Ignorance, misery, the dehumanisation of the mob: interpretations vary. The urge to educate (Hugo particularly insists on that), to enlighten the masses, reveals a weakening optimism. By the end of the century, a whole tradition of suspicion and fear, running from Maistre to Le Bon will legitimate a certain degree of alienation of the people in favour of social cohesion. From Versailles 1789, to Versailles 1871, the century is driven by this question: if the People's violence was legitimate in 1789, even sacralised, how would their violence in the nineteenth century be interpreted? What meaning was to be given to the relentless revolutions and riots that continued to shake the capital?

1848 was a turning point in a process that saw the myth of the People gradually being replaced with the ideology of class struggle; the ideal of national unity now seemed clearly undermined by social and economic divisions. And this was only two years after Michelet devoted a third of his *Le Peuple* to what should unite them. As he was to acknowledge later: 'un monde a sombré depuis lors' (Pe, preface of 1865, p. 247). June inflicted a fatal blow to the *dispositif légendaire*. And the myth of the People was affected by something that June 1848 had made explicit: a clash between the People – as it had thus far been imagined – and the people who were fighting on the barricades

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[12]Théophile Gautier, *Tableaux de Siège, Paris, 1870-1871* (Paris: Charpentier, 1871), pp. 372-3.

against the Republican troops. Bourgeois and workers no longer had the same dreams.[13] Michelet had been proud to be counted among the *barbares* in 1846, but when his hunch that France could be divided into two nations became reality, the emotional quality of the word *barbares* took a new dimension.[14]

The myth of the People elaborated in the nineteenth century in France was an intellectual construction in the way Hobbes and Rousseau's concept of 'état de nature' had been: an idea more than a reality. It was in the nature of that myth to meet a need for social cohesion that had been at risk ever since the French revolution. The abstract quality of the notion helped to attenuate the many divisions that threatened France at a time which was also characterised by an increasing tendency to individualism: 'entre individu et groupe, il n'y a pas de différences sociales ou économiques', Ellul notes; 'c'est une idée abstraite à laquelle on confère tous les attributs de la souveraineté'.[15] This intellectual construction was also a sacred and mythical one; one that had deified the People, France, and history in a single move.

The myth of the People fueled the politics of the first part of the century. Hence, the effort to excuse, or even legitimise, its revolutionary violence, as it allowed the People to access history, as we have seen in the previous chapter. It is this myth that endured until 1848, when universal suffrage gave it a fatal blow: no one had thought then than the People could go wrong. The constitution of the myth of the People in its Parisian shrine had somehow de-realised the rest of the country. But in December 1848, universal suffrage consigned the 'capitale du genre humain' to a marginal place. Was there a *national* myth of the People? As Marx argued, 1848 and 1851 have to be understood together, the coup being nothing more than the natural outcome of the peasants' decision to elect a Napoleon as their leader.[16] The socio-economic structure of the French peasantry fragmented the country into tiny, self-sufficient and isolated groups, with no sense of belonging to a community (class, people nor nation). France was then nothing more than the sum-total of its inhabitants, lacking collective consciousness: 'the great bulk of the French nation is formed by simple accretion, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes' (p. 117). Marx further argued that this

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[13]Servier notes a difference between the bourgeois rational, scientific technocratic utopia and working class millenarianism. '[L'utopie bourgeoise] 'représente les aspirations de la bourgeoisie, à l'opposé de toute pensée révolutionnaire, de toute régénération de la société par la seule vertu mystique du peuple'. Jean Servier, *Histoire de l'utopie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 366.

[14]'Le mot me plaît, je l'accepte... *Barbares*!' (p. 72). He later adds: 'Une France!... Ne devenons jamais deux nations, je vous prie'. (p. 75). Hugo summarises it all: 'au fond que fut juin 1848? Une révolte du peuple contre lui-même' (*Mis.*, III, p. 197).

[15]Ellul, *Histoire des institutions*, p. 357.

[16]See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 116-7.

undermines the democratic value of the universal suffrage which now benefits the executive power: if the people have no political sense, then their vote only means they surrender their democratic power to Napoleon III. But the perverted universal suffrage has another impact, this time on Paris's pretense to speak in the name of the People. If universal suffrage claims to guarantee the democratic nature of a regime, it also gives primacy to unpoliticised peasant over potentially revolutionary Parisians.

The result was that the city that had embedded the revolutionary values for so long was marginalised in the name of democracy. Worse, Paris, blemished by the criminality and envy associated with it, was now viewed as perverting its mythical mission, confusing riots with revolution. After they had contributed to the myth of the People, Michelet and Hugo needed to clearly separate the enlightening myth from the darkening mobs of the nineteenth century – those Maistre called 'la populace', described with a similar fascinated horror by Zola and Le Bon. And if Hugo deplored that the People were asleep, he, too, acknowledged that the mob most certainly were not.

If Hugo remains the poet of the People, he is equally the writer of the crowds. The distinction between the two is crucial in his work and thought. Numerous figures and visions serve to show how the people, when not serving their sacred mission, were thought of as degenerating into *populace*. It is the case, notably, of the people of *La Cour des Miracles*, whose crooks have nothing to do with the People : 'déchet du passé et présence prophétique des "classes dangereuses"', Seebacher comments.[17] For Hugo, the people are as different from the *populace* as the revolution is from the *émeute*[18] – the difference being one of legitimacy: 'il y a l'émeute et il y a l'insurrection', he explains, 'ce sont deux colères; l'une a le tort, l'autre a le droit'. For Hugo, it is the reaction against tyranny that legitimises insurgency: 'la guerre du tout contre la fraction est insurrection; l'attaque de la fraction contre le tout est émeute' (*Mis.*, III, p. 77). On the other hand, revolution cannot be confused with the *jacquerie* – 'révolte du malaise contre le bien-être' (*Mis.*, III, p. 23). The enlightenment brought to and by the People in 1789 rendered the *jacquerie* obsolete: 'la révolution est la vaccine de la jacquerie. [...] Le grand ressort du spectre rouge est cassé' (*Mis.*, III, pp. 24-5). In *Paris*, he writes 'après la révolution française, aucune gangrène du peuple français n'est possible' (P, p. 95): the *jacquerie* belongs to the past. Or so it should. But in a context of social division and isolation, envy emerges as a renewed threat, as Tocqueville pointed out:

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[17]Seebacher *Victor Hugo ou le Calcul des profondeurs*, p. 186.

[18]Hugo seems stuck between Maistre on his right, who sees *populace* where he should see the People, and Blanqui on his left, who mistakes the first for the second: 'Il n'y avait dans Blanqui rien du peuple et tout de la populace' (CV, I, p. 781). See also P, pp. 66, 84 and 96 (on Maistre).

Les hommes [...] n'y sont que trop enclins à ne se préoccuper que de leurs intérêts particuliers, toujours trop portés à n'envisager qu'eux-mêmes et à se retirer dans un individualisme étroit où toute vertu publique est étouffée.[19]

This social break-up – envy jeopardising national unity and social cohesion – that became so vividly apparent after June 1848, allows its contemporaries to make sense of the 'spectre rouge' which fails to die as it should after 1789: individual selfishness and *envie* provide a meaningful explanation of the people's otherwise inexplicable tendency to revolt.

The *Jacquerie* encapsulates the counter-myth of the barbarians. It emerges from the phantasmagoria I described earlier. It presents a double threat to social order and to the myth of the People: in both cases, it is antagonistic to the idea of progress (be it bourgeois or romantic), it is archaic. The gap between the two myths is manifest, opposing the mission attributed by the writers to the People to the reality of contemporary uprisings that resisted this model. The people degenerating into mobs was a constant contradiction of the myth of the People born from 1789. Far from being seen as part of a continuing struggle that was anything but resolved with Thermidor, contemporary rioters were associated with criminals and *misérables*. One trademark of the discourse on Parisian rebellion in the second part of the nineteenth century was precisely to confuse urban barbarians and modern revolutionaries, thus denying the latter any moral or political justification.

If collective and spontaneous violence is never interpreted as a political action, it is because it remains highly illegitimate as an expression of the mob, anarchy and chaos. Understood as barbarian, animal and evil *in nature,* it can not be considered as a political, conscious action. The idea that the uprisings of the nineteenth century are based on a thoughtful political agenda is alien to the thinkers of the time. The elite, including the left, sees them as alienated, blind and archaic. Let us insist again on the importance of the ideal of progress in this regard, and its use in a discourse that rejected what it labeled 'archaic'. The myth of the People, the priority of the symbol – as defined by an elite – over the autonomy and identity which the people might constitute for themselves is a major aspect of the discourse against revolutions and uprisings in the second half of the century.

This discourse focuses on the city's *classes dangereuses*; and more specifically on the *ouvrier*. Doubly feared as a possible criminal and a revolutionary, the *ouvrier* is rarely opposed as a political opponent – this would somehow legitimate his form of

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[19]Tocqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la révolution,* pp. 50-1.

protest. Drawing a picture of the lower classes as controlled by their instincts is one way to dodge a political analysis of their revolt and avoid any dialogue: there is no communication possible between men and beasts. For the bestiality of the enemy is not to be taken purely metaphorically: the rioters are real, actual herds of savage beasts, packs of dogs, enraged wolves, hyenas, or even vermin.[20] They are driven by their animal instincts.

The logic is not one of seeking to understand a phenomenon, but one of surviving in the face of a threat by providing relevant meaning – which, as we have seen, is a major function of myth. Monsters, demons, evil are a terrorising representation of the other, one which helps to construct the identity of a community – a priority for the relatively new bourgeois political power. Confusing the city, deviant individuals (criminals or revolutionary) and the masses in the same figure – the monster – the bourgeoisie aims to define *a contrario* the basis for its own social model: rationality, space, light, hygiene, circulation are the major themes not only of bourgeois discourse, but of nineteenth-century urbanism, as we have seen. Bourgeois identity thus defines itself in opposition to its perception of popular violence: based on an idea of human progress, it opposes the animal regression of violence; in insisting on science and rationality, it opposes the instincts liberated by the mob; lastly, the bourgeois see urban, collective violence as reminiscent of the *jacqueries*, as though the *exode rural* had brought legions of barbarians to invade the cities. If 'that mob is [...] identified with the monster [...], revolt itself thus takes the shape of a monster'.[21] It follows that the discourse that denounces riots can only do so by referring to depoliticised, yet highly mythical terms:

> Une lutte manichéenne du Bien contre le Mal, de la civilisation contre la barbarie, de l'ordre contre l'anarchie, de l'intelligence contre la bêtise, de la tête contre le ventre, du devoir contre l'égoïsme, du travail contre la paresse, enfin de l'élite de la société contre tout ce qui est mauvais, pervers et bestial.[22]

We have seen that this discourse is not the prerogative of bourgeois power alone. Hugo, Sue, Zola, all self-proclaimed socialists, all indulged in the fear of their time: the urban mass unleashed, bringing chaos, ordeal, and apocalypse. As the People are frozen into a myth, the incomprehension of what the real, actual people of the city are about reaches new heights. The extraordinary violence of the discourse denouncing the events

[20]Oehler, *Le Spleen contre l'oubli*. See also Pierre Michel, *Un Mythe romantique: les barbares. 1789-1848* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1981), and Jean Pommier, *Les Ecrivains devant la révolution de 1848* (Paris: PUF, 1948).
[21]Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, p. 18.
[22]Paul Lidsky, *Les Ecrivains contre la Commune* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999) p. 48.

of June 1848 prefigures the almost unanimous denunciation of the Commune.[23] And by 1871, the rhetorical violence is unleashed with virtually no dissident voice to be heard. It seems that the time has then come to settle scores with the great urban monster and the fears it had generated for so long. The defeat of the Commune brings Paris down. And it falls to the writers to put the last nail in the coffin: the last Parisian insurrection generated the most unanimous literary denunciation of a revolution, even among self-proclaimed socialists such as Zola.

(iii) Urban expiation: the end of a myth

I believe one of the best illustrations of the outburst of rhetorical violence against the Communards is to be found in Zola. Just as Hugo was the poet of the People, Zola was undoubtedly the writer of the mobs. Before writing directly about the Commune, he had produced one of his masterpieces which can be said to be deeply influenced by the Parisian events. Although set in the North of France and focusing on the mines, I regard *Germinal* as an allegory of the *bas-fond*: the population is equally in the dark, physically, morally and metaphorically; equally sodden with misery. *Le Voreux* represents both the inferno of modern industrial cities and the never-ending fall of the people.[24] It is the ultimate symbol of the urban underworld, with its claustrophobia (the mines' galleries) and darkness (coal and the absence of light); the promiscuity between men and women; moral depravation; absolute misery; and just enough political consciousness to bring the *misérables* to their ruin without enlightening them.

The scenes of insane crowds – one of Zola's trademarks – culminate in a mad uprising before the closing of the novel brings the promise of future germination:

> Des hommes poussaient, une armée noire, vengeresse, qui germait lentement dans les sillons, grandissant pour les récoltes du siècle futur, et dont la germination allait faire bientôt éclater la terre.[25]

A promise which is met in *La Débâcle* – the penultimate episode of Zola's great panorama of life under the Second Empire, *Les Rougon-Macquart*.[26]

In *La Débâcle*, Zola proposes an extraordinary account of the Commune. The two main protagonists, Jean and Maurice, had met during the Prussian war in 1870 and

[23]See Oehler on 1848 and Lidsky on 1871.

[24]See Jean-Claude Charvoz, 'Le Monde imaginaire d'Emile Zola d'après les Rougon-Macquart', in *Le Retour du mythe* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1980), pp. 83-115.

[25]Emile Zola, *Germinal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 594.

[26]Emile Zola, *La Débâcle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). 'La débâcle' generally refers to the military disaster of Sedan, but the dramatic outcome of the self-inflicted defeat of Paris certainly prolongs the disaster of 1870.

become close friends. Yet in 1871 they find themselves on opposite sides: Maurice is a
Parisian Communard, Jean a Provincial Versaillais. They remain friends. However,
during a fight, Jean accidentally fires on his friend. Overwhelmed with his act, he then
hides him, protecting him, trying to look after a wound that will prove fatal. Meanwhile,
Paris is burning, set alight by the desperate Communards gone insane as their inevitable
defeat comes closer.

'Paris brûle !' is the final chapter's *leitmotiv*, illustrating its main theme: expiation –
'expiation de tout un peuple' (p. 554). The capital of *Nana* and *La Curée*, of the *Bonheur
des Dames* and *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, the city of all the depravations of the
second Empire, the great Babylon, faces its apocalyptic sentence at last, burning and
bleeding altogether:

> Une grande clarté rouge éclairait déjà le ciel, au sud, comme si tout Paris se fût embrasé. A mesure
> que la nuit s'était faite, cette lueur avait grandi; et, peu à peu, elle gagnait l'horizon entier,
> ensanglantant un vol de petits nuages qui se noyaient, vers l'est, au fond des ténèbres accrues (p.
> 551).

The Prussians, who had been unable to take the capital despite a harsh siege, now
contemplate the spectacle with delight: despite their victory over France, 'rien ne valait
ce spectacle de Paris, détruit de folie furieuse, s'incendiant lui-même' (p. 554). Yet they
are not simply pictured as mere enemies, enjoying the self-inflicted French defeat, they
see themselves, rather, as France's new divine wardens, sent to

> Châtier un peuple pervers. Paris brûlait en punition de ses siècles de vie mauvaise, du long amas de
> ses crimes et de ses débauches. De nouveau, les Germains sauveraient le monde, balayeraient les
> dernières poussières de la corruption latine (p. 555).

But what makes the necessity of divine punishment all the more poignant is that it is a
vision shared by Maurice himself. The wounded, feverish rebel goes from nihilistic,
frantic, delirium to the consciousness of the evil nature of the Commune. Zola excels in
descriptions of madness; here, Maurice's insanity is fueled by the fire that is burning
Paris and him at the same time: 'Ah ! dit à son tour Maurice, repris de folie devant cette
destruction qu'il avait voulue, que tout flambe donc et que tout saute !' (p. 561) – a
passage that echos Souvarine's trance in *Germinal*. The feverish delirium brings
Maurice to the fantastic vision of a fiery dance in the Tuileries: 'Ah ! Dansez, dansez
donc, dans vos cotillons qui fument avec vos chignons qui flamboient' (p. 562). The
lights of the second Empire that had fed on misery, and was inextricably perverted by
disease are now shining in its own destruction: it is all too good to see the purifying

flames bringing it all to an end. The inevitable reference to Sodom and Gomorrha made by Zola at this stage symbolises the fate of modern Babylon.

The fire purifies not only because it destroys the Paris of Napoleon III but also because it reduces a revolutionary city to ashes. The second Empire and the insurrection are seen as the two faces of the same coin: the two signs of Paris perversion. The capital of envy – 'ville unique et universelle, machine à produire de la gloire et de l'innovation, mais aussi de l'échec et de l'amertume'[27] – had come to symbolise moral, urban, political, and social degradation altogether. Paris was rotten to the core, not just with filthy Second Empire lucre, but equally with the revolutionaries' envy. The Communards have just added to the dirt (p. 569).

When asked why he, a soldier at Sedan, joined in such a perverse course of action, why he joined these 'scum', Maurice does not refute the terms of the question, nor the 'saleté' of his actions: 'parce qu'il y a trop de souffrance, trop d'iniquité et trop de honte', he answers in a tone reminiscent of Vallès. His actions, like those of Souvarine and Etienne in *Germinal*, can be explained in many ways – misery, hunger, injustice –; yet they remain essentially illegitimate and tarnished with madness, and it falls to Maurice himself to acknowledge it. As Paul Lidsky noted, the best way to prove that the Commune is evil is to have a Communard say so: 'non seulement les Communards font leur autocritique, mais encore ils deviennent les porte-parole des écrivains'.[28]

The punishment has only started, though, and it is now the turn of the Versaillais to indulge in destruction in a 'Paris délivré' (p. 570). Delivered from its imperial sins by the fire, it can now be freed from its revolutionary sinners. As the ashes fly all over the city, Paris continues to burn, and the settling of scores begins. The scale is great, but also extraordinarily mythical:

> La démence soufflait. [...] Détruire pour détruire, ensevelir la vieille humanité pourrie sous les cendres d'un monde, dans l'espoir qu'une société nouvelle repousserait heureuse et candide, en plein paradis terrestre des primitives légendes ! (p. 571).

Maurice fully subscribes to the need for this destruction, again echoing Souvarine's nihilistic frenzy in *Germinal*. War is good, he argues, 'elle fait son œuvre' (p. 572). And this work is to tear out the weed, and to enable the good seeds to grow. The radical nature of the treatment is justified, he argues, as he recalls his friend Jean's advice:

> Lorsqu'on avait de la pourriture quelque part, un membre gâté, ça valait mieux de le voir par terre, abattu d'un coup de hache, que d'en crever comme d'un choléra... J'ai songé souvent à cette parole,

[27]Christophe Charle, *Paris Fin de siècle. Culture et politique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1998), p. 12.
[28]Lidsky, *Les Ecrivains contre la Commune*, pp. 138-9.

> depuis que je me suis trouvé seul, enfermé dans ce Paris de démence et de misère... Eh bien ! c'est moi le membre gâté que tu as abattu... (p. 576).

A pathetic acknowledgement: Maurice admits that *he* is the rotten part of his friend: 'j'étais l'ulcère collé à tes os' (p. 576); which equals saying that Paris is France's gangrenous limb. This becomes particularly evident if we bear in mind that Jean is a Macquart, stemming from the rotten part of the genealogical tree elaborated by Zola in his obsession with atavism. The Macquarts are affected by alcoholism and madness: Jean is the son of Antoine, so soaked in alcohol that he will die of self-combustion;[29] he is also the brother of Gervaise (possibly Zola's most pathetic example of atavistic fate); the uncle of demented Jacques (*La Bête humaine*), the perverted Nana, and of Etienne, the activist and survivor of *Germinal*, who suffered from an attack of delirium similar to Jacques's in *La Bête humaine*, and similarly explained by an insane and destructive heredity. And yet one exception in a rotten genealogical branch, Jean is the healthy part, the *rural* one.

Maurice dies and so soon will the fire, the redness of the city owing more now to the sunset but still reminiscent of the blaze: 'les toitures s'embrasaient, telles que des lits de charbons. [...] Paris achevait de se consumer en braise' (p. 581). The bad seed is gone to allow the germination of a long desired golden age:

> Le pauvre être s'en était allé, affamé de justice, dans la suprême convulsion du grand rêve noir qu'il avait fait, cette grandiose et monstrueuse conception de la vieille société détruite, de Paris brûlé, du champ retourné et purifié, pour qu'il y poussât l'idylle d'un nouvel âge d'or (p. 580).

In an extraordinary statement, Zola concludes with a reactionary call for the traditional rural values of France, a return to its pre-revolutionary roots:

> C'était la partie saine de la France, la raisonnable, la pondérée, la paysanne, celle qui était restée le plus près de la terre, qui supprimait la partie folle, exaspérée, gâtée par l'Empire, détraquée de rêveries et de jouissances; et il lui avait ainsi fallu couper dans sa chair même, avec un arrachement de tout l'être, sans trop savoir ce qu'elle faisait. Mais le bain de sang était nécessaire, et de sang français, l'abominable holocauste, le sacrifice vivant, au milieu du feu purificateur. Désormais le calvaire était monté jusqu'à la plus terrifiante des agonies, la nation crucifiée expiait ses fautes et allait renaître (p. 576).

As the evening twilight falls on Paris as a modern, revolutionary myth, the dawn is set on the promise of a new, yet traditional France, a healthy, non-urban, non-destructive revolution in its original meaning of an eternal return.

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[29]Emile Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1968), pp. 293-4.

(iv) The thirst for urban apocalypse

What the blaze of Paris, or rather, its narration by Zola indicates, is a sort of fascination with seeing Babylon on its knees, humiliated by itself, defeated by its own perversion and excesses. The tension of the century between boredom and the nostalgia for greatness finds its breaking point here: 'intellect and feeling were, literally, fascinated by the prospect of a purging fire'.[30] The greater the city, the greater the fall; as the ultimate city, the fall of Paris is described as the greatest in history and myth alike: 'ni Babylone, ni ses filles, ni la vieille Sodome et la vieille Gomorrhe n'ont ainsi péri de leurs propres mains. [...] Jérusalem est dépassée. Depuis le Christ, aucune ville n'est tombée de cette mort'.[31] The apocalypse symbolised by the burning of Paris echoes the abnormal status of the capital – 'image complètement hors normes de la capitale française, foyer de toutes les passions, de toutes les folies, de toutes les richesses, de tous les pouvoirs'.[32] From 1789 to 1871, Paris had grown out of proportion: capital of modernity, and of the new, bourgeois power, it had also come to harbour too many antagonisms, too many dark corners, too many uncertainties, too many threats. The extraordinary success of the photo albums of Paris's ruins that followed seems to make the best use of new technology in order to immortalise Mercier's daydream a century earlier, when he had imagined and visualised Paris crumbling down over its weak foundation (see chapter 4).

As long as Paris was resisting the Prussians, it was fighting in the name of France in a struggle made all the more sublime by France's defeat. But when the struggle becomes Franco-French again – 'la guerre a éclaté entre Paris et Versailles' (CV, II, p. 632) –, it seems that the time has come to put Babylon down. In 1871, Paris ceases to lead France as it claimed to do for about a century; imposing its rules, its myth, its phantasmagoria upon the rest of the country. The domination of modern Babylon comes to an end. And what an end it is: an apocalyptic self-destruction. Paris could not be defeated by anyone other than itself: 'Paris ne sera pas tué, Paris se tuera lui-même'.[33]

This urban apocalypse 'fired' the writers' imagination. As if they felt that the blaze signified the end of a myth, they could not help but see the last Parisian uprising and its defeat as something worthy of the great monster Paris once had been. How

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[30]Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, p. 27.

[31]Louis Veuillot, 'Paris brûlé', in *Paris pendant les deux sièges*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Lathielleux, 1927), vol. XIII, p. 490.

[32]Charle, *Paris Fin de siècle*, p. 8.

[33]Maxime Du Camp, *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie jusqu'en 1870* (Monaco: Rondeau, 1993), p. 747.

extraordinary, though, that it fell to the writers to indulge in the apocalypse of an urban monster they had so willingly contributed to creating.

The fact that the Commune was almost never analysed but rejected; never seen as a political (or even social) event but as the outburst of senseless anarchy and destruction – *fièvre obsidionale* – takes the dominant discourse to a spiritual and moral level.[34] The meaning of the *semaine sanglante* is essentially moral: it is a crusade against evil, and a healthy reaction against the havoc of envy. And this quasi-mystical fight is precisely set in the 'cité maudite', modern Babylon. The building of the Sacré-Cœur as a gesture of expiation will be the outcome of this religious logic of exorcism. In a century of secularisation and rationality, the contrast is striking.

The reference to an apocalypse tells us not so much about the reality of the Commune itself as the degree of mythical thinking reached by 1871 France. The increased emotional sharpness underlines a certain primacy of myth over the real. If the discourse of the apocalypse appears striking in the century of rationality, let us not forget that rationality itself serves a myth; thinking in terms of progress helps to delegitimise the deviant by labeling it 'archaic', going in the wrong direction as defined by the dominant discourse. Similarly it uses a vocabulary of science to demonstrate the inadequacy (biological, pathological) of the deviant. The doctors of the city claim to use science to make a diagnosis, based on an apparently neutral and objective observation of the facts, when their description is shaped by dominant ethics and modern beliefs. As Corbin noted, Zola 'reproduit les découpes sociales indiquées par les savants et par les observateurs sociaux, quelques décennies auparavant'.[35] Yet again, rationalism and myth meet when they confuse 'le mot et la chose'.

Thus it would be wrong to assume that the military and symbolic victory of the Versaillais is solely a victory of a reactionary elite. If the rhetoric of the apocalypse dominates the perception of the Commune's fall, it is also because of a tension that has run through the whole century ever since the fall of Napoleon; a mental framework made of the already mentioned boredom and exacerbated imagination that grew in Paris; of the morbid fascination for darkness, emptiness and heroism; of the poetics of boredom, disgust and decadence. Gautier's 'plutôt la barbarie que l'ennui' seems to sum it all up, as Steiner noted:

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[34]See Lidsky p. 68. There is no point in analysing what is perceived as a pathological and criminal movement.

[35]Corbin, *Le Temps, le désir et l'horreur*, p. 234.

If we can come to understand the sources of that perverse longing, of that itch for chaos, we will be nearer to an understanding of our own state, and of the relations of our condition to the accusing ideal of the past.[36]

The picture of Paris ashes, the Sacré-Cœur, the apocalypse are stunning illustrations of the theologico-political framework of the nineteenth century and of the social function of myth in modern societies, particularly in times of crisis and identity's uncertainties. France's reconstruction had to take into account the fragility of the national community, which made it all the more urgent to create favorable conditions for the constitution of collective identity. The violence of the rhetoric against the Commune is therefore no more senseless than the violence it denounces; it has its own logic and responds to a very real issue of social cohesion, seeking securing references that would allow the constitution of two antagonistic yet complementary identities: the society's and the monster's. The discourse's violence reflects the violence of the fear felt by the Versaillais: it is not only or even predominantly rational but affective. As Lidsky observed, '[il] reflète la peur et [...] doit, contradictoirement, l'entretenir en même temps que la conjurer',[37] one of the main functions of myth as we have seen. The fear of social disintegration generated the discourse of national, republican unity facing the divisions brought by the communal agenda of the workers; nothing could better symbolise the end of the People and Paris as a myth.

And nothing could better symbolise the growing mythical function of a second Leviathan either: the modern state. For if Paris is seen as an urban monster, it is also associated with the regime's machine. In a context of secularisation of society and profound shake-up of its foundations, it now falls to the state to guarantee social cohesion and national identity. Paris-state; Paris-place: on a political level too, the Parisian double Leviathan informs us about the function of myth in modern society.

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[36]Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, p. 18.
[37]Lidsky, *Les Ecrivains contre la Commune*, p. 158.

Chapter 7

Paroles at Odds: the law of the state, the conscience of the seer

> *Vous fondez une république de glaives, [...] je
> fonderais une république d'esprits.* [1]
>
> *Si Paris a fait la révolution, il l'a aussi en partie
> perdue.* [2]

In the aftermath of the Commune, Paris was stripped of its military and municipal power: the *garde nationale* was dissolved and, from 1871 to 1974, the capital would be the only city without a mayor. [3] These decisions favoured a clear distinction between local and national power, the latter regarding the municipality with a suspicion reminiscent of Thermidor's. 'Saturée d'histoire, de luttes et de politique, la ville des révolutions est en même temps, pour la première fois, confrontée à son impuissance réelle'. [4] This, in turn, affected the symbolic status of the capital. In this final chapter, I propose to look at this change of status which affected Paris as a site of power. Although the Republic seems to prevail, we shall see that the defeat of Paris as a myth can be interpreted as a catastrophe equivalent to that of 1848. Inevitably, it fell to Hugo the seer to respond.

The local, popular power of revolutionary Paris was replaced with a more national, representative and institutional entity after Thermidor, and most notably under Napoleon's leadership. We shall see how the Leviathan-city coexisted with the Leviathan-state, and the importance of the latter in the process of modern myth-making. The question of local and national power is of major importance: as Lefort pointed out, 'la position et la représentation du pouvoir, la figuration de son lieu, sont [...] constitutives de l'espace social, de sa forme, de sa scène'. [5] I aim to demonstrate that the social function of myth in modern times cannot be fully understood without a look at the modern state.

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[1]Hugo, QT, p. 371.

[2]Daniel Roche, *Atlas de la Révolution française*, 11. 'Paris' (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 2000), <www.ehess.fr/editions/ouvrages/0013-Introduction.html>, p. 4.

[3]Paris was under the authority of two *préfets*, hence the ministries of the Interior and the Police – whenever these two were separate. Clemenceau vainly proposed a mayor for Paris: 'L'Assemblée juge qu'un vrai maire de Paris serait trop puissant dans la République' (Favier, *Paris*, 897). More recently, Jacques Attali reported Mitterrand's own suspicion towards a Parisian mayor: 'Souvenez-vous d'Etienne Marcel' he confided, *Verbatim* (Paris: Arthème-Fayard, 1993), vol. 1, p. 23.

[4]Charle, *Paris fin de siècle*, p. 13.

[5]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, pp. 122-3.

The state is rarely considered in the field of *l'imaginaire*, and yet studying it provides an excellent perspective on the relation between facts and their representation:

> [L]'histoire de l'Etat doit être par excellence le produit d'une articulation entre l'histoire des faits et l'histoire des idées et des représentations sociales. L'Etat travaille la société en même temps qu'il est constitué par l'image que celle-ci se fait de lui. Il n'est pas un objet qui aurait en lui-même sa consistance propre, extérieur à la société, mais la résultante d'une interaction permanente avec elle.[6]

This effectively brings *l'imaginaire* and politics together: 'Produit de la société, [l'Etat] a simultanément vocation à la produire'.[7] Social fragmentation and political uncertainties generated by the revolution's legacy led the state to evolve so as to ensure that favourable politico-imaginary conditions would strengthen the nation's cohesion: 'L'Etat entend être à la fois force de gouvernement et de recomposition du tissu social'.[8] It is the unique politico-religious situation of France in 1789 that eventually led the state to embark on a new role – both modern and mythical.

An understanding of the new symbolic status of Paris and the state will lead to Hugo's reflection upon the republican ideal in *Quatrevingt-treize*, a novel written at a time when the republic made its third attempt to inscribe the revolutionary legacy in solid institutions. In the aftermath of 1871, Hugo chooses to go back to 1793 in order to rethink the mythical function of Paris as the place of revolutionary revelation at the very moment when the city as a modern myth was being quashed. Looking at Girard again will help to better understand what Hugo's conception of an enlightened Republic, and what he hopes to achieve in terms of demystification.

(i) A revolutionary *parole*

It is worth remembering that the Revolution of 1789 occurred in a context of relatively weak administrative structures led by an equally weak head of state. The revolutionaries found themselves in a unique position as they could not operate within a reliable institutional framework.

> C'est ce qui explique sans doute pour une large part l'extraordinaire fluidité de la politique révolutionnaire, qui n'a jamais de point d'appui étatique fort. La Révolution, en 1789, s'est installée dans un espace abandonné par l'ancienne monarchie, espace qu'elle n'a jamais réussi à restructurer de façon durable et systématique jusqu'au Consulat.[9]

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[6]Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours*, p. 14.

[7]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 217.

[8]Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours*, p. 115.

[9]Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, p. 80.

This relatively ill-structured space – further broken up by the Revolutionaries themselves – was nonetheless very much localised: as we have seen in chapter 3, the Revolution was the moment that brought political power back to Paris and 'sacralised' the capital.

The concentration of powers in one same location was to benefit the Parisians : 'Tous les pouvoirs sont désormais concentrés à Paris, et à la merci du peuple'.[10] But it was on August 1792 that the people of Paris stepped in the institutional arena too. The legal *commune* was swept away by the *sectionnaires* and replaced with a *commune insurrectionnelle*. 'Maître de la rue, le peuple est maître du pouvoir'.[11] The *citoyens passifs* were now fully integrated in the revolutionary process: they could join the *garde nationale* and the local assemblies, in other words, be militarily and politically active: 'Par le suffrage universel et l'armement des citoyens passifs, cette *seconde révolution* intégra le peuple dans la nation et marqua l'avènement de la démocratie politique'.[12]

In this unique situation made of an elusive institutional framework and the pressure of the Parisian street, the revolutionaries had to compete in a symbolic contest for a position of legitimacy as recognised by the popular and revolutionary discourse. The empty space was, in this context, filled not so much with new institutions, as with the people's *parole* seen as encapsulating and expressing the new idea of *souveraineté populaire*.

Claude Lefort observed that the logic of the revolutionary discourse during the Terror consisted in the paradoxical effort to speak for, and represent, the *souveraineté populaire* without ever giving the impression of stepping into the (monarchic) role of head of the new regime: 'la Terreur multiplie les positions de pouvoir en ouvrant la possibilité à qui les conquiert de masquer l'exercice de la toute-puissance [...]. La Terreur est révolutionnaire en ceci qu'elle interdit l'occupation de cette place'.[13] In other words, the leaders have to be seen as the voice of the Revolution; their position depends on them personifying, and being identified with the revolutionary *parole*:

> Le héros révolutionnaire tire son existence de la parole qui le nomme comme tel. [...] Le pouvoir de la parole est lié au charme tel que, émise par l'orateur, elle semble plus que la parole d'un homme: celle même du héros collectif, de l'Assemblée ou, par-delà l'Assemblée, celle du peuple.[14]

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[10]Favier, *Paris*, p. 844.

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 846.

[12]Albert Soboul, *La Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 245.

[13]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 116. Lefort starts from a speech made by Robespierre on 11 Germinal An II. See pp. 81-119.

[14]*Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

It is precisely this sense of a collective discourse voiced by one, where the word of the *Conventionnels* and those of the people seem to merge, that is seen, notably by Hugo, as the indication of a revelation similar to the revelation of the Word-*Verbe* in Saint John:[15] 'Il y avait dans la Convention une volonté qui était celle de tous et n'était celle de personne. Cette volonté était une idée, idée indomptable et démesurée qui soufflait dans l'ombre du haut du ciel. Nous appelons cela la Révolution' (QT, p. 171). This idea is not man-made, it is the Word of God: 'Le rédacteur énorme et sinistre de ces grandes pages a un nom, Dieu, et un masque, Destin' (*Ibid.*).

As we have seen in chapter 5, the Revolution was the moment when God's will and the people's action meet. What happens in the Convention is precisely the Word of God being heard through the revolutionary *parole*: 'La Convention a toujours ployé au vent; mais ce vent sortait de la bouche du peuple et était le souffle de Dieu' (p. 172). Hence the importance of the revolutionary and popular *parole* in *Quatrevingt-treize*: the voice of the people 'se fait enfin parole prononcée, proclamée, entendue, écoutée. La construction du roman porte la marque de ce tournant essentiel qui se situe, dans l'histoire, en 93 et qui s'exécute en un lieu précis: Paris'.[16] If Paris is the sacred place of revolutionary revelation it is because it is the place where this *parole* is expressed.

For Hugo, there is more in 1793 than the Terror: the bloodshed coincided with the peak of the revolutionary *parole* as expressed by the people of Paris and the Convention in a symbiosis never achieved since. Hugo goes into great detail to explain how the assembly operated as a place, so as to allow the public not only to flock in, but also to speak to and with the *Conventionnels* in a permanent, ever-renewed dialogue (QT, p. 155); how the Convention's proceedings were constantly under siege from the people's expectations and wishes (QT, pp. 165-6). In this relation lies the whole ambiguity of 1793 as the peak of revolutionary *sacralité*. The sacred had been – literally – detached from the king's body and was now invested in the *parole*. Hence the symbolic status of the *Conventionnels*, the voices of the Revolution. However, the position of the people in the revolutionary process since August 1792 meant that the word of the *Conventionnels* needed constantly to be in tune with the people's. Should the link between the people and their representatives be in crisis, the first could reclaim the *glaive de la loi*. This sword of Damocles had hung over the Convention since the 10 August which had shown the will of the people to take the law into their own hands when they perceive the assembly as impotent. This is what had triggered the September massacres and the crisis

[15]Or *verbum*, the latin translation of the Greek *logos*, 'intelligence divine organisatrice du monde', Gabrielle Chamarat-Malandain, 'Voix et parole du peuple dans *Quatre-vingt-treize*', Groupe Hugo, 16 décembre 1989, p. 5, n. 23.
[16]Chamarat-Malandain, 'Voix et parole du peuple dans *Quatre-vingt-treize*', p. 1.

of the summer 1793: without a symbolic intermediary, they exerted justice so as to protect the sacred attainments of *their* revolution.[17]

Thermidor marked a radical rupture with this experience. It is in this regard significant that Robespierre, thus far seen as the voice of the *souveraineté populaire*, should be denounced as a tyrant, as someone who manipulated the *parole* to assume a position of power.[18] The *parole* was now held in suspicion, and needed to be replaced by solid institutions. This turning point affected Paris both institutionally and symbolically, as the local was no longer seen capable of embracing and representing the nation. From then on, the construction of modern institutions and administration would grow independently from a *commune de Paris*. The two Leviathans – the city and the state – split and would not be confused again.

After the fall of Robespierre, the elaboration of a new constitution fueled debates and reflections, not just only about the Terror as such, but also about what was now seen as a deviation from the ideals of 1789: the 'despotisme de la liberté' put in place by a revolutionary government and a popular movement. This point is essential in that it would redefine the conception of *souveraineté populaire* in the next century, and with it the conception of the *état libéral*.[19] The whole idea of the new constitution of Year III was precisely to prevent the return of any popular dictatorship.

As the assembly was back in its prerogative of effectively representing the nation, and acted in the name of *souveraineté populaire*, the antagonism between Paris and the nation turned in favour of the province. The suspicion and fear generated by the central role that Paris had played and the last *sans-culotte* riot in Prairial justified for the *Thermidoriens* the need to reduce its power – popular (*sans-culotte*) as well as institutional (the *commune*). The *sans-culottes*' rebellion was crushed and Paris' municipal power was reduced to its '1/83e d'influence' praised by the *Girondins*.[20] Still localised in Paris, the national power was no longer to be confused with a city now under the close control of the state:

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[17]See Sophie Wahnich, *La Liberté ou la mort. Essai sur la Terreur* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2003), p. 45-50. 'Pour comprendre l'économie émotive de la demande de terreur. [...] [Il s'agit] de repérer quand et comment ce qui a été produit comme sacralité révolutionnaire a été bafoué. Ce qui produit effectivement l'effroi, c'est bien cette rupture du sacré' (p. 33). The Parisian *sections* put pressure on the Convention to have the Girondins arrested (2 June 1793), and a few months later to make the terror official (5 September).

[18]The rumour spread that Robespierre wanted to become king. However implausible, this rumour proved believable by many contemporaries. See Bronislaw Baczko, *Comment sortir de la terreur. Thermidor et la révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

[19]The debate started shortly after 9 thermidor. See Benjamin Constant, *De la force du gouvernement actuel de la France et de la nécessité de s'y rallier*, published in 1796 (Paris: Flammarion, 1988).

[20]That is, counting for nothing more than a *département*. A doctrine formulated by the *Conventionnel* Lasource, cited by Favier, *Paris*, p. 853.

La multiplication des fonctionnaires, [...] la présence pesante du préfet, maître du jeu désormais, et la docile élite des notables constituent une toile serrée d'intérêts convergents qui assure le contrôle efficace de la ville et tient en étroite dépendance les classes populaires rendues inoffensives et privées de tout pouvoir.[21]

Meanwhile the state underwent massive transformations. After the turmoil of the Revolution, the administrative structure put in place by Napoleon was designed to endure and develop. Centralism was now combined with greater flexibility, adaptability and control, allowing a balance which favours changes without ever threatening the core of the state-system.[22] No fewer than fifteen different constitutions were adopted between 1791 and 1958; and yet this never undermined the Napoleonic administrative structure which kept expanding. In a century known for its revolutions and political instability, the permanence of the state's apparatus is striking.

If this evolution is essential in an analysis of political mythology, it is because of the relation between the French state and the sacred. As we have seen in chapter 2, a process of secularisation affected the status of kings in the eighteenth century, and gradually brought the Church away from the public sphere. Consequently, the social link was gradually transferred to a secularised state, whose very functions therefore evolved: 'L'Etat n'est pas seulement un appareil administratif. [...] Il est une forme efficace de représentation sociale. [...] Il produit du lien social et de l'unité, met en forme la société et constitue la nation'.[23] If one of the main functions of myth is to preserve social cohesion, in the post-revolutionary (re)construction of the nation, it fell to the state to preserve and facilitate the cohesion, unity, and identity of French society.

(ii) Modern state, mythical function

L'Etat façonne la nation[24]

The transition from religious to secular power leaves the state with the mission and authority to produce meaning for the community. It is now up to the state, via its recognition of the key moments of life (birth, marriage and death are now essentially civil), and through its surveys and missions (as the state itself develops the scope of its prerogatives) to shape society and collective identity, to legitimise the citizens' position

[21]Chaussinand-Nogaret, 'La Ville jacobine et balzacienne', p. 550.

[22]Ellul, *Histoire des Institutions*, p. 363.

[23]Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours*, p. 14-5.

[24]Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la révolution*, pp. 259-60.

within the framework it provides, and to make sense for the community. In this regard, the modern state steps into some functions thus far attached to the Church.

Interestingly enough, the secularisation of the modern state does not weaken the scope of its power: 'Avatar moderne de la sacralisation du pouvoir, la légitimité laïcise son fondement sans en affaiblir la solidité puisqu'à l'investiture divine, elle substitue la consécration juridique'.[25] The sacrality may have left the body of the king, but only to be transferred to the law by the revolutionaries. Burdeau further argues that the evolution of the state comes from the rationalisation of a belief in a superior, sacred authority thus far delegated from the gods:

> Ne pouvant plus attacher crédit aux fables, aux prodiges ni à l'onction sacrée, on demande à une construction intellectuellement rationnelle ce que, dans les siècles anciens, les hommes attendaient de la légende ou de la mythologie. (...) Le concept d'Etat rend acceptable le Pouvoir, en résolvant la contradiction qu'il recèle et qui tient à ce qu'il est individuellement intolérable et socialement inéluctable. Par là, l'idée de l'Etat rejoint bien la raison d'être de la pensée magique qui, par le sens qu'elle attribue aux phénomènes qu'elle explique, subordonne les comportements individuels aux croyances collectives.[26]

Rational thinking and technique may well replace mythology, but the relation to a sacred institutional power survives: 'La France qui a le culte de l'Etat et de l'unité réductionniste, a changé de religion d'Etat, passant du catholicisme gallican à la religion athée de l'Etat'.[27] In fact, this secular religion is an essential part of the evolution of the French administrative system: 'Fatalité de la désymbolisation du monde: elle appelle son administration', Gauchet argues,

> la prose des bureaux se substitue à la poésie du Prince. C'est au travers de son emprise envahissante [...] que l'Etat assure les êtres de la stable lisibilité de leur monde que leur procurait autrefois la dévotion pour le dépositaire sacré du dessein intangible des dieux.[28]

Rosanvallon analysed how the role of the state progressed after 1789 to produce the nation and society.[29] What changed with the revolutionary and post-revolutionary state was the will to unify the nation, shape its references, and rationalise its organisation: 'permettre une administration facile et régulière conforme aux impératifs d'exactitude et d'uniformité requis par un gouvernement représentatif de l'unité nationale' (p. 103). Hence, the interest in education, linguistic policy (promoting French at the expense of

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[25]Georges Burdeau, *L'Etat* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1970), p. 45.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 77.

[27]Chaunu, *Le Basculement religieux de Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, p. 17.

[28]Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, p. 286.

[29]Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours*. Further references will be made in main text in brackets.

local languages and *patois*), enforcement of the metric system: 'il s'agit de mettre en place les techniques et instruments de mise en forme du social' (p. 103).

Here, we grasp the essential role of the state in the formation of the political imaginary as it aims to shape the social in a context made of the (re)composition of a national community fragmented by the Revolution, the end of *corps intermédiaires* and the subsequent individualisation of society.[30] Rosanvallon underlines the originality of this undertaking: 'tache inédite d'ordre sociologique et culturel qu'il s'assigne pour [...] combler le vide provoqué par l'effondrement des structures corporatives et trouver un substitut à l'ancienne "concorde" du corps politique traditionnel' (p. 99). The modern state thus not only grows in size and power, its very nature changes:

> L'Etat n'est plus seulement compris comme le sommet régulateur et organisateur d'une hiérarchie articulée de corps intermédiaires. Il est érigé en instance de production du social et devient l'agent principal d'unification d'une société d'individus atomisés (p. 96).

Gauchet argues against a dichotomy between society and the state that developed in the nineteenth century – notably by Tocqueville, but also by Marx. The legitimacy of state power, and its apparently paradoxical expansion in the liberal era, lies precisely in the principle of national sovereignty: 's'il est fondé à s'insinuer en tout lieu [...] s'il est appelé à s'intéresser à une gamme toujours plus large de sujets [...] c'est au service de la prise transformatrice qu'une société démocratique entend s'assurer sur l'*ensemble* sans exception des mécanismes et des figures de son ordre'.[31] The state becomes more technical, develops its expertise so as to adapt to society's evolution: 'Ce qui caractérise l'administration moderne c'est que, tout en conservant ces fonctions d'exécution, elle est devenue l'organe de la rationalité technique de la société particulière'.[32] In other words, the state expands, because it sees it as its mission – as the delegate of sovereignty – to know more about its citizens and to act upon more aspects of society:

> Il n'y a pas captation par l'Etat de la commande sociale comme s'il s'agissait de priver méthodiquement la collectivité du savoir sur son être et du pouvoir sur ses fins. Il s'agit au contraire de les lui rendre, et c'est à ce dessein qu'est entièrement ordonnée la concentration dans une instance spéciale des moyens de connaissance, des instruments d'information et de saisie, des facultés d'investissement et d'orientation.[33]

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[30]The *décret D'Allarde* and the *Loi Le Chapelier* suppressed the corporations in 1791. Effectively, this meant to forbid any intermediary power between the citizen and the state and seriously jeopardised the creation and functioning of trade unions.

[31]Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, p. 261.

[32]Eric Weil, *Philosophie politique*, (Paris: Vrin, 1996), p. 149.

[33]Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, pp. 287-8. In fact, the state relies on independent institutions to be properly informed and acts according to the law which also escapes its prerogatives; all this to ensure the good functioning of the social machine: 'tout ce travail immense d'extraction du savoir et de

The nineteenth-century context of increasing social, political and economic fragmentation, and yet, at the same time, of relative tacit consensus about the position of the state and its social function, made it the prime target of political struggle: 'Car s'il est le centre vital de la nation, il suffit de s'en saisir pour être maître de la société'.[34] Furet further demonstrates how the new role of the state explains it has become the 'chief booty of the victor':[35] 'c'est le consensus [sur les structures de l'Etat] qui explique que toute visée de changement social, chez tous, implique la saisie préalable du pouvoir central de l'Etat'.[36]

The belief in the taking over of the state so as to adapt it to some political agenda and change society is nevertheless contradicted by the various regime changes that affected nineteenth-century France, all of which show that the regimes had to adapt to the state machinery, and not the reverse, as Marx himself acknowledged: 'All upheavals perfected this machinery instead of destroying it'.[37] However the belief persisted in the possibility of wresting the state from bourgeois hands and changing it so as to prevent it from serving bourgeois interests. It is only after the Commune that Marx operated a radical turn: in *The Civil War in France*, the Communard experience led him to put the machinery – rather than its bourgeois nature – at the centre of his reflection.[38] The Communards had explored a new model, in total contradiction with the dogma of a strong, centralised state: local, autonomous power, decentralisation, and self-governance. 'Les Communards apportent le modèle "enfin trouvé", Marx concludes, 'modèle qui passe par l'élimination de l'Etat-Leviathan.[39]

This institutional experience could have been criticised and analysed, its flaws highlighted. But as we have seen, such a debate was out of the question outside the

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redéfinition généralisée des normes n'a d'autre nécessité que d'assurer au corps collectif comme tel sa souveraine détermination de lui-même' (*Ibid.*, p. 288).

[34]Furet, *La Révolution française*, vol. 1, p. 9. 'La vie politique française est caractérisée au XIXe siècle par un consensus profond sur les structures de l'Etat, et par un conflit permanent sur les formes du même Etat. [...] Le consensus sur l'Etat administratif rend les révolutions techniquement faciles, et le conflit sur la forme de l'Etat les rend inévitables', Furet explains in 'La Révolution dans l'imaginaire politique français', p. 81.

[35]Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 116.

[36]Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, p. 95.

[37]Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 116.

[38]Ansart argues that such a conception had been the result of an intellectual reflection developed outside the practical conclusion reached by the working class at the same time. Intellectually, the model of a central state seemed necessary. However, a close observation of the Commune's *practice* of local power brought Marx to envisage what had been thus far almost impossible to conceive: that the alienating power of the state-Leviathan might not be inevitable after all. Pierre Ansart, *Idéologies, conflits et pouvoir* (Paris: PUF, 1977), pp. 198 and 204.

[39]*Ibid.*, p. 204.

working-class itself, which was severely damaged anyway by the anti-Communard reaction. In the context of a centralised state that had grown from monarchic absolutism to republican Jacobinism, the Marxian proposition that such a model could and should be outstripped opened up a frightful vision for a France that had not yet fully recovered from the revolutionary shock. 1871 not only reopened the wounds of 1793, it also encroached upon the state's prerogatives – hence the perception of the Communards as bringing chaos to France. For one last time, Paris claimed to be the voice of the nation's interests and republican values, but this time there was no institutional vacuum to be filled: the revolutionary *parole* would be in direct opposition to the institution that claimed to be the incarnation of national sovereignty and society itself.

(iii) Revisiting 1793: resolving the deadlock of 1871

The elections of February 1871 had sent a majority of *hommes de l'ordre* to the new republican assembly, thus reflecting France's rural power and its desire for peace and order – a programme reminiscent of Napoleon III's. Paris – like most major cities – was at odds with the nation, as it had voted for a republican agenda, an essential part of which consisted in pursuing the war against Prussia, and liberating the occupied territory of Alsace and Lorraine.

Quite remarkably, given the past hostility shown by Paris to *fédéralisme*, a taste for municipal power followed, and when the insurrection started in March, one of the first claims was for self-governance: 'Le mouvement se tourne contre l'Etat, contre le pouvoir, contre une Assemblée nationale dans laquelle le peuple de Paris ne se reconnaît pas. [...] L'autonomie politique de Paris est un symbole autant qu'une fin'.[40] Faced with its political weakness, Paris still entertained a nostalgia for its past national role, and although the representative system made its voice marginal, the capital endeavoured to represent the nation in a way similar to 1793, when its voice had led the nation, and when the legitimacy of the people's *parole* had been able to overwhelm the blind legality of the peasants' vote.

Therefore, the fall of the Commune marked the fall of the mythic status of Paris as the embodiment of the revolutionary, popular *parole* born in 1789. The victory of the Versaillais brought a final blow to the thus far untarnished mythical and revelatory quality of the capital of the Revolution. What died in Paris's apocalypse were not solely the bad seeds of urbanity, the evil Babylon, the havoc of envy, the roots of anarchy, the restless Leviathan: the revelatory power of Paris fell too. The fall of Paris in 1871 echoed its rise in 1789 (both occurring in opposition to Versailles), but it was also

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[40]Favier, *Paris*, p. 896.

reminiscent of 1793 in many ways: '93 est la guerre de l'Europe contre la France et de la France contre Paris. Et qu'est-ce que la Révolution? C'est la victoire de la France contre l'Europe et de Paris contre la France' (QT, p. 118). 1871 is a backlash in this regard: Paris defeated by France, France defeated by Europe.[41] For Hugo, this was, after 1851, a second historical catastrophe.

Hugo had shared much of Paris's fate: the siege and the outrageous news of France's defeat. The beginning of the Commune coincided with the funeral of his son, Charles. He then moved to Belgium where he followed the events. If his attitude during the Commune seems ambivalent, his incessant calls for clemency for the Communards marks him out in the context of the *curée* described in the previous chapter. Hugo defended the defeated, pleading repeatedly for amnesty, making every effort to save them (Rochefort in particular) from the government's retaliation. Worse even: he welcomed political refugees in Brussels.[42] His attitude, as we shall see, was not so much a matter of Christian charity as the result of a political and institutional reflection about the nature and system of the republic.

Hugo's profound rethinking of history after 1851 and his philosophy of the revolution developed in exile are put to the test yet again in 1871. The revelatory quality of the Revolution, much as the Christian revelation, ought to have changed history,

> L'avènement de la conscience historique coïncidera avec celle d'une nouvelle logique de l'histoire mettant un terme à l'enchaînement des crimes commis depuis la Révolution française. [...] [Mais] le rejet de l'Empire [est advenu] selon [la loi] du Talion, réanimée par la Commune.[43]

1793 had been justified by Hugo because of the centuries of injustice that had preceded and prepared it. In contrast, the violence of 1871 has no moral, nor historical justification.

It is in the context of post-commune reaction – a reaction made and justified in the name of the Republic itself – that Hugo writes *Quatrevingt-treize*. His perception of the Commune as yet another civil war following yet another attempt at building a republican regime (at that stage by no means guaranteed to last any longer than the

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[41]For Hugo the victory of Germany concerns Europe as a whole. See CV, 2, p. 730.

[42]Hugo's attitude at a time of extreme conflict attracted much violent reaction: his home in Brussels was besieged (see CV, 2, pp. 646-7) and he was subsequently expelled from Belgium - his attitude of restraint generating a much violent opposition, a further illustration of the Erasmus syndrome. The following year, Barbey famously demolished *L'Année terrible* as a piece of Prussian propaganda: 'Vous n'êtes donc [...] qu'un employé volontaire de la Prusse: [...] Vous pouvez renoncer à la langue française, qui ne s'en plaindra pas; car depuis longtemps vous l'avez assez éreintée. Ecrivez votre prochain livre en allemand', Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'Un poète prussien' 13 mai 1872, in *Dernières polémiques* (Paris: Savine, 1891).

[43]Gabrielle Chamarat, 'Préface' in *Chât.*, p. 18.

previous ones) brings him to reconsider the sacred origins of modern France: *Quatrevingt-treize* 'est tout entier investi par une réflexion sur l'origine, sur cette origine des temps modernes, de l'histoire, de la société, de la pensée et de la parole moderne que représente la Révolution française'.[44] The future that lay ahead in 1871 cannot be thought of without a reflection on, and understanding of what 1793 had been. As he had written the uprising of 1832 through the prism of 1848, Hugo now writes 1793 with reference to 1871. A close parallel between the two contexts is drawn, notably when writing about the two bloodsheds: 'On adossait la chaîne à une fosse creusée et l'on fusillait; les fusillés tombaient dans la fosse parfois vivants; on les enterrait tout de même. *Nous avons revu ces mœurs*' (QT, pp. 189-90, my emphasis).[45] This is a clear allusion to the *semaine sanglante*. Hugo had thought about the revolutionary revelation for decades, and was contemplating a vast work dedicated to it. 1871 made it all the more urgent.

What drives Hugo's reflection in *Quatrevingt-treize*, I believe, are two interrelated ideas which are essential with regard to the question of modern myth in the context of the third attempt to build the long-awaited republican regime on the ashes of Paris Commune: 1) the question of what I will be referring to as the Cainite cycle of violence that failed to be broken by 1789; and 2) the opposition between two Republican voices: the popular and revolutionary *parole*, and the frozen, rigid word of the *décret*.

(iv) Breaking the Cainite cycle: Christian revelation

> *La mythologie est-elle l'éternelle répétition de l'histoire, toujours incomprise, de Caïn et Abel?*[46]

The attempts made by Hugo to break the renewed cycle of violence he sees in the anti-Communard reaction needs to be understood outside the usual set of moralistic and sentimental considerations. As Baudelaire said, Hugo is first and foremost a *visionnaire* and a poet, and this gives its value to his morals:

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[44]Chamarat-Malandain, 'Voix et parole du peuple dans *Quatre-vingt-treize*', p. 1. It is worth mentioning in this regard, that at the very moment when the memory of the Commune is being erased – physically and symbolically – in Paris, Hugo turns to the great forgetting of the nineteenth century: the Vendée war.

[45]Many other similarities bring the two contexts together. The scenes of 'Les rues de Paris en ce temps là' in particular echo the siege of 1870-1871: 'Les Allemands étaient aux portes. [...] On souriait héroïquement. [...] Tout était effrayant et personne n'était effrayé' (p. 110); 'Aucune défaillance dans ce peuple' (p. 114).

[46]René Girard, *La Voix méconnue du réel* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2002), p. 63.

Il ne s'agit pas de cette morale prêcheuse qui, par son air de pédanterie, par son ton didactique, peut gâter les plus beaux morceaux de poésie; mais d'une morale inspirée qui se glisse, invisible, dans la matière poétique, comme les fluides impondérables dans toute la machine du monde. La morale n'entre pas dans cet art *à titre de but*. Le poète est moraliste sans le vouloir, *par abondance et plénitude de nature*.[47]

I believe one way to understand his thought on charity and forgiveness is to come back to Girard's theory of mimetic violence and scapegoat seen in chapter 1, and look more specifically here at his interpretation of the Passion. What brings the seer and the anthropologist together is a common will to use revelatory tales to deconstruct the myths their society live in, and a similar willingness to stop the Cainite cycle.

I am using this phrase in reference to humanity's first crime by Cain, and the subsequent cycle of eternal revenge – and thus violence. As we have seen, René Girard regards crime as the foundation of civilisation and culture.[48] It is, in this regard, no coincidence that Cain founded the first city: human civilisation is based on a 'violence originelle', and it is the role of myth to hide this reality to the members of the community. This in turn allows the cycle of eternal revenge – the Cainite cycle – to operate; it is at the heart of what Girard calls *l'illusion mythologique*.[49]

We have also seen in chapter 1 Girard's theory of the scapegoat, which is essentially a process of projection of the fears felt within a community (fear of social disintegration) onto an outsider (*victime émissaire*) which can easily be sacrificed without any fear of initiating a new cycle of revenge *within* the group. The process works so long as there is absolute unanimity about the culpability of the scapegoat, his responsibility in the group's crisis. The paradox of an innocent victim being seen by everyone – including by himself – as guilty is precisely the mark of *l'illusion mythologique*. This illusion, Girard claims, is deconstructed by the telling of the Passion.

Often presented as yet another example of mythical narrative, the Passion is, for Girard, a revelation and a demystification in that, for the first time, the scapegoat is openly seen as *innocent* by the narrative: 'La victime est défendue par le texte au lieu d'être attaquée'.[50] The very fact that the text presents Jesus as an innocent figure is an indication that the myth no longer works: the spell that guaranteed the unanimity against the scapegoat is broken.

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[47]Baudelaire, '*Les Misérables* par Victor Hugo', p. 218. Baudelaire notes, however, that *Les Misérables* is an exception in the matter.
[48]*Ibid.*, pp. 161 & 186.
[49]Girard, *Et Je Vois Satan Tomber Comme l'Eclair*, p. 115.
[50]Girard, '2000 et le mythe de l'ère post-chrétienne', p. 332-3.

For Girard, the gospels reveal the mystification which hides that human society is founded on collective violence. Being a Christian, for Girard – in what I perceive as a very Hugolian way –, is therefore not so much about dogma, but about deconstructing myth and mystification: 'c'est précisément rompre avec l'unanimité victimaire';[51] in other words, breaking free from the Cainite cycle of eternal violence:

> La victoire de la vraie foi, ce ne sera pas le rassemblement de tous les hommes sous un règne unique conjoignant lui-même le ciel et la terre; ce sera le renversement complet de ce qui fut l'universelle règle des hommes. [...] Se délier de ce qui est l'obligation par excellence aux yeux du monde, à savoir la réciprocité violente, la voix du sang, le devoir de vengeance comme dette envers sa communauté d'appartenance.[52]

The relevance to Hugo's work – from *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* to his pleading for the Communards' amnesty – is evident enough. But the question of amnesty that preoccupies and mobilises Hugo in the immediate aftermath of the Commune is not a matter of charity only. It derives from a reflection upon Republican institutions when they are perverted by this *illusion mythologique*.

What the Christian revelation developed by Girard, also shows, is how a perfect legal system – as the Romans liked to see it – not only proves incapable of breaking this illusion when it sees it, it is also subdued by it. Pilate knows Jesus to be innocent, acknowledges it, and yet, faced with the risk of a riot, caves in to the crowd and gives an aspect of legality to what he knows to be illegitimate.[53] The legal crucifixion only replaces the spontaneous stoning. Nothing in this carefully crafted machinery of the legal roman system can prevent the execution of an innocent known as such by the Roman authority (not to mention the release of a criminal, Barabas).[54] Despite the revelatory quality of 1789, this process is still at work. And now the Republic's condemnation of the Communards offers a new variation on an old theme, Hugo the seer embarks on a political reflection upon the very nature of the Republican institutions which are to be decided upon in the aftermath of a civil war.

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[51]Girard, *La Voix méconnue du réel*, p. 193.

[52]Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, p. 164.

[53]Girard, *Et Je Vois Satan Tomber Comme l'Eclair*, pp. 49-50.

[54]See also Jacques Ellul, *Anarchie et Chrisitianisme* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1998).

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(v) Hugo and the Republic: *pro jure contra legem*[55]

The poet is not only a seer, he is a deputy,[56] and his pleading for amnesty is linked to his concern about the increasing power and influence of the executive: 'La question n'est pas une question de simple miséricorde' he writes, 'une question de commutation ou de grâce, c'est-à-dire une question exécutive: c'est une question de haute justice, de haute politique, d'effacement total du passé, c'est-à-dire une question législative' (CV, p. 849). Amnesty is, for Hugo, a matter of justice, it therefore depends on *souveraineté populaire* – i.e. on the Assembly (CV, 2, pp. 849-50). Hugo is clearly in favour of a parliamentary regime that would give preeminence to the legislative: 'l'exécutif doit être subordonné au souverain, à l'Assemblée' (CV, 2, p. 850).

This, however, needs to be nuanced: 'Hugo pense la souveraineté – légitime lorsque le peuple l'exerce directement sur lui-même, nulle et non avenue dans tous les autres cas – et ignore ou rejette l'Etat'.[57] The suspicion Hugo feels for rigid institutions equals his fear of the people resuming their political indifference. They have to be fully and actively integrated into the republic. In this regard the dissolution of the *garde nationale* in favour of a professional army is a matter of serious concern: 'L'écrasement de Paris amènera le désarmement de la garde nationale. Le désarmement de la garde nationale, c'est la livraison de la France à l'armée' he had predicted (CV, 2, p. 878). When his prophecy was fulfilled, he fearfully concluded: '*c'est la dictature de l'obéissance passive*, c'est la *consigne supérieure de la loi*, c'est l'abîme. Nous y voilà (CV, 2, p. 882, my emphasis). A few years before the Boulanger crisis and the Dreyfus affair, Hugo sees it as a danger to leave the defence of the republic to the military only. But his reflection goes deeper and what he then fears most – like Gambetta – is a growing gap between the state apparatus and society.[58]

What this quotation also suggests, is an acute sense that the justice system – even a republican one – does not automatically serve justice. In fact what the repression of the Commune had showed was precisely a gap between the two: retaliation, vengeance, mythical violence and anti-communard hysteria had all been made in the name of a rational justice system. Hugo denounces the process: 'Ces hommes [Hugo refers to

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[55]Hugo, 'Le droit et de la loi', in *Actes et paroles*, in OC, vol. XV-XVI/1, p. 581.

[56]Hugo was elected by the Parisians in February 1871 (second behind Louis Blanc), only to resign a month later. He was elected to the Senate in 1876. 'Dans son rapport à Paris, l'enjeu symbolique est bien plus fort que s'il était élu député de l'une des circonscriptions parisiennes. [...] Il deviendra le délégué de la commune de Paris. [...] la Commune (avec une majuscule) a retrouvé un héraut' Agnès Spiquel writes in her '1875', Groupe Hugo, 25 mars 2000, p. 7. His main fight in an increasingly reactionary chamber will be to obtain a vote on amnesty.

[57]Rosa, 'Ce que c'est que l'exil de Victor Hugo', p. 8.

[58]Madeleine Rebérioux, 'Hugo dans le mouvement politique et social (1870-1885)', Groupe Hugo, 4 avril 1987, p. 3.

Thiers and his government], ils disent: *tout avec la loi, tout pour la loi, tout par la loi.* Qu'avez-vous fait? Fusillades sommaires, tueries sans jugement, cours martiales de hasard, justices improvisées, c'est-à-dire aveugles' (CV, 2, p. 736). In other words, Hugo claims: *'Vous partez d'un droit pour aboutir à un crime'* (CV, 2, p. 713). Not surprisingly then, the opposition between republican legality and legitimacy – rules and *conscience* – in the context of a civil war is at the heart of *Quatrevingt-treize.*

The opposition between the rule and *conscience* was already at work in *Les Misérables*. Javert, who, like Cimourdain, owes much to Robespierre, represents the continual defeat of the former against the latter. Although Javert manages to persecute many characters, bringing incessant insecurity to Valjean's life, he ultimately incarnates the limits of the state when moved by a strict respect of the rules and nothing else: 'en un mot la Lettre sans l'esprit; c'est l'abominable Javert', Baudelaire proclaimed, 'Javert m'apparaît comme un monstre incorrigible, affamé de justice comme la bête féroce l'est de chair sanglante'.[59] In the novel, Javert succeeds in victimising the innocent (Fantine, and as a result Cosette) while being totally inefficient in guaranteeing social and political order: the Thénardiers and their gang can be arrested, they never stay long in a prison described as a sieve; and he proves equally incapable of preventing the insurrection. His ultimate defeat will be his long lasting chase of Valjean who manages to make him doubt. 'Javert déraille', and kills himself.

This theme is examined further and in more details in *Quatrevingt-Treize*. The novel opposes two types of *paroles* which coexist in the Convention: 'celle de l'Assemblée, dont on a dit le contact étroit avec la rue, et celle que l'on peut appeler du "décret" et qui, paradoxalement, doit, pour être opératoire, perdre une part de son contact avec la réalité'.[60] The popular and revolutionary *parole* is more emotional, but also in close contact with the real: 'ancré sur l'émotion de celui qui parle, proche du concret, figuré avec énergie [...]'.[61] In the novel, it is personified by Radoub: 'émotion, familiarité des tournures et du vocabulaire, images vives, sens du burlesque, rythmes simples et forts, et surtout cet appel désespéré au sens de la réalité, que gomme le décret'.[62] This is illustrated in his agonising participation in Gauvain's trial. The rule of the law and the people's sense of righteousness are then entirely at odds, and when the law is enforced, despite Radoud's vehement defence of Gauvain, the logic of the condemnation to death

[59]Baudelaire, *'Les Misérables* par Victor Hugo', p. 223.
[60]Chamarat-Malandain, 'Voix et parole du peuple dans *Quatre-vingt-treize'*, p. 6.
[61]*Ibid.*
[62]*Ibid.,* p. 7.

of a much admired hero of the Revolution by the republic itself escapes Radoub who passes out.

In contrast, Cimourdain personifies the *décret*: 'Il avait, pour tout soumettre à son autorité, le décret de la Convention [...], de pleins pouvoirs émanés du Comité de salut public, et une injonction de lui obéir, à lui délégué, signée ROBESPIERRE, DANTON, MARAT' (p. 227). Hugo draws a terrible Robespierre-like portrait of the incorruptible, pure and inflexible revolutionary of 1793: 'l'effrayant homme juste' (p. 121) 'atteint par le virus effrayant de sa vertu' (p. 123). Cimourdain is described as austere (p. 117), rigid (p. 119); confusing reason with logic (*Ibid.*). His immense knowledge acquired through constant study goes against life: Cimourdain 'savait tout de la science et ignorait tout de la vie' (*Ibid.*).

Opposing the *décret*, Gauvain is the man who represents the republican ideal; a very Hugolian voice for clemency, pleading for the enemies of the first republic as Hugo does for the enemy of the third: 'Amnistie est pour moi le plus beau mot de la langue française' (p. 231).

Cimourdain and Gauvain are two antagonistic figures, united only by an enduring affection; 'ces deux antagonistes étaient deux amis'. (p. 127). But that friendship is jeopardised by their irreconcilable conceptions of the revolution: 'L'amitié était entre les deux hommes, mais la haine était entre les deux principes' (p. 227). Through this dichotomy – a soul cut in two halves (pp. 227-8) – the Revolution reaches a turning point. As the republic seems to overcome its enemies, the question is raised as to what kind of republic is about to triumph: 'la république de la terreur [ou] la république de la clémence' (p. 226); Cimourdain's 'république de l'absolu' or Gauvain's 'république de l'idéal' (p. 368). What is at stake is not only the form of the republican regime, but the relation between the republic and the real.

Gauvain rejects Cimourdain's rather narrow conception of reality: 'Votre république dose, mesure et règle l'homme; la mienne l'emporte en plein azur; c'est la différence qu'il y a entre un théorème et un aigle. – Tu te perds dans le nuage. – Et vous dans le calcul'. (p. 368). For Cimourdain, all this is dream and utopia, the latter needing to be disciplined to be truly productive: 'Il faut pourtant saisir l'utopie, lui imposer le joug du réel, et l'encadrer dans le fait' (p. 370). The claustrophobic image of the 'joug du réel' is opposed by Gauvain who personifies the freedom of the mind: 'Non! plus de joug! l'homme est fait, non pour traîner des chaînes, mais pour ouvrir des ailes' (p. 372); 'je veux une république d'esprits'. (p. 371). The brain is no longer the prison, the burial vault of the mind, it has become for Gauvain – who speaks as a 'prophète' (p. 371) – '[une] voûte visionnaire' (p. 373).

Malandain has analysed this relation between the two revolutionary *paroles* and the real: 'En face du discours de Cimourdain de la loi, de la ligne droite, Gauvain tente d'instaurer une parole qui évite et détourne l'abstraction'.[63] The real as expressed by Cimourdain is too rational, too logical, to include life: 'la réalité dont parle Cimourdain, parce qu'elle est soumise à trop de logique, n'est en fait qu'une représentation abstraite de ce qui vit, et qui est mouvement, courbe, report dialectique (*Ibid.*). This is why Gauvain opposes the mathematical discourse of Cimourdain: 'un travail de substitution de termes ramène l'homme dans le monde et lui rend sa qualité d'être pensant' (*Ibid.*).

And this theme that puts man – rather than institutions – at the centre of the Republic recalls Michelet: "Soyez frères", dit le christianisme. Mais pour être frère, il faut *être*; or, l'homme n'est pas encore; le droit et la liberté constituent seuls la vie de l'homme; un dogme qui ne les donne pas n'est qu'une fraternité spéculative entre zéro et zéro'(RF, p. 35). A true republican regime can only be made of these *être pensants*. We are here at the heart of this thesis: for Michelet and Hugo, a Republic is first and foremost a system that breaks man free from the idleness, conformity and illusion of a politico-mythical system that 1789 ought to have revealed once and for all. Yet it depends on the people to hear this revelation and act accordingly.

(vi) 'Une république d'esprits': *parole* and demystification

Le cadavre est à terre et l'idée est debout[64]

Only these 'êtres pensants' are capable of going beyond the word of the *décret* to see the principle: '[ils] ne confondent pas les affirmations du code avec les solutions du droit, et [...] ne croient pas que la volonté momentanée de la loi suffise pour réprimer l'éternelle révolte de la réalité méconnue' (CV, 2, p. 745). The law is relative; *le droit* is absolute. And the law can only guarantee *le droit* if and when enlightened.

The work of humanity should fight both rhetorical violence and the Cainite cycle, the two being closely related. The Cainite cycle is not just about physical violence, it is first and foremost a violence committed against reality: 'A la terreur répond la terreur [see QT, p. 190]. Le langage est fondé sur l'injonction et menacé par l'abstraction'.[65] This explains Hugo's suspicion towards words when used to freeze meaning, just as religion

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[63]*Ibid.*

[64]Hugo, cited in Franck Laurent, 'Victor Hugo, *Le Rappel* et la Commune', Groupe Hugo, 13 mars 2004, p. 16.

[65]Chamarat-Malandain, 'Voix et parole du peuple dans *Quatre-vingt-treize*', p. 6.

freezes the Word of God: 'le mot fixe les choses. L'idée les pense en devenir'.[66] The opposition between word and ideal warns us that the legitimacy of the republican regime lies not in its legal framework as such, but in its humanity.

1793 – the bloc of history collapsing – reveals Cain/Marat: 'depuis six mille ans, Caïn s'est conservé dans la haine comme le crapaud dans la pierre, le bloc se casse, Caïn saute parmi les hommes, et c'est Marat' (p. 140). Armed with his hatred and the legal force of the *décret*, Marat justifies the bloodshed because it is necessary to the victory of the Revolution. When Cimourdain prolongs this justification, he uses images similar to those used later by Zola in *La Débâcle*: gangrenous France requires heavy surgery – which he very much identifies with butchery (p. 230). The terror is justified by historical necessity. The constitution and the declaration of the rights of man are suspended in the name of *salut public,* which takes primacy over the right; the principles are being sacrificed for more efficiency and the ultimate victory of the Revolution.

This discourse, made according to cold logic and a lifeless sense of the real reveals a contradiction between the end and the means which, for Gauvain, must obey the same principle: 'on ne fait pas le mal pour faire le bien (p. 231). To be more than a reified public object (*res publica*), the newly-born republic needs to be driven by a superior principle. 'Ce qui fonde [...] la civilisation [...], c'est, tout autant, et sans doute plus encore que le progrès technique, la pensée qui l'organise'.[67]

The *décret*, rational and logical as it may be does not in itself guarantee anything other than a well-organised apparatus. But if men want to operate any differently from an anthill – ants too are organised and disciplined (QT, p. 372) –, if the republic wants to be more than a mere institutional framework, they need to be guided by their conscience, not by the *décret*: 'la parole au nom du droit n'a de légitimité que garantie par une conscience qui, pour Hugo, s'assimile à l'âme et qui n'est pas autre chose que Dieu dans l'homme'.[68] Hence Hugo's/Gauvain's idealism: they operate very much in the framework of a revolutionary, pre-modern state, where an inspired *parole* leads the republic. In 1871 such a conception seems at odds with the importance gained by the state:

> Le droit n'a pas de visibilité. Il siège dans la conscience, celle de l'homme et celle des peuples. Comment fonder une légitimité politique sur ce qui n'a pas de visibilité? D'une certaine manière, Hugo n'adhère pleinement à la république et ne la prend en charge dans son discours que

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[66]Delphine Gleizes, 'Victor Hugo en 1848: la légitimité du discours', Groupe Hugo, 13 mars 1999, p. 5.
[67]*Ibid.*, p. 2.
[68]Spiquel, '1875', p. 6.

lorsqu'elle n'est plus un régime – soumis aux contingences des lois et d'une constitution en pleine genèse – mais un idéal, grandi par les exigences du droit.[69]

His theologico-political reflection seems very much incompatible with the framework of modern politics: 'la grande faiblesse de toute pensée gnostique, sa fragilité, reste qu'elle est incapable de s'incarner dans l'ordre socio-politique des collectivités modernes' Shayegan argues.[70]

The novel concludes on the moral victory of Gauvain (republican man) over Cimourdain (republican rule).[71] It is, however, a victory to be. The Revolution had announced the triumph of equity over the judiciary; the future over the present that shaped it but which needs to be transcended (Gauvain was educated by Cimourdain); 1793 had been the advent of the popular *parole* – productive in the *Convention*, liberating with Gauvain. But the revelation of the revolutionary Word – much as the revelation of the Passion in Girard – does not mean it has been properly heard. In fact it is yet to be fully understood:

> L'avènement d'une parole nouvelle, retrempée aux sources vives de la voix populaire, reste à la fin en attente d'une reconnaissance historique. Le discours de Gauvain [...] semble moins la considérer comme un acquis des temps modernes que comme une conquête possible de l'avenir.[72]

And if the three protagonists who personify the past (Lantenac), the present (Cimourdain) and the future (Gauvain) all die, the people (Radoud, but also Michelle Fléchard's three children, adopted by the Parisians) survive, and with them the hope that the revelation may, in the future, strike the people's consciences.

The myth of Paris, as the site of the revolutionary revelation and the people's *parole* had been a romantic attempt to find the means of demystification within myth itself, within the *dispositif légendaire*. This attempt does not end in 1851, as it survives in exile with Hugo and in France with the *démocrates-socialistes*. But after the missed opportunity of 1848, 1871 brings yet another blow to this idealism: this time the myth of Paris itself seems discredited. It is nonetheless at this very moment that Hugo goes back to its origins in an attempt to build a bridge between the revelatory quality of revolutionary and popular Paris and the nation,[73] and to reinvigorate the republican

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[69]Gleizes, 'Victor Hugo en 1848', p. 5.

[70]Shayegan , *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?*, p. 205.

[71]'Force à la loi' (p. 379) is followed by the last *parole* of the novel: Gauvain's 'Vive la république!' (p. 380).

[72]Chamarat-Malandain, 'Voix et parole du peuple dans *Quatre-vingt-treize*', p. 7.

[73]This is illustrated by the Parisians meeting Michelle Fléchard in QT: the Bretonne fails to understand anything from the situation she suffers from – let alone any political dimension. Only the Parisians seem

ideal of the *Printemps des peuples* he had thus far incarnated. However, the romantic tradition very much dies in 1871, together with the *démocrates-socialistes'* programme and the Commune: in 1871 the myth of Paris appears obsolete – the *parole* coming in direct contradiction with the voice of the state, and losing the legitimacy thus far granted by its revelatory quality. Legitimacy now stands within the law.

Hugo suffers a stroke in 1878. 'Un totem, c'est ce que les républicains au pouvoir feront de lui, lorsqu'il n'aura plus guère les moyens de se défendre'.[74] He dies a few years later in 1885, and is promptly *panthéonisé*. The harmless myth of the patriarch of the third republic comes at a convenient time,[75] and to this day Hugo is hardly remembered for his revolutionary philosophy and the subversive quality of his writing. Hugo had nevertheless offered a 'modèle d'articulation de l'art et de la politique. [...] C'était l'illustration et la réalisation concrète d'un idéal politique et littéraire neuf: où l'absolu de l'art ne pouvait être disjoint de la démocratie républicaine conçue comme progression vers l'absolu'.[76] The enduring myth of a Hugo as naive prophet of human progress still undermines the potentially subversive nature of his work. His legacy remains tainted by his recurring themes of charity, fraternity and justice. Perhaps these words resonate differently when written by Baudelaire who saw *Les Misérables* as a waking call: 'un étourdissant rappel à l'ordre d'une société trop amoureuse d'elle-même et trop peu soucieuse de l'immortelle loi de fraternité'.[77] Offering the disturbing spectacle of *misérables* living and undermining the positive side of the myth of Paris, Hugo's book forces the reader to watch the unwatchable. In imposing the seer's vision onto the reader, the book anticipates a political awareness: 'c'est un livre interrogant, posant des cas de complexité sociale, d'une nature terrible et navrante, disant à la conscience du lecteur: "Eh bien? Qu'en pensez-vous? Que concluez-vous?"'.[78] And Baudelaire further argues: 'N'est-il pas utile que de temps à autre 'le poète, le philosophe,

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able to understand the broader picture of her plight, and who is responsible for it, when herself seems totally blind. See QT, pp. 26-35.

[74]Guy Rosa 'Hugo politique. 1872-1880', Groupe Hugo, 17 mars 1989, p. 8.

[75]'Dans les faits, la démocratie républicaine a cessé très vite – dès 1885-90 – de s'identifier à la mutation continue et réciproque de l'idéologie et des rapports sociaux: à une révolution permanente et pacifique'. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[76]*Ibid.* Although he opposed the Commune because it brought France into a civil war when it should have been fighting Germany, Hugo's political vision was very close to the programme of the Communards. In fact, and this is rarely pointed out, his conception of the republic had the commune at its heart: 'Une chose est à faire, énorme: constituer la Commune', intermediary between the state and the individual. 'Après quoi la révolution de France sera vraiment finie' (CV, 2, p. 772). Again Hugo is at odds with the model of the central state that is consolidated by the post-1871 republic.

[77]Baudelaire, '*Les Misérables* par Victor Hugo', p. 224.

[78]*Ibid.*, p. 220.

prennent un peu le Bonheur égoïste aux cheveux, et lui disent, en lui secouant le mufle dans le sang et l'ordure: "Vois ton œuvre et bois ton œuvre"?'[79]

Paris the state survived Paris the myth. The defeat of the Commune and the scale of the repression weakened the socialist movement for a decade. The capital of revolutions no longer had much weight when faced with the legality/legitimacy of a Republican regime and the will of the country as expressed in elections. As the state mattered more in terms of shaping the nation's representations in a society characterised by individualism and massification, a new relation to public opinion emerged: 'Les plus clairvoyants découvrent qu'il faut toucher l'"opinion publique" et donc inventer de nouveaux liens entre les intellectuels et le peuple qui sortent des schémas romantiques obsolètes'.[80] To a large extent, the century of Hugo ends there, and with it the romantic belief in myth as a means of demystification.

Shayegan's quote above indeed shows the limits of this endeavour. But Hugo's political gnosis has at least one merit: to provide the tools to resist *illusion mythologique*, even when it is presented as rational. '[L'œuvre de Hugo] ressemble fort au *cogito* de Descartes, et [...] si elle ne fonde ni une philosophie ni une religion, et encore moins une secte, elle établit très certainement une discipline et une culture de la conscience; [...] [une] théorie et pratique de la responsabilité [...] critique'.[81] This often overlooked aspect of Hugo's work seems to me particularly relevant in the following century. In the context of growing, impersonal and elusive state power, where the regime itself becomes technical, the new techniques of propaganda are about to transform myth into a political weapon: ideology.

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[79]*Ibid.*, p. 224.
[80]Charle, *Paris Fin de siècle*, p. 14.
[81]Jacques Seebacher, 'Hugo et la quadrature des religions', Groupe Hugo, 20 Septembre 2003, p. 3.

Conclusion
From myth to ideology

> *Rien ne ressemble plus à la pensée mythique que l'idéologie politique.*[1]
>
> *Il faut se saisir de l'imagination des hommes pour les gouverner.*[2]

'C'est un espoir sans doute bien illusoire que de prétendre définitivement transcender l'opposition du rationnel et de l'imaginaire',[3] Girardet writes, thus underlining the difficulty of reaching definite conclusions in this field. The problem of studying myth, he argues, lies in the fact that only those who live within mythic thinking can grasp its full reality. Seen from the outside, myth can appear as a dead body ready to be dissected; 'Entre les données de l'expérience intérieurement vécue et celles de la distanciation critique, le hiatus subsiste, qu'il est peut-être possible de réduire, qu'il est vain pourtant de rêver de totalement abolir' (pp. 23-4). However 'modern' and inscribed in socio-political realities it may be, the myth of Paris does not escape this difficulty.

(i) Paris, myth and modernity

The myth of Paris developed in the wake of the French Revolution, and within a politico-imaginary setting – *dispositif légendaire* – which combined myth and history, poetics and politics. The shockwave of 1789 and the subsequent need to reconstruct the community on new foundations combined with the secularisation of society which transformed and sacralised politics and history. Historians, but also the state, were now in charge of modeling the collective representation of society and its past. Paris appears as the site of this theologico-politico-historical attempt both to reconstruct national memory and to build a nation on the promises of 1789.

In that regard, the specificity of Paris as a modern myth, when compared to another great example of a nineteenth-century city in literature, London, is that, although the gloom and darkness are common to both, Paris alone is the capital of a heavily centralised state and – the two are closely connected – the cradle of the Revolution. As 1789 had raised the promise of radical changes which, for many, were still to be fulfilled, any of these changes affecting the nation would be decided in and by Paris. A

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[1] Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, p. 231.
[2] Fabre d'Eglantine, cited in Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 104.
[3] Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques*, p. 23.

culture of revolution developed, defining political life in terms of conflicts around the much debated legacy of 1789, and locating these conflicts where history was constantly being made and written: Paris. In other words, Paris became both a target (to seize the power located in the capital) and the place that shaped the symbolic contest for that power.

With this in mind, the representation of Paris in literature is far more than just illustrative, and serves one of the main functions of myth: making sense, interpreting the changes affecting the community. Thus, the dark and evil depiction of the city and the obsessions generated by its underworld that we have seen in authors as diverse as Balzac, Hugo, Sue or Zola, not only reflect a deep socio-cultural anxiety, but also an urge to provide meaning and social cohesion in a particularly vulnerable context: 1) The century of Prometheus had to cope with the many contradictions inherited from its 'sacred origins'; 2) it also had to redefine itself in the light of the profound shake-up of a traditionally Christian country which went from its status of 'fille aînée de l'Eglise' to the 'fille aînée de la révolution'; 3) it had to face the massive transformation of and in the city (demographic explosion, Haussmannisation, urban *imaginaire*) and the increasing division between the capital and France; and 4) it had to resolve the contradictions between national sovereignty and individualism; in other words, to combine the local and the national within an attempt to (re)construct the French nation and its memory.

The poetics of oxymoron which characterizes the discourse on Paris matches the great flexibility of mythic discourse. Thus, Paris could very well serve to represent and explain radically opposed ideas. It was the place of poetic and political ambivalence and contradiction. It was a place that generated fears and fascination; terror and the comforting defences against it; admiration and repulsion; order and chaos. The contradiction reached its peak with Haussmann: at last, the city was expurgated of its filthy slums, rationalised, modernised. And yet the massive transformation of Paris was seen and vigorously denounced as the tragic destruction of an equally idealized city. Poets such as Baudelaire regretted the old city and proclaimed – thus defining – its authentic identity: mysterious, ambivalent, unknowable, unpredictable and restless, like its people.

The two dominant sets of representations of Paris echo the antagonisms of the French Revolution: *sans-culotterie* against bourgeoisie; violence of the street against violence of the state. Both are oppositional, exclusive and refractory – although complementary and reflecting each other. The contradictions embedded in Paris correspond to the mythic nature of the capital: there is great ambivalence in the sacred

as a *tremendum fascinosum* that gives myth the ability to encapsulate the dark side of the human condition as well as its luminous, bright side.[4]

It is then less surprising to see Paris going from being the capital of revolutions to the place of their repudiation – the Commune being disavowed by the writers. This occurs through the redefinition of the myth of the People as we have seen at work in the writing of Michelet, Hugo and Zola. The masses gradually came to generate a genuine terror that derived from the perception of their inexplicable, archaic and bestial violence. The symbolic opposition between Paris and Versailles, which opens and ends the period considered for this study, can illustrate how the city of Baudelaire – a place of ambivalent, anarchic and unpredictable qualities – came to be defeated by the rationalism of the Versaillais. We have seen how Zola perfectly illustrated this evolution of the image of the people (prisoners of their instinct and animality), and the subsequent clash between the two *lieux*, Paris and Versailles. As an ephemeral reappropriation of the city by the people, the Commune appears retrospectively as an odd anachronism: Paris had already surrendered to the ordered model of the *cité idéale*. Within the century, the capital had become governed by bourgeois values and more importantly, in my view, by those of the state.

The study of the social functions of myth in religious societies explains why it endures in different contexts. Myth meets socio-psychological needs for authority and protection (by sanctifying the position of the leader); social cohesion (in legitimising social norms); and the affective needs of the community (addressing its fears). Because what is sacred is unquestionable and fixed (yet flexible and adaptable), it remains the best possible protection for social cohesion. Myth gives both a narrative and a frame of action to a community: it helps to make sense of the chaos that threatens it and to define the actions and rituals that keep that chaos outside from entering. This relation between emotion, mythic thinking and mythic discourse remains active in modern settings.

The importance of the Revolution in the nineteenth-century psyche partly accounts for the political power and social alienation of myth; we have seen the role of fear in the development of myth-making. As a religious process which sacralises collective memory and strengthens collective identity, myth seems very much needed in times of uncertainties, in modern and archaic societies alike. This not only explains why myth persists in modern times, it also suggests that rationalism can go hand in hand with the power of influence of myth (as the work of Zola illustrates so well). History, and the status it achieved in the nineteenth century stand at the crossroads of both.

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[4]Paul Ricœur, *Le Mal* (Genève: Editions Labor et Fides, 1986), p. 18.

(ii) *Le sens de l'histoire*

L'Histoire c'est l'écriture du progrès de la civilisation;
c'est aussi l'historiographie des dominants.[5]

History acquired a new influence in the nineteenth century, gradually combining the authority of a religion with the legitimacy of a science, and forming a new form of hermeneutic violence in the process. God's will is replaced by the reliability of science and values presented as universal and progressive: history claims to look at facts, to depend on an apparent objective conception of time and progress. However, there is a certain degree of hermeneutic violence in the history made in the nineteenth century, based on a myth, 'celui d'une continuité cumulative – en fait lacunaire et violemment sélective –, continuité destinée *comme le mythe en général*, à atténuer certaines contradictions [...] et à faire le lien (re-ligio) entre des termes antinomiques'.[6]

As the interpreters follow the agents in the making of history, the new priests of modernity found themselves in a position to decide the meaning of the French Revolution and the status of the People of 1789 (thus providing a framework for the interpretation of the People's actions in 1848 and 1871); 'idéalisation guidée par la volonté de nier l'existence qui compose effectivement le peuple pour parler et agir en son nom'.[7]

Meanwhile, this progressive conception of history provides a very efficient tool to reject oppositions which are *ipso facto* oppositions to progress, thus discredited in that their very opposition is a mark of their allegiance to old prejudices. There is no worse sin in the nineteenth century than going against one's time, against history. The new religion of history, too, has its heretics, those who deny the *sens de l'histoire* (both meaning and direction): the archaic, anti-progressivists, reactionaries, retrogrades are the new losers of history.

In this regard, it is interesting enough to observe that the failure of the French Revolution was transformed into a cultural, historical, intellectual and philosophical victory, and that the winners of 1815, Maistre, Bonald and Burke were relegated to the category of history's defeated, precisely because their conception of 1789 as a divine test was to be overwhelmed by the mythico-rational (modern) conception of the Revolution as the sacred origins of modern history. The opponents were presented not so much as

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[5]Millet, *Le Légendaire au XIXe siècle*, p. 121.

[6]Bernard, *Le Chouan romanesque*, p. 39. My emphasis.

[7]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 176. The author refers to 1848 here.

contesting a position of authority, as the enemies of progress and reason, blindly attacking a system that aimed to free men from their prejudice and illusions: 'le discours dominant prend les allures d'une libération'.[8]

The antagonism between the progressives and the reactionaries is not based on reason only or historical analysis, 'elle se fait selon les valeurs quasi-religieuses qui sous-tendent les idéologies en devenir'.[9] New, modern myths help to distinguish what is legitimate from what is not: 'le verbe idéologique ne présente pas au sujet un éventail de possibilités entre lesquelles il aurait à choisir, mais une vérité morale à laquelle il serait indigne et dégradant de se soustraire'.[10] The fact that rationalism is a self-proclaimed attempt at demystification gives it a legitimacy that a non-religious system would otherwise lack.

However rational this discourse claimed to be, it served its own myths, even in the name of demystification. The opposition to the Communards and the indulgence in representing Paris as suffering and humiliated clearly demonstrated that politics and the impulses of *l'imaginaire* had blended in a political phantasmagoria. No one did more than Zola to base perceptions upon facts. And yet in his account of the Commune, he indulged in a deeply mythical account of these 'facts'. As I have argued, this is perfectly in the nature of myth which serves the needs of explanation and the provision of meaning, not accuracy.

> Le réel raconté dicte interminablement ce qu'il faut croire et ce qu'il faut faire. Et qu'opposer à des faits? On ne peut que s'incliner, et obéir à ce qu'ils "signifient", comme l'oracle de Delphes. [...] Cette institution du réel est la forme la plus visible de notre dogmatique contemporaine. Elle est aussi la plus disputée.[11]

This recalls Caillois's tale, 'le crocodile ensorcelé', which brings religious and modern societies together in a relation of similar hermeneutic violence and rhetorical manipulation.

The specificity of modern mythic thinking lies precisely in a lack of awareness about its true nature; demystification and the ideal of rational thought are so prevalent that it is easy to rely on science without realising that science too can fulfill the need to believe. And yet science and information can be used within a system of beliefs – call it mythical or ideological. One can then confidently deny being myth's dupe as one relies on facts and rational arguments. This is where myth and ideology meet.

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[8]Philippe Bénéton, 'La Liberté conforme', *Géopolitique* n° 61, Printemps 1998, p. 55.
[9]*Ibid.*, p. 56.
[10]Ansart, *Idéologies, conflits et pouvoir*, p. 46.
[11]Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 271.

(iii) From myth to ideology

> *La conception historique du monde nous a libérés des dernières chaînes. [...] Mais quels sont les moyens de surmonter l'anarchie des convictions qui nous menacent?*[12]

The study of myth in the nineteenth century seems to bring religious myth and political mythology together as they both meet the same social needs: 'l'idéologie satisfait les deux besoins majeurs de l'homme moderne : son besoin de croire et son besoin, non moins urgent, d'expliquer et de justifier sa croyance'.[13] As integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a socio-political programme, ideology – just like myth – has an explanatory function and dynamic quality; it invites the community to engage actively in the elaboration of a collective goal; and it meets its affective needs.

> [Les idéologies] satisfont, d'une part, l'esprit collectif du groupe par la vision d'une société close, et, d'autre part, elles prétendent être scientifiques, donc conformes à l'expérience de la réalité. Toute idéologie a une grande charge affective (...), et un appareil logico-rationnel qui lui donne une apparence scientifique et philosophique.[14]

Like myth, ideology claims to hold the monopoly of meaning and truth, but also of the criteria on which meaning and truth can be formulated. For Marx and Engels, ideologies were the values of a dominant class, imposed on other classes, which, when they integrated them, were seen as alienated. An ideology succeeds – like myth – when it is not seen for what it is (a collective belief) but as a global and rational system of interpretation: true and indisputable facts.

One could even argue that ideology is politics made religious: 'Il y a [...] mythologisation de la politique quand il y a transfert d'aspiration (foi), de représentation (mythes), de comportements (rites) de la sphère religieuse à la sphère politique, transfert [...] de l'espérance humaine de la religion dans la politique'.[15] Which, as we have seen, is exactly what occurred in the nineteenth century – a time of a teratologic marriage between politics and the religious: 'L'histoire est toujours faite par les hommes, mais la

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[12]Wilhelm Dilthey, cited by Kurt Flash, 'La Vérité comme multiplicité: l'expérience de l'histoire', in Cyrille Michon (dir), *Christianisme. Héritage et destins*, pp. 277-8.

[13]Shayegan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?*, p. 187.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 185.

[15]Sironneau, 'Retour du mythe et imaginaire socio-politique', p. 27.

puissance des transformations socio-politiques envisagées a quelque de chose de religieux'.[16]

However, political ideology – although religious – is not reduced to a modern religion: although mystical, the ideological discourse does not include God; it is free from transcendence. And this poses a major problem: in a secular framework, the production of legitimate discourse cannot be based on an absolute; it is relative. Yet it claims to tell the truth and to be universal. As a self-proclaimed rational discourse, ideology is less likely than religion to benefit from unverifiable principles: 'L'idéologie est privée de cette caution absolue et va donc se trouver dans l'obligation de réinventer les arguments nécessaires à l'établissement des valeurs sans pouvoir se fonder sur une autorité incontestée.'[17]

In a context of rationalisation and the fragmentation of society that characterises the nineteenth century, the absence of a collective, agreed, transcendent authority turns ideologies into the locus of social and political conflicts: 'L'idéologie ouvre un champ de bataille permanent à la conquête de l'influence, à l'agression et à la défense des pouvoirs, au maintien des contrôles et à la révolte contre les contrôles'.[18] The ideological discourse is a double process of legitimisation of the holders of political authority and delegitimisation of their opponents: 'le propre d'une idéologie politique est de construire un double raisonnement d'invalidation et de validation des systèmes de pouvoir', Ansart further argues.[19]

As the myth of Paris posed the French Revolution as the origin of modern France, the opponents to that myth were discredited, as we have seen. The radical nature of the revolutionary rupture created 'une opposition fondamentale destinée à avoir quasiment la force d'une querelle religieuse autour de deux conceptions du monde'.[20] But we have also seen that these origins were in need of definition and agreement, therefore facilitating antagonism between the sons of the Revolution themselves.

The French Revolution – and the subsequent definition of its mythical and social function – provided the main elements for ideology to develop. It combined secular messianism (reshaping man and the world to its ideal) with a symbolic struggle for legitimate power through the practice of discourse, *la parole*. The point of my discussion of Lefort's analysis of Robespierre's discourse and of Hugo's *Quatrevingt-Treize* was to show this.

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[16]Gauchet, 'Croyances religieuses, croyances politiques', p. 271.

[17]Ansart, *Idéologies, conflits et pouvoir*, p. 40.

[18]*Ibid.*, pp. 36 and 45.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 43.

[20]Furet, *La Révolution en débat*, pp. 77-8.

> Les procédés de manipulation des débats, de sélection des adhérents, des militants au service d'un discours homogène, gagnent une efficacité pratique en même temps que symbolique: le pouvoir qui se dissimule dans la parole pour s'accoupler avec l'opinion se convertit en pouvoir politique.[21]

As we have seen with Lefort's analysis of Robespierre's discourses, the revolutionaries discovered how public opinion and dominant discourse could make history.

(iv) The danger of mythic thinking

One interesting example of the modern system of belief is the nineteenth-century taste for utopia which blends rationalism and millenarianism, techniques and faith, to propose new forms of a collective – and in a way totalitarian – dream: 'faire entrer le non-encore advenu dans un plan déterminé'.[22] The belief in a unique and perfect social system yet to be constructed indicates an evolution of myth within the framework of the ideology of progress: instead of looking at the past (the golden age), one turns to the future (utopia). The observation of nature and mankind legitimates the perfection of a model elaborated rationally. In return, the perfection of the model justifies any means, however coercive. The model is set, and it is up to man to adapt to it. 'L'utopie est toujours peu ou prou une immobilité rêvée, un jeu abstrait qui annule magiquement les surprises du temps, ou tente de les conjurer par des règles réputées immuables. Elle projette d'abolir l'histoire ou de la pétrifier'.[23] This is criticised by Isaiah Berlin as it tends to freeze the ideal, when social organisation is by nature unstable, requiring a constant compromise between its members, and constant readjustments[24] – a very Hugolian point. As we have seen, Hugo's main aim was to raise consciousness, and forbid the materialisation of principles into spiritless rules (identified with Javert and Cimourdain). For him, *la République d'esprits* can last so long as the ideal prevails over the rules. Ideology allows exactly the opposite.

By the end of the century, ideology combines the legitimacy given by reason and science with the influence of myth in the gradual consciousness of the extraordinary power of suggestion of this modern, politico-religious recipe. The sacred spread in the social system at the same time when renewed pessimism about human nature, the development of the masses, and the revolutionary belief that human progress could only come from a regeneration of society left the individual in a relatively minor position. It

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[21]Lefort, *Essais sur le politique*, p. 150.

[22]Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde*, p. 257.

[23]Ozouf, *Les Aveux du roman*, p. 344.

[24]See Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: chapters in the history of ideas* (London: John Murray, 1990).

is only in the 1940s that the full consequences of this trend became a major source of concern.

The shock of the Second World War falls largely outside the field of this research. However, the renewal of mythic thinking in Nazi Germany and its confusion with political ideology through modern techniques brought Cassirer to formulate valuable insights into the relation between the modern and the religious. I believe his *Myth of the State* very much prolongs Hugo's premises, exploring the consequences of what are essentially Hugo's defeats, whilst taking a highly nineteenth-century stance on the relation between religion and reason.

Cassirer published *The Myth of the State* in 1944 as a response to Rosenberg's *The Myth of the twentieth century*, and to its influence upon Nazi Germany. Both authors start from a similar acknowledgement: the return of myth in modern times. For Rosenberg, the old forgotten myths were to reconcile Europe with its gods and bring invincible force to its people. Cassirer cannot help but share a similar diagnosis on this invincible force, but sees this mythical resurgence as responsible for the success of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. The gods are indeed an extraordinary power over the mind. Long repressed by the triumph of reason, they seem to have come back to strike in the heart of modernity. After such a turn, *The Myth of the State* attempts to be what Hugo's work had in a very different mode tried to be: *une prise de conscience –* 'la grande psychanalyse de la pensée politique occidentale, que celle-ci n'a pas faite et qui l'a conduite au désastre'.[25]

What impresses and horrifies Cassirer most is the absolute powerlessness of reason confronted by the strength of a mythical influence in politics:

> The most alarming feature [...] of modern political thought is the appearance of a new power: the power of mythical thought. The preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought in some of our modern political systems is obvious.[26]

A disciple of the Enlightenment, Cassirer sounds grim when admitting the defeat of reason before *la pensée magique*: 'It is beyond the power of philosophy to destroy political myths. A myth is in a sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational arguments; it cannot be refuted by syllogisms'.[27]

For him, the separation between reason and the intellect on the one hand, and myth and religion on the other is absolute. They are totally antagonistic, but what the lessons

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[25]Vergely, *Cassirer*, p. 37.

[26]Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, p. 3.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 296. 'Here rational and scientific thought openly confess their breakdown; they surrender to their most dangerous enemy' (p. 4).

of history seem to suggest is that myth has benefited from modernity and taken its revenge after its traditional exclusion from secular, western philosophy. Hence, the power of mythical rhetoric seen in chapter 3 is no longer safely contained in archaism: *pensée magique* has spread and contaminated the most modern and secular societies through politics; this monstrous aberration which combines modern techniques and political purpose has brought the alienating capacity of myth to unprecedented heights: 'Myth has always been described as the result of an unconscious activity and as a free product of imagination. But here we find myth made according to plan. The new political myths do not grow up freely'.[28] The rational state combines with the power of influence of myth, a power that was reborn in the wake of the Revolution.

In this regard, Cassirer regards the resurgence of myth operated by the Romantics as a dangerous mistake, both philosophically and politically: 'myth becomes [...] a subject of awe and veneration. It is regarded as the mainspring of human culture. [...] Instead of being the opposite of philosophic thought myth has become its ally; and, in a sense, its consummation'.[29] The Romantics broke from a tradition of opposing *muthos* and *logos*, and in legitimating myth in the century of secularisation, made a dramatic *contresens*: instead of reaching a superior degree of human consciousness and freedom of the mind, man can now sacralise himself, and turn his story into a myth. In other words, the Romantics missed an unprecedented opportunity – made possible by the Enlightenment – to free themselves from God and, instead, repositioned the divine within the human; 'conférant un pouvoir au mythe, [le Romantisme] a ouvert la voie à quantité de perversions concernant le sujet, la morale, la politique et la technique'.[30] It fell to Cassirer to assess the dramatic consequences of this deviation in 1945.

Cassirer's critique of modern myth is based on the premise that reason and myth are two separate fields and should remain so. 'Pour préserver la liberté de l'esprit, il faut cesser de "croire" dans la vie politique et avoir avec elle des rapports techniques et sécularisés' Vergely summarises.[31] Indeed, 'La pensée mythico-religieuse est une pensée anti-critique, non conceptuelle'.[32] And yet, what I have tried to demonstrate, is the interference between rational and mythical thought, and the role played by belief in the constitution of modern society. The idealism of Cassirer derives from a long tradition of suspicion towards the religious, and is based on the belief that man could operate outside its framework. But can we? The success of Durand in putting *l'imaginaire* back

[28]*Ibid.*, p. 282.
[29]*Ibid.*, p. 183.
[30]Vergely, *Cassirer*, p. 73.
[31]*Ibid.*, p. 69.
[32]Shayegan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?*, p. 237.

at the centre of the humanities helps to provide some valuable answers, as well as contributing to rehabilitate Hugo.

(v) *Homo religiosus*?

> *L'incompréhension moderne du religieux prolonge le religieux.*[33]

Maistre, 'le voyant – clair – de l'obscur' as Steiner calls him,[34] had rejected the premise set by the Enlightenment and the revolutionary gospel as fundamentally biased. The so-called 'freedom' from religion was yet another illusion, he claimed, and its outcome was doomed: left to themselves, men would become the victims of their own inability to fix themselves any limits; humanity was bound to go insane. Maistre's sombre pessimism about human nature and cruel disdain for man's pretense to govern himself reasonably strike a few sensitive chords in the twentieth century and pave the way for rethinking the relation between the religious and the political.

Surprising as it may seem, the *homo democraticus* joined in this pessimistic analysis. Tocqueville raised a similar religious issue: 'que faire d'un peuple maître de lui-même, s'il n'est pas soumis à Dieu?'[35] What shall become of a humanity left to itself, without any principles other than its own, human, all too human?

The outcome of the universal suffrage in 1848 brought a fatal blow to the Romantic optimism in that regard: the apparent inability of the masses to make the 'right' choice was starting to cause some concern among the Republicans themselves. The end of the century showed unprecedented interest in, and horrid fascination for, crowds, mobs and masses, as irrational, violent and non-human entities. A country of reactionary peasants and cities of rioters seemed not the most favourable conditions for a democratic system precisely based on the assumption that man can and should govern himself. When the myth of the enlightening People gave way to a picture of shapeless masses and unpredictable mobs, Maistre's warning started to sound disturbingly relevant.

Many have wondered about the influence of Rosenberg's work in the 1930s, and Durand offers an audacious parallel to explain it: 'C'est que le nazisme, comme la révolution française, a fourni à un peuple [...] un ensemble de rites et de mythes, une

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[33]Girard, *La Violence et le sacré*, p. 391.

[34]Steiner, 'A l'ombre des Lumières', in Michon, *Christianisme: héritages et destins*, p. 36.

[35]Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981), vol. I, p. 401.

prothèse du religieux'.[36] However disturbing the parallel, and although I tend to reject teleological interpretations of totalitarianism which would start in 1793, the point raised by Durand is interesting in that it focuses on a religious vacuum that needs to be filled. Durand believes that 'mythical explosions' arise when the leaders of a community (what he refers to as 'les magistères') ignore the evolution of the collective psyche. There is a fundamental contradiction in the return to myths initiated by the Romantics and an elite that claimed to speak in terms of rationality: 'les grands magistères de l'Occident – Eglises et Etats – ont boudé la remythologisation. [...] D'un même pas, Eglises et Etats démocratiques ont laïcisé les savoirs, sécularisé les pouvoirs...' (pp. 38-9).

Yet, Durand further argues, the need to dream, to imagine, to believe remains, uncontrolled, anarchic. The disciples of Reason failed to see the implication of the dark counter-current, even though it was very widely expressed in the nineteenth century in France – *l'imaginaire du bas-fond*. 'L'absence des magistères collectifs pour contrôler les poussées des nouvelles "théologies" abandonne nos remythologisations au péril de leurs effets' (p. 41). Such a vacuum allows, and even requires, the return of the gods: 'Les dieux ignorés [se vengent et] réinvestissent fanatiquement les passions et les pulsions [de l'homme] dans l'attitude politique et sociale'.[37] Hence the need to acknowledge, accept and understand the relation man establishes with his gods rather than denying it.

> Les dieux nous renseignent seuls sur nous-mêmes. La mythologie, la tragédie, la littérature grecque [...] nous renseignent seules sur ce qu'étaient culture et civilisation grecques, sur ce qu'était l'homme hellénique. Mais pas seulement sur cet homme-là: également sur ce que nous sommes. Elles démystifient en nous ce que nous attribuions idéologiquement à une positivité objective.[38]

It was precisely one of the endeavours of this work to engage with the religious: what Hugo, Girard and Durand show, though in very different ways, is not only the danger of ignoring the religious, but also the demystifying, subversive and revolutionary potential within myth itself.

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[36]Durand, *Introduction à la mythodologie*, pp. 36.
[37]Durand, *Science de l'homme et tradition*, pp. 229-30.
[38]*Ibid.*, p. 234.

(vi) *Homo democraticus*?

> *La "lutte finale" ne sera pas ce que prévoyait Marx :*
> *elle opposera le philosophe tragique au nihilisme de la*
> *massification planétaire.*[39]

In a context that combined individualism and masses – the two sides of a single coin[40] – Tocqueville worried about a new form of despotism; a soft one, coming not only from the new power of the state, but equally from a democratic, individualistic society itself: 'je vois une foule innombrable d'hommes semblables et égaux qui tournent sans repos sur eux-mêmes pour se procurer de petits et vulgaires plaisirs, dont ils emplissent leur âme'; each one isolated and detached from any collective belonging.[41] Marx's sack of potatoes meets La Boétie's *drogueries*. In this context, liberty ceases even to be desirable: some may be afraid of it as they confuse it with anarchy; others are going back to the concept of 'servitude nécessaire': dangerous or impossible, liberty remains in doubt.[42]

This brings us back to the issue raised by the Grand Inquisitor about the very possibility – or desire – of human emancipation; his need for authority; his search for something or someone to believe in – concerns which link Tocqueville and Dostoevsky in an unlikely combination.[43] Ideology and religion have this in common that they facilitate social norms and submission to authority and help the collective in a persistent opposition to the individual 'posed as the sphere of freedom, autonomy and rebellion'.[44] From myth to ideology, the system of belief may differ, but faith and the need for certainties seem to prevail.

A hundred and fifty years after Fabre d'Eglantine had noticed the importance of controlling man's imagination, it fell – interestingly enough – to Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, to push the logic further and to theorise propaganda and public relations after World War I. But it was in the 1930s and 1940s that the power and influence of what Durand referred to as 'l'imagination symbolique', showed its full

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[39]Jean Granier, *Nietzsche* (Paris: PUF, 1982), p. 34. The author refers to Nietzsche's *Zarathoustra*, and the unwillingness of the people to follow the philosopher's message.

[40]See Ellul, *Histoire des institutions*, p. 259.

[41]Tocqueville, *De La Démocratie en Amérique*, vol. II, p. 385.

[42]*Ibid.*, p. 397.

[43]'désespérant de rester libres, ils adorent déjà au fond de leur cœur le maître qui doit bientôt venir'. This sentence could have been writen by the Russian novelist. It is in fact by the French liberal (*De La Démocratie en Amérique*, vol. II, p. 397).

[44]Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, p. 211.

impact. Goebels had been an attentive reader of Bernays who would have to think again about the lesson given by his 'disciple', and subsequently embarked on developing new techniques to attenuate and control the demons of the masses.

The alienating quality of myth has probably never been better understood. It has never been so efficient either: with unprecedented sophistication, *divertissements* and *drogueries* combine with media and PR techniques to keep the restless masses – and individuals – asleep and satisfied. In this sense as in so many others, 'le XXe siècle n'a pas préparé le XXIe : il s'est épuisé à satisfaire le XIXe'.[45]

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[45]Romain Gary, *Au-delà de cette limite, votre ticket n'est plus valable* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). Or, as Kristeva put it: 'Our century is still living on the nineteenth century's momentum' cited by Terdiman, *Discourse / Counterdiscourse, The theory and practice of symbolic resistance in nineteenth-century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 43.

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