Transfiguring Disfiguration in *L'Homme qui rit*: A Study of Hugo’s Use of the Grotesque

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The most coherently developed study of the function of the grotesque in Hugo’s work has been presented by Anne Ubersfeld in *Le Roi et le bouffon*. She relies for her analysis of dialogue in Hugo’s theater on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism as he elaborates it in his books on Dostoevsky and Rabelais. The brilliance and ingenuity of Ubersfeld’s textual analysis are undeniable, and her application of Bakhtin’s theories to Hugo’s work is, in my view, entirely justified; but it seems to me that her conclusions regarding Hugolian discourse generally invite close scrutiny. Ubersfeld seems to read both Bakhtin and Hugo through the decentering prism of Derrida and Lacan, causing her to depart dramatically from Bakhtin’s vision of the grotesque as a fundamentally vivifying and revolutionary form to reach the conclusion that Hugo’s theater enacts the absolute breakdown of communication. For her it is a stage of empty words (“la vaine parole”), where history is affirmed as a locus of derision.

Ubersfeld’s conclusions clearly place her on the side of the moderns as opposed to the ancients in the current critical controversy that has begun to affect Hugo studies in a very fundamental way. Hers is a powerful deconstructive reading of Hugo’s work that seeks to demonstrate how the formal organization of dramatic tirades subverts Hugo’s professed humanitarian and liberal ideology, which, on the level of theme, places God, history, and progress at the center of its discourse. This essay will examine certain of Ubersfeld’s theoretical presuppositions and propose a reading of *L'Homme qui rit* that suggests both the applicability of Bakhtin’s mechanism of dialogism and a vision consonant with Bakhtin’s belief in the restorative value of art and the revolutionary power of language to effect historic change.

For Bakhtin it is the degree to which the historial dialectic operates as a principle of organization within a text that determines the text’s social or moral value as a liberating historical force. The only way a writer can participate in history is to prevent his own text from being absorbed into the canon of officialdom, by adopting a discourse at odds with the official one, a “grotesque” discourse in which dialogism or the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes is a structural principle. This potentially revolutionary discourse was
realized most fully in medieval and Renaissance carnival forms, which found expression in the subculture of the marketplace, "a second World and a second life" outside of officialdom. Carnival festivities, occurring at breaking points in the cycle of nature, are characterized by the "inside out" and the "upside down," which Ubersfeld calls the X of the Bakhtinian system. They provide a dialogistic experience in which language constantly doubles back on itself and in which participants are both actors and spectators. The parodistic and specular nature of carnivalesque language creates a three-dimensional drama rather than a linear, monologic instrument of repression. The laughter this Renaissance grotesque releases is both gay and mocking, but above all unifying, participative, and regenerative. The buffoon who stands somewhere between art and life and who entertains the king by mocking him is the grotesque figure par excellence.

By the late eighteenth century, according to Bakhtin, the grotesque in literature developed a very different expression, although it still represented a rebellion against literary and political officialdom: "The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy," "marked by a vivid sense of isolation." The revolutionary drama occurs not in the marketplace but within the "interior infinite" of the individual, at odds with an atomized, class-structured society. The mask in romantic grotesque is no longer an outward sign of play and metamorphosis, but rather functions to hide the drama taking place in a "subjective, lyrical, or even mystical sphere." The laughter this form of the grotesque releases is ironic rather than jubilant. But despite the grotesque's connotations of alienation, Bakhtin insists upon its fundamentally restorative value whenever it appears: "Actually the grotesque, including the Romantic form, discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads men out of the confines . . . of the indisputable and stable. Born of folk humor, it always represents . . . the return of Saturn's golden age to earth—the living possibility of its return. . . . The existing world suddenly becomes alien . . . precisely because there is the potentiality of a friendly world. . . . The world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed. While dying it gives birth." Bakhtin's language here takes on the messianic tone of Hugo's own utopian proclamations concerning the revolutionary power of language. In fact, Bakhtin was a great admirer of Hugo as reader of Renaissance literature, asserting that Hugo expressed "the most profound and full appreciation of Rabelais" of any writer in the nineteenth century.

Hugo began to elaborate a concept of the grotesque in the preface to *Cromwell* in 1827, where he claimed that the grotesque must be included in modern art if it is to reflect the dual nature of man who is both body and soul. In fact, without the presence of the grotesque, the sublime, as a reflection of providential order, would not be conceivable even as an absent idea. The
marxist Bakhtin objected to Hugo’s introduction of this metaphysical level into the grotesque and did not seem to consider the possibility that Hugo’s concept of divinity was very close to Bakhtin’s own ideal of a generative world body. He was mistaken in imagining that Hugo’s grotesque functions as a mere contrast to the sublime, since in Hugo’s work all grotesque figures are themselves dialogistic, containing the sublime within them. Providential order was conceived by Hugo in socialist utopian terms; and bodily disfiguration, such as we see it in Quasimodo or Gwynplaine, both victims of corrupt civilization, reflects the degree to which society is out of kilter with that generative power. In other words, the grotesque points to the generative power within the material bodily world that, if not perverted by society, will provide the force that will bring about the realization of the utopian condition.

Hugo goes on in the preface to trace the history of the grotesque in Western art; and, as Ubersfeld notes, his references correspond almost work for work to those that Bakhtin singles out in his examples of the grotesque in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance literature. That Hugo should include a history of the grotesque in his own elaboration of the concept would seem proof of his faith in dialogue as regenerative communication as Bakhtin also understood it: “The ideal of mother geniuses . . . induced the Romantics to seek the seed of the future in the past and to appreciate the past from the point of view of the future which it had fertilized and generated.” Like Bakhtin, Hugo identifies the grotesque with “le peuple” throughout the preface, thus insisting upon its revolutionary context from the beginning of his career. Avatars of the buffoon figure crucially linked to the people—Quasimodo, Triboulet, Don César, Gwynplaine—are a constant in Hugo’s work, and their development reflects his own evolving attitude toward the themes of history and revolutionary change.

Ubersfeld seems clearly authorized, then, to apply Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism as a measure for her own evaluation of the function of the grotesque in Le Roi s’amuse, which for her serves as a model for Hugo’s theater generally. It is a play of the conjunction of two laughtersthe king’s and the fool’s—neither of which is funny; in fact, she points out, there is a total absence of the comical in this play whose title suggests comedy. If anything, laughter kills. The main character, Triboulet, is a grotesque inversion of the conventional tragic configuration: king/father. Despite the hideous death of his child, brought about ironically by his own efforts to kill the king, Triboulet is not ennobled through suffering but figuratively castrated, and he remains throughout a scandalous travesty of the noble father. The same distortion of the tragic code that exists on the level of character is true for language in this play. Triboulet speaks in the place of a king, who, in turn, disguises himself throughout the play as if he were a carnival figure speaking in the vulgar idiom of the people. Thus neither character can function as a constitutive consciousness because neither is a unified self. No matter what Triboulet talks about
(revolution, love, justice, suffering), no matter what self he seeks to enunciate (the people, father, king), he is always perceived as the fool; and his message, within the play, falls on deaf ears. Thus the principle of dialogism, the presence of two simultaneous codes of which one does not belong to the enunciating subject, controls and disseminates every tirade. According to Ubersfeld, the king and the fool both fall into a locus of derision and remain there, with history, unrecuperated: "L'inversion grotesque demeure au stade de la destruction. Elle ne débouche pas sur la renaissance, elle ne repasse pas de la mort à la vie. Ainsi, comme il y a une place en creux de l'Histoire, il y a une place en creux du rire." For Ubersfeld, Hugolian discourse is entirely drained of its restorative value and leaves only a theater of rupture, eccentricity, and parody: "Ce qui règne dans le drame hugolien, c'est la permanence de ce que Bakhtine appelle l'excentrique et les mésalliances . . . dialogue où il y a confrontation plutôt que communication et échange." "

Although Ubersfeld's analysis of the breakdown of communication on stage in Le Roi s'amuse seems valid, one may well question her right to conclude that Hugolian discourse generally is nonconstitutive. How is it that we, as recipients of that discourse, can perceive and lament the breakdown we observe within the texts themselves, unless we have a very different relationship to authorial voice from that of recipients to speakers figured within the fictional space?

What is more, Ubersfeld's strong new reading of Hugo, clearly informed by Derridean theory on the nature of language, raises a number of questions for anyone coming to Hugo from a more traditional, historically based critical stance. Most important, one may ask whether Ubersfeld's presuppositions as to the cause of the breakdown of communication within Hugo's work are justified. The fundamental characteristic causing the emptiness of Hugolian discourse, according to Ubersfeld, is the decenteredness of the enunciating subject. The "je" who speaks is not only mistaken for someone he is not, but he is fractured on the inside himself: "Si le sujet hugolien . . . ne parle à rien ou à personne, c'est que son discours n'est pas parlé par un vrai sujet. C'est toujours le discours . . . de celui qui n'est pas ce qu'il est. . . . Le dialogisme grotesque interdit au sujet de se faire le sujet de sa propre parole." Thus a "vrai sujet" means for Ubersfeld a unified subject. But to privilege unity in Hugo's thought is to ignore an important aspect of his concept of the grotesque as he describes it in the preface to Cromwell, where dualism is understood within a Christian context. It is not, as it is for Lacan or Freud, a sign of loss of self, but rather the authentic spiritual condition of all men, a condition necessary if one is to participate meaningfully in history. Christianity teaches man, he says in the preface, "qu'il est double comme sa destinée, . . . qu'il est le point d'intersection, l'anneau commun des deux chaînes d'êtres qui embrassent la création . . . la première, partant de la pierre pour arriver à l'homme, la seconde, partant de l'homme pour finir à Dieu" (3:47; my italics). In saying that
human consciousness is a “point d’intersection,” Hugo proposes the X of the grotesque as a mediating figure, not a figure of radical discontinuity. Doubleness is conceived not as alienation but as a means of transfiguration.

Further, is it fair to use *Le Roi s’amuse* as a model for all of Hugo’s plays written in the 1830s? Triboulet cannot be recuperated on a moral or spiritual level because he never accepts this truth of his condition; Ruy Blas, on the other hand, does and is able to influence the queen in such a way as to help her rise to her historic destiny as sovereign rather than remain an isolated, lyrical subject. Ubersfeld states that the drama of Hugo’s theater is to reconstitute the “je pulvérisé,” but that is the drama of his most deluded protagonists. In fact, loss of the lyrical, individual self is an important step in the Hugolian quest toward finding mankind in oneself. Ubersfeld seems, on the contrary, to be privileging that individualized self when she says: “Ce n’est pas le sujet seul qui est touché, mais tout ce qui dans la définition des actants touche au statut de l’individu.”

*L’Homme qui rit* (The Man Who Laughs/Mankind Laughing) is a novel whose ambivalent title reflects this important development from atomized individual to Everyman necessary for prophetic language. At the end of *L’Homme qui rit* Gwynplaine will in fact hand his historic destiny over to his bastard double, Lord David Dirry-Moir, whose marketplace pseudonym is a constellation of names, Tom-Jim-Jack, which means Everyman.

Although Ubersfeld explicitly states that she is speaking only for Hugo’s theater, it seems unlikely that Hugo’s views on language would be different in his lyrical or narrative works. One may well ask, however, if there has been a change in the writer of *Le Roi s’amuse* by the late 1860s, when he claimed in notes for his project that he intended to write a trilogy whose works (*L’Homme qui rit, La Monarchie, and Quatre-Vingt Treize*) would symbolize the great achievements of the revolution—hope, freedom, and progress, respectively. This is the same writer who said in a note in 1868: “Si Ton demande a l’auteur de ce livre pourquoi il a écrit *L’Homme qui rit*, il répondra que, philosophe, il a voulu affirmer l’âme et la conscience, qu’historien, il a voulu révéler des faits monarchiques peu connus et renseigner la démocratie, et que, poète, il a voulu faire un drame” (14:388).

The ironic echoings between *L’Homme qui rit* and *Le Roi s’amuse* would suggest that there exists a generative dialogue poeticized within Hugo’s work. We know from the prefaces, the one to *Ruy Blas* in particular, that Hugo liked to present, as part of his mythic scheme, his individual works as chapters in a larger narrative reflecting the trajectory of historic change and of the development of his own consciousness. The powerfully active and syntactically open title of the later novel, *The Man Who Laughs*, comments ironically on the reflexive purposelessness of the formulation *The King Amuses Himself*. It is by order of the king ("jussu regis") that Gwynplaine is abducted and disfigured in order not to be recognized as the legitimate heir to a rebellious nobleman who
refused to accept a restoration monarchy after the fall of Cromwell’s Republic. Thus the later work admits much more revolutionary ferment than the earlier one, which takes place in France under the reign of Francis I. The particular form of disfiguration chosen for the child, a gaping smile surgically carved into his face, makes him an ideal buffoon for the people’s amusement in the marketplace world of folk culture. When Gwynplaine’s aristocratic identity is restored, he delivers a speech to the House of Lords announcing the Revolution that will, as we know, wipe the smile off the king’s face. But because the nobles can see only the grinning mask, they pay no attention to Gwynplaine’s message and almost laugh their own heads off listening. The mask that the king had carved into Gwynplaine’s face is, as he tells us, the symbolic face of the people who laugh to forget their suffering.

Thus a mirror image emerges as well as an important transformation. Gwynplaine is both the dramatically idiosyncratic individual, disfigured freak of the carnival show, and a figure for mankind, which includes both the people laughing to forget and the lords, laughing to suppress or deny the suffering presence demanding affirmation, a presence which, as we know, will have the last laugh in Quatre-Vingts Treize. The relationships of Gwynplaine as buffoon to these two audiences (the people and the lords) and of the audiences to each other suggest that this is indeed a novel of hope, as Hugo asserted in his notes, and that the man who laughs is an enunciating subject who constitutes himself as the powerfully determining symbolic subject of his own discourse.

I shall turn now to the two key scenes in which Gwynplaine’s appearance is received by a laughing audience.

Hugo’s protagonist comes of age under the sign of the Bakhtinian X. Gwynplaine and a blind baby named Dea are adopted by a traveling mountebank, a skeptic with a tender heart who always says the opposite from what he means. He calls himself Ursus and has named his tame wolf Homo, for example, thus: “Homo n’était pas le premier loup venu” or “et Homo était un vrai loup.” Throughout this section we are obliged to read the narrative à l’envers, so to speak. The little family of social rejects forms an idyllic world of its own as it rolls around England in its circus wagon, “The Green Box”: “Dans cette baraque, il y avait la liberté, la bonne conscience, le courage, le dévouement, l’innocence, le bonheur, l’amour” (14:203). Out of their lyrical isolation, Ursus conceives of an “interlude” to entertain the marketplace public, a simple allegorical drama that he calls “Chaos vaincu.” In it Gwynplaine, who is Man, struggles against Chaos, figured by Ursus and Homo. Just as Man is about to be defeated, Dea appears, bathed in ethereal light and singing Spanish verses that claim the redemptive power of song. Man responds to her summons in a voice “plus profonde et . . . plus douce encore, voix navrée et ravie, d’une gravité tendre et farouche” (14:199). The narrator informs us that “C’était le chant humain répondant au chant sidéral.” At the moment of
salvation, however, as Gwynplaine’s face is drenched in light to reveal “le monstre éproué,” the crowd bursts into gales of laughter: “Dire la commotion de la foule est impossible. Un soleil de rire surgissant, tel était l’effet” (14:199). The laughter is not cruel, but rather a kind of effulgence that attests to the triumph of light over darkness depicted on stage. The audience identifies with Gwynplaine without realizing it: “On sentait qu’elle aimait son monstre. Le savait-elle monstre? Oui, puisqu’elle le touchait. Non, puisqu’elle l’acceptait”; and, through the sight of the grotesque coupling, they experience his transformation from monster to divinity: “Dea adorait l’ange, pendant que le peuple contemplait le monstre et subissait, fasciné lui aussi, mais en sens inverse, cet immense rire prométhéen.” Hugo underscores the potentially cataclysmic nature of this communal hilarity in terms that recall Bakhtin’s insistence on the utopian nature of the grotesque quoted earlier ("Born of folk humor, it always represents . . . the return of Saturn’s golden age to earth. . . . The existing world suddenly becomes alien . . . precisely because there is the potentiality of a friendly world"): “Toute cette nuit et tout ce jour mêlés se résolvaient dans l’esprit du spectateur en un clair-obscur où apparaissaient des perspectives infinies. Comment la divinité adhère à l’ébauche . . . comment le défiguré se transfigure, comment l’informe devient paradisiaque, tous ces mystères entre­vus compliquaient d’une émotion presque cosmique la convulsion d’hilarité soulevée par Gwynplaine” (14:200).

But, although the official churches are drained of their faithful, who prefer to attend the performance at the Green Box, Ursus’s lyrical text does not produce revolutionary action. In fact, the play functions as an opiate, helping the people forget their suffering. Whatever their laughter may imply about the communal body of mankind, the audience and the actors perceive themselves as separate from each other after the play is over. Gwynplaine, Dea, Ursus, and Homo are immersed in their private happiness and the audience is convinced of its superiority over the actors: “le dernier calfat . . . se considérait comme incommensurablement supérieur à cet amateur de ‘la canaille’” (14:201).

Nevertheless, the daily transformation of the Green Box from locus amoenus to theater opening onto the world inevitably brings with it a rift in the idyllic fabric of the players’ existence. That rift, the loss of innocence, is, as always for Hugo, the opening onto another, superior level of awareness. As Gwynplaine watches the laughing audience day after day, he begins to see beyond the mask of laughter into their suffering interior: “Il était ravi d’être muré, mais de temps en temps, il levait la tête par-dessus le mur. Que voyait-il autour de lui? . . . une promiscuité de ruines. Chaque soir toutes les fatalités sociales venaient faire cercle autour de sa félicité . . . il lui venait des idées . . . il sentait des veillées de secourir le monde . . . il perdait le sentiment de la proportion jusqu’à se dire: ‘Que pourrait-on faire pour ce pauvre peuple?’” (14:203–4; my italics).17
The opportunity to act comes when Gwynplaine discovers his identity as lord of England. The room where he will deliver his speech in the House of Lords, with its elaborately hierarchical and ritualized seating arrangements, is a translation into political reality of the ironic inscriptions enumerating the rights of the nobility that covered the walls of Ursus's carnival wagon. Thus we recognize in another locus of immurement and delusion a possible stage for a theater of revolution.

The sign of the X continues to inform Hugo's text. Gwynplaine's sudden ascent to the very top of the social hierarchy represents a temporary moral fall in terms of his perception of his relationship to his fellow man. He now sees himself on top of an illusory mountain, in control of others, a unified self like the "right" kind of sovereign who will be the epic spokesman for God and humanity. Hugo uses theater imagery to describe this phase of self-delusion: "Il se représentait une entrée splendide à la chambre des lords. Il arrivait gonflé de choses nouvelles . . . il leur montrerait la vérité" (14:285). It is here that he most resembles Triboulet, the buffoon "gonflé d'illusions."

As I see it, Gwynplaine's speech can be divided into three major movements according to the changes in the speaker's perception of himself in relation to his audience, changes that can be charted according to his use of the three pronouns of tragic discourse (here I am adopting Ubersfeld's model): the je of the enunciating subject (Gwynplaine), the vous of the addressee (the lords), and the il who is the subject of the discourse (the people).

The illusion of being in control, of being a unified self, is translated in the first few moments of his speech by the fleeting control he is able to exert over the grin carved into his own face: "Par une concentration de volonté égale à celle qu'il faudrait pour dompter un tigre, il avait réussi à ramener pour un moment au sérieux le fatal rictus de son visage" (14:347). Yet it is this unified face that the narrator describes as "un masque sur un fond de fumée." This first movement is structured according to an almost perfectly balanced je-vous opposition, an ironic inversion of the relationship of dominance the nobility exerts over the people that Gwynplaine has come to denounce. "Mylords, j'ai à vous parler. . . . Je suis celui qui vient des profondeurs . . . vous êtes les grands et les riches. . . . Moi, je ne suis qu'une voix. . . . Vous m'entendrez. . . . Je puis vous dire ce que vous pesez" (my italics). During this phase the narrator compares Gwynplaine to Michael and his audience to the dragon: "On est, pour ainsi dire, debout sur une cime d'âmes. On a sous son talon un tressaillement d'entrailles humaines" (14:348). Thus Gwynplaine has moved from one form of isolation to another—from withdrawal into the personal happiness of the circus wagon-idyll to a stance of superiority and dominance in the House of Lords. In both cases the stage from which he speaks is cut off from his audience, and they are, in a sense, justified in perceiving him as monstrous alterity. As long as Gwynplaine can control his face, the lords
listen respectfully, but a relationship of antagonism has been established ("L'auditoire hait l'orateur," 14:350), and at the first sign of weakness, rebellion breaks out. This weakness occurs, significantly, when Gwynplaine evokes that lyrical je of the circus wagon that he abandoned in becoming a public figure.

Infuriated by the laughter he provides, Gwynplaine pursues his denunciation of the monarchy's repressive control of the people, this time suppressing the first person pronoun almost entirely from his rhetoric and moving from the past tense of his own history to the present tense of society's dilemma. Instead of the je-vous opposition, he focuses on the relationship of the vous to the il, on the ties that bind nobles to people. Rather than "Je puis vous dire ce que vous pesez," he says, "Dieu vous pese . . . vous êtes des hommes comme les autres," and he seeks to describe the specific social ills that beset the people. The reaction of his audience to this part of his speech is even more intensely derisive than before.

At this point Gwynplaine recognizes the absolute breakdown in communication that has occurred between himself and his audience and lapses into a kind of soliloquy in which his own consciousness becomes the theater of convergence that he had imagined his message would create. His speech is now powerfully revolutionary, a discourse of prophecy spoken in the future tense: "While dying it gives birth" (Bakhtin). The future is there in the room, personified by a very young lord, not laughing, but staring gravely at Gwynplaine in the midst of the hilarity: "Un des pairs mineurs . . . se leva debout sur son banc, ne riant pas, grave comme il sied à un futur législateur, et, sans dire un mot, regarde Gwynplaine avec son frais visage de douze ans en haussant les épaules" (14:353).

Both je and vous merge with the il of that otherness they would seek to understand: "Ah, je suis un des leurs. Je suis aussi un des vôtres, ô vous les pauvres. . . . O mes frères d'en bas, je leur dirai votre dénûment" (14:352). He addresses the reified people of his opening remarks as if they were now there, living presences in the room—in the place of the lords: "Qu'est-ce que ces gens qui sont à genoux? Qu'est-ce que vous faites là? Levez-vous, vous êtes des hommes" (my italics). The laughter that greets this phase of the speech is different from the derisive laughter of the first two movements. Since the lords are no longer the recipients of the speech, they are left in a state of ambivalence from which they cannot transform Gwynplaine into the ineffectual subject of their interpretation. The laughter is no longer triumphant but jubilant, the kind of participative laughter we heard in the marketplace: "On bondissait, on criait bis, on se roulait. On battait du pied. On s'empoignait au rabat. La majesté du lieu, la pourpre des robes, la pudeur des hermines, l'in-folio des perruques, n'y faisait rien. Les lords riaient, les évêques riaient, les juges riaient. Le banc des vieillards se déridait, le banc des enfants se
tordait” (14:354). With the internalization of the dialogue as a structuring principle of his own discourse and the multiplication of himself into the world’s body, Gwynplaine as the man who laughs or mankind laughing takes on a symbolic plenitude he never before possessed. He now speaks of himself in the third person, as the cosmic laughter of transfiguration announcing the oncoming apocalypse: “C’est la fin qui commence, c’est la rouge aurore de la catastrophe, et voilà ce qu’il y a dans ce rire, dont vous riez . . . tout ce que vous voyez, c’est moi. Vous avez des fêtes, c’est mon rire. Vous avez des joies publiques, c’est mon rire. Vous avez des naissances de princes, c’est mon rire. Vous avez au-dessus de vous le tonnerre, c’est mon rire” (14:354). Instead of representation by language, there occurs, as Bakhtin proposes, experience in language. The laughter of his speech is echoed in the wild laughter that rings throughout the hall, causing an absolute collapse of the ceremony that characterized the opening of the session. The “rire” as subject of Gwynplaine’s discourse begins to constitute the action: “On ne savait plus où l’on allait, ni ce qu’on faisait. Il fallut lever la séance” (14:355). The House of Lords dissolves in front of our eyes; a space riddled with cracks, it collapses and disappears: “Les assemblées ont . . . toutes sortes de portes dérobées par où elles se vident comme un vase par des fêlures” (14:355). Gwynplaine thinks the truth without realizing it when he says to himself: “Ce qui était triomphe à la Green Box était chute et catastrophe à la chambre des lords.” As Gwynplaine leaves the closed space of the House of Lords, he hears his bastard double, Lord David Dirry-Moir/Tom-Jim-Jack, pick up the challenge that Gwynplaine has hurled: “je fais de sa cause ma cause . . . et de vos ricanements ma colère” (14:358).

Thus Hugo sees Gwynplaine as a figure for the grotesque fulfilling a historic function much as Bakhtin describes it: “The cyclical character is superseded by the sense of historic time. The grotesque images . . . become the means for the artistic and ideological expression of a mighty awareness of history and historic change.”¹⁸ The figure of disfiguration becomes, in this novel at least, a prophetic and transfiguring agent, opening the way to a more promising future.

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⁴. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 6. The following is a summary from Bakhtin’s introduction to *Rabelais and His World*.

6. Bakhtin, _Rabelais_, p. 48. Most of Hugo's novels begin under the sign of life emerging out of death. In _L'Homme qui rit_ the first human voice Gwynplaine hears after he has been abandoned in a wasteland landscape is that of a baby's cry. He finds the baby, Dea, under the snow, still attached to her dead mother's breast, the last drop of milk having turned to ice. His own coming into being is described syntactically as emergence from oblivion: "Il venait d'être—oublié—par eux" (_Oeuvres complètes_, ed. Jean Massin, 18 vols. [Paris: Club français du livre, 1967–70], 14:60; all references to Hugo's work will be from this edition).


8. "Victor Hugo has a true awareness of these moments of crisis in history, but his theoretic expression of it is false. To a certain extent it is metaphysical" (ibid., p. 127).


11. Ibid., p. 469.

12. Ibid., p. 539.

13. Guy Robert has pointed out that Hugo was fascinated by the hieroglyphic significance of the alphabet. In 1839 he listed in a travel notebook a symbolic value for each letter. Among others, there were: "H, c'est la façade de l'édifice avec ses deux tours. . . . X, ce sont les épées croisées, c'est le combat; qui sera vainqueur? . . . aussi les hermétiques ont-ils pris X pour le signe du destin . . . Z, c'est l'éclair, c'est Dieu" (cited by Robert in "Chaos vaincu": _Quelques remarques sur l'oeuvre de Victor Hugo_ [Besançon: Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon, 1976], p. 172).


15. See ibid., p. 535: "L'analyse que nous venons de tenter peut être étendue à l'ensemble de la dramaturgie hugolienne qui serait alors comprise comme dramaturgie de la vaine parole."

16. Lucien Dollenbach proposes that this play within the narrative functions as a specular "mise en abyme" that inevitably mediates our reading of the novel as a whole (_Le Récit spéculaire, essai sur la mise en abyme_ [Paris: Seuil, 1977], pp. 79–80).

17. This move from private spiritual communion to public forum is an essential step in Hugo's redemptive scheme: "Il y a des êtres qui . . . ayant l'azur du ciel, disent: c'est assez! songeurs absorbés dans le prodige, puisant dans l'idolâtrie de la nature l'indifférence du bien et du mal, contemplateurs du cosmos radieusement distraits de l'homme, qui ne comprennent pas qu'on s'occupe de la faim de ceux-ci, de la soif de ceux-là . . . esprits paisibles et terribles, impitoyablement satisfaits. Chose étrange, l'infini leur suffit. Ce grand besoin de l'homme, le fini, qui admet l'embrasement, ils l'ignorent. Le fini, qui admet le progrès, ce travail sublime, ils n'y songent pas" (_Les Misérables_, 11:851–52).

18. In his "Présentation" to _L'Homme qui rit_. Pierre Albouy has aptly described the last part of Gwynplaine's speech as "la béance ouverte vers l'avenir" (14:26).
