TRANSFORMATIONAL GRACE IN VICTOR HUGO’S

LES MISÉRABLES

A Thesis

by

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DEDICATION

To God

With gratitude for the promise of Philippians 1:6
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ABSTRACT

TRANSFORMATIONAL GRACE IN VICTOR HUGO’S

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This thesis analyzes the process of human transformation apparent in Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, specifically focusing on Hugo’s representation of God’s involvement in the process. I identify three major motifs: “Mysterious and Terrible Blows”; the “Abyss,” and the “Holy”; and the “Convert,” as movements in a recursive process of transformation which Hugo structures around four biblical imperatives of increasing difficulty: honesty, love of neighbor, love of enemy, and love of God above all else. I further analyze Hugo’s portrayal of human transformation through the lens of “transformational logic,” a theory which synthesizes insights from the human sciences and Christian theology. Reading Hugo’s text through this lens points to Hugo’s belief in God’s active presence in the abysses of life, graciously working to bring about his good purposes in the life of the individual.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Victor Hugo, in the preface to his monumental work Les Misérables, declares:

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilization, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine, with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age—the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night—are not yet solved; as long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless. (xii)

Though one may draw from this preface the seemingly obvious conclusion that Hugo’s Les Misérables is about the ills of social injustice and human misery on a universal scale, doing so misses Hugo’s insistence on the centrality of the spiritual realities of life. Mario Vargas Llosa, in The Temptation of the Impossible, states that “by focusing on this short epigraph, many critics have concluded that the book’s concerns are social, and that Victor Hugo was striving, in the novel, to combat the injustice, prejudice, and neglect suffered by workers and by women and children in France at that time” (147). That the novel addresses the social and political issues of Hugo’s day which called for such a work to be written is undeniable, for it clearly affirms Hugo’s desire that the darkness of civilization, especially institutionalized darkness, be eradicated. The preface may reasonably be taken as a declaration, if you will, of the problems faced by Hugo’s contemporaries, and common to humanity. The work itself, however, is about solving these problems, and offers a solution which Hugo frames, through the narrative of Jean Valjean’s
transformation, in theological terms. Vargas Llosa argues that Hugo wanted “to
demonstrate the existence of a transcendent life, of which life on earth is a mere transient
part” (147). Though Hugo prefaces his work with his socio/political concerns which
suggest his reason for writing, deep within the heart of the work the narrator states that
*Les Misérables* “is a drama the first character of which is the Infinite” (Hugo 443). In
other words, it’s about what God is doing in the world. Lisa Gasbarrone, in “Restoring
the Sacred in *Les Misérables*,” states that Hugo “chose deliberately to place faith in God
and the experience of the sacred at the very heart of the work” (1). Vargas Llosa asserts
that “the most important presence in the book, its essential context and its binding force:
[is] the mysterious hand of God” (145). Hugo poses the central question of the novel,
“Where is God?” (83), in the chapter “The Waters and the Shadow,” in which he
describes the experience of a man overboard, drowning in the “monstrous deep” of the
“abyss” (82). His question addresses the nature of God’s involvement in the problem of
human suffering. According to Gasbarrone, “Hugo himself, like his characters, seems to
grapple existentially with the question of God’s presence and meaning in the world” (2).
The question of God’s whereabouts when one encounters the abysses of life, raised in the
face of his own personal tragedy, and the many social ills of his time, drives Hugo to
write *Les Misérables*, which ultimately stands as his answer to the question.

Hugo’s passionate interest in the transformation of human society is evident
within the novel, yet his masterpiece *Les Misérables* insists that the individual must first
be transformed, and, being transformed, can then bring about positive change within
society. His narrative about the nature of human transformation, which he exemplifies in
the life of the convict Jean Valjean, shows God’s active involvement in bringing about
Valjean’s redemption and eventual sanctification. Hugo’s choice to frame his narrative of Jean Valjean’s transformation in Christian terms is not incidental, but central to the meaning of the novel, and points to God’s active presence in the world, graciously working to transform individuals, who in turn transform the world around them. In this thesis, I argue that Hugo intends his readers to recognize, through the narrative of Jean Valjean’s life, that human transformation is a spiritual undertaking which is often initiated, and always assisted, by God, whose grace is manifest in the details and circumstances of individual lives; that they connect the transformational grace made evident in the narrative to the “real reality” of their own lives; and that they come to understand that what matters most in life is relationship and union with God.

Though the academy has produced many significant readings of *Les Misérables* which enhance our understanding of the social, political, psychological, literary, and even religious aspects of Hugo’s work, the many distinctly Christian allusions and symbols in *Les Misérables* have often been either neglected, relegated to structural purposes, or in some way secularized in the critical literature, leaving a gap in our understanding of the novel. Richard Maxwell for instance, in “Mystery and Revelation in *Les Misérables*,” a title which one might take to suggest an essay discussing the spiritual aspects of Hugo’s masterpiece, on the contrary, avoids any discussion of Hugo’s exploration of spiritual transformation in the work, including those episodes which feature mystical experience, equating mystery with secrecy and intrigue instead (314). Gasbarrone notes another tendency in “scholarly and academic readers [who, unlike Maxwell,] acknowledge readily the presence and importance of faith in the novel” yet then “proceed . . . to treat the sacred as if it were only (instead of also) a
metaphor” (2). Yet, when the Christian elements of the work are examined in light of the role they play in Valjean’s transformation, it becomes apparent that they function as more than an archetypal, or mythical framework on which to hang a socio-political, psychological, or other reading of the work. Though Hugo dedicates large portions of the text to socio-political concerns, it is a mistake to relegate the Christian story of grace, which permeates the novel, to a supporting role for the secular concerns of the work. Though some critics acknowledge and discuss the major religious themes present in the work, they tend to frame their discussion of them in secular terms, often emptying them of significance for the reader’s own life and experience of the world. Such an approach implies that though parallels to the social evils of poverty, inequality, and injustice depicted in Hugo’s fictional world may be readily found in the current reality of the reader’s world, Hugo’s depiction of God’s transforming grace in the life of Jean Valjean has no correspondence to what Vargas Llosa calls “real reality” (19). Lewis R. Rambo in *Understanding Religious Conversion*, though discussing the study of religious conversion per se, may have an insight into this scholarly aversion to acknowledging the spiritual realities inherent in human transformation. He self-inclusively states that “we scholars may be reluctant to give serious consideration to the religious factor because it might challenge us to modify our worldview, and confront us with the possibility that we are limited creatures who may be dependent upon a deity expecting moral responsibility and obedience” (11). Such a confrontation, however, is precisely what Hugo intends for his readers to encounter; he intends that they make meaningful connections between his portrayal of Jean Valjean’s transformation and their own lives.
Critics’ diverse opinions on the import of the spiritual aspects of *Les Misérables* echo the multiplicity of genres in which they attempt to place the novel. Vargas Llosa calls Hugo the “emblematic figure of French romanticism” (2), and *Les Misérables* the “last great classical novel” (30). He disagrees with those like Olin H. Moore who in “Realism in *Les Misérables*” suggests the presence of realism in the novel. Vargas Llosa cites loquaciousness, what he calls the “verbal incontinence” (19), of the characters as one indication that the novel does not depict “real reality.” He argues that those who see “*Les Misérables* as a faithful reflection of reality, . . . [should] listen to the characters carefully, and with a stopwatch in hand” (19). Moore, however, traces a pattern of developing realism in Hugo’s work, arguing that a trend toward what he calls “photographic realism” (212) is especially evident in the differences between Hugo’s original manuscript, *Les Misères*, and the final published version of *Les Misérables*. He cites the Gorbeau tenement as one “example of Victor Hugo’s nearly photographic descriptions” (214) in *Les Misérables*, describing the following paragraph as “typical of his tendency to emphasize details of houses” (214). Wilbur translates the paragraph in question thus:

> The staircase led up to a very spacious interior, which looked like a barn converted into a house. This structure had for its main channel of communication a long hall, on which there opened, on either side, apartments of different dimensions scarcely habitable, rather resembling booths than rooms. These chambers looked out upon the shapeless grounds of the neighbourhood. Altogether, it was dark and dull and dreary, even melancholy and sepulchral, and it was penetrated, either by the dim, cold rays of the sun or by icy draughts, according to the situation of the cracks, in the roof, or in the door. One interesting and picturesque peculiarity of this kind of tenement is the monstrous size of the spiders. (Hugo 375)

While Vargas Llosa and Moore draw different conclusions from considering different aspects of the narrative, Porter splits the religious elements of the novel into two genres
and then describes *Les Misérables* as a synthesis of both. He attributes indications of
God’s presence in the text, and narrative elements concerning the soul and life after
death, to idealism (142-146), and then asserts that “Hugo depicts his characters’ moral
progress realistically: revelation comes to them in stages, not total and instantaneous like
the vision to Saul on the Damascus Road” (147). Eric D. Mason, in “Narrating the
Chronotope of the Saint: Ordinary Time in the Novel,” may come closest to accounting
for the religious aspects of the novel when he places the narrative of Valjean’s spiritual
transformation within the tradition of hagiography. He says that the “‘event’ being
interpreted in hagiography is an individual’s progress on the path to salvation, an
increasing nearness to God” (9). He argues that *Les Misérables* “presents, through its
narrator, central character, and forms of time and space, an awareness of God’s presence
that anticipates and approaches unity with God” (10).

Some critics who recognize and acknowledge Hugo’s intention that *Les
Misérables* be taken as a work which addresses spiritual realities, nevertheless dismiss
them as being romantic notions of Hugo’s fancy. Vargas Llosa, for instance, relates that
in an extensive introduction to *Les Misérables*, which was eventually abandoned and not
published with the work, Hugo “exhorted the reader to read *Les Misérables* as a
‘religious book,’” (64) and claims that Hugo “intended *Les Misérables* to be a religious
tract” (4). He acknowledges Hugo’s belief that “something exists outside man, and that
there is a link which is both impalpable and unbreakable, that joins man to the Unknown”
(153-154), yet his analysis of the work suggests that what Hugo wrote is pure fiction, that
is, that it has little or no correspondence to “real reality” (19). Vargas Llosa, however,
states that Hugo “has extraordinary aspirations, and it is through them that these teeming
adventures [of Les Misérables] have become so extensive that they appear ‘real.’” Vargas Llosa’s point though is that “they are not real. Quite the opposite. Everything is fiction . . .” (13). Though Vargas Llosa acknowledges Hugo’s belief in God, he claims that “the narrator [is] the God of the novel” (160), distancing Hugo’s depiction of God’s grace from the “real reality” of his reader’s lives.

Other critics also acknowledge the religious thrust of Hugo’s work while subtly dismissing it as a romantic or utopian aspect of Hugo’s vision. Victor Brombert, for example, in Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel, asserts that “Hugo’s profession of faith must . . . be read as a protest against what he himself calls ‘intestinal socialism’—that is, a socialism too exclusively preoccupied with economic realities and economic solutions. Man’s needs do not consist merely of filling his belly. The soul is hungry, too, and cannot live on meat and nothingness . . .” (119). According to Brombert, “no authorial statement could proclaim more clearly the precedence of spiritual needs over political commitments” than Hugo’s insistence that “‘man is a still deeper reality than the people’” (123). Yet he claims that Hugo’s “deeper visionary tendencies are determined by grim social and historical realities, by utopian dreams and fears, and by the need to relate private phantasms to the thrust of external events” (11). Such comments suggest that the spiritual aspects of Hugo’s work, while important to him, may be relegated to the realm of “utopian dreams” and “private phantasms.”

Some writers simply exclude or deny the religious aspects of Les Misérables, while others acknowledge and elucidate the larger religious themes of the work, then assign a secular agenda to their presence and importance in the work. Alexander Welsh in “Opening and Closing Les Misérables,” for instance, claims that Jean Valjean’s “activity
is chiefly inspired by sexual longings” (21). Rather than acknowledge the spiritual aspects of the novel, he asserts that “a tremendous force of sublimation seems at work” in the narrative. Kathryn Grossman asserts another secular interpretation of the novel. In ‘Les Misérables’: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption, she states that Hugo’s Les Misérables is “a modern retelling of Satan’s fall from grace, [that] the fugitive’s epic struggle for moral dignity and spiritual progress taps into a wellspring of familiar images, symbols, and myths.” She states that “the use of repeating motifs to highlight the novel’s moral, political, and spiritual concerns unites the plot, subplots, characters and digressions into one tightly woven design” and says that “in this way, Hugo confers on the secular belief in progress the full force of the myths of sin and redemption, that pervade religious thought” (11). In other words, she suggests that Hugo’s use of religious “images, symbols, and myths” serves not to portray a spiritual reality he would have his readers take seriously, but that he has usurped the inherent power of these spiritual elements to serve secular ends.

While this is by no means a complete or definitive portrait of critical thought on the spiritual aspects of Les Misérables, it is representative of the larger critical picture of the work. Gasbarrone, in her discussion of the ways in which the religious aspects of the novel are often marginalized, states that “the prevailing paradigm in literary criticism and interpretation for the past several decades has been what Paul Ricoeur calls a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’” (6). Though she indicates that “such an approach restores the ambiguity and multiplicity that is inherent in language and narrative” (6), she also argues that it tends to divert the impact of the acknowledged “visionary and transcendent” elements of the work “from the religious to the aesthetic or ideological
realm” (10). Approaching Les Misérables from this perspective, she says, “has led readers and critics to set aside the role of faith in the novel. The poet, the revolutionary, even the philosopher are brought to the center of interpretation, while the priest is relegated to the margins” (7). Yet, according to Gasbarrone, “Les Misérables is a deliberate, sustained account of what happens when various characters . . . encounter, grapple with, and finally accept or reject faith” (18). This suggests that there is room for a critical approach which takes Hugo’s belief in God seriously, “to read Les Misérables for what Hugo tells us about the experience of the sacred, . . . not to endorse his beliefs, but rather to elucidate them” (Gasbarrone18). Therefore, because the critical literature leans so heavily toward secularizing the spiritual aspects of the work, I have reached outside the established literary and critical circle to a theoretical work which addresses human transformation from a theological perspective to consider the real-world implications of Hugo’s portrayal of Christian grace and personal transformation. The Transforming Moment by James E. Loder speaks directly to God’s role in the process of human transformation. This makes his work uniquely suited to assist a reading of Les Misérables which assumes, as Hugo does, a very real link between his depiction of God’s involvement in human transformation, and the ways in which God may be seen to work in the lives of ordinary men and women in “real reality.”

As literary theorists disagree about genre and the role of faith, if any, in the novel, so to do theologians and theorists from the human sciences offer differing perspectives on the nature of human transformation and religious conversion. Chana Ullman in The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion, asserts on the basis of her psychological study of young converts “that conversion pivots around a
sudden attachment, an infatuation with a real or imagined figure which occurs on a background of great emotional turmoil” (xvi). Her studies show that “the typical convert was transformed not by a religion, but by a person” (xvi). Though she speaks specifically about the influence of authority figures and other members of the convert’s new community of commitment, her insight resonates with Christian conversion which brings one into relationship with God through the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. James W. Fowler in Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning, defines conversion as “a significant recentering of one’s previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one’s life in a new community of interpretation and action” (282-283). Both of the studies cited above focus exclusively on the human side of the conversion experience, as is appropriate for any study of human transformation from the perspective of the human sciences, for the study of spiritual realities lies outside their purview. According to Cedric B. Johnson and H. Newton Malony, in Christian Conversion: Biblical and Psychological Perspectives, “the divine side of conversion is defined theologically and is not amenable to the behavioral scientist. The God who gives the person faith and repentance is not predictable” (174). Human transformation, when brought about through Christian conversion as in the case of Jean Valjean, invites a critical approach which can fully address the human side of the experience through the insights of the human sciences and at the same time address the spiritual realities at work in the process. Rambo asserts that “however scholars may choose to delineate its causes, nature, and consequences, conversion is essentially theological and spiritual. Other forces are operative, but the meaning, the significance,
and the goal are religious and/or spiritual . . .” (10). Fowler writes that H. Richard Niebuhr “likens faith to a cube. From any one angle of vision . . . the observer can see and describe at least three sides of the cube. But the cube has back sides, a bottom and insides as well. Several angles of vision have to be coordinated simultaneously to do any real justice in a characterization of faith” (32). Johnson and Malony address this difficulty by incorporating studies from the human sciences and from a theological perspective into their work. They approach these usually mutually exclusive approaches to the study of conversion by dividing their book into distinct sections. The first part of the book describes various perspectives on conversion from the human sciences. In the second part of the book, Christian conversion is presented from a biblical point of view. The authors note that

... in a study of conversion in the Bible, one always finds a twin emphasis—on the divine role and on the human role. On the human side, the focus is on the person who turns. On the divine side, God is seen as the One who is active in turning the person to himself. (73)

Approaching human transformation which results from Christian conversion from a single perspective, whether that be from the view of the human sciences or the view from theology, necessarily limits one’s understanding of the experience or process. Johnson and Malony state that “Ultimately, . . . the sensitive participant/observer of the experience may be a major factor in the understanding of conversion. We need more theologically alert, scientifically astute, and theologically informed and empathic experimenters . . .” (174-175). Loder’s work, drawn from his clinical training, counseling practice, and pastoral work, as well as from his own experience, shows him to be a “sensitive participant/observer of the experience.” He synthesizes insights about human
transformation from the human sciences and Christian theology into a theory of transformation which accounts for both human and divine participation in the process.

Hugo infuses *Les Misérables* with a palpable sense of God’s presence. A sense of mystery permeates the spiritual aspects of the work, raising questions about God’s connection to, and activity in, the lives of characters within the narrative, especially within the life of Jean Valjean. Like Hugo, Loder understands human transformation to be spiritual in nature and brought about through the agency of God’s “Holy Spirit” (4). He states that when the “ego itself” is the central concern, “the logic of transformation is transposed to the level of divine action. In this the Holy Spirit as *Spiritus Creator...* transforms the human ego.” He posits a pattern of transformation which he calls, “transformational logic” (130), in which the human spirit’s “integrity in driving toward meaning and wholeness” (3) holds “continuity and discontinuity together in productive tension.” According to Loder, human transformational experiences arise out of this tension through a five-step sequence: 1. Conflict in context, 2. Interlude for scanning, 3. Insight felt with intuitive force, 4. Release and repatterning, and 5. Interpretation and verification (3, 4).

My reading of Hugo’s narrative about the nature of human transformation draws out the many Christian symbols and allusions he uses to contextualize the events of Jean Valjean’s life. I have structured my chapters around the major motifs Hugo uses as recurring steps in a pattern of transformation based on progressively difficult biblical imperatives: honesty, love of neighbor, love of enemy, and love of God above and before all else. I identify three major motifs Hugo uses to portray the sequence of transformation in Valjean’s life, and construct my chapters around them, using Loder’s theory to reveal
places in the text where Hugo embeds evidence of God’s grace and involvement in the
process. I also discuss the ways in which Hugo’s portrayal of Valjean’s transformation
reflects the real-life process of transformation described by Loder. Occasional corrections
to the translation, when indicated by the original text, have been made.

In Chapter II, “Mysterious and Terrible Blows,” I address the motif of ‘blows’
as they pertain to initiating the transformational sequence in the novel. I examine the
implications of two exemplary ‘blows’ which preface the remaining blows in the
narrative, the implied blow received by Bishop Bienvenu as a young man, which turned
him toward God and the religious life, and the figurative ‘blow’ of the drowning man in
“The Waters and the Shadow.” I also consider the three main blows involved in the
transformation of Jean Valjean, and one blow each that befalls Javert and Thénardier,
respectively. Each blow is examined for evidence of grace, and the implications of its
presence or absence for initiating the transformational sequence. I interpret these blows in
light of Loder’s theory, as pertaining to the first step of transformational logic, “Conflict
in Context.” I offer close readings of these blows to highlight the ‘context’ in which each
blow falls. These close readings reveal how Hugo’s use of Christian motifs and images
frame these blows in such as way as to assert their spiritual nature, and follow the
progression of Valjean’s transformation as he is confronted with increasingly difficult
biblical imperatives. Finally, I identify some of Hugo’s unorthodox beliefs, and consider
his Manichean leanings as they pertain to his portrayal of spiritual forces in the text.

In Chapter III, “The Abyss” and “The Holy,” I explore Hugo’s motif of the
“the abyss,” linking it to the concept of the “void” in Loder’s discussion of the four
elements of being for the human, “environment, selfhood, the possibility of not being,
and the possibility of new being” (69). I also link Hugo’s representation of experiences of the abyss to the second step of transformational logic, “Interlude for Scanning.” Because representations of experiences of the void, and of the illuminating vision, are so closely linked in *Les Misérables*, this chapter also includes an examination of Hugo’s representation of visions in the novel. I give close readings of Valjean’s visions, which I link to the concept of the “Holy” as it relates to the possibility of new being, juxtaposing them to Javert’s vision, which is also linked to the concept of the “Holy” though it leads to his suicide. I interpret these visions as pertaining to the third step of transformational logic, “Insight felt with intuitive force.” Additionally, I briefly address the concepts of conscience and free will as they pertain to the text and Christian teaching, as well as continuing to examine Hugo’s focus on the link between biblical imperatives and human transformation.

In Chapter IV, “The Convert,” I consider the motif of conviction as it pertains to Valjean’s original conviction, and imprisonment for theft, and how it is overlaid with new meaning as he internalizes, by living out, the biblical imperatives with which Hugo structures his transformation. I consider Hugo’s narrative in light of Loder’s discussion of convicional knowing, and in terms of the final two steps of his theory, “release and repatterning” and “interpretation and verification.” I also consider the ways in which Hugo uses location in the novel to graphically portray spiritual elements in the text, including the significance of the Gorbeau tenement, the convent garden, the garden on the Rue Plumet, and the house on the Rue de l’Homme Armé.
CHAPTER II

“MYSTERIOUS AND TERRIBLE BLOWS”

“Mysterious and terrible blows” (Hugo 3) and their transformational potential are introduced on the first page of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, presaging their repeated appearance throughout the text. Reference to such a blow so early in the narrative suggests that profound personal change brought about by sudden shocks, will be a central theme of the novel. The ramifications of these “mysterious and terrible blows” for the lives of Hugo’s characters, are implied in their first mention, and exemplified in the suggested magnitude of Bishop Bienvenu’s transformation. Within his account of the bishop’s early life, the narrator asks whether he had been “suddenly attacked by one of those mysterious and terrible blows which sometimes overwhelm, by smiting to the heart, the man whom public disasters could not shake, by aiming at life or fortune” (3). In his brief response, “No one could have answered; all that was known was that when he returned from Italy he was a priest” (3), the narrator strongly suggests that a personal calamity so affected M. Myriel, a “passionate, perhaps a violent, man” (48) who was “devoted to the world and to its pleasures” (Hugo 3), that he became a priest. The reader is alerted to five important aspects of the novel by this question and its seemingly offhanded answer. This short exchange contains the foreshadowing of calamity, the connection between calamity and transformation, an indication that one’s core identity is what undergoes transformation, the association of transformation with the spiritual life,
and an indication that these life-changing blows are somehow “mysterious and terrible.” The life crises the reader is warned to watch for are sudden and potent, they can “overwhelm” even the strong and experienced, they strike the heart by threatening what is held most precious, “life and fortune,” and finally, they come from an outside will, for they are “aimed” rather than random (Hugo 3).

The connection between calamity and personal transformation within the novel suggests that Hugo sees such life crises as having a purpose for the lives of those on whom they fall. The narrator’s description of these ‘mysterious and terrible blows’ assumes that Hugo’s readers will recognize them as familiar to their own experience, suggesting that Hugo intends his reader to consider the purpose of such crises within their own lives however distant or different they may seem from those of his characters. His choice of a convict as the principle recipient of these blows is significant, for he sets this narrative about human transformation in a distinctly Christian framework within which the concept of conviction is of vital importance. A close look at Hugo’s portrayal of these blows suggests that he sees human transformation as an essentially spiritual enterprise.

The inherently spiritual nature of human transformation also comprises the central focus of James E. Loder’s *The Transforming Moment*, a theoretical work which delineates the real-world process by which transformation occurs. Loder’s work is particularly useful as a lens through which to read *Les Misérables* for several reasons. First, like Hugo, Loder sees purposeful connections between life crises and human transformation. Second, he understands human transformation to be spiritual in nature, and, like Hugo, frames his work in distinctly Christian terms, speaking specifically about the role of conviction in the transformational process. Finally, Hugo’s belief in God’s existence is a perspective he
shares with Loder, a perspective which both men assume has real world implications for the lives of their readers, a perspective which is also foundational to this thesis. I argue that *Les Misérables* is a narrative about the nature of human transformation, which Hugo portrays as being essentially spiritual, often initiated by a profound shock or severe blow connected to one’s identity which is provoked by a mysterious will originating outside the self, and that these blows are purposeful, that they hold the potential for salvific or sanctifying effects. Hugo repeatedly affirms God’s involvement in the transformational process, and consistently brings forward the idea that relationship and union with God are the ultimate goals of life.

Hugo’s choice of M. Myriel as the first character to introduce to the reader may seem odd or arbitrary, for the narrative of his life as the bishop of Digne fills only a small number of pages compared to those dedicated to Jean Valjean, whose transformation occupies the main narrative thread of the work. Yet the bishop fills a foundational role in the text and a central role in Valjean’s transformation. Welsh explains that “beginnings and endings of narrative . . . are arbitrary disjunctions in a sequence of events that is presumed continuous, extending before and after the events that are narrated” (10). He asserts that Hugo relies on the “axiom that everything that has happened up to now,” that is up until the opening words of the novel, “can in theory be known to us” (14). If, as Welsh suggests, all of Myriel’s past life is potentially known to the narrator, then the reader must assume that only those portions of Myriel’s life which have importance for the narrative are made known. By placing M. Myriel in this primary position within the text and immediately suggesting that his is a transformed life, Hugo asserts a continuity of action in history, as Welsh suggests, the continuity of conversion.
and transformation of individual lives begun before the narrative opens. The opening narrative of Myriel’s life establishes the motif of spiritual transformation as central to the text and serves to define the contours of a transformed life.

Hugo associates M. Myriel’s turn toward the spiritual life with ‘mysterious and terrible blows,’ implying that such blows, or life crises, play a role in the transformation of the recipient. Briana Lewis, in Plus le Même Homme, notes that life crises serve an initiatory function in Jean Valjean’s transformation (135-36). The exemplary transformational narratives discussed in The Transforming Moment, also show profound life crises serving to either initiate, or sustain the transformational process in the recipient’s life. Rambo notes that “the typical psychological study of conversion stresses the way in which conversion is often preceded by anguish, turmoil, despair, conflict, guilt, and other such difficulties” (9). Such experiences ring true in many conversion narratives, including this one. Loder argues that transformation begins when such conflict emerges within a given context, and describes “Conflict in context,” the first of five steps in his transformational theory, as a “deep movement of the human spirit [which] begins in restless incoherence, dichotomy, or fragmented situations . . . which defy our elemental longings for coherence” (3). The initiatory function of this step, and the closeness of its description to the way characters respond to crisis in Les Misérables, make it a fitting lens through which to consider the motif of ‘mysterious and terrible blows’ in the narrative, for they provoke just this kind of chaotic, personal fragmentation, in which internal conflict engenders a powerfully motivating desire for resolution. By positing a positive function for life crises in the transformational process, both Hugo and Loder show that God’s grace may be made manifest in the wake of what Hugo calls ‘mysterious
and terrible blows,’ initiating and assisting the transformational process within the lives of individuals.

Many critics suggest that Les Misérables was born of Hugo’s own encounter with public calamity and personal tragedy. That his circumstances contributed to the creation of such a masterpiece attests to the potential for positive results from the difficult and challenging realities of life. Yet transformation does not always take place in the wake of such blows, which sometimes merely serve to plunge the person into an abyss from which there seems no escape. Hugo’s ability to powerfully reflect within the narrative such central realities of the real world is in part what makes Les Misérables such a potent and enduring narrative. Hugo’s work, however, does more than reflect these realities; his narrative challenges the reader to consider two things: first, what part individual responses to such blows play in the transformational process, and second, the critical role grace and forgiveness play in human transformation.

Hugo’s choice to place a bishop’s transformation at the beginning of his text is the first indication that he sees human transformation as inherently spiritual, and that he intends the novel as a spiritual work. Kathryn M. Grossman in Les Misérables: Conversion, Revolution, Redemption, recognizes the importance of the religious aspects of the work for Hugo. She notes that the 365 mostly short chapters of which it consists are “like the sequence of daily biblical readings in a liturgical lectionary.” She states that “Les Misérables aspires to function as a kind of spiritual guide, as a means for reflecting on time and eternity, the secular and the sacred” (Les Misérables 26). According to Mario Vargas Llosa in The Temptation of the Impossible, Hugo argued with his son Charles over his choice to make M. Myriel a bishop, asserting that exchanging a secular figure for
the bishop would not suit his purposes, because they were religious in nature. Indeed, Gasbarrone states that “unlike Charles” who argued for a character “more in keeping with the progressive political message of the novel,” Hugo “rejected the secular option to take a characteristically longer view, one that illustrates the essential role that religion plays not only in the novel but also, Hugo believed, in human thought and experience” (4).

Vargas Llosa states that “the main function of the bishop of Digne in the novel is to act as a catalyst for the ex-convict Jean Valjean to change from an evil man into a good man” (Vargas Llosa 64). Because Hugo intends to tell a redemption story, a character “with a liberal, modern profession, like a doctor” as Charles Hugo here suggests, cannot suffice for his purposes (qtd. in Vargas Llosa 64). Hugo insists on making M. Myriel a priest because the change he foreshadows in his portrayal of the bishop’s life is a complete transformation, reaching to the very depths of the soul. Hugo spends significant narrative time developing the bishop’s character as a man wholly devoted to God, who loves and cares for others, a man who “took the straight road” which Hugo characterizes as “the gospel” (Hugo 50). Gasbarrone aptly characterizes “Bishop Myriel” as modeling an “impeccably Christian way of life, guided by his quiet but relentless piety [which] sets the tone for the entire work” (4). The depth of transformative work implied in the life of Bishop Bienvenu, because of his early placement in the novel, suggests the nature and magnitude of transformation one should expect to encounter again in the narrative. The scope of his transformation also implies that such transformation does more than improve one’s outlook or ethics, as Vargas Llosa’s notion of Valjean’s change from an “evil man to a good man” (64) might suggest. Hugo’s choice to open his narrative with a bishop is important because he is setting the parameters, framing a picture, if you will, of what a
forgiven and redeemed life looks like, parameters by which Valjean’s life will be measured. Valjean’s transformation is portrayed as a spiritual journey, which begins with conviction, leading to his conversion, and eventually to his sanctification. Bishop Bienvenu is not only instrumental in Valjean’s conversion, he sets the standard for goodness in the narrative, exemplifying each biblical imperative Valjean is challenged to incorporate into his own life during the course of his transformation. Like Hugo, Loder sees human transformation as having deep implications for the life of the individual. He notes that “it is important to understand that transformation is not merely a synonym for positive change. Rather it occurs whenever, within a given frame of reference or experience, hidden orders of coherence and meaning emerge to alter the axioms of the given frame and reorder its elements accordingly” (4). In other words, one’s whole frame of reference is completely altered.

Though Bishop Bienvenu appears first in the narrative, establishing the spiritual tenor of the text as Christian, what God does in the life of the convict Jean Valjean is the primary concern of the text, making the blows which befall him central to its meaning. Miranda Kentfield contends, however, in her dissertation on generic innovation in Hugo’s novels, that his primary concern in Les Misérables is with “social injustice and the need for social progress” (98), yet she also affirms that “Hugo felt that social progress should first be measured in moral and spiritual, rather than material terms” (99). Though a strong vein of social and political elements runs through the novel, and can arguably be linked to Valjean’s transformation, the changes that take place in him are manifestly spiritual in nature. Hugo’s insistence on establishing the spiritual nature of human transformation early in the text, by placing Bishop Bienvenu’s life
narrative at the very beginning, supports the claim that the central focus of the work is religious rather than political in nature. Kathryn Grossman asserts that for Hugo “the highest sphere of moral action is spiritual rather than political” (Figuring 163), noting that “Valjean’s conversion effectively removes him . . . from the realm of politics and history.” His life becomes a spiritual journey, his transformation spanning the course of the novel, rather than occurring instantaneously with the first blow. He is “continually becoming a good man” (Figuring 148), according to Grossman, who insists that the point is not in Valjean “making automatically good responses to temptation” but rather “in having such responses proceed from a growing, vital self” (Figuring 149). In other words, it’s about how his transformation occurs over the course of the novel. Hugo’s narrative also shows that the growing vitality of Valjean’s developing identity depends upon his relationship with God, the source of the changes taking place within him.

The centrality of the spiritual aspects of transformation for the meaning of this narrative makes it vitally important that we understand how Hugo represents the spiritual forces operating in the text. Though the overall thrust of the work accords with the Christian gospel in affirming God’s perfect goodness and final victory over evil, and affirms that relationship and union with God are the ultimate goals of life, Hugo’s representation of spiritual forces in the narrative is strongly influenced by Manichean thought (Huss et al. x). Hugo’s understanding of spiritual realities diverges from orthodox Christianity in several ways. First, he espouses the “radical dualism” of Manichean thought which “stemmed from an extreme interpretation of the dichotomy between Body and Flesh in Pauline teaching” (“Manichaeism” 555). It promulgates the notion of “Two Principles, Light and Darkness” existing as two separate spiritual forces in the universe,
representing good and evil, which exist in constant warfare. According to Manichean teaching, a spiritual battle rages around and within us, the ultimate outcome of which is uncertain, whereas orthodox Christian teaching proclaims God’s ultimate victory over evil as already accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Another unorthodox element of Manichaeism, regards the “human soul . . . as an element of divine nature held captive in the flesh” (556), a belief Hugo incorporates into the text by suggesting that a spark of the divine resides within even the vilest of characters, apart from any relationship with God (Hugo 78). A second way Hugo’s representation of spiritual forces in the text diverges from orthodox Christian teaching is the personification of fate which lends the narrative a flavor of the fantastic. The most significant divergence of Hugo’s personal beliefs from Christianity is his denial of the incarnation of Christ. According to Huss et al., Hugo sees Jesus as “no more than an enlightened reformer” (ix). Though this is so, he embeds the narrative of Valjean’s transformation, through his use of Christian symbols and motifs, within the framework of Christian grace.

Due to Hugo’s dualistic leanings, two distinct spiritual forces, God and destiny, are at work in the text, and though the text is in some instances ambiguous on the question of the distinction between them, they can and should be distinguished from one another. The ability to trace God’s involvement in the transformational process within the narrative depends upon being able to identify his voice and actions, and to distinguish them from the opposing spiritual force of Destiny which Hugo has included in his fictional world. The battle between these two powers is dramatically portrayed in Valjean’s inner turmoil brought on by successive life crises. Hugo’s dualism is also incorporated into the narrative through the blows which befall various characters. That
they are ‘aimed,’ implies that they originate from a will outside of the self, while their ‘mysterious and terrible’ nature suggests a spiritual force far greater, and more powerful than that of any human. Because Hugo posits two such wills at work in opposition to one another within the text, the reader must take care in attributing these ‘mysterious and terrible blows’ to the appropriate source.

Hugo carefully shrouds the spiritual in mystery, effectively portraying potency and otherness, while obscuring motive and identity. Yet identity is of critical importance to this text, as are names, which change frequently, confusing or concealing identity. Discerning God’s presence and activity in the narrative depends upon the reader’s ability to correctly identify and differentiate him from the opposing malevolent power, which is also at work in the text. Since ambiguous designations like “the Unknown” (49), “the great All” (27), “incorruptible supreme equity” (288), “the infinite” (452), and “the inexorable invisible” (1195), are used throughout the text for God, Hugo’s dualistic portrayal of spiritual realities becomes difficult to detect. Hugo has, however, helpfully given the reader an ancient and useful way of distinguishing God’s identity in the following, recorded by Bishop Bienvenu in the margin of a volume of correspondence:

Oh Thou who art! Ecclesiastes names thee the Almighty; Maccabees names thee Creator; the Epistle to the Ephesians names thee Liberty; Baruch names thee Immensity; the Psalms name thee Wisdom and Truth; John names thee Light; the book of Kings names thee Lord; Exodus calls thee Providence; Leviticus, Holiness; Esdras, Justice; Creation calls thee God; man names thee Father; but Solomon names thee Compassion, and that is the most beautiful of all thy names. (Hugo 18-19)

Here, scriptural metonymy reveals God’s character, and Myriel’s recorded contemplation of God’s names demonstrates the practice of naming him by his attributes and actions. This practice remains common today, as a sample from Loder’s work demonstrates. He
variously refers to God as “Holy Spirit” (1), “Spiritus Creator” (4), “the ineffable Source” (6), “the One” (6), and “gracious source” (11), among others, as well as quoting Kierkegaard who refers to God as “the Power that posits the self” (qtd. in Loder 5).

Hugo’s use of this ancient practice in Bishop Bienvenu’s contemplations suggests that the reader may be confident then in identifying God in the text when actions and evident attributes match his perfections in goodness, mercy, and holiness.

Hugo also obscures God’s presence in the text by incorporating words such as Providence, Fate, Destiny, and Fortune. If one mistakes all such designations as pointing to a single spiritual reality, namely to God, then God appears to be changeable, and capricious. Vargas Llosa makes this error when he discusses the motif of the “hand” which leads and guides, or grasps, and seizes. He sees but a single “hand,” an “invisible, all-powerful ‘hand’” that at times grabs the characters and manipulates them at will and, on other occasions, loosens its grip on them and allows them to act freely . . .” (52); he, therefore, concludes that it is a “capricious ‘hand’” (53). Mason also makes this error, claiming that “Hugo uses ‘la providence’ to refer to the incidents of fate that reveal God’s will,” suggesting that fate may be equated with God in the novel. He claims that Hugo’s view of ‘fate’ is “unlike . . . a modern view of fate as a collection of circumstances or imperatives . . .” (20). In some instances, this is correct, for fate is sometimes personified in the novel, as is destiny, both of which denote the personification of a negative spiritual force in the world. Sometimes however, Hugo uses the word ‘fate’ in this modern sense, Valjean’s ‘fate’ for instance is to remain a convict throughout the novel, his circumstances do not change, though he does. Huss et al., however, recognize the differences in Hugo’s use of these various designations in the text, arguing that Hugo saw
destiny, another name he uses for fate, as a “force acting independently of, and
oftentimes contrary to God” (x). They note “the dualism of Providence and destiny, of the
constructive and the destructive agency, of the good and evil principle” in Hugo’s works
and claim that this dualism “is one of Hugo’s fundamental beliefs . . . one of the
mainsprings and leading ideas in his most noteworthy productions” including *Les
Misérables* (xi). Though Hugo’s frequent use of these opposing forces is apparent in the
text, he often undermines the Manichean belief that they are equally powerful and that
the outcome of the battle between them is uncertain. Nevertheless, the distinction made
by Huss et al. is helpful, suggesting that one may read ‘God’ when Providence is
encountered in the text. Fate and destiny, however, were ever the enemies of Jean
Valjean. The text states that “no violence of ill fortune had been spared him; the ferocity
of fate, armed with every vengeance and with every scorn of society, had taken him for a
subject and had greedily pursued him,” that he had endured every torture “in that
inquisition of destiny” (Hugo 999). This passage is an instance of such personification in
which these forces function in opposition to God and his purposes.

The way these designations are sometimes grouped in the text can mislead, as
can the assumptions of the characters, which may confuse God, Providence, and Destiny,
making them seem as though they are all one, as in the following examples. When
Fantine came upon Madame Thénardier and her two little girls, before the inn at
Montfermeil, “she thought she saw above this inn the mysterious ‘HERE’ of Providence”
(Hugo 130, emphasis mine). She mistakenly believes that God has provided a safe and
pleasant place for her child. The text however, indicates that “fate” not providence is at
work here, that if Mme Thénardier were standing instead of seated, she may have
“dismayed the traveler [and] disturbed her confidence” keeping her from making such a profound error in judgment. The text notes the irony of how great events often turn on seemingly insignificant circumstances: “A person seated instead of standing; fate hangs on such a thread as that” (130, emphasis mine). Fate is associated here with the dire consequences for both Fantine and Cosette which stem from this error. Hugo also inserts, however, a subtle commentary on the ultimate frailty of fate, which hangs here on the thread of circumstance, undermining the notion that fate is as powerful and irresistible as God who holds the power to control or make use of circumstance for his own purposes.

Jean Valjean provides a second example of how character misinterpretation creates uncertainty over God’s identity, purposes, and actions in the text. In this passage, Valjean wants to believe that the voice which tempts him to evil is God’s voice, offering him a way of escape from the machinations of fate. When Jean Valjean learns that Champmathieu is being tried in his place at Arras, he has a monumental crisis of conscience. The narrator gives the reader an intimate account of the ongoing argument in Valjean’s mind. After some thought about the implications of the situation, he decides that, “Providence has done it all. This is what He wishes apparently. Have I the right to disarrange what He arranges? . . . It is God’s will. I must do nothing contrary to the will of God” (Hugo 196). Hugo makes it clear however, that God, “that mysterious power” is at work speaking through Valjean’s conscience, and not satisfied with Valjean’s resolution. The text identifies this voice telling him to “think!” (197) as the one which spoke to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane when he agonized over facing the cross. After a few moments thought, Valjean

. . . confessed to himself that all that he had been arranging in his mind was monstrous, that ‘to let the matter alone, not to interfere with God,’ was simply
horrible, to let this mistake of destiny and of men be accomplished, not to prevent it, to lend himself to it by his silence, to do nothing, finally, was to do all! it was the last degree of hypocritical meanness! it was a base, cowardly, lying, abject, hideous crime! (Hugo 197)

It would be a mistake to understand the phrase “not to interfere with God” as meaning that what Valjean had taken for God’s will a moment before, actually was God’s will. It may appear at first glance, that Valjean is rejecting God’s will together with “this mistake of destiny and of men” taking them for the same thing, when it is rather, Valjean’s recognition of his error. To “not interfere with God” was monstrous not simply because he, Valjean, intended Champmathieu’s fall, but because he confused “this mistake of destiny and of men” for the will of God (Hugo 197). In other words, he recognizes in this moment that another power is at work here, tempting him through circumstances, trying to cause him to fall from his intention to follow God. This reading shows God and Providence as connected, and shows the error of linking God and Destiny. Though Valjean’s struggle to recognize God’s will in this situation continues, his conclusion in this segment agrees with his final choice. By following the principle of recognizing God by his divine attributes and goodness, and by avoiding the error of confounding him with the force of Fate or Destiny, the reader may be confident in rightly recognizing Hugo’s representation of God’s presence in the text.

The importance of ‘mysterious and terrible blows’ for initiating and sustaining transformation in Hugo’s text justifies their close study. The situational nature of transformative, or “knowing events” in Loder’s terms (33, 36), suggests that the context within which these blows fall is vital for ascertaining their meaning, as well as what they imply for the meaning of Hugo’s text. Rambo’s study also proposes a gradual process of conversion, outlining seven stages through which the convert passes. Some of these
stages overlap or correspond to certain steps in Loder’s transformational theory. The importance of context for conversion, or the transformational process, is one such overlap. Rambo identifies “Context” as the first stage of conversion, yet also claims that it “is more than a first stage that is passed through; rather it is the total environment in which conversion transpires” (20). Because of the importance of context, I include five close readings which focus on blows central to Hugo’s depiction of human transformation, specifically considering the situational context in which each blow falls. These readings address the way in which the character’s core identity is challenged and affected by the blow, the connection between the blows and the spiritual life of the character in question, the potential of each blow for initiating or sustaining the character’s transformation, and the likely origin of each blow.

Though blows of various magnitudes fall on many characters in *Les Misérables*, and identity change is a major theme of the novel, the process of spiritual transformation is only fully developed in Jean Valjean. A brief look at his introduction into the text offers the opportunity to introduce a couple of terms used in connection with Loder’s theory, through which many of the transformational aspects of the narrative are explicated in this thesis. Valjean’s entry into Digne gives the reader a brief sample of what Loder calls a “knowing context” (37). According to Loder, there is an “inherent pattern or logic [to] a knowing event” which “begins when there is an apparent rupture in the knowing context, conflict [then] initiates the knowing response” (37). He states that “Knowing events are situated; they depend initially on assumptions about and within their situations for the meaning of the knowing act.” The key term “knowing event” refers to a completed experience of the transformational process (37), which Loder calls
“transformational logic” (42). The context within which conflict arises is referred to as a “knowing context,” in addition, the person involved in these knowing acts is called the “knower” (37). Finally, the “knowing act” is defined as a “constructive act of the imagination” (37), or “imaginative construct.” Loder summarizes the “crux of . . . an imaginative construct” using the term “bisociation” which he credits to Arthur Koestler, and defines as “two habitually incompatible frames of reference converging, usually with surprising suddenness, to compose a meaningful unity” (Loder 38). I examine several instances in which such “imaginative constructs” feature in Les Misérables in the next chapter. Subsequent references to these terms will appear in this thesis with single quotes, and should be assumed to refer to Loder’s concepts. In the following example of a ‘knowing context,’ Valjean is the ‘knower.’ At the time of his arrival in Digne, Jean Valjean conceives of himself as rejected and reviled, a “wicked” and “impious” man (Hugo 78). What he knows about himself is formed by the brutality of nineteen years in the galleys, and by the rejection of all who refuse him fair compensation and lodging due to his yellow passport. Seen from Loder’s perspective, Valjean’s ‘knowing context’ consists of his identity as a convict, and of his concept of the world as being unjust, hostile, and threatening.

Hugo’s Manichean leanings are made evident in his portrayal of the blows that fall within the narrative, for they originate from what he understands as the opposing spiritual forces in the universe. These are most commonly understood, in Hugo’s text, as God and Destiny. The first and most important blow to befall Jean Valjean is Bishop Bienvenu’s forgiveness; it is salvific in nature, originates with God, and shows that his goodness abounds even to those who act in opposition to him. Though Hugo’s dualistic
leanings are evident in the various origins of these blows, he nevertheless suggests in subtle ways throughout the text that Destiny, though powerful, and often harmful to the characters in the text, cannot match God’s power or authority. By beginning the narrative with the introduction of Bishop Bienvenu, and then embedding the first blow within the context of Valjean’s encounter with him, Hugo establishes God as the preeminent spiritual force within the text. A close reading of this passage reveals Hugo’s belief in God’s superior power. Loder’s insistence that the meaning of ‘knowing acts’ is embedded within the ‘knowing context’ (37), suggests that a close reading of the circumstances within which this blow falls will also reveal its meaning for the text. A close look at the text surrounding this first blow shows the failure of encouragement and generosity to initiate the transformational process in Valjean. It also reveals the essential elements of a blow which suffice to provoke, what Loder terms the “rupture” of the individual’s ‘knowing context’ initiating the transformational process (37).

A close look at the early scenes in which Valjean appears suggests that Hugo believes society can only be changed as the individuals in whom it consists are themselves transformed. As the brief introductory look at Valjean’s entry into Digne from Loder’s perspective implies, Valjean’s overall ‘knowing context’ confirms that society has rejected him, completely excluding him from fraternity and fellowship. A closer look at his entrance into the town of Digne also highlights the failure of one man’s good influence to transform society itself. The reader first meets Valjean “an hour before sunset” (Hugo 52) looking for lodging in the little town of Digne. A rapid social descent ensues as he is rejected by the proprietor of the town’s fine inn, by the keeper of a “humble tavern” (55), and by the prison “Turnkey” (57), representing his rejection by all
levels of society. He is also turned away from a cozy home by the “master of the house” (58), and from a “wretched dog-kennel” (59) by the dog, hence, after social rejection, rejection by man and beast alike. That this revulsion for the stranger occurs in Digne, the town where “in nine years, by dint of holy works and gentle manners, Monseigneur Bienvenu had filled the city . . . with a kind of tender and filial veneration” (44), shows the limits of one man’s influence upon a populace in general. Vargas Llosa asserts that within the world of Les Misérables, “there is no guarantee at all that most of society will experience a . . . conversion” like Valjean does, “or that they will, as a group, acquire . . . high moral standards” (36). Indeed, the details of Valjean’s entrance into the town, show that though the people of Digne venerate the kind bishop, they do not follow his example of goodness and generosity to strangers. This pervasive and pointed lack of compassion towards the stranger in their midst points to Hugo’s recognition that without the personal transformation of individuals, society itself cannot be significantly or permanently transformed.

After making his point about societal rejection of the outcast, and the need for the transformation of individuals, Hugo begins narrowing the focus of his narrative to the particular individual to be transformed within its pages. Rambo notes that

One of the problems facing the student of conversion is to understand the sequence of events that constitute the conversion process. Some form of crisis usually precedes conversion; that is acknowledged by most scholars of conversion. The crisis may be religious, political, psychological, or cultural in origin. Where scholars disagree is on whether the disorientation precedes contact with a proselytizer or comes afterward. (44)

The context within which Valjean encounters Bishop Bienvenu is clearly one of societal rejection which sets the stage for psychological and spiritual crisis. The scene immediately following Valjean’s rejection by the citizens of Digne suggests an existing
“disorientation,” that he suffers from a still more profound rejection, and reveals details about the very personal context of the first blow he receives. According to Loder’s theory, this extended narrative context holds the meaning of the ‘knowing act’ which is to come. Though he is now a free man, Valjean remains condemned, not only in the eyes of others, but, more importantly, in his own estimation of himself. This self-condemnation has implications for the magnitude of the “rupture” he will suffer, once this mysterious and terrible blow falls. Loder’s claim that a “knowing event [is] of far greater significance if the initial conflict is not . . . generated from the outside . . . but a conflict that the knower had had all along but not recognized” (37), means that Valjean’s internal dilemma over his status as a convict will imbue the blow which befalls him with profound significance. This aspect of Loder’s theory indicates that he sees a definite link, and at the same time, a difference between an individual’s preexisting internal conflict, or ‘disorientation,’ and the acute crisis provoked by some external element in a given context, which initiates the transformational process.

Hugo accomplishes two things in this most personal of the opening scenes: he intensifies Valjean’s internal conflict by shifting his focus from a social to a personal context, graphically portraying Valjean’s own rejection of himself; and subtly begins linking Valjean to Jesus, a process of identification which will continue throughout the narrative. Feeling dejected and forsaken, Valjean leaves the town looking for shelter in the open country, only to find himself “in a field [where] before him was a low hillock covered with stubble, which after the harvest looks like a shaved head . . . [and where] there were very low clouds which seemed to rest upon the hills” (Hugo 59-60). This stubble-covered hill mirrors Valjean’s own head with its “shorn, but bristly” hair (52),
over which hung the weight of his conviction, symbolized here by the dark low clouds hanging over the hills. The text notes that “after a moment of motionless contemplation, he turned back hastily to the road” (60). Valjean’s turning from this scene to find shelter elsewhere is, in essence, the final rejection, the rejection of himself. This “hideous, mean, lugubrious, and insignificant” hill, which strikes Valjean as “sinister” in the darkness, evokes a shadowy image of himself, which he does not consciously identify as such. This shadowy image of Valjean, comprises the identity which his first blow challenges. However, the time he spends contemplating it is but “a moment,” not long enough for self-recognition, nor long enough to recognize God’s presence, represented in the solitary tree which stands out against the night sky, the most foreboding and ambiguous reference to the cross in the text. Whereas the landscape represents Valjean’s present identity, this solitary, “ugly tree . . . which seemed to be twisting and contorting itself,” foreshadows the linking of his future identity with that of Christ, signifying the mental torment Valjean endures as the narrative progresses, as well as his life of sacrificial love. Yet it also signifies the One who bore such a cross before him, suggesting his nearness to Valjean in the depths of his forsakenness, for the symbolic tree was just “a few steps” from him. Victor Brombert recognizes, in this symbolism, Hugo’s deliberate identification of Valjean with Christ, for he says, “the low hill resembling a shaved head, the dark sky, the sinister light, the one deformed tree—unmistakably brings to mind Golgotha and the Passion of Christ” (97-98). However, he does not recognize God’s implicit presence in this scene, identifying with Valjean in his suffering, dejection and loneliness, as the One who walked this lonely road of rejection before him. This desolate scene reflects Valjean’s interior reality. His “soul had withered . . . slowly but fatally”
(Hugo 82); the brutality and injustice of his imprisonment provoked in him “habitual indignation, bitterness of soul, [and] a deep sense of injuries suffered,” because of which he harbors a deep “hatred of human law.” The narrator tells us that “through suffering on suffering he came little by little to the conviction, that life was a war; and that in that war he was the vanquished” (78). This is Valjean’s larger ‘knowing context,’ which the good bishop of Digne disturbs, and is important for an overall understanding of Valjean’s eventual transformation. His deep-seated identity conflict, which endures until the very end of the novel, originates in his unremitting status as a convict. Yet, Valjean’s ‘knowing context’ narrows further as the narrative progresses.

Hugo’s insertion into the narrative of a single individual at the pivotal moment of Valjean’s journey through Digne reinforces his point that societal change can only come about as individuals are transformed. As Valjean re-enters the town, a seemingly insignificant shift takes place in the narrative. Up to this point, the reader witnesses the repeated rejection of Valjean by others and finally by himself, however, the following scene breaks this pattern. Valjean wanders a little, at first, but when he reaches “the Cathedral square, he [shakes] his fist at the church” (Hugo 60), the only place to which he has not turned for food and shelter, signifying his rejection of God. Yet within moments of his defiant gesture, “an old woman [comes] out of the church,” which she represents. Hugo’s inclusion of this solitary woman reflects what Gasbarrone describes as Hugo’s “sense of the sacred as both immanent and accessible” (9), for she acts as God’s immediate and gracious response to Valjean. The old woman approaches Valjean in the dark, calls him friend, gives him all the money she has with her, and, concerned for his welfare, despite his rude response, directs him to the good bishop’s door, assuring him
that he will find lodging there, which indeed he does. The gracious actions of this solitary
woman, when compared to the hostile rejection of Valjean by the rest of the town,
suggest that Hugo sees transformation primarily on an individual scale, rather than a
social one. Brombert argues that Hugo places supreme importance on the individual,
saying that for Hugo “the priority of the individual soul remain[s] unchallengable,” and
“the individual is valued as larger and deeper . . . than . . . the group” (124). The actions
of this singular woman toward Valjean, harmonize with his portrayal of Bishop Bienvenu
whose transformation is firmly rooted in the Christian gospel. Her actions, like those of
the good bishop, show her to be a transformed individual who follows the biblical
command to love her neighbor as herself (Lev. 19.18). Her inclusion in the narrative is
consonant with Gasbarrone’s proposal “that Les Misérables is perhaps most devoted to . .
an exploration of the meaning and practice of faith” (17).

Hugo uses the following scene to elaborate on what it looks like to follow this
command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, as well as to build evidence into the text
which suggests that God himself is present when his people follow his commands. As the
nameless woman promises, Valjean finds a warm welcome in the bishop’s home, even
though he identifies himself as a convict the moment he opens the door. The good bishop
calls him Monsieur, and invites him to put down his load and sit before the fire. The
bishop, introduces himself simply as a “priest,” and kindly calls the convict “brother.” A
meal is prepared while they talk by the fire. The good bishop tells him, “this is not my
house; it is the house of Christ” (Hugo 67), indicating God’s presence in that place,
something of which Hugo has made the reader aware prior to Valjean’s arrival. In a letter
written to a friend by the bishop’s sister, Baptistine, she asks, “What is there to fear in
this house? There is always One with us who is the strongest: Satan may visit our house, but the good God inhabits it” (Hugo 30). Though the allusion to Satan suggests the evil and danger Valjean brings with him, the bishop’s confidence in God’s presence and protection allows him to consider Valjean’s suffering and to encourage him to leave bitterness and anger behind with the past and look toward the future. Bishop Bienvenu tells him prophetically that “there will be more joy in heaven over the tears of a repentant sinner, than over the white robes of a hundred good men” (Hugo 68), which is Jesus’ conclusion to the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15.7). When the supper is ready, Valjean joins the family at the table, where the silver candlesticks and extra silver place settings honor him as a guest. As they eat, the good bishop keeps up a kindly chatter to help his guest feel at ease while a bed is made ready for him. During this extraordinary evening, the good bishop, through including Valjean in the intimacy of his home and family, provides a glimpse of what fellowship in right relationship is like, and extends to the convict an indirect invitation to change his ways, to leave his past behind and live henceforth in security and hope. Though the experience of this evening is a wonder to Valjean, and conflicts with his conception of himself, and his ‘world,’ or his ‘knowing context,’ it does nothing to alter it, for in Les Misérables, as is often the case in the real world, personal transformation requires a blow profound enough to break open what Loder refers to as the structural “axioms” (4) of the individual’s perceived “world” (71-75).

Hugo shifts the focus of the narrative, once the meal is completed, from the bishop’s personification of the good neighbor, to Valjean, whose stark contrast to the bishop’s goodness is framed for the reader in additional, meaningful gospel allusions.
Just as Jesus and his teachings are invoked in the opening scenes of Valjean’s visit with the good bishop, further references to the gospel are imbedded in the passage concerning Valjean’s theft of the bishop’s silver. The presence of Christian images and icons such as the cross-shaped patch on the bedroom curtain (21), and the crucifix above the mantle (89), along with mysterious intimations of God’s presence, not only set the tone in this passage (88-89), but also comprise, according to Loder’s theory, the details of Valjean’s ‘knowing context.’ Valjean’s dreary and confused thoughts in the night make it clear that his difficulty is embedded in his identity as a convict. The heady weight of God’s presence which Hugo implants in this scene, suggests his intention to show God’s mysterious engagement with the convicted felon through warnings heavy with Christian symbolism. Loder affirms this connection between crises of identity, such as Valjean’s, and God’s involvement in the transformative process. He states that when the conflicted situation is “endemic to the ego itself . . . the logic of transformation is transposed to the level of divine action” (4). Hugo shifts this passage into a more pronounced spiritual register by incorporating a subtle and highly charged allusion to the gospel, Peter’s denial of Jesus on the night he was betrayed. When Valjean awakes in the middle of the night and approaches the good bishop’s room, he finds the door which separates the two sleeping chambers, “unlatched” (Hugo 87); he needs only to push it open. He pushes once, “lightly with the end of his finger” and the “door yield[s] to the pressure with a silent, imperceptible movement.” But the opening is not yet wide enough, so he pushes “again more boldly,” and again it gives silently. Now, however, there is an obstacle in the way that requires him to open the door even further, so “he pushe[s] the door a third time.” These three pushes of the door parallel Peter’s three denials of Jesus. At the third
push of the door, “a rusty hinge suddenly sends out into the darkness a harsh and prolonged creak,” just as the cock’s crow split the night when Peter denied Jesus the third time (Matt. 26.69-75). Just in case the subtlety of the allusion escapes his reader, Hugo adds, “The noise of this hinge sounded in his ears as clear and terrible as the trumpet of Judgment Day” (Hugo 87). This dual allusion to Peter’s betrayal and to judgment embedded in circumstantial detail, may be read as God’s potent warning to Jean Valjean of the exact nature of what he is about to do, identifying this theft as more than a violation of the law, unmistakably identifying it as a betrayal. By this act of theft, in defiance of the warning given, Valjean not only denies God’s presence in that place, made visible by the “serene and majestic glory” of the bishop’s face in trustful slumber (Hugo 88), but denies the sufficiency of God’s goodness as well, offered to him through Bishop Bienvenu’s welcome and hospitality. The allusion to betrayal, and its connection to the gospel, is strengthened by the fact that what Valjean steals is silver, thirty pieces of which secured Judas’ betrayal of Jesus (Matt. 26:14-6). The nature of Valjean’s transgression shifts the import of his action into a new register of reality, transcending the physical act of theft, and entering the spiritual realm where meaning and consequence result in more profound and longer lasting effects.

Hugo strengthens the sense of Valjean’s crisis being bound up with his identity by alluding to the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah, highlighting the sense of impending judgment in this scene. The threat of judgment inherent in this allusion is spiritual, and suggests a condemnation far greater than a return to the galleys for theft. The text indicates that Valjean, terrified by the noise of the hinge, stops “petrified like the pillar of salt, not daring to stir” (Hugo 87). The allusion refers to Lot’s
wife, who, in the midst of her rescue from the destruction of Sodom, turns back, refusing salvation, and is turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19.26). The allusion indicates that the theft Valjean is about to commit constitutes a deliberate turning away from salvation, back to his old ways of theft. Grossman suggests that through his hospitality, the good bishop offers Valjean “a choice about existing henceforth in ‘goodwill, gentleness, and peace’” (*Les Misérables* 29), a choice of which he seemed only vaguely aware. As Jean Valjean contemplates the sleeping bishop, who shines with an “inward radiance” (Hugo 88), and “something of divinity,” he “hesitat[es] between two realms, that of the doomed and that of the saved” (89), signaling that what he does in the night has eternal significance for his soul. The allusion to Lot’s wife also forewarns that judgment will be swift, and that the nature of the judgment will be such that Valjean will be utterly transformed.

Hugo’s dualistic leanings are clearly visible in these passages in the opposition between the potent and spiritual forces of God and destiny. The way in which they operate in the passage, however, suggests that Hugo believes people, even those directly influenced by these forces, are ultimately free to choose their actions and therefore responsible for their choices. Porter asserts that Hugo’s “concept of Providence always preserves a dimension of human responsibility that can alter an outcome” (146). The influence of the bishop’s kindness causes Valjean to pause and think in the still night, but does no more than “muddy . . . the troubled stream” (Hugo 85) of his thoughts. The text says that he is capable of “a serious, premeditated act, discussed by his conscience, and pondered over with the false ideas which . . . a fate [such as his own would] give” (81). As in Fantine’s disastrous choice to leave Cosette with the
Thénardiers, fate is invoked in Valjean’s capacity for such action, as are his “false ideas,” which, like Fantine’s false perception of the hand of Providence, are associated with circumstances. The text indicates that Valjean’s “hatred of human law,” had become “hatred of society, then hatred of the human race, and then hatred of creation,” and that such hate “reveals itself by a vague and incessant desire to injure some living being, it matters not who” (82). Grossman states that “the good priest’s [kind] words and deeds have little effect on Jean Valjean who robs him as he sleeps” (Les Misérables 28).

Though the bishop’s kindness gives him pause in the night, his thoughts turn to the evils of his past, rather than to a future in which angels rejoice over him as the bishop suggests is possible. Valjean’s actions are born of bitterness and hate, provoked by years of brutal injustice, yet the blow which befalls him is a response provoked by his evil actions, not something initiated apart from the context of his own determined will. Through the numerous symbolic warnings in the night, the narrative shows that Valjean’s intentions are known by God, yet not preempted by him; that is, God does not prevent Valjean’s betrayal of the good bishop, though God is manifestly present in the situation. Nor does God prevent the brutality Valjean himself suffers at the hands of others. In both instances, the text affirms the freedom accorded to human will, saying through the good bishop that “what [a] neighbour does, God permits” (Hugo 25). Though surrounded that night by signs of God’s presence, and warned of impending judgment, Valjean is not overwhelmed by God, nor kept from acting freely.

In these introductory scenes, Hugo carefully paints the context of Valjean’s life to show the magnitude of transformation possible within an individual who encounters God’s grace. Valjean’s repeated rejection by society, his self-condemnation,
defiant betrayal of the good bishop, and his expectation of judgment, may be understood through the lens of transformational logic, to comprise the specific ‘knowing context’ which Bishop Bienvenu’s forgiveness ‘ruptures.’ This ‘mysterious and terrible blow’ differs in kind and origin from the remaining blows which befall him, being distinctly spiritual in nature, and initiated by God, through the hand of the good bishop, whom the text represents as a Christ figure. In spite of the warnings of judgment, and the reality that Valjean clearly deserves punishment for his actions, this blow is full of blessing and promise, given for the rescue of Valjean’s soul. Grossman notes that “the good priest’s words and deeds have little effect [on] Jean Valjean,” that his “kindness and generosity” are insufficient to effect change in the convict, and that the “revelation of a different moral order altogether” (Les Misérables 28) is needed. As Grossman suggests, simple, kindly hospitality was not enough to counter the years of abuse and injustice suffered at the hands of others. Only a blow as shocking and unexpected as the Bishop’s forgiveness and protection could reach someone as hardened and beaten down as Valjean. In terms of Loder’s theory, this blow constitutes for Valjean the ‘rupture’ of his ‘knowing context,’ initiating the transformational sequence which then plays out through the remainder of the narrative. This disruption in his perception of the world allows him to recognize the truth about himself as events develop in the text. Loder stresses that transformations of this order are far more than a simple matter of establishing a new “moral order,” a different kind of law, or example to follow, as Grossman suggests. He claims rather that they establish a radical order of “new being” graciously initiated by God (Loder 87), and which ultimately transcends death.
Hugo, by delivering this blow through the bishop in the context of the spiritually charged scenes in which Valjean’s crime takes place, makes the spiritual nature of this blow, and hence of Valjean’s entire transformation, clear. The establishment of the radically new order of being, of which Loder speaks, depends not only upon the ‘rupture’ of the old order, but also upon God’s involvement in the transformational process. The potential for transformation inherent in such ‘ruptures’ also depends upon the nature of the ‘rupture’ itself, and upon the response of the individual. In this case, the blow, or in Loder’s terms, the “rupture,” consists of three parts: revelation, redeeming action, and identification. Bishop Bienvenu’s identity is revealed; showing Valjean that he has offended someone who possesses the right and authority to condemn him, both socially and spiritually. Yet, the bishop chooses redeeming action rather than judgment, forgiving Valjean, and purchasing his soul for God. The element of gracious forgiveness in this blow is critical for making Valjean’s transformation possible. This redeeming action establishes a new identity for Jean Valjean, as one belonging to God.

Critics disagree about the nature and import of this pivotal scene, which largely determines the meaning one draws from Hugo’s narrative. Briana Lewis, in treating the crises which bring about Valjean’s transformation, omits the aspect of forgiveness in Valjean’s encounter with Bishop Bienvenu. She focuses specifically on Valjean’s sequence of differing identities, and defines ‘Jean Valjean’ as an identity which is socially insupportable and therefore ultimately insufficient to sustain his life. Yet she consistently omits the spiritual symbolism Hugo uses in the text to show the stability of Jean Valjean’s identity as one belonging to God, which persists through all the variations of identity he assumes after his encounter with Bishop Bienvenu. Lewis argues that
Valjean’s first blow comes in a later scene, with his realization that he has stolen Petit Gervais’ coin, yet she admits in her discussion of that passage, that Valjean is “already in a state of crisis upon leaving the bishop” (135). Failing to recognize the bishop’s forgiveness as constituting Valjean’s initial crisis, and the spiritual nature of that crisis, Lewis focuses only on the bishop’s charge to Valjean to become honest. As the narrative progresses, however, the text shows that Valjean’s becoming an honest man proves insufficient to bring about his complete transformation, or in spiritual terms, his sanctification. Lewis’ omission of the bishop’s purchase of Valjean’s soul for God elides the spiritual purpose of Hugo’s narrative. According to Vargas Llosa, during the previously mentioned argument with his son Charles over investing a bishop with such influence in the narrative, Hugo states that “Man needs Religion. Man needs God.” (qtd. in Vargas Llosa 64), suggesting the centrality of the spiritual aspects of the work to its meaning. For Hugo, the redemptive potential of these ‘mysterious and terrible blows’ is what makes them significant, transformative. When “Bishop Bienvenu, calls Valjean “brother,” telling him “you belong no longer to evil, but to good” (Hugo 92), he is not simply telling him to behave better in the future. He is drawing him into God’s family, offering him a new life in relationship with God. He says, “It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!” (92). Grossman states that Valjean “violated Myriel’s hospitality and trust,” yet the bishop in an “unmerited act of grace” shields, and forgives him, when punishment is justly deserved (Les Misérables 29). When he arrives at the bishop’s home, Valjean conceives of himself as a victim marked out for punishment beyond his deserving. After his experiences in the night, however, he knows that he is not a victim,
but a thief who has betrayed the bishop’s kindhearted hospitality, and who deserves punishment. Valjean expects judgment and hostility from the bishop, but the bishop gives him his treasured silver candlesticks instead. Valjean’s encounter with the bishop shatters his idea of himself and his understanding of his ‘world.’ Bishop Bienvenu’s gentle hospitality challenges his notion of a bishop as someone distant, incomprehensible and threatening (Hugo 66). This bishop proves to be none of those things, and only the possibility of a new identity as a child of God, given through the Bishop’s act of redeeming grace, is incomprehensible. Likewise, though the possibility of a new life exists for the convict, one initiated by God through the bishop, Valjean remains free to choose for or against God’s will. Though the good bishop claims his soul for God, Valjean’s response is his own to make, and remains in doubt for some time after the encounter.

Valjean’s first blow unmistakably frames the spiritual nature of these blows, which is revealed, as Loder suggests, in the context within which they arise. In the case of the first blow, Valjean’s ‘knowing context’ is framed by Hugo’s heavy use of Christian allusion and symbolism. The context of Valjean’s second blow, however, is markedly devoid of any such symbolism, suggesting that this blow falls from that force which in the world of Les Misérables opposes God in the world. The most noticeable difference between these two blows is that the sense of God’s presence, palpable on the night Valjean betrays Bishop Bienvenu, is noticeably absent when he learns how nearly he has been identified by Javert, and about Champmathieu’s danger. The scene is strangely lacking in drama, though it leads to one of the most dramatic passages of the novel. The blow falls quietly, like the ominous silence of a gathering storm, the tension
understated, kept in check by the humility of Javert’s confession and Madeleine’s cool, offhanded response. Though the mayor remains calm, when he hears Javert utter the name Jean Valjean he feels the “shudder which precedes great shocks” and bends “like an oak at the approach of a storm,” and he feels “clouds full of thundering and lightnings gathering upon his head” (Hugo 193). There is warning here, as of an impending storm, but not the warning of impending judgment which Valjean receives prior to his betrayal of the good bishop, for this time Valjean himself is betrayed. Hugo’s belief that Destiny works against God’s purposes in the world surfaces in this attack of fate against Jean Valjean, who is actively seeking to draw closer to God by serving his community.

In addition to the lack of God’s felt presence in this scene, the lack of redeeming action, the third element present in the blow of forgiveness, suggests that this blow originates from a will other than God’s. The sinister origin of the fearful blow Javert delivers unknowingly to Valjean, is more positively revealed by the reference just prior to the scene in which it falls, to the “black vein of destiny” (Hugo 177). Destiny is associated here as elsewhere in this text with darkness, as opposed to the soft “ineffable twilight” of the previous scene, in which “the sleeping bishop appeared as if in a halo” (88). Though the reference is to Valjean’s destiny, it is immediately associated with Javert, who delivers the blow. The text describes him as a violent person “who was never kind,” a “savage in the service of civilization” (177). The text says that “at the moment when the name which he had so deeply buried was so strangely uttered, he was seized with stupor, and as if intoxicated by the sinister grotesqueness of his destiny” (192, emphasis mine). Valjean’s status as a convict reemerges in this scene, threatening the new life he has built subsequent to his conversion. The malevolent hand of destiny
endeavors to tempt Valjean away from his purpose to “sanctify his life” (192), by threatening to destroy the “honest man” he has become. Javert’s astute guess at Valjean’s past, and his revelation about Champmathieu’s danger, directly challenge Valjean’s identity as an honest man, and comprise the two parts of this blow, identification and revelation.

In addition to incorporating indications of duality in the spiritual forces at work in the text, through the outward events and circumstances of this second blow, the text highlights the duality of Valjean’s identity. Hugo incorporates striking similarities between Bishop Bienvenu and Father Madeleine into the passages set in Montreuil sur Mer, yet the text also shows that Madeleine differs from the bishop in significant ways. The second blow Valjean receives falls “six or seven years” (Hugo 146) after his encounter with Bishop Bienvenu. The text shows that his circumstances, as well as his name and identity, are radically altered from those of the earlier scenes. Seen from Loder’s perspective, Valjean’s ‘knowing context’ is significantly altered. Whereas in Digne Valjean is rejected by the townspeople, and more importantly, rejects himself, in Montreuil sur Mer, as Father Madeleine, his acceptance follows the same trajectory the good bishop’s had years earlier at Digne (Hugo 4). Gossip and slander gradually gave way to “satire” then “wit” and finally “vanished entirely; respect became complete, unanimous, cordial . . .” (146). Even his designations undergo a gradual change, progressing with an increase of esteem, from Goodman, to Father, to Mayor. His words possess “almost the same accent as the words of Monseigneur the Bishop at Digne. . . .” His former rejection of himself and of God has vanished likewise. He is . . . happy to feel his conscience saddened by his past, and the last half of his existence giving the lie to the first, he live[s] peaceable, reassured, and hopeful,
having but two thoughts: to conceal his name, and to sanctify his life; to escape from men and to return to God. (192)

This passage, though it shows the sincerity of Valjean’s desire to become what the good bishop desires of him, indicates that his transformation is as yet incomplete, in part because he desires to “escape from men” (192), a sentiment which runs contrary to the biblical imperative to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19.18). In contrast to Bishop Bienvenu, who freely mingles with the people of his parish, Valjean holds himself aloof from his neighbors. The text characterizes Valjean’s life in Montreuil sur Mer as “unassailable and inaccessible” (Hugo 192), though he does many good works benefiting his neighbors, endeavoring to assuage their suffering as the bishop does in Digne. The paradox of Madeleine’s relationship with his neighbors, his employees, and the larger community as a benefactor who desires to remain a stranger in their midst, hints at the duality that exists within him. Valjean’s interior duality is confirmed by the conflicting nature of his aims, to escape from men and return to God.

Though Hugo emphasizes the similarities in the financial contributions Bishop Bienvenu and Madeleine make to the wellbeing of their communities, and in the appreciation of their community in return, his portrait of Madeleine is more complex than that of the bishop. Hugo paints the bishop as being perfectly fearless in the face of personal danger, secure in his faith that God is in control and will protect and care for him. Though the text indicates that Madeleine “live[s] peaceable, secure, and hopeful” his confidence lies not in God, as Bishop Bienvenu’s does, but rather in his alias, and in the good works he does, believing that they will shield him from discovery. He also mistakenly believes that his transformation is complete, that having “deeply buried” the name of Jean Valjean he is safe from discovery, and can go on indefinitely living a quiet,
useful, and beneficent existence. He believes that his efforts in becoming “what the bishop had desired” somehow earn him a reprieve from being a convict, that with his transformation, his security is assured. Yet the text indicates that he lives in fear of betraying himself as the convict Jean Valjean. In spite of his fear, however, there are notable exceptions to Valjean’s typical behavior of keeping his distance from his neighbors, times when his dual purposes, “to conceal his name, and to sanctify his life,” conflict. These moments show that his sanctification matters far more to him than concealing his identity, for in these instances he does “not waver in sacrificing . . . his security to his virtue” (Hugo 192). He constantly searches for word of Petit Gervais, publicly mourns Bishop Bienvenu’s death, rescues Fauchelevent, and finally defends Fantine against Javert, risking exposure in each instance. Each of these episodes, especially his intervention to save Fauchelevent, heightens Javert’s suspicions of him, increasing his risk of exposure. His challenge to Javert’s authority on Fantine’s behalf, an act of compassion in which Valjean identifies with the accused, finally causes Javert to denounce him.

Hugo suggests through the outcome of Valjean’s second blow that God may use any circumstances, whether good, or ill, to achieve his good purposes. The context of this second blow links it to Valjean’s ongoing internal dilemma over his identity. Javert’s admission of betrayal shatters Valjean’s belief in his safety, showing him that he cannot rely on his alias, or his good deeds, to protect him. Javert’s revelation proves to Valjean that his remaining unknown cannot last indefinitely. More importantly, however, this blow challenges his identity as an honest man, and reveals that his dual aims of concealing his identity, and drawing closer to God, are ultimately incompatible. The
impossibility of remaining disguised and following Jesus’ command to love his neighbor as himself, for in disguise he cannot be himself, constitutes the rupture of Valjean’s ‘knowing context’ in this situation. Though the narrative gives strong indications that destiny initiates this crisis, the outcome shows God’s active presence in the midst of Valjean’s circumstances, using this blow to bring Valjean further along the path of sanctification, challenging him to adopt the biblical imperative to love his neighbor as himself. Though this blow of destiny may have been intended as evil, to tempt Valjean away from God, Hugo shows God’s ultimate supremacy through its eventual outcome which benefits Valjean as well as others. The good results of this blow encompass the temporal good of an innocent man being set free; and eternal good of Valjean’s relationship with God being strengthened; and the affirmation of Valjean’s new life as an honest man who belongs to God.

Ambiguity characterizes Valjean’s third blow, which I want to suggest has a dual origin, though only “fate” is directly invoked in the text. This blow intensifies the contest between God and fate over Valjean’s identity and ultimately his soul. The potent metaphor of the mirror, as that which reflects an image directly connected to one’s identity, plays a key role in this blow. As in the scene leading to the first blow, Hugo’s portrayal of Valjean’s third blow is infused with mystery, though once again, not with the sense of God’s felt presence as in the circumstance of the first blow. Delivered through the agency of the mirror, this blow comes as quietly as the second one, and as unexpectedly as the first; however, it consists of the element of revelation only.

Though mirrors typically show us exteriors, the image, or face we present to others and the one by which we recognize ourselves, they are often used in literary texts
in symbolic ways. Tzvetan Todorov, in *The Fantastic*, notes the presence of mirrors “whenever the characters must make a decisive step toward the supernatural” (121). Such an association rings true in this instance, for the mirror reveals the compromised state of Valjean’s soul, challenging him to move still closer to God. According to Todorov, “vision pure and simple,” understood as ordinary sight, “reveals an ordinary world, without mysteries” (122). He opposes ordinary sight to “indirect vision” which “distorts normal vision” as in hallucination, or the “vision” of the “visionary,” and claims that “indirect vision is the only road to the marvelous” which he identifies as “transcendence.”

As Todorov suggests, Hugo’s use of hallucination and vision in this passage, two ways of indirect seeing, reinforces the idea of opposing spiritual forces at work in this blow. The double image presented to Valjean by the mirror and the blotter, suggests the opposition of God and Destiny in the delivery of this blow, represented in the confusion caused by the letter’s dual appearance. One moment the writing is plainly readable in the mirror, and in the next, the reverse, for in the “five lines imprinted on the blotter[,] the reversal of the letters made a fantastic scrawl” which Valjean thought “was a hallucination” (Hugo 998). The actual imprint of Cosette’s words of love to another appears to him as “a hallucination,” something unreal. The plain meaning of Cosette’s letter, however, appears as a “vision” in the reflection of the mirror. The hallucination of the illegible “fantastic scrawl” suggests the evil force at work causing distress and confusion, eliciting Valjean’s response of hatred for Marius. Vision, however, is associated in the Hugo’s text with God, and this vision in the mirror shows Valjean plainly not only the clear words of the letter, but also a glimpse into the hidden spiritual reality of his life. When Valjean looks in the mirror a second time, the narrator comments that, “the second sight of a vision is a
reality” (998, emphasis mine). This “second sight,” is not so much a ‘second look,’ as an ‘inner vision’ which reveals the real state of Valjean’s soul, which his care for Cosette and his good deeds had hidden from him. The reality of the love Valjean has internalized is contested by this blow. The narrator says that

\[
\ldots\text{he, Jean Valjean, the regenerated man, the man who had labored so much upon his soul, the man who had made so many efforts to resolve all life, all misery, and all misfortune into love; he looked within himself, and there he saw a spectre, Hatred. (1001)}
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This, in Loder’s terms is Valjean’s ‘knowing context’ which this third blow ruptures. Valjean has come to believe that he has resolved “all life, all misery, and all misfortune into love” and is horrified to find that he is still capable of hatred. The duality of confusion and clarity in the mirror, representing Valjean’s self-deception and self-recognition, shows the opposing purposes of the spiritual forces at work here. Destiny tempts Valjean to cease following the way of love exemplified by the bishop, while God reveals an area of weakness, which needs to be addressed for the sake of Valjean’s sanctification. For some time past, Valjean’s concerns have been increasingly focused on retaining exclusive possession of Cosette’s affections as well as maintaining his own safety. The text shows that his love for Cosette surpasses his love and desire for God. While “loved by Cosette, he was content! He asked nothing more. Had anybody said to him ‘Do you desire anything better?’ he would have answered: ‘No.’ Had God said to him: ‘Do you desire heaven?’ he would have answered: ‘I should be the loser’” (Hugo 773).

Hugo uses the interplay between the blotter, and the mirror to enlighten Valjean to the state of his soul and challenge his identity as a man who loves. Lewis sees Hugo’s use of the mirror in the blotter scene as signifying a crisis over the “jeopardized
state of [Valjean’s] identity.” She interprets the mirror as reflecting the inadequacy of Valjean’s disguise as Fauchelevent, and the limits of his role as Cosette’s father. Neither of these assumed roles, however, is essential to his identity, nor does her interpretation allow room for the spiritual forces Hugo imbeds in this passage by his use of the mirror. Lewis claims rather, that “as Cosette begins to look toward a husband to replace the father in his protecting role, Jean Valjean’s meager existence in the world loses its primary motivating force and finds itself challenged” (161). Though Valjean’s motivations are challenged by this blow, because it reveals the hatred within him, the narrative suggests the jeopardized state of his soul, not the jeopardized state of his identity, as Lewis contends. Contrary to Lewis’ assertion that Valjean loses his primary motivation to live when Cosette marries, the narrative shows that in rescuing Marius, Valjean fulfills his role as provider, secures Cosette’s future in a legitimate family, and provides for her future financial needs. Valjean’s rescue of Javert and Marius suggests that his primary motivation derives not from his role as Cosette’s father, but from his desire to draw near to God, a desire which had for some time been overshadowed by the contentment he found in his life with Cosette.

By evoking the old convict in Valjean’s sudden rush of hatred for Marius, Hugo reinforces the idea that one’s transformation is a gradual process, that Christian love has multiple facets which one internalizes with practice, over time. Valjean’s hatred suggests that a life of happiness based on his continued status as sole possessor of Cosette’s affections is incompatible with a life of continuing nearness to God, in part because it comes at the cost of Cosette’s happiness. The blow reveals Valjean’s heart, in which his desire for nearness to Cosette eclipses his desire to draw near to God. His love
for her is revealed as a love of self, rather than a self-giving love which attends to the needs of the beloved. Valjean’s insistence on isolation, because of his fear of exposure, shows that he is not yet “grounded” in his “Source,” that he does not trust God for his safety and wellbeing. He has once again fallen short of the gospel imperative to love his neighbor as himself, because he continues to hide himself behind an alias, not even admitting his identity to Cosette. According to Loder, “the one place . . . where the self can remain itself is in its Source. If the self is to remain authentic, it must be, as Kierkegaard says, ‘. . . grounded in the Power that posits it’” (79). Applying Loder’s principle here that “the self is truly itself in the ongoing act of giving love” might seem to suggest that since Valjean loves Cosette, he is living out an authentic identity, even while hidden behind an alias. His alias, however, prevents him from being himself and therefore from allowing Cosette to flourish. Loder claims that “the self is grounded in the power that posits it when it lets the being of others flourish.” In other words, the self which exists in relationship with God allows the flourishing of others. Though Valjean deeply loves Cosette, his love for her changes over the years, from nurturing ‘mother’ love in the early years, to the protective love of a father, and finally into a possessive love, intolerant of rival lovers (Grossman, *Figuring* 140). Grossman suggests that Valjean’s love for Cosette “is more complicated than that simply of father or mother” referring to “the incestuous overtones” (*Figuring* 140) of the passage which pictures Valjean as “‘a father . . . son . . . brother . . . and . . . husband’” (qtd. in *Figuring* 140) to Cosette. Grossman sees Valjean’s “attachment to the small valise” (141) which Cosette calls “the *inseparable*” (Hugo 996), and which contains articles of her clothing, as being suggestive of “fetishism” (*Figuring* 141). Even so, Grossman suggests that Valjean’s is a
“‘divine’ passion . . . that multiplies the angles from which to regard the other.” Though the text suggests a “divine” (Hugo 999) element to his love, which is eventually borne out by his actions on Cosette’s behalf for Marius, this blow and the hatred it reveals sends him reeling into a foul abyss. Shocked by the hatred he finds within himself, Valjean discovers to his dismay that his transformation is not complete, that he does not yet love as he has been loved. Though much remains after this blow to complete Valjean’s transformation, he is, by the end of the novel, truly transformed, or, in Christian terms, sanctified.

Through the many characters who experience blows similar in severity to Valjean’s, Hugo shows that God’s grace and the opportunity for transformation are available to all. Yet no other character experiences the kind of transformation seen in Valjean. The blows he endures during the course of the narrative show that, in Hugo’s view, redemption and sanctification result from a gradual process which is brought about with divine assistance. Loder suggests this process is endemic to the human spirit (Loder 1), yet initiated from without. He explains that human transformation “is a work of love that the Holiness of being performs on behalf of the self” (80). Hugo suggests in Les Misérables that the transformation of human identity is initiated from without, and that, even when the force of destiny initiates the blow, God may turn it to his own purposes. Hugo also suggests the critical role of forgiveness in initiating spiritual transformation. His narrative shows God using transformed individuals, or those already involved in the transformational process, to initiate, through the gracious act of forgiveness, the transformation of others.
Significant similarities exist between Valjean’s initial blow, which he receives from Bishop Bienvenu, and the blow Valjean himself delivers to Javert in releasing him from the barricade. Hugo demonstrates through these similarities the importance of one’s response to grace for the process of one’s spiritual transformation. The first and most important similarity is that they are blows of forgiveness, both of which hold salvific potential. Secondly, both blows come through the hand of a forgiven and transformed individual whom Hugo takes pains to paint as a Christ figure. Grossman sees Valjean “as a Christ-figure—no less than saint, . . . [who] takes Champmathieu’s ordeal upon himself (Figuring 156). Just as Bishop Bienvenu’s ineffable radiance in the night signifies God’s presence in him, and Valjean’s presence in the courtroom at Champmathieu’s trial signifies God’s being present through him, Hugo paints Valjean as representing God’s presence in the barricade, where he is “everywhere present . . . like a providence” (Hugo 1083). Though the context of this blow lacks the kind of supernatural elements present when Valjean encounters the bishop, Valjean’s forgiveness of Javert, implicit in his releasing him from the barricade unharmed, signifies God’s gracious activity on Javert’s behalf. According to Loder, the individual who is “grounded in the Source, that which ‘lets it be,’ . . . spontaneously replicates and expresses that Source by ‘letting be’ in all its ‘worlds’ ” (80). From this perspective, Valjean’s generous act of ‘letting be’ toward Javert, his enemy, signifies God’s gracious action on Javert’s behalf.

Though vast personal differences exist between Valjean and Javert, making any similarity of ‘knowing context’ unlikely, the similarities Hugo implants into the circumstances which surround these blows, suggest that he intends the reader to draw a parallel between them. The circumstances in which both Valjean and Javert find
themselves when they encounter unmerited grace are paradoxically tied together through similarity bound in opposition. Like Valjean, who is taken as a thief and held by authorities when caught fleeing with the bishop’s silver, Javert is taken and held by authorities, only Javert is doing his duty as a police officer when he is captured as a spy and held by a counter authority in the barricade. Both men are released by the gracious intervention of another, who lies in order to save them, and in each case, the betrayer is unexpectedly forgiven by the betrayed. Though without being explicitly stated, Valjean, like the good bishop before him, offers forgiveness rather than judgment to Javert, and secretly releases him from the barricade instead of killing him as the insurgents, and Javert himself, expect. Both men are shocked by the experience of forgiveness, a blow which in each case is sufficient, in Loder’s terms, to ‘rupture’ the governing ‘axioms’ by which they operate. In both cases, the forgiven man is drawn into the transformational process due to the ‘rupturing’ blow which constitutes, in Loder’s terms, an instance of “conflict in context” (3).

Hugo suggests, through Javert’s encounter with Valjean, that transformative blows often shake the foundations of one’s identity. Revelation of identity is a central element of the blow Valjean delivers to Javert. Just as Valjean’s identity is contested by the blow he receives from the bishop, Javert’s identity as an upright man, superior to the criminals he encounters, is contested by the blow he receives from Valjean. A new identity as one under God’s authority is also revealed to him through this blow. Likewise, as Bishop Bienvenu is revealed as a person of greater authority than the simple priest Valjean takes him to be, Valjean’s unexpected identity as a good and honest man is revealed to Javert in this encounter. When Valjean cocks his loaded gun and escorts him
out of the barricade, Javert is certain of being killed by the hand of a “robber,” “brigand,” and “convict” (Hugo 255), for he recognizes the man who requests the “reward” (1064) of blowing his brains out, as Jean Valjean, a convict in breach of his ban. Javert is the only one in the barricade who is not deceived about Valjean’s identity, yet because of his rigid prejudice, he is blind to the reality of who Valjean actually is. Javert’s contempt and condemnation toward anyone who has once broken the law is evident when Valjean produces un couteau ‘a knife’ to cut the rope by which Javert is bound (Hugo 1066). Upon seeing the knife Javert exclaims, “Un surin! . . . Tu as raison. Cela te convient mieux” ‘A surin! . . . You are right. That suits you better’ (Hugo 1066). A telling element of the text is highlighted here in Wilbour’s translation; he leaves the original French word “surin” in the text, pointing to its significance for understanding Javert’s meaning. The “couteau” which Valjean produces is simply a ‘knife’ (Hugo 1066), but Javert, thinking he is about to be killed, calls it a surin, a tool, according to Larousse, fitting the purposes of an assassin (“Surin,” def. 2.). Javert, knowing Valjean to be a convict, assumes that he is therefore a murderer as well. The language of the text indicates that Javert assumes Valjean is an assassin, so when he sets Javert free instead of taking his revenge, Javert is “aghast,” and unable to move (Hugo 1066). His view of the world is shattered by this convict who forgives and protects instead of taking revenge. Valjean proves he is not a murderer, as Javert expects, and by giving Javert his real name and where he may be found, he lives into the bishop’s charge to be an honest man. Again, Javert’s response to Valjean’s unexpected behavior is more telling in the French, in which personal pronouns designate the relationship between, and relative status of, various parties to a conversation. In French, use of the personal pronoun vous for you, indicates a formal
relationship in which a certain amount of respect is expected, for instance in a child’s address to an adult, or an employee’s address to an employer. The French personal pronoun _tu_ for _you_, on the other hand, is familiar, designating a status relationship of a superior to an inferior, such as an official to a citizen, or between friends, and equals, or the close relationships between family members. Though Javert uses the familiar form “_tu_” in his immediate response to Valjean, “Tu as dit Fauchelvent” ‘You said Fauchelevant’ (Hugo 1066) because he is speaking as a superior, a representative of the law, to a criminal, moments later he drops the familiar form and addresses Valjean using the formal “_vous_,” signaling a new, and unaccustomed respect (Hugo 1066). When Javert says, “Vous m’ennuiez” ‘You annoy me,’ the formal “_vous_” connotes a respect in which all superiority is absent. The change in personal pronoun Javert uses to address Valjean only moments after receiving this blow indicates the force of its impact, for from the point of his arrest in Montreuil sur Mer, up to this point in the narrative, Javert has consistently spoken to Valjean with what the narrator calls “contemptuous familiarity” (Hugo 254). The text says “he had nothing but disdain, aversion, and disgust for all who had once overstepped the bounds of the law. He was absolute, and admitted no exceptions” (149), considering anyone in this position as being beneath him in every regard. Yet, from this point on, he continues to speak to Valjean with respect. The narrator notes this change later in the text, in a comment omitted from Wilbour’s English translation. The narrator states “Il continuait de ne plus toutoyer Jean Valjean” ‘He no longer spoke in familiar terms to Jean Valjean’ (Hugo 1879, 7: 180). The blow clearly rattles Javert, changes the relationship between him and Valjean, and profoundly affects his behavior in subsequent encounters with him.
This blow, which “astonished” Javert also contains the elements of redeeming action and revelation (Hugo 1066). As the good bishop shields Valjean from punishment and forgives his theft, Valjean shields Javert from the insurgents who intend his death. In the act of releasing him and identifying himself to him, Valjean forgives Javert for failing to recognize that a convict might change, and may be capable of goodness. Not only does Jean Valjean give Javert his life, a redeeming action in and of itself; in so doing, he also gives him the opportunity to change. Though not explicitly stated in spiritual terms, the potential for transformation exists for Javert in this action, just as much as the bishop’s forgiveness extends the option of salvation to Valjean. Seen from Loder’s perspective, this blow of forgiveness ruptures Javert’s ‘knowing context,’ challenging his assumptions about right and wrong, good and evil. He knows he has been an enemy of Jean Valjean, and now knows that his enemy, in saving his life, has in some way risen above him. Though Valjean makes no explicit claim on Javert’s soul for God, as the bishop does for him, the text clearly signals the option for repentance and transformation.

Hugo demonstrates, through the last blow for discussion here, what is required within the narrative for a blow to hold salvific potential and initiate the transformational process. The blow Thénardier receives from Marius has striking similarities to Valjean’s first blow, though the contrasts between them are of greater significance than their similarities. Hugo suggests through the close similarities between these blows, the inability of a severe blow to initiate the transformational process when the element of God’s grace is absent. The dual elements of the blow Thénardier receives are identity and revelation, but its association with chance (Hugo 1237), rather than with God or Destiny,
suggests that the spiritual elements we have seen in the blows previously discussed are absent.

This blow, like Valjean’s first, is embedded in the issue of identity. Three identities, either disguised, or previously hidden from the characters involved in the confrontation, are revealed in this passage, those of Thénardier, Marius, and Jean Valjean. Though the issue of identity is central to this blow, as in Valjean’s initial blow, Thénardier himself is remarkably unconcerned about his own identity. Throughout the novel, Thénardier appears in one disguise or another; he changes names and identities as casually as one changes clothes (Llosa 55). In this scene, his use of a new, previously unseen disguise initially deceives Marius. However, when Marius confirms Thénardier’s identity and confronts him with his previous aliases, Thénardier denies them, only admitting his identity when Marius unexpectedly throws money at him. The text says Thénardier was “strangely surprised; he would have been disconcerted if he could have been” (1243). Though Thénardier is surprised to be ‘known’ by Marius, the money makes a much deeper impression on him than the revelation of his identity, which in itself is not enough to move him. Perhaps this is because, as Lewis argues, Thénardier achieves invisibility “not by complete hiding, but rather by the underworld art of disguise” (111). His “deception” she says is “accomplished not by actual physical disguise” though that plays a role in deceiving Marius in this scene, “but by invisibility combined with untruth.” Marius’ knowledge of Thénardier’s real name is not completely disconcerting because, according to Lewis, he has not tried to obliterate that name, but to embellish it. He remains calm and assured because he retains the element of deceit even when the element of invisibility is removed. The element of deceit, however, is reversed
in this scene. Thénardier attempts to extort a sizable sum from Marius for reporting what he believes to be the truth; however, what he actually reports is false; he is so steeped in falsehood that even when he tries to tell the truth, it comes out as a lie.

Hugo strongly suggests to his reader, through this blow, the tremendous importance of extending grace in all circumstances to others. Though surprised by Marius’ knowledge of his identity, the blow Thénardier receives does not concern his own identity at all, but Marius’. Once Thénardier gives Marius all the information he has come to sell him, accusing Jean Valjean of being an assassin and a thief, Marius delivers a blow which could potentially open up a space within Thénardier for transformation to occur. The blow he delivers, however, contrasts with the blows previously discussed in a couple of ways. First, this blow is devoid of grace and forgiveness. Marius has no purpose in mind beyond “aveng[ing] the colonel for the misfortune of having been saved by such a rascal,” to “deliver the colonel’s shade at last from his unworthy creditor” and “release his father’s memory from imprisonment for debt” (Hugo 1244). According to the text, “Thénardier [is] petrified” when Marius produces the coat from which the piece Thénardier possesses had been torn. The revelation “floor[s]” him (1249). This confrontation between Marius and Thénardier, could not be more different from the one between Bishop Bienvenu and Jean Valjean. The good bishop forgives Valjean’s past and claims his future, calls him brother, and blesses him with the resources necessary to make the changes he expects of him possible. Marius, on the other hand, like the innkeeper of Digne who evicts Valjean saying, “your name is Jean Valjean, now shall I tell you who you are?” (55), looks only at Thénardier’s past and tells him exactly who he is, “a wretch,” “a liar,” “a slanderer,” and “a scoundrel” (1250). Even the wretched Thénardier
recognizes that one’s past may be remedied, that “acts, old, by-gone, and withered . . .
may be cancelled by prescription in the eye of the law, and by repentance in the eye of
God” (1241). Yet Marius never entertains such options for Thénardier. He continues, “I
know enough about you to send you to the galleys, and further even, if I wished” (1250).
The good bishop knows as much about Valjean, but calls him “my friend” (92), and
shields him from the gendarmes who hold him. To the bishop’s departing words to
Valjean, “my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am
buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I
give it to God!” (92), Hugo juxtaposes Marius’ words to Thénardier, “Go and get hung
elsewhere!” (Hugo 1250). Thénardier is as “thunderstruck” as Valjean, but instead of
going away astounded by kindness and forgiveness, “Thénardier [goes] out,
comprehending nothing, astounded and transported with this sweet crushing under sacks
of gold” (1250). The text calls what Marius does, in shielding Thénardier from
prosecution, and providing funds for him to start over in America, a “good deed” which
Thénardier’s wickedness corrupts, resulting in the evil of slavery (1250). When compared
to the actions of Bishop Bienvenu however, Marius’ actions can at best only be called a
“good deed”; it does not begin to approach the level of the Bishop’s redeeming action on
Valjean’s behalf. Though the text affirms the free will of the characters in the narrative,
and that Thénardier chooses corruption from first to last, the reader is left to wonder what
might have happened, if the blow Marius delivered had been a blessing rather than a
curse. The text says that Thénardier “was irremediable” (1250), or beyond “remedy, cure,
or correction” (“Irremediable”), but only after his encounter with Marius, suggesting the
outcome of that encounter may have been dramatically different had Marius offered grace and forgiveness rather than money.

The second difference between this blow and the ones delivered by Bishop Bienvenu and Jean Valjean is that Marius, himself, is not engaged in a spiritual transformation. Though what he does on Thénardier’s behalf is merciful, the element of condemnation links Marius, in this instance, to the social world of the courts, and the galleys, though his actions allow Thénardier to escape them. His father’s encounter with Thénardier at Waterloo establishes a relationship that becomes increasingly intolerable for Marius. In contrast to Bishop Bienvenu who takes in the convict, and calls him brother, establishing a familial relationship, which, because of its spiritual nature will stretch beyond the bounds of time, Marius exiles Thénardier, severing their relationship permanently. Though he shows mercy for his father’s sake, Marius wants nothing more than to be rid of Thénardier forever. Though he is shocked to learn that he is mistaken about Marius’ identity, and about Valjean’s actions in the labyrinth of the Paris sewer, Thénardier’s ‘knowing context’ is not ruptured by the blow he receives, for it lacks the element of grace. Marius strips Thénardier of his disguise, but his identity remains intact, undisturbed by the encounter, allowing him to leave Paris facing a new adventure rather than an abyss.

Though Hugo himself holds unorthodox religious views, he repeatedly affirms God’s involvement in the transformational process, and consistently brings forward the idea that relationship and union with God are the ultimate goals of life. As the readings of these blows show, Hugo embeds the narrative of Valjean’s transformation within a Christian context suggesting that he sees spiritual transformation, or redemption, as being
intrinsically connected to the gospel. As the contrast between Valjean’s first blow and the 
blow received by Thénardier show, within Hugo’s narrative only those blows which offer 
God’s gracious forgiveness hold salvific or sanctifying potential. The readings in this 
chapter suggest that Hugo believes the blows of life to be purposeful, that they potentially 
hold great good for the recipient. The blows discussed in this chapter exemplify the 
nature of blows in the novel and represent the diverse blows which befall other characters 
in the narrative. Though most of the ‘mysterious and terrible blows’ experienced by other 
characters are simply given, many without further comment, their purposeful nature and 
salvific or sanctifying potential may be assumed to be similar to that of the blows 
considered within this chapter. Rambo asks: “What is the nature of the crisis that 
stimulates or facilitates conversion?” (46). His answer reflects research from the human 
sciences which suggests “social disintegration, political oppression, or a dramatic event 
as the instigator of crisis.” Many of the blows in the narrative fall within these 
parameters. Rambo also allows, however, that “crisis can be brought on by something 
less dramatic, such as the response of a person to powerful preaching that convicts him or 
her of sin, starting a process of self-exploration and a search for salvation” (Rambo 46). 

Within Hugo’s narrative, though blows may be embedded in a context of social or 
psychological crisis or a context of spiritual conviction, the presence or absence of God’s 
grace, extended in forgiveness, determines the salvific potential of a blow. What these 
readings suggest for an understanding of Hugo’s narrative is the recognition that God’s 
grace, extended through, or in association with these blows, is potentially available to all 
the characters within the novel. The tacit assumption of Hugo’s narrative, that the 
‘mysterious and terrible blows’ represented within the novel are essentially of the same
nature as those encountered in the ‘real world,’ suggests that Hugo recognizes the purposefulness of such blows within his own life and in the lives of his readers. Beyond the purposefulness of such blows for initiating or sustaining spiritual transformation in a ‘real world’ context, the narrative strongly suggests to Hugo’s readers the importance of being people who extend God’s grace to others.
CHAPTER III

“THE ABYSS” AND “THE HOLY”

The recurring motif of the abyss in *Les Misérables* is closely related to the concept of the void in James E. Loder’s *The Transforming Moment*. Hugo portrays the abyss as encompassing fathomless immensity, or infinity, including the soul, echoing the infinity of God as “an abyss concentric with another abyss” (Hugo 449). Loder, on the other hand, portrays “void” as an absence of positive good, saying that “any talk of ‘void’ is . . . a semantic anomaly; it seems to be speaking of nothing as if it were presence; nonbeing as if it were being” (80-81). The discrepancies in the way these metaphors are characterized might suggest they are not related closely enough to be linked in any meaningful way. I want to suggest, however, not only that Hugo’s portrayal of his characters’ experience of the abyss links it to Loder’s concept of the void, but that Loder’s concept provides readers with a lens through which to see the purposefulness of such experiences. Within Hugo’s narrative, the abyss serves as a powerful metaphor for the space opened up within the human soul by the shock of profound crisis. This portrayal of the abyss as an experience of a soul in crisis links Hugo’s metaphor to Loder’s concept of the void, which he claims is “implicit the moment [one’s] lived ‘world’ is ruptured” (Loder 81).

The inherently spiritual nature of experiences of the abyss within Hugo’s text is evident in its first portrayal, the narrative of the drowning man in the chapter titled
“The Waters and the Shadow,” in which Hugo poses the central question of the novel. In this grim scene, the narrator describes the anguish and desperation of a man overboard, “alone in the terrible gloom of the abyss.” As the drowning man’s strength fails, and he strains against the elements vainly shouting for help, the narrator asks “Where is God?” (Hugo 93). Hugo’s haunting question seems to suggest that God is absent when the blows of life plunge one into the abyss, sinking, thrown off, and forsaken by humanity. The aching solitude and vast emptiness of ocean and sky in this scene closely reflect Loder’s concept of the void, which he claims has “many faces” including “absence,” “loss,” and “loneliness” though “death is the definitive metaphor” (Loder 84). Loder asks a parallel question about encounters with the void in real life: “Why does the self continue to create its ‘world’ and compose new meanings and enact its story when the whole theatre of its existence is dark and the building has been condemned?” Loder insists that “we make a mistake if we look for answers to why in some place extrinsic to our existence [that] the answer, like the question, is intrinsic to our selfhood” (85). Loder’s insistence that the answer is “intrinsic to our selfhood” makes his theory particularly applicable to a consideration of Les Misérables, a narrative about identity and the transformation of the self. Though written long after Les Misérables, and Hugo’s own death, Loder’s work, The Transforming Moment, provides a helpful lens through which to consider Hugo’s question, for it addresses the common human experience of the void. Loder claims that it is precisely in the midst of such experiences that God is found. He says that “in the midst of the deepest extremity a sense of the Holy in us cries out for a manifestation of the Holy beyond us” (86), and agrees with Kierkegaard, who he says “repeatedly insisted with bewildering brilliance that the faces of the void become the faces of God” (Loder 85).
Though Hugo’s question seems to suggest that God is absent in the abysses of life, the scene in which he poses it speaks against such a reading. Set in the “monstrous deep” composed of “the yielding, fleeing element,” that “abyss” of “yawning precipices full of darkness” echoes the formless void of the biblical creation myth (Hugo 82). The Genesis narrative says that in the beginning “the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Gen.1.2). The motif of the abyss, inherently chaotic and indistinct, yet dense with creative potentiality, by its very nature suggests God’s brooding presence. Hugo’s use of this motif in a defining moment of the text suggests that one must look beyond the physical aspect of such scenes to find the inherent spiritual reality of God’s presence within them. Like the early suggestion in the life of Bishop Bienvenu, that transformation of the self requires an initiating ‘blow,’ signaling the reader to watch for such blows in the text, the drowning scene foreshadows the many encounters with the abyss within the narrative. Likewise, as the issues which arise in the narrator’s early question about the bishop’s having experienced a transformative blow in his youth, tell the reader a great deal about the nature of the blows which would follow in the text, Hugo poses questions in the drowning scene which his later portrayals of the abyss answer. The question, “Who shall restore [this soul] to life?” (Hugo 83), foreshadows the themes of death and resurrection which run throughout the narrative. Just as the previous question about God’s presence, which seems to suggest a negative answer, that “there [is] no good God” (65) is contradicted by the biblical creation imagery of the scene, this second question obliquely points to resurrection, to God’s creative Spirit bringing life out of death. Hugo’s allusion to the Genesis narrative signals the reader to watch for God’s
creation of something good out of the evil and chaos of Valjean’s desperate life as a convict.

Hugo’s repeated use of the metaphor of the abyss in *Les Misérables*, is compelling because his reader recognizes it as a common human experience, and a deeply significant aspect of the very nature of human being. Loder also recognizes its deep significance for the individual. He identifies four elements of human being, “environment, selfhood, the possibility of not being, and the possibility of new being.” He asserts that though humans typically try to block the third dimension out of their awareness, “the possibility of not being” inevitably imposes itself upon the individual at some point (69). Hugo insightfully portrays this third aspect of human being as the abyss, which many of his characters eventually encounter, and some of them survive. Loder discusses the “possibility of annihilation, the potential and eventually inevitable absence of one’s being . . . under the rubric ‘the void,’ because this is the end result of each human being, implicit in existence from birth and explicit in death” (70). He states that “nothingness, or negation of being is . . . part of the uniqueness of human being . . . meaningfully included in the composition of our lived worlds” (81). According to Loder, the intrusion of the void into the two-dimensional world of the individual provokes engagement with the second step of transformational logic (81), the “interlude for scanning” in which possible solutions to crisis are sought (3). When applied to Hugo’s text, this connection between the void and the activity Loder identifies as an ‘interlude for scanning’ suggests the type of activity the reader should expect to find characters engaging in when they find themselves in the abyss.
Hugo himself, in the very writing of *Les Misérables*, engaged in what may be understood as “scanning” activity in response to tragedy in his own life. *Les Misérables* is seen by some critics to be a direct outgrowth of Hugo’s own search for God in the midst of his experience of the abyss opened in his heart by the death of his daughter. Kathryn Grossman discusses how the tragedies in Hugo’s personal life shaped the writing of *Les Misérables*. She claims that the “many voices” in the poetics of *Les Misérables* “contain an ‘abyss in the center’—the presence of death introduced by his daughter Léopoldine’s premature disappearance” (*Figuring* 4). For the reader who knows that Hugo’s daughter drowned in a boating accident, the drowning scene in *Les Misérables* becomes emblematic of Hugo’s own experience of the abyss. The death of his child shook Hugo most profoundly. Laurence Porter writes that “Léopoldine’s premature death was even more of a loss than the death of one child: her new husband also drowned trying to save her, and she was pregnant with Hugo’s first grandchild” (Porter 101). He indicates that this tragedy turned Hugo to the contemplation of God’s purposes. If, as Grossman and Porter suggest, *Les Misérables* is an expression of Hugo’s search for God in the face of this tragic loss, and if Loder is correct that the such experiences of the void are precisely where God may be found, then Hugo’s narrative ought not only to pose the question, but stand as an answer to it. I want to suggest that this is the case, that Hugo’s narrative of Valjean’s transformation is his answer to the question of whether one is as alone as it seems when facing the unavoidable abysses of life.

Hugo’s question about God’s presence during times of crisis signals that, in addition to his belief that the ‘mysterious and terrible blows’ of life pertain to the spiritual realm, he also believes that the transformational process they initiate is a spiritual
undertaking. The pattern of transformation Hugo incorporates into the novel begins with a blow which plunges its recipient into an abyss in which a spiritual struggle occurs. However, the spiritual nature of these struggles is not always immediately evident or obvious within his text. Loder’s theory is a helpful lens through which to read the text in these instances for he identifies ways in which God may be seen to be actively present within the process of human transformation. His description of what encounters with the “Holy” may look like offers the reader a way of identifying places within Hugo’s text where spiritual activity takes place. Loder’s theory, because it is grounded in Christian belief, may be especially helpful for readers not familiar with the many Christian allusions and motifs Hugo employs, to frame his portrayal of ongoing divine creative action in the text. By bringing new, transformed, life out of the chaos of the abyss, Hugo suggests that human transformation is dependent upon God’s grace, which, like redemption, is a gift bestowed on the individual by God. I argue that Hugo intends his narrative of Valjean’s religious conversion and subsequent transformation to show that God is actively present when one encounters the abysses of life, and that such experiences are purposeful, holding the potential for empowering individual transformation if cooperatively engaged by the human will.

Hugo suggests, through his portrayal of Jean Valjean’s encounters with the abyss, that such encounters function as necessary components of one’s transformation. In fact, only those characters within the narrative which personally experience the abyss have the potential for being transformed. Like Hugo’s narrative, Loder’s work makes a connection between personal crisis experiences and transformation; he claims that experiences of the void are “essential to human transformation” (Loder 89). Experiences
of the abyss in Hugo’s text, when viewed from Loder’s perspective, may be seen as closely aligned with the second step of transformational logic, which he calls the “Interlude for Scanning” (3). For instance, Hugo’s emblematic rendering of the drowning man’s experience of the abyss shows him engaging in typical scanning activity. Activities such as delimiting the terms of the crisis, seeking resolution, and shedding old notions which no longer fit the new reality revealed by the precipitating blow, comprise the elements of this step (Loder 37). Hugo’s drowning man “calls,” and “stretches out his hands” (Hugo 82), which “clutch” and “grasp” for something to support him, while “he implores the blue vault, the waves, [and] the rocks” (83); these things may be interpreted as active engagement with his problem, “searching out the possible solutions” (Loder 37) to his crisis. Loder characterizes such activity as “an indwelling of the conflicted situation” (37), with “an investment of caring energy” in a “step of waiting, wondering . . . and exhausting the possibilities” (38). Loder defines “indwelling” as allowing the “features and essential nature [of the problem or situation] to impress themselves upon the knower, and to establish . . . in terms of its own intelligibility the conditions under which it may be known” (224). Hugo’s drowning man is engulfed in the abyss, he is “in the monstrous deep” and “feels that he is becoming the great deep, [that] he makes part of the foam” (Hugo 82), in essence, he is “indwelling” his crisis, or “the conflicted situation” (Loder 37). The man “strains,” “struggles,” and “swims” (Hugo 83), which, in Loder’s terms, may be seen as his making “an investment of caring energy” (Loder 37) as he engages his dilemma. In the midst of all this desperate activity the man thinks about the life he had only minutes ago, and anticipates his doom, thinking of “his lifeless body in the limitless gloom” (Hugo 83), reflecting the way one “waits and wonders” (Loder
as part of this step in the transformative process. Finally, finding all his efforts to be “useless,” he “yields” and “seeks death” (Hugo 83), having “exhausted the possibilities” he is filled with “exhaustion” and “worn out” (Loder 38). The narrator’s statement that “the soul drifting in that sea may become a corpse” lends a shuddering sense of finality to this scene, but the question which immediately follows it, “Who shall restore it to life?” (Hugo 83) foreshadows the numerous resurrections within the narrative. Death, according to Loder, is the ultimate expression of the void, or in Hugo’s terms, the abyss. Loder states that the absence of being is, “the ‘goal’ of evil” (Loder 83), he claims that “all evil presses toward the reversal of God’s creative action; God created everything out of nothing, but evil seeks to return everything to nothing” (83). Though the drowning scene focuses on the inevitability of death, and questions God’s presence in the darkest hours of one’s existence, the closing question Hugo’s narrator asks in this scene suggests the possibility of another outcome, that the very nature of the abyss invites God’s creative, renewing, and life-giving action.

Hugo consistently links encounters with the abyss in the narrative, with symbolic evidence of God’s presence in its midst, suggesting Hugo believes that one may find God present and active in the abysses of life. Yet, not every encounter with the abyss Hugo portrays within the novel results in the transformation of the individual involved. Those which do, however, not only show evidence of the “Holy” (Loder 85) arising from these encounters, but also show evidence of the individual’s cooperation with the movement of the “Holy” within the depths of the soul. The “aha” (Loder 4), or transformational, moments of Hugo’s text, usually involve a vision, or focus on a symbol, often a crucifix, and may be understood in terms of Loder’s theory as the third step of
transformational logic, “insight felt with intuitive force” (3). Loder links this step, which often involves an “imaginative leap” (25), with the fourth aspect of being for the human, “new being,” which springs forth with the emergence of the Holy from the depths of the void, an event which though intrinsic to the nature of the self, depends upon God’s assistance (Loder 87). Loder describes this step as a “constructive act of the imagination” in which “a new perception, perspective, or world view is bestowed” on the individual, through the “construction of insight sensed with convincing force.” According to Loder, this experience constitutes the “central” or ‘knowing act’ in which “the elements of the ruptured situation are transformed” (38). Reading Hugo’s text through this lens suggests that one may find evidence of new understandings of self and others, or imaginative solutions to the individual’s dilemma or crisis, emerging from the midst of the character’s experience of the abyss. Specifically, Valjean’s visions comprise moments in which an imaginative solution to his crisis emerges from within. Though new insight springs from the internal workings of the human spirit, often through unconscious and well as conscious engagement with the conflicted situation, Loder insists that, no matter the context, “the insightful resolution to conflict is always a gift that takes awareness by surprise” (Loder 41). Hugo’s portrayal of these experiences reflects their transcendent nature, suggesting that he understands these transformative insights as gracious gifts of God.

The setting of Valjean’s initial experience of the abyss, like the setting of the drowning scene, links transformational activity in the narrative to the spiritual life. Immediately following his forgiveness by Bishop Bienvenu, Jean Valjean flees to an immense, desolate expanse (Hugo 93), “an entirely solitary place” (93). The setting sun
reveals “an absolute desert” under a sky of “immense height” (93), where there is space “on all sides,” and “nothing about him but . . . shadow” and “silence” (95). The emptiness and enormity of this location mark it as an abyss. The imagery Hugo employs in this scene alludes to biblical temptation narratives in which God’s involvement in the transformation of human identity is apparent, signifying the spiritual nature of the struggle in which Valjean engages. Isolation and deprivation are key characteristics of the desert, and the void is implicit here, yet God’s presence is also implicit in the immensity of such settings, where the individual’s spiritual identity is contested and eventually confirmed. Three exemplary biblical narratives cast the desert as a place of trial and temptation highly charged with spiritual significance. The book of Exodus presents Israel’s desert wanderings as a time of instruction and trial, in which their identity as a people is transformed. More closely linked with Hugo’s narrative, however, is the gospel account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, where his spiritual identity as God’s son is challenged and confirmed (Matt. 4.1-11). Though the echoes of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness within Hugo’s passage mark it as beginning Valjean’s development into a Christ figure, Hugo also links ValJean’s desert experience to the Apostle Paul’s encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. In that narrative, the risen Jesus appears to Saul in a powerful, and life changing experience, as a bright light which blinds him. Jesus speaks to Saul by name, and attends, as Loder notes, to his “particularity” (Loder 21), to the particular conflict within his soul, challenging him to recognize the inherent incompatibility of his actions with his intentions. A key feature of this narrative is the bestowal of a new name, Paul, and new identity, an apostle of Jesus Christ, with the restoration of his sight (Acts 9.1-18). Saul’s encounter with Christ does not simply bring
about behavioral adjustments; he does not simply cease hating Christians, or simply become tolerant of them, rather he becomes one of them. His very identity is radically altered by his encounter with Christ. Hugo ties Valjean’s encounter with the Bishop to this Damascus road narrative when the narrator says “the bishop had hurt [Valjean’s] soul, as a too vivid light would have hurt his eyes on coming out of the dark,” that “the convict had been dazzled and blinded by virtue” (Hugo 97). It’s also important to remember here that Hugo casts the bishop as a Christ figure, and as such, Valjean’s encounter with him may be read as representing an encounter with Christ. Because Hugo makes this link between Valjean and Saul, who is blinded, and then transformed, by his encounter with Christ, the reader should anticipate that Valjean’s desert experience will also result in a radical alteration of his identity, that he will not simply stop stealing and become an honest man, but that he will, eventually, like Saul, be completely transformed. As in these biblical narratives, Valjean’s desert experience is a time of trial and temptation, which challenges the convict to embrace the identity bestowed on him by the bishop, as one belonging to God. Hugo’s use of such imagery suggests that he sees transformation as the bestowal of new being upon the individual, arising from one’s encounter with God.

The desert temptation imagery Hugo employs, because of its focus on identity, is most appropriate for the setting of Valjean’s conversion, for his identity is already an issue when he arrives in the bishop’s home, though he is not yet in crisis. Grossman discusses the depth of degradation associated with Valjean’s status as a convict, noting that his “loss of freedom is paralleled by a more insidious loss—that of individual identity” (Figuring 36). This loss of individual identity, signified by his name
being replaced with a number, links Valjean with the indistinct and unformed nature of
the world prior to God’s creative activity, in which he brings forth by separating out,
making distinct, and naming. After his release from the galleys, Valjean finds that the
designation “convict” is an indelible part of him, and when he encounters the bishop, it
seems the whole of his identity. Grossman notes that his “passage through Digne after his
release raises the questions that pursue him the rest of his life: Who am I? Where am I
headed?” (Figuring 142). The good citizens of Digne, however, are only too ready to tell
him who he is. The innkeeper’s statement, and question, “Your name is Jean Valjean,
now shall I tell you who you are?” indicate that his identity is bound to his status as a
convict, rather than to his name (Hugo 55). Defined exclusively by negative
connotations, the designation “convict,” marks Valjean as nameless, or as Grossman
suggests, without identity (Figuring 36). She also suggests that the Bishop challenges
Valjean’s belief that his conviction excludes the possibility of his ever being anyone
other than a convict (Figuring 142). The bishop gives Valjean a new name, signifying a
new identity, and with it, an unexpected relationship to himself, when he says, “Your
name is my brother” (Hugo 67). As Valjean later tells Marius, “A name is a Me” (1206),
or as Grossman states it, “A name is a Self” (Figuring 143), an identity. If creation is the
making particular of things, and beings, out of the unformed mass of the void, then the
bishop’s act of naming the convict is the first movement in the transformation of
Valjean’s identity, for it bestows particularity upon him, gently, and subtly insisting that
personhood supersedes all categories. The seeds of Jean Valjean’s identity crisis, which
are planted in his experience of the galleys, begin to take shape in the bestowal of the
name “my brother” (Hugo 67).
Hugo paints Valjean’s struggle in this abyss as a dark or foggy mental churning, in which his pride strives with the bishop’s challenge of his conception of himself as a victim, wronged by society, and entitled to revenge. Valjean enters this scene in a mental daze, his feelings disturbed, and his thoughts largely unformed, and chaotic, like the ocean. Like the drowning man, he struggles in the abyss of his soul straining to make sense of the bishop’s words and the claims made on him. He is no longer certain who he is, but knows he must now choose who he will become. Seen through the lens of Loder’s theory, Valjean’s desert contemplations may be understood as his engagement with the second step of transformational logic, an “interlude for scanning” (3). Valjean experiences “inexpressible and distressing confusion” (Hugo 97), reflecting the chaotic nature of the abyss, or in Loder’s terms, the void. His investment in the struggle wearies him (92), and his indecisiveness, typical of the “interlude for scanning,” reflects the engagement of his conscious and unconscious mind in considering available options (Loder 37), and in weighing the implications of yielding to the bishop’s admonition. Following the bishop’s command to become an honest man would mean death to “that hatred with which the acts of other men had for so many years filled his soul, and in which he found satisfaction” (Hugo 96-97). It would also mean a new and completely unfamiliar life, “all pure and radiant” (97) which Valjean struggles to resist because it fills “him with trembling and anxiety.” As in typical ‘scanning’ activity, Valjean vacillates between opposing alternatives, searching out the terms, or nature, of his crisis, seeking resolution, and shedding old notions which no longer fit the new reality created by the bishop’s forgiveness. The conflicting elements of Valjean’s situation engage his
mind completely as he endeavors to find a foothold in the unexpected abyss in which he suddenly finds himself.

Hugo suggests a purposeful, and creative, aspect to encounters with the abyss by implanting evidence of God’s transforming power at work in Valjean’s desert experience. His allusion, in this passage, to the biblical creation account, and to biblical temptation narratives, accords with Loder’s claim that “the Holy Spirit as Spiritus Creator” meets the individual within the experience of the void and “transforms the human ego” (Loder 4). According to Loder, when a conflict is “endemic to the ego itself,” as Valjean’s is, “the logic of transformation is transposed to the level of divine action” (4), which suggests that one should find evidence, beyond the symbolism in the scene, of God’s presence and activity in Valjean’s desert experience. I want to suggest that this is precisely what one should see in Petit Gervais’ sudden and unlikely appearance on the scene. Considered in the light of Loder’s theory, Valjean’s encounter with Petit Gervais may be read as an instance of God’s direct involvement in Valjean’s paralyzing quandary, assisting him to reach resolution. Loder stipulates that in order for resolution to one’s dilemma to arise from within, an “indwelling of the conflicted situation” must occur (Loder 37). Loder characterizes indwelling as an unconscious movement away from internal debate, and toward resolution, an opportunity for the elements of the conflict to fall into place in a new and unexpected way, which may then arise into consciousness in an “imaginative leap” (30, 33). According to Loder, “one’s attention must at least for a moment be diverted from the problem as such” in order for the needed “indwelling” to occur (37). In other words, as long as Valjean’s mind remains wholly focused on the elements of his conflict, he cannot move forward into resolution.
Loder’s claim that the Holy Spirit assists in the process of transformation, suggests that it is precisely in this place where one is unable to move forward, or back, by oneself, that God providentially intervenes. Grossman recognizes God’s active participation in Hugo’s text, stating that “God appears in Les Misérables as . . . spectator and participant” (Figuring 241), and that God’s intervention in human affairs comes “through human agents” (242). Though she is not specifically speaking of Petit Gervais in this passage, the concept applies, even though the child is wholly unaware of his participation in God’s activity on Valjean’s behalf. Though Valjean is tempted to resist the bishop’s admonition to become an honest man, he is, at the same time, drawn by the bishop’s goodness and unexpected kindness to him, toward the possibility of a whole new life. He is so preoccupied with his conflicted feelings and confused thoughts that when Petit Gervais comes blithely and noisily along the path, he does not notice. In his mental absorption, he unknowingly plants his foot on the coin which has rolled away from the child. The text indicates this happens while Valjean’s “intellect” struggles “in the midst of so many new and unknown influences” (Hugo 97). Though the child eventually succeeds in attracting his attention, it is only for a moment, hardly enough to impress Valjean with his existence, and not enough to communicate his problem. Even when Valjean stands, frightening Petit Gervais away, he remains wrapped in thought, his mind completely focused on reconciling his conflicted identity as one both condemned and forgiven. Only his discovery that he has stolen the child’s coin shocks him out of his reverie, and jolts him into action. It is Valjean’s futile search for Petit Gervais, which sufficiently diverts his mind from his confused thoughts and feelings, allowing his unconscious mind to
realign the elements of his conflict, so that resolution can rise to the surface from the depths of his being.

Hugo suggests God’s active involvement in this scene symbolically by portraying the child’s coin as an “open eye” which sees beyond the detail of this new crime, and into Valjean’s heart, convicting him. His discovery of the “forty-sous piece which his foot had half buried in the ground” struck him “like an electric shock” (Hugo 95), showing him that his natural inclination, that is, what he does without thinking, is toward the wrong. Just as the image of the crucifix in Bishop Bienvenu’s home indicates Christ’s presence there, the image of this “open eye” indicates God’s omniscient presence in the midst of Valjean’s desert experience. Other passages in Hugo’s text identify God as the One who sees (Hugo 163, 194). Grossman also suggests that this “open eye” is a manifestation of God’s all-knowing and all-seeing presence in this scene (Figuring 242). This symbolic eye shows Valjean that God recognizes him for who he really is, showing him that without divine assistance he cannot choose to do the right thing, and convincing him of his need for the kind of radical change that comes with repentance.

The appearance of Petit Gervais on the scene at just the needed time, though coincidental, is not random, nor without significance which reaches beyond its structural function. One might view the boy’s appearance upon that lonely scene, however, as being so improbable and conveniently coincidental as to be contrived. In fact, Hugo’s work comes in for criticism of just this sort. Vargas Llosa criticizes the many instances of coincidence in the narrative, suggesting that though they serve structural purposes, they have no basis in “real life” (41). He refers to such events within the narrative as an “order of coincidence” (40), saying that “[c]oincidence is one of the fundamental ways of
organizing life in fictive reality” (41). He contrasts the abundance of coincidence in the novel with “real life,” stating that “however many coincidences occur in the world of the reader, he or she knows quite clearly that chance does not operate in real reality so often and with such precision” (41). In contrast to Vargas Llosa’s view of coincidence as a function of chance, Loder suggests that many instances of coincidence reveal a deeper ‘real reality,’ a spiritual reality at work in the real world. He asks his readers to consider the possibility that one may be “closer to the fundamental reality of his existence” in the midst of convictional experiences, many of which involve what is commonly called simple coincidence (Loder 15). He states that “many people experience a synchronistic conjunction of events which directs the scanning process or sets it on its way” in real life experience (102). He notes that “coincidence is frequently a catalyst” to knowing experiences as diverse as “scientific discovery and religious illumination.” According to Loder, when one is engaged in conflict in “four-dimensions,” that is, a conflict in which two dimensional life is threatened by the void, and in which the possible emergence of new life is implicit, such an aligning of events “suggests . . . that inside meaning is being correlated to outside event in a way that transcends the inside-outside distinction” (102). In Valjean’s case, the inside-outside correlation is clear, his inner turmoil over which identity he will embrace is seemingly decided for him by the outward action of his theft. Loder emphasizes “that in four dimensional perspective[,] it is not one’s own initiative but the initiative of the Holy, working deeper than consciousness and well beyond it, that brings forth the inside-outside reversal in the transformed person” (103). When applied to Hugo’s narrative, Loder’s claim implies that the appearance of Petit Gervais is not coincidence, but evidence of God’s gracious activity in Valjean’s life. I want to suggest
that what Loder’s theory reveals in this scene is what Hugo intends for his reader to see, that is, evidence of God’s active presence in the midst of the abyss. This is not to suggest that God’s spirit prompts Valjean to steal the coin; the text makes it clear that “habit and instinct,” act while Valjean’s mind is occupied with his struggle. It is to suggest, however, that Hugo points toward God’s use of even our wrongs for his good purposes, and suggests to his readers God’s ongoing creative activity bringing good out of the chaos of the abyss. Vargas Llosa is not mistaken in seeing the structural nature of coincidence in the text, but to dismiss the possibility of a larger meaning which reaches beyond the text misses or elides important implications for the ‘real world’ lives of Hugo’s readers.

Though God’s assistance is implied in the distraction of trying to locate the child, and made visible by seeing the scene through the lens of transformational logic, the vision that emerges with Valjean’s resolution has obvious spiritual connotations, suggesting Hugo’s intention to reveal God’s presence in the scene. The instant Valjean gives up the distraction of looking for the child, resolution surfaces into consciousness, and is expressed in his anguished cry, “What a wretch I am!” (Hugo 96). Hugo portrays this transforming moment, as an experience of self-recognition, in which Valjean “saw himself as he was” (98). This moment is accompanied by a “vision” so powerful and “profound that it swallows up reality” (98). In it,

. . . he beheld himself . . . so to speak, face to face, and at the same time . . . he saw, at a mysterious distance, a sort of light which he took at first to be a torch. Examining more attentively this light which dawned upon his conscience, he recognized that it had a human form, and that this torch was the bishop. (98)

In terms of Loder’s theory, this experience is the “central turning point in the transformational knowing event . . . an eruption of new being in the presence of imminent
void . . . a manifestation of the abundance with which being-itself supplies the deepest needs of human being” (87). According to Loder, God’s presence and activity are not only implicit in experiences of the void, but God’s creative activity is central to all transformative knowing. The essence of the third step in Loder’s transformational logic, “insight felt with intuitive force,” is a “constructive act of the imagination; an insight, intuition, or vision [that] appears on the border between the conscious and unconscious, usually with convincing force, and conveys in a form readily available to consciousness the essence of the resolution” (Loder 38). Hugo portrays just such an event in Valjean’s vision, in which he “shrank and faded away” while “the bishop alone remained” filling “the whole soul of this wretched man with a magnificent radiance” (Hugo 98). The bishop’s radiance grows “brighter and brighter in his mind—an extraordinary light” in which Valjean “beheld his life” which “seemed to him horrible” and “his soul” which, though it was “frightful,” is now “softened” by that very “light” (99). Loder states that “manifestations of the Holy extend, as Pascal suggested, from . . . irrepressible and scandalous ambiguity to an overwhelming flood of light, power, beauty, and glory” (Loder 90). From this perspective, Valjean’s mental state of indecision and ambiguity gives way to a manifestation of God’s grace in this powerful vision, in which Valjean’s former self, filled with hatred and despair, disappears into the void, and new being, illumined by the bishop’s goodness, emerges, resolving, for a time, his identity conflict. Valjean’s resolution emerges in much the same way Loder suggests Saul experienced conversion on the Damascus road, saying his “vision was a powerful mediating Presence that brought with it both a negation of his previous circumstances and the conviction that the answers to life’s deepest questions were packed into that moment” (Loder 42). That
Valjean’s previous circumstances are negated by his vision is clear, for he disappears while the Bishop, with whom he will now identify, grows larger and brighter; in essence, the convict is subsumed by the convert.

Though this powerful vision wells up from deep within Valjean’s soul, the text indicates the presence of “an invisible power,” in that place, which “overwhelm[s]” him through the agency of his own conscience (Hugo 96), and from which his vision springs. Though Valjean clearly invests much thought and emotional energy into the effort to recompose his ‘world,’ his sudden, unlooked for, vision of light suggests that Hugo believes God’s involvement is necessary for its achievement. Valjean’s vision may be seen as analogous to Saul’s Damascus road experience. Loder states in his discussion of Saul’s conversion, that

There is no personal calling, no history-making, no divine validation or transformation apart from Saul’s imaginative leap into another reality, the reality of Christ’s Presence. Any attempt to grasp the meaning of this experience by ignoring the vision is simply avoiding the issue. However, as with all vision, he sees a reality that is partially constructed by his own intelligence. That his intelligence does constructive work in the knowledge he has of Christ does not detract from the authenticity of his envisioning. That Christ takes the initiative to provoke the constructive act by which Saul envisions his Presence does not eliminate Saul’s participation in what he sees, hears, and comes to know. (24)

Understanding Valjean’s vision of the bishop in this light shows several things: the involvement of Valjean’s own intellect; Valjean’s implicit identification of the bishop with Christ, a link the text itself affirms; and God’s initiative in provoking the vision. Rambo also asserts the necessity of God’s involvement in the process of conversion; he “see[s] ‘genuine’ conversion as a total transformation of the person by the power of God” (xii). God’s participation in Valjean’s redemption, initiated by the blow of Bishop Bienvenu’s forgiveness, and sustained by the intervention of Petit Gervais, continues in
the giving of this vision. Valjean’s mystical experience may be understood from Loder’s perspective as the ‘Holy’ emerging from the midst of the abyss, transforming the face of the void into the face of God (85), for in this vision the bishop’s “magnificent radiance” symbolizes God’s holiness shining through him as “an extraordinary light” (Hugo 99). Valjean’s initial experience of the ‘Holy’ is similar to that which Loder describes when speaking of a mystical encounter experienced by Kierkegaard. He states that such experience

... is very like a direct knowledge of God in the classical mystical tradition. The . . . relationship of the human self to the Divine Presence temporarily bursts the limits of the imagination, but imagination recoils and images rush like a torrent into the pure light . . . as one shields one’s eyes when surprised by a sudden burst of sunlight. (Loder 5)

The images which take shape in Valjean’s vision represent the realignment of the disparate elements of his shattered world. Though Valjean is clearly involved in this process of realignment, he cannot resolve his conflict or emerge from the abyss on his own; his vision is essential to move him past the chaos within himself to reach resolution. Loder states that “no matter how one searches with penetrating conscious analyses to make logically tight connections, the insightful resolution to conflict is always a gift that takes awareness by surprise” (41). He claims that “when the resolution is given, self-transcendence (. . . or freedom to choose) springs into being spontaneously” (41). The Bishop’s forgiveness had initiated for Valjean the transformative process; he could not from that point forward simply drift, “for it was no longer in his power to prevent the bishop from having talked to him and having touched him” (Hugo 97). He has to choose, either to remain a convict, retaining the “hardness of his heart” (96), or to be “convicted,” and respond with brokenhearted repentance “to the possible life that was offered to him
thenceforth.” Though the vision which symbolizes the solution to his crisis is given, it
remains for Valjean to respond. Valjean’s tears, the “first he had wept for nineteen
years,” evidence his broken heartedness, and his figure “in the attitude of prayer,
kneeling] upon the pavement . . . before the door of Monseigneur Bienvenu” (99),
signals his repentance, his willing choice to turn away from hatred, and follow the
Bishop’s example, taking up his charge to “become an honest man” (92). Gasbarrone
calls Valjean’s kneeling before the Bishop’s door “the sign of his completed conversion”
(12). That an “inside-out reversal” takes place in Jean Valjean manifests in his life
variously (Loder 103), the most obvious instance appearing as he first internalizes,
through the ‘imaginative construct’ of his vision, the goodness of Bishop Bienvenu, and
then lives it out in a new and transformed existence as Father Madeleine.

As in the biblical narrative, in which the change in name from Saul to Paul
signifies the beginning of what becomes a radical change of identity, Valjean’s adoption
of a new name affirms that his transformation has indeed begun, that the crisis over
continuing to live as a convict, or being converted, is resolved. Valjean’s new name may
represent, for him, the about face of his conversion, and his acceptance of the new
relationship bestowed on him by the bishop, of “brother,” and a child of God. However,
he also uses this new name to obscure his past and his identity. Though new being begins
taking shape in Valjean, his living under an alias indicates that his identity remains a
latent issue. The name he takes, Father Madeleine, resonates with these conflicting
significances, reflecting the still disparate parts of his identity. Assuming the title of
Father takes on echoes of the priesthood and signals his desire to model himself after the
loving father he found in Bishop Bienvenu, while the name Madeleine, according to
Porter, “alludes to Mary Magdalene, the archetype of repentance” (130). Though Valjean’s desire is sincere, disguising his identity under an alias indicates that his efforts to become an honest man are incomplete.

Hugo’s allusion to Peter’s denial of Jesus suggests that though becoming honest is a central part of Valjean’s conversion, that honesty is not the only issue entwined with his conflicted identity. The question of betrayal remains an unresolved and unaddressed issue in his life which is addressed by his second experience of the abyss. Hugo continues to develop Valjean as a Christ figure in his portrayal of this abyss as a Gethsemane experience, in which he wrestles with conflicting desires as Jesus did. In Valjean’s effort to become an honest man, he adopts two aims, “to conceal his name, and to sanctify his life” (Hugo 192). His pursuit of sanctification, however, is hindered by his efforts to conceal his identity. Because he fears betrayal, Valjean’s efforts at becoming honest focus almost entirely on economics. He spends little to no effort, except in extraordinary circumstances, on being a neighbor. Though his hatred of society, a defining aspect of his identity prior to his desert experience, dissolves as he becomes society’s benefactor, he has yet to embrace the biblical imperative to love his neighbor as himself. His concealed identity, and desire to “escape from men” (Hugo 192), prevent him from doing so because he cannot be himself. Reading Valjean’s need for an alias from the perspective of Loder’s theory suggests that Valjean’s reluctance to be recognized by others is not simply a matter of avoiding capture and imprisonment, but springs from the wounds of his past. It also suggests the newness and tenuousness of his relationship with God. Loder explains as a general principle that when “one is ‘seen’ in a way one has not seen oneself; in a sense [when] one is violated . . . until . . . the self has
been authentically grounded beyond itself, it cannot respond as a ‘thou’” nor “become one to another person” (78). The designation “thou” which Loder uses here implies not simply an “other,” but an “other” with whom one is in relationship, be that neighbor, friend, family member, or even enemy. What Loder’s theory suggests about the narrative is that though Valjean is now a convert, he is not yet “grounded” in God. In other words, he is vulnerable to betrayal, because he does not yet see God as the source and sustainer of his new life. Because this is so his new identity is tenuous; others, and therefore, relationships, remain a threat to him. Though the narrative portrays Father Madeleine as a man at the center of civic life, he remains, socially, and relationally, on the periphery, purposefully unconnected to anyone in his community.

Hugo expands Valjean’s inner conflict in his second experience of the abyss, for though the issue of his identity as a convict remains central, the added issue of the nature of his relationship to others comes to the forefront. In his desert experience, Valjean wrestles with the possibility of becoming a child of God, and a brother to the bishop; in his Gethsemane experience, he wrestles with the challenge of becoming a brother, in his turn, to a stranger. In addition to expanding the nature of Valjean’s identity conflict, Hugo also revisits the issue of betrayal, a central element in Valjean’s initial experience of the abyss. In fact, the blow of his betrayal by Javert sends him into this second abyss. The narrative portrays Javert as a lurking threat, like “an eye always fixed on Monsieur Madeleine; an eye full of suspicion and conjecture” (Hugo 150). Hugo juxtaposes this tiger’s eye (148), aligned with destiny, to the all-seeing eye of God, represented by the child’s coin, in Valjean’s conversion experience. Whereas God, through the eye of the coin, sees him not only for who he is, but also for who he might
become, destiny, seeing through Javert’s eyes, wants only to devour. Javert’s threatening insinuation forces Valjean to recognize the conflicting nature of his dual aims, that while one of his aims may be “necessarily good, . . . the other might become evil” (198). His desire to draw close to God is “devotion,” while his desire to remain anonymous is “selfishness; . . . the one said: ‘the neighbor,’ and . . . the other said ‘me;’ . . . one came from the light, and the other from the night” (198-199). In essence, Hugo asserts through this passage that one cannot be in relationship with God and not be in relationship with others as well. Hugo’s portrayal of this battle of conflicting desires as a garden of Gethsemane experience, reinforces the spiritual nature of Valjean’s ongoing transformation. Grossman alludes to Jesus’ Gethsemane experience when she calls Valjean “the man who agonizes over Champmathieu as Christ on the way to Calvary” (Figuring 156). Just as Jesus struggled in prayer over his conflicting desires to avoid crucifixion and follow God’s will, Valjean struggles over an impending death of self, wrestling with his own desire to remain safe and anonymous, and God’s desire that he be a neighbor to a stranger, as the bishop was to him.

Hugo’s narrative, by requiring the ‘death’ of Monsieur Madeleine, along with all his good works in Montreuil sur Mer, insists that the condition of one’s soul before God is vastly more important than the outward circumstances of one’s life, and makes the point that God places supreme importance on the individual. According to Grossman, when Madeleine entertains the utilitarian thought that “the rescue of a single person is secondary to the survival of the many,” he violates the “highest laws of conscience” (32). Valjean’s Gethsemane experience is a struggle of the will which ultimately requires the death of his pride, a barrier between himself and others which prevents his nearness to
God. Valjean believes that he has accomplished, on his own, all the good done in
Montreuil sur Mer since his arrival. He proudly tells himself, “I have created all this, I
keep it all alive; wherever a chimney is smoking, I have put the brands in the fire and the
meat in the pot; I have produced ease, circulation, credit; before me there was nothing . . .
I take myself away; it all dies” (Hugo 200-201). He recognizes, however, that to save
Champmathieu he “must bid farewell to this existence, so good, so pure, so radiant; to
this respect of all, to honor, to liberty” (205). From his perspective within the abyss, it
appears to Valjean that drawing near to God means death to his transformed existence
and the resumption of all the ignominy of life in the galleys. Indeed, as Grossman notes,
once he reveals his identity in the courtroom, claiming his status as a convict, his life as
Madeleine no longer exists (Les Misérables 33). It is important to note however, that
though his circumstances radically change, Valjean’s soul, redeemed through his
encounter with Bishop Bienvenu and growing in sanctification through his good works in
Montreuil sur Mer, is strengthened through this trial, and purified of pride by the
experience.

Hugo not only paints Valjean’s experience of this abyss as a battle of his will
over a choice between incompatible aims, but also as a choice between two seemingly
mutually exclusive identities. According to Grossman, Valjean’s dilemma over
Champmathieu is a clash “between two identities that each lay claim to the same man”
(Les Misérables 32). Valjean’s agonizing over which identity he will retain, and which he
will allow to die, suggests that he cannot see any other alternative. The possible third
alternative of a single whole self, composed of both elements of his dual identity, does
not seem possible to Valjean at this stage of his transformation, though such wholeness is
precisely what his transformation presses toward, and eventually achieves. Grossman claims that, for Valjean, attaining “inner peace requires the harmonizing of these clashing voices” (32), suggesting a third alternative, a blending of his dual identities. Yet she subsequently claims that “when the smoke clears . . . the victor who emerges is a transfigured Jean Valjean. He is no longer a rejected, forgotten, subsidiary identity for Madeleine, with no more reality than Champmathieu. Rather, it is Madeleine who does not exist . . .” (33). The parameters of this battle look quite different however, when seen through the lens of Loder’s theory. In this light, Valjean’s interior battle over remaining Madeleine, or acknowledging his identity as the convict Jean Valjean, constitutes a second interlude for scanning in which he once again wrestles with the various elements of his conflicted identity in an effort to ‘recompose’ his ‘world’. In terms of transformational logic, Valjean must choose between the ‘axioms’ upon which he built the world of Father Madeleine, either to maintain a safe distance from his neighbors, and therefore from God, or to draw close to God by embracing his relationship as a neighbor to others, specifically the stranger Champmathieu. He must now also include the new reality of Champmathieu’s peril, as well as discard one or both his conflicting dual aims, to enable the construction of another new and personally stable ‘world’. Figuring out which of his incompatible aims to reject, and which to keep, and how to redefine himself in light of Javert’s revelation of Champmathieu’s peril, sets the parameters of this abyss.

Hugo makes it clear that Valjean’s battle rages within the spiritual realm, confronting him with what Loder calls the “intrusive threat of nothingness” which imposes itself in real life. For Valjean, this threat means a certain death of self, and he struggles over choosing which self to own and which to betray. As with the veiled nature
of his eventual transformation, the sanctifying aspects of his experience of this abyss are not immediately visible to Valjean, who sees only the stark difference between the honor of being Monsieur the Mayor, and the horror of being the convict Jean Valjean. Loder claims that “the void has many faces as it intrudes into two dimensional life, and all represent a need on the part of the ungrounded self to recompose the lived ‘world’ in some imaginative way so as to remove the intrusive threat of nothingness” (81). At one point, Valjean determines to annihilate his former self, the convict Jean Valjean, by burning everything which can betray him as the miserable criminal he once was, in essence, annihilating the convert to be rid of the convict. Loder claims, “we always have difficulty composing out or covering over the nothingness because it is not merely ‘out there,’ it is embedded in the very heart of the untransformed self” (81). Seen from Loder’s perspective, Valjean’s identity is not yet completely “grounded in its Source” (80), and because this is so, he cannot imagine a self which encompasses both identities. The perceived necessity of choosing between these starkly contrasting identities causes Valjean to consider escaping the nothingness of the void, by means of the void, for in order to avoid the death of Monsieur Madeleine, Valjean entertains the evil possibility of allowing an innocent stranger to bear the living death of the galleys in his place.

The threat of death in this abyss brings Hugo’s questions, raised in the emblematic drowning scene, to mind: Where is God in this abyss? And, who will restore this soul to life? In contrast to that early scene in which the heavens seem like brass because the drowning man receives no answer to his desperate calls for help, the text shows that Valjean is not alone in the abyss. As he holds the Bishop’s silver candlesticks before the fire, “a voice crying within him” (Hugo 203) speaks from “the obscure depths
of his conscience” (204), warning him against a second betrayal. Though he sees “nothing distinctly” (205) to help him decide, and knows with certainty that either way “something of himself [must] surely die” (206), Valjean listens to this mysterious voice, yet, in his delirium, is uncertain of whether it arises only from within, or whether it echoes audibly in the room around him (204). He seems confused about the source of this warning voice, and asks “aloud in a startled voice,” “Is there anybody here?” The narrator immediately answers saying, “There was One; but He who was there was not of such as the human eye can see” (204), indicating God’s presence in the room with Valjean. Though Valjean senses this presence, he believes he is alone. Because he is not yet confident that God is guiding and caring for him, he believes that the closed door means that no one can be in the room with him.

Yet in this scene Hugo implies that to struggle with one’s conscience is to struggle with God, for when he refers to the voice of Valjean’s conscience he adds, “that is to say God” (194). Though Hugo seems to suggest, through this mysterious voice, equivalence between God and conscience, his overall portrayal of conscience is ambiguous. Hugo writes that conscience “is the compass of the Unknown,” and that the human activities of “thought, meditation, and prayer . . . are the great mysterious pointings of the needle” (Hugo 449), suggesting that the conscience is a faculty through which individuals search for or communicate with God. On the one hand, he suggests conscience functions, in this way, as a link between the individual and God, whom the text describes as “ideal, absolute, perfection” (452). On the other hand, he defines conscience as “the chaos of chimeras, of lusts and of temptations, the furnace of dreams, the cave of the ideas which are our shame . . . the pandemonium of sophisms, [and] the
battle-field of the passions” (191). This definition of conscience resembles the chaos of the abyss, or void, the raw material out of which God brings new being, suggesting the link is more complex than the simple equation ‘conscience equals God.’ The correspondence, or connection, between God and the human conscience these descriptions imply echoes the allusion to the creation account Hugo employed in the drowning scene, that God’s creative activity brings forth new being from the chaos of the abyss. In this case, God moves through Valjean’s conscience, eventually bringing to the surface of Valjean’s conscious mind, the previously unthinkable option of a whole self, composed of both Madeleine and Valjean. Though the text states that “it was [Valjean] himself who spoke and himself who listened,” it also indicates that in listening to his conscience, Valjean was in effect listening to God, “yielding to that mysterious power which said to him ‘think!’ as it said two thousand years ago to another condemned: ‘march!’” (196-197). The allusion to Jesus’ Gethsemane experience identifies the voice speaking through Valjean’s conscience as God’s. By linking God and conscience in this way, Hugo not only implies God’s presence in the abyss, but also his intention to guide Valjean through it.

Critics offer various ways of understanding the relationship between God and conscience as presented in the text, yet they each point to conscience as an awareness of God's moral claim on the self. Porter initially states that Hugo equates God with conscience (129) but later qualifies this interpretation, saying that Hugo dramatizes “his heroes’ relentless pursuit by conscience, meaning our instinctive awareness of God” (137). Kentfield suggests that Hugo depicts conscience as “a kind of moral and ethical ‘organ’ . . .” (102-03), linking the conscience with the soul (118). She states that “Hugo’s
narrator makes it clear that Valjean’s conscience represents a God-principle within him, a source of connection to the divine that guides him intuitively toward moral and spiritual salvation” (131). Kathryn Grossman, in a psychological take on conscience, calls it the “link between the ‘lower self’ and the ‘higher self’ between the soul and God” (Figuring 145). She links conscience and consciousness, calling the conscience “the apprehension of the self in the midst of its actions” (145). J. Fox, in his article on natural law in The Catholic Encyclopedia states that “conscience itself owes its authority to the fact that it is the mouthpiece of the Divine will . . .” (1). Thomas Oden softens this understanding somewhat, linking conscience with consciousness. He argues that grace works through the human conscience, that “conscience itself is not the direct voice or absolute will of God; rather God speaks indirectly through conscience, which is the moral self-awareness that accompanies consciousness” (72). This definition resonates with Hugo’s representation of how Valjean’s conscience functions as he wrestles with this dilemma, though Hugo’s text suggests that Valjean hears a real voice.

Hugo dramatically portrays the functioning of Valjean’s conscience as an internal debate, in which both his conscious and unconscious mind struggle in this abyss. Grossman, in addition to linking the voice Valjean hears to conscience, likens his inner debate to “internal, psychological warfare, [in which] one can be almost literally of two minds” (Les Misérables 32). Valjean’s ongoing, internal engagement with his conscience, when seen from the perspective of Loder’s theory, comprises “scanning activity,” in which he is considering “possible solutions” and evaluating “errors, keeping parts, and discarding others” (Loder 37). Consciously, Valjean argues, on the one hand, that he should remain Madeleine, because he alone has “aroused, vivified, animated, quickened,
stimulated, [and] enriched, all the country” (Hugo 201), but on the other hand, he argues that he may “only enter into sanctity in the eyes of God, by returning into infamy in the eyes of men” (198). In this conscious debate, his whole focus is on himself, his sanctification, his abasement, and his inflated sense of importance to his community.

When he finally falls exhausted into sleep, however, his unconscious mind continues the work in the form of a dream about his “brother” (207). This dream cuts right through his prideful focus on self, showing him the deeper reality of his dilemma, his need to recognize Champmathieu as a brother, as Bishop Bienvenu recognized him. Grossman notes that “just as Myriel had shown mercy to the basest of creatures, so he [Valjean] must deliver this man—his ‘brother’—from unnecessary suffering” (Les Misérables 33).

The biblical command to love his neighbor as himself, embedded in Valjean’s conscience through Bishop Bienvenu’s example, drives him to Arras while the scanning process continues in his mind, and he struggles between choosing God’s will or his own.

Hugo’s narrative, by contrasting the chaos of the conscience to the perfections of God, and then positing a strong connection between God and conscience, implies the creative activity of God in the workings of Valjean’s conscience. Another element Loder adds to the consideration of conscience makes a distinction between moral conscience and the work of the Holy Spirit. He connects duty to moral conscience, which motivates good works, distinguishing it from the empowerment to accomplish those good works, which he attributes to “a gracious act of the Spirit of God” (Loder 180). From this perspective, Valjean’s good works in Montreuil sur Mer may be seen as being motivated by his good conscience, his intention to draw closer to God, while the ability to actually accomplish those good works should be recognized as “a gracious act of the Spirit of
God” (Loder 180). Loder’s perspective, in this way, also resonates with how Valjean’s conscience functions in this dilemma, driving him to Arras to rescue a stranger against a strong desire to remain safely hidden behind an alias in Montreuil sur Mer. This distinction, when applied to Hugo’s text, suggests that Valjean’s sanctification, like his conversion, depends upon God’s gracious involvement. The connection between the work of conscience, as a motivator to do good works, and the work of the Holy Spirit, enabling the accomplishment of those good works, aligns with the second and third steps of transformational logic. In the second step of the sequence, the mind, or conscience, engages in scanning activity, on both the conscious and unconscious level (Loder 37), while the in the third step, the “imaginative vision” (24), or “mediating image” arises (41), according to Loder, from the relationship between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit, bringing about transformation and new being. Loder argues that “the self as spirit may function . . . as conscience, but its identity is with being-itself” (80), or God, who Loder says may be described “as that which ‘lets be’ or ‘lets flourish’” (79), echoing the creative, bringing forth aspect of God’s involvement in the transformational process. Through Valjean’s struggle with his conscience, his agonizing contemplations, and his dream in the night, Hugo represents the motivating work of the human conscience, through which God may speak.

Though Hugo sometimes uses circumstance and coincidence as avenues through which God speaks in the narrative, he insists that one’s conscience be the more authoritative guide to action. The intrusion of Petit Gervais into Valjean’s consciousness in the desert scene functions as a circumstance through which God moves. Because of Hugo’s dualism, however, it would be an error to suppose that God alone makes use of
circumstance or coincidence in the text. Hugo makes it clear that not all coincidence in the text arises from the same source and for the same purpose. Through the voice of conscience, God propels Valjean to Arras, yet, all along the road, Valjean looks for circumstances to prevent his arrival. Yet, each time Valjean encounters such a circumstance, his conscience drives him forward the moment it proves to be nothing more than delay. In contrast to his desert experience in which coincidence is an avenue of God’s gracious assistance, coincidence in Valjean’s Gethsemane experience functions as temptation. Because Hugo imbues fate, or destiny, in the text, with spiritual power in opposition to God, Valjean’s desire to draw closer to God requires that he discern between the actions of God and those of this other spiritual force. In this experience of the abyss, coincidences along the way which seem to point to God’s deliverance prove to be false indicators of what Valjean should do, and the voice of his conscience, though terrible, proves to be the guide which sustains his spiritual transformation.

Hugo implants symbolism into the scenes in Arras which points to God’s active assistance in Valjean’s decision-making process, though what actually goes on in his mind during the moment of resolution is obscured in the text. Hugo’s text notes the significance of Valjean being in the judge’s chamber during his final moments of indecision, for in this chamber judgment is routinely made about who is sentenced and who goes free, and in this matter, Valjean has the responsibility for making the judgment. Though it does not appear that Valjean deliberates in any purposeful way in this room, what happens here is decisive (Hugo 230). The text shows that distraction from his immediate dilemma, which Loder suggests is necessary for arriving at resolution, occurs during this time. According to the text, Valjean “endeavour[s] to collect his thoughts, but
[does] not succeed. [For] at those hours especially when we have sorest need of grasping the sharp realities of life . . . the threads of thought snap off in the brain” (Hugo 230). As Valjean hesitates in the judge’s chamber staring at a framed document on the chamber wall, his thoughts wander to Fantine and Cosette, while he reads “without paying any attention, and without knowing what he [is] doing.” This distracted state, in which his mind wanders from his problem, finally allows resolution to surface into consciousness. According to Loder’s theory, transforming moments are attached to an “image that comes with intuitive power to reorganize the elements of the original conflict,” and this image “may be attached to a dream, a cluster of memories, a vision of the future, or even to a person or circumstance in the “lived world.” This “image” begins to form in the judge’s chamber, where Valjean contemplates, through what Loder might term “a cluster of memories,” the sacrifices Fantine made on Cosette’s behalf (Loder 105). Though he walks away from his duty one last time, when he stops in the hallway there is “but one voice within him” (Hugo 231). Though this single voice is not identified in the text, what plays out in the courtroom suggests that his dual identity as Monsieur Madeleine and Jean Valjean merges through this experience into a single being. Sitting in the courtroom as the Mayor of Montreuil sur Mer, and an honored guest of the judge, Valjean is confronted by the reality of his identity as a convict, an identity he has tried to bury with the name Jean Valjean.

Hugo indicates through the symbolism of this passage that though Valjean now hears but a single voice, the battle over his soul being waged by opposing spiritual powers continues. Valjean’s agonizing contemplations imply that his decision and what takes place within the courtroom hold as much consequence for his soul as for his natural
life. Though the actual moment at which resolution emerges from this abyss is not obvious, it may be recognized as such when the symbolism Hugo implants in the text is read through the lens of Loder’s theory. Images in this passage suggests that, in addition to God’s Spirit, which leads Valjean into the courtroom, the negative spiritual force of fate or destiny continues operating within this abyss, tempting Valjean to save himself by betraying Champmathieu. When he returns to the judge’s chamber, the handle of the door to the courtroom shines “out before him like an ominous star” (Hugo 230). Rather than giving off a radiate light like the bishop in the night, or like Valjean’s powerful desert vision, this sight is “ominous.” The text says it seems to him “like the eye of a tiger,” (231), not like the all-seeing eye he recognizes in Petit Gervais’ coin, but like the eye of something ferocious, ready to devour him. Upon entering the courtroom, Valjean’s vision expands, like the one in the desert, to include the person of Champmathieu, in whom “he thought he saw himself” (232). This moment of self-recognition is described as an “unheard-of vision,” in which all the court trappings resembled “a sort of representation of the most horrible moment of his life” (233). Hugo also describes what Valjean sees as a “sort of hallucination” (232), in which, “by some tragic sport of destiny . . . another self [appears] before him” (233). It seems to Valjean that his own horrible trial is reoccurring before his eyes, “all, everything was there,” seemingly the same place, “same hour . . . same faces . . . judge . . . soldiers . . . spectators” (Hugo 233). The conjunction in the text of this “hallucination” and its origin with “destiny” signals to the reader that this “unheard-of vision” arises not from God, but from an opposing spiritual power, in a final attempt to keep Valjean from his aim of drawing near to God.
Though Hugo shows the dire face of destiny pursuing Valjean in this abyss, even into the courtroom itself, he subtly portrays its impotence in the placement of the symbolic representation of God’s presence in the scene. By placing a crucifix on the wall “above the head of the judge” (Hugo 233), Hugo signals God’s authority over every other authority, including that of the presiding judge and Valjean’s own mysterious and tragic fate. The narrator indicates that God’s presence in the courtroom is symbolized by this crucifix, saying that such a “thing did not appear in the court-rooms at the time of [Valjean’s] sentence,” and then commenting that “when he was tried, God was not there” (233). When this passage is read from Loder’s perspective, the symbol of the crucifix does more than signify God’s presence and authority; it may also be seen as provoking the imaginative vision of the third step of the transformational process. The presence of the crucifix in the courtroom comprises what Loder calls a “mediating image” (41).

According to Loder’s theory, transforming moments are attached to these images which arise “with intuitive power to reorganize the elements of the original conflict” (105). Grossman suggests that it is Valjean himself who brings Christ’s presence into the courtroom, that the crucifix symbolizes his sacrifice as much as Christ’s (Figuring 156). This reading partially aligns with Loder’s understanding of a ‘mediating image’ that the individual in the midst of conflict invests a symbol or image with meaning. From this perspective, the crucifix may be seen as a ‘mediating image,’ to which Valjean attaches meaning and significance, and from which erupts a new understanding of his conflicted situation, emerging with “intuitive power . . . reorganize[ing] the elements of the original conflict” (Loder 105). According to Loder, “the insightful resolution to conflict is always a gift” which he asserts originates through an “intentionally cooperative intervention
from a realm of reality beyond consciousness itself” (41). In other words, though resolution arises from within the conflicted individual’s own mind, it is not arrived at by the individual alone, but in cooperation with God’s Spirit. Loder explains that “mediation via an imaginative construct” such as an infusion of meaning into the crucifix in the courtroom, “springs from an engagement and indwelling of a conflicted situation . . . then from a point seemingly disengaged from the conflicted situation, emerges a transformed construction of those elements ready to be interpreted back into the situational context” (41). Just prior to entering the courtroom, Valjean’s thoughts are “seemingly disengaged” from his situation as he thinks about Fantine and Cosette, yet those very thoughts, catalyzed by the symbol of the crucifix in the courtroom, transform the elements of his problem.

The symbol of the crucifix plays an important role in Hugo’s narrative, symbolizing a life of sacrifice for the sake of others. The courtroom scene is not the first place in the text in which a crucifix catches Valjean’s attention. When Fantine first sees Madeleine in the infirmary, after he has rescued her from Javert, he seems to her “transfigured” and “clothed upon with light . . . absorbed in a kind of prayer,” while he gazes at “a crucifix nailed against the wall” (Hugo 174). When Fantine asks what he is doing, he replies, “‘I was praying to the martyr who is on high.’ And in his thought he added: ‘For the martyr who is here below.’” She is no longer degraded in his eyes because he knows that she has sacrificed all, out of love for Cosette, in an effort to provide for her needs. Grossman notes that Fantine “provides a model of self-abnegation that steers the ex-convict toward the right moral track” (36). Valjean’s distracted contemplation, in the judge’s chamber, of Fantine and Cosette, allows him to recognize
self-sacrificing love as the highest good. Therefore, once he is in the courtroom and confronted by the crucifix, the ultimate image of this love, he recognizes its import for his own situation, even though he clearly understands that such love is always costly. Only with the emergence of this ‘mediating insight,’ symbolized by the crucifix, is Valjean able to discard the one ‘axiom,’ “to conceal his name,” and completely embrace the other ‘axiom,’ “to sanctify his life” (Hugo 192). According to Loder, “the self is truly itself in the ongoing act of giving love” (79), therefore only as himself, is Valjean able to recognize himself in his neighbor, and to “love the other one as [he] has been loved” (Loder 180). Speaking of transformation in therapeutic terms, Loder explains that

... when insight comes ... extraordinary connections are made; or ordinary connections are given new or extraordinary significance. It is as if scales fall from the eyes, and distorted perceptions of people, especially of oneself, are corrected. Defenses become optional rather than compulsive; acceptance of self and world become possible. (Loder 59)

Valjean’s recognition of God’s presence in the courtroom, signified by the crucifix, and his vision of the other as self, corrects his distorted image of himself as Creator and Sustainer of his community, and emboldens him to claim his identity as the convict Jean Valjean.

Valjean’s sudden courageous denouncement of himself, after his fearful and tumultuous night, springs from a new assurance of God’s presence and guidance. Loder’s reading of the biblical Emmaus road narrative resonates with Valjean’s courtroom experience. When read in this way, Valjean’s “courage” in the face of certain arrest and imprisonment, may be seen as “an expression of deeper self-understanding and an overpowering assurance that [his] ‘world’ accurately reflects [God’s] world” (Loder 108). In relating the Emmaus road narrative, Loder makes the point that, “Seeing’ things
as they really are is a remarkable antidote to fear . . . particularly where one is convinced that the power that overcomes death is the ground of one’s being.” William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, lists this assurance as one of the results of conversion. He speaks of “the unaccountable feeling of safety” (158), and the calm confidence of those assured of God’s protective presence. He asks “how can it possibly fail to steady the nerves, to cool the fever, and appease the fret, if one be sensibly conscious that, no matter what one’s difficulties for the moment may appear to be, one’s life as a whole is in the keeping of a power whom one can absolutely trust?” (158). He provides several dramatic examples of the convert’s confidence in the face of imminent danger, one of which he obtains from the autobiography *With Christ at Sea*. The writer, a new convert named Frank Bullen, relates the details of an incident which has a striking resemblance to the narrative of the rope-entangled sailor dangling over the abyss who is rescued by Valjean.

It was blowing stiffly . . . and we were carrying a press of canvas to get north out of the bad weather. Shortly after four bells we hauled down the flying-jib, and I sprang out astride the boom to furl it. I was sitting astride the boom when suddenly it gave way with me. The sail slipped through my fingers, and I fell backwards, hanging head downwards over the seething tumult of shining foam under the ship’s bows, suspended by one foot. But I felt only high exultation in my certainty of eternal life. Although death was divided from me by a hair’s breadth, and I was acutely conscious of the fact, it gave me no sensation but joy. (qtd. in James 160)

Though the experience of joy Bullen describes is markedly absent in Valjean, his rescue of Champmathieu, and the endangered sailor later in the text, indicate his confidence in God’s presence and involvement in the details of his life. He testifies to this reality as he leaves the courtroom, comparing his corrected view of himself, with that of the spectators, saying, “You all . . . think me worthy of pity, do you not? Great God! When I think of what I have been on the point of doing, I think myself worthy of envy” (Hugo
Valjean’s proclamation seems to indicate that his choice, to die to himself for the sake of another, arises from an understanding that the sanctification of his soul is of far greater importance than saving his mortal life, an understanding that assumes the continuance of his life after death.

Hugo makes God’s presence in this abyss gloriously evident to everyone in the courtroom when Valjean steps up and solemnly claims his identity as the convict Jean Valjean. Valjean’s choice to denounce himself for the sake of Champmathieu, may be understood from Loder’s perspective, as a participation in the fourth dimension of being, an emergence of the ‘Holy’ from the abyss, reversing Valjean’s earlier urge to annihilate himself. His confession is not simply a claim to his identity as Jean Valjean, for he also acknowledges the man he has become in Montreuil sur Mer saying, “I have disguised myself under another name, I have become rich, I have become a mayor, I have desired to enter again among honest men” (Hugo 243). With the merging of his dual identity, he becomes truly whole, at least for a while. Seen through the lens of Loder’s theory, the uniting of these seemingly mutually exclusive identities, the third alternative he could not conceive of earlier, occurs through the insight given him in the ‘mediating image’ of the crucifix, the symbol of Christ’s supreme self sacrifice for the sake of others. In the act of claiming both of his identities, an entirely new and glorious creation emerges, a man who is stronger as one, than as two, for neither physical strength, nor willful determination, could bring him to sacrifice himself for a stranger. Loder notes that “to love as one has been loved is the only way to abide in the transformation effected by [God’s] Spirit” (Loder 181). Valjean, by sacrificing his life as Madeleine for Champmathieu, paradoxically “abide[s] in the transformation” affected by his conversion. His sacrificial
action shows that his new being transcends his existence as Monsieur Madeleine, the Mayor of Montreuil sur Mer, and that his transformation requires more than economic honesty, and promises more than a life of uncommitted isolation. Wholeness, for Valjean, means merging convict and convert, allowing denunciation to become life-giving affirmation. Seen through the perspective of Loder’s theory, Valjean’s claim to both aspects of his identity constitutes “the decisive recentering of [his] personality around a transcendental reality that points to the invisible God” (Loder 167). The crowd in the courtroom witnessing this recentering “beheld the effulgence of a great light” (Hugo 245), reminiscent of the “serene and majestic glory” (88) of the bishop’s peaceful slumber, and were “dazzled at heart” (245). Just as God’s warning presence is manifest in the Bishop’s radiance, his active presence in the courtroom is manifest in the ‘great light’ of Jean Valjean’s self-sacrifice. Valjean’s life-changing moment of self-recognition, followed by the public acknowledgement of his full identity, may be read through the lens of Loder’s theory as recognizable parts of a real world patterned process of transformation, exemplifying God’s grace in an instance of the ‘Holy’ entering into the chaos of a broken world and transforming it.

The ‘mediating image’ of the crucifix used by Hugo in the courtroom scene to symbolize the presence of the ‘Holy’ in the midst of Valjean’s second abyss is made real in Valjean’s third experience of the abyss. Hugo paints Valjean’s final experience of the abyss as twofold, with each part portrayed as Christ’s Calvary experience. The first portion of this abyss consists of Valjean’s journey through the Paris sewer carrying Marius on his shoulder, as Christ carried his cross on the way to Golgotha. The second portion of this abyss, though separated in time from the first portion, springs from the
same blow, Cosette’s love for Marius. This portion of Valjean’s experience of the abyss occurs, after Cosette’s marriage to Marius, in a scene in which Hugo paints Valjean in the posture of one crucified “his arms extended at a right angle, like one taken from the cross and thrown down with his face to the ground” (Hugo 1197). This figurative crucifixion signifies Valjean’s final death to self. In addition to linking Valjean to Christ through a series of experiences patterned after those of Jesus, Hugo depicts Valjean’s transformation in terms of incorporating into his life a series of increasingly difficult biblical imperatives, which draw him ever closer to God. Whereas Valjean’s initial challenge is to become an honest man, and his struggle over denouncing himself for the sake of Champmathieu concerns the biblical command to love his neighbor as himself, his crisis over Cosette’s love for Marius confronts him with Jesus’ command to love his enemy, and finally, in obedience to the very first commandment, to love God above all else. Hugo graphically portrays Valjean’s internal experience of this abyss as a journey through the Paris sewer, carrying Marius, who eventually becomes the instrument of his final death to self.

In his final depiction of Valjean’s experience of the abyss, Hugo portrays the progressive nature of spiritual transformation, an ongoing process in which, though one draws ever closer to God, unexpected depths may open within the soul, revealing remnants of self which remain opposed to God. Provoked by the blow of Cosette’s letter to Marius, Valjean is shaken “from head to foot [with] a shudder of revolt” in which “he felt even to the roots of his hair the immense awakening of selfishness, [while] the Me howled in the abyss of his soul” (Hugo 1000). The moment this abyss opens before him, Marius becomes his enemy. The threat of losing Cosette
. . . came from him. [Marius, and] he, Jean Valjean, the regenerated man, the man who had labored so much upon his soul, the man who had made so many efforts to resolve all life, all misery, and all misfortune into love; he looked within himself, and there he saw a spectre, Hatred. (1001)

Hugo calls the human soul an abyss, and shows Valjean’s interior to have unexpected depths, “interior subsoilings” (1000) which his sudden hatred reveals. Hugo metaphorically portrays the labyrinthine depths of Valjean’s soul as the foul abyss of the Paris sewer, a miasma of hatred. There is, perhaps, no place more opposed to the sense of wholeness he increasingly experiences as the narrative progresses. Valjean himself understands the increasing sense of wholeness in his ongoing transformation in terms of his encounter with the good bishop, which he sees as the “dawn of virtue on his horizon” and in his life with Cosette, which he perceives as “the dawn of love” (381). Hugo aptly depicts these as dawning experiences, epitomized by light and radiance, for they are beginnings. Hugo repeatedly brings Valjean up short, revealing areas of darkness within him, even though he continues to draw ever closer to God. When Valjean seems, through his good works in Montreuil sur Mer, to be a highly virtuous man, he finds that true virtue requires that honesty be accompanied by love of neighbor. In the abyss opened by his hatred for Marius, he finds that drawing near to God requires love of an even greater depth. Hugo insists, in harmony with the gospel, that only a love which reaches beyond one’s neighbor can mature into the fullness of its nature. The sudden rush of hatred Valjean feels for Marius, his enemy, challenges the depth and reality of the love he has so diligently worked to incorporate into his life, and sets him on a darker path than any he has yet faced.

Hugo uses the barricade scenes in part to display Valjean’s goodness, all the virtues he has incorporated into his life since his conversion. This above-ground, out-in-
the-open setting symbolizes what is visible in Valjean’s life. His actions in the barricade accurately demonstrate the extent of his moral development since Champmathieu’s trial. His time there allows him numerous opportunities to love his neighbor, as well as move beyond love of neighbor, and to love his enemies. He rescues insurgents and soldiers, involving himself in the barricade only to save life and give aid wherever he can. He shoots the soldier’s hats off, warning instead of killing them, so Combeferre calls him “a man who does kindness by musket shots” (1045). Seen from Loder’s perspective, Valjean’s activity in the barricade reflects God’s nature, for he lets “the being of others flourish” (Loder 79) as much as is possible in that environment. Hugo’s text imputes God’s omnipresence and providential care to Valjean, saying that “[t]hanks to him, everywhere present in the carnage like a providence, those who fell were taken up, carried into the basement-room, and their wounds dressed” (Hugo 1083). God’s love within him, so visible in this saving work, clashes with his utter hatred for Marius, constituting Valjean’s conflict in this abyss.

Hugo paints Valjean as a mysterious figure in the barricade, associating him with the spiritual forces active there. By placing Valjean into the midst of this bloody scene, an abyss for those trapped behind the barricade, Hugo suggests that God’s presence and assistance is not exclusively available to Valjean, that He is active and available to all who find themselves facing an abyss. Valjean actively seeks the good of friends and enemies alike, suggesting that he has internalized Jesus’ command to “do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6.27). Even his enemy Javert comes under his care and protection, though this is not known to the insurgents. Loder’s claim that the “self is truly itself in the ongoing act of giving love” (Loder 79), suggests that the very act of
delivering Javert from the barricade allows Valjean to identify himself to Javert. His act of mercy is a revelation to Javert, but his presence in the barricade is an enigma to everyone else, for his seemingly contradictory actions make his purpose unclear. Though his actions affirm his intention to follow the Bishop’s example of love for all, he harbors a burning hatred for Marius. Read from the perspective of Loder’s theory, Valjean’s enigmatic actions in the barricade may be understood as the release of “pent-up aggressive energy” (Loder 88) produced by his hatred for Marius. According to Loder, once the energy produced by conflict is released, it may “then be reinvested in another object—the very [o]ne against whom the [hatred] was initially directed” (88). Loder writes of an experience in his own life in which he first conceives of God as void, then as enemy, and finally as companion (88). A similar scenario plays out in Hugo’s portrayal of this abyss, in which Marius represents the void of abandonment, which opens before Valjean with the realization that he could lose Cosette to another. Valjean immediately identifies Marius as this other, and therefore an enemy, and the rising hatred within him generates considerable energy which needs an avenue for release. Paradoxically, release comes through his loving, gracious, and merciful activities in the barricade. As in Loder’s case, the release of Valjean’s pent-up energy allows him to then reinvest it into rescuing Marius, the one who provoked his hatred in the first place. The text indicates that though Valjean “did not appear to see Marius; the fact is, that he did not take his eyes from him. When a shot struck down Marius, Jean Valjean bounded with the agility of a tiger, dropped upon him as upon a prey, and carried him away” (Hugo 1083). The language of the text here expresses the conflict raging within Valjean, who comes to the barricade to rescue Marius, yet harbors a fierce desire for his destruction. Though he rescues his
enemy Javert, and has long practiced loving his neighbor as himself, he now holds a more formidable enemy in his arms, one whose power over his life is greater even than that of Javert. Marius, the wounded and unconscious man he now holds in his power, threatens his possession of Cosette, whose exclusive love he desires to keep above all else.

Hugo uses the stench and darkness of the sewer to portray the invisible part of Valjean’s soul, not yet wholly cleansed and filled with the light of God’s love, in much the same way he portrays all that is open and visible in his life through the public arena of the barricade. The visible, invisible opposition in these scenes is recognized by David L. Pike, in Subterranean Cities, who notes the symbolic opposition of the sewer with the city under which it lies. He says that Jean Valjean’s journey through the Paris sewer is “paradigmatic” of “the many narratives of sewer discovery” in late nineteenth century literature, especially of London and Paris. He asserts that “the journey metaphor is rooted in the construction of the sewers as the mirror image of the metropolis above, an otherworld just beneath the city streets” (190). On the one hand he says that the sewer “represented the rational control of the archaic underground . . . [yet] at the same time, it retained a strong symbolic resonance as a stubbornly irrational space, the most organic, primitive, and uncontrollable part of the modern city” (190-191). The symbolism of irrationality, of the “primitive and uncontrollable” nature of the underground may reasonably be applied to the hatred that so unexpectedly rises to the surface from the depths of Valjean’s soul. Hugo’s narrative refers to Valjean’s labyrinthine underground road, as a “lurid place” of “darkness” (1090), “bottomless,” “leprous,” “unknown,” and “frightful” (1093). Pike’s description of sewers as places which “accumulate waste, not only excrement and offal but the cast off and outmoded remains of things, places, people,
techniques, and ideas for which physical and conceptual space no longer exists in the
world above” (191), resonates with the conflict in Valjean’s soul. In the world above,
though it contains the bloody barricade, Valjean is able to carry out the biblical
imperatives of love of neighbor, and even love of enemy. His hatred however has no
place in the world above; his actions in the barricade demonstrate his utter rejection of
societal and personal hatred. He cannot remain above ground with hatred for Marius
festering within him, and so is forced to carry it underground, symbolically taking up
arms and doing battle deep within his own soul as he carries Marius, the object of his
hatred on his shoulder.

The “deep peace [and] absolute silence” (1085) of the tunnel into which
Valjean drops, seems, at first, to be a place of safety, but proves to be otherwise, for he
falls “from one circle of hell to another” (1103). The narrator’s comment that “the pupil
dilates in the night, and at last finds day in it, even as the soul dilates in misfortune, and at
last finds God in it” (1104), suggests that, though Valjean trusts God to lead him, he is
also, in some sense, searching for God in his overall conflicted situation. The text states
that he is “swallowed up in Providence” and likens him to the “prophet” Jonah, in the
“belly of the monster” (Hugo 1105), a biblical story to which Jesus alludes as a sign of
his own death and resurrection (Matt. 12:38-40). Though Pike would identify the sewer
through which Valjean journeys sociologically, as the underbelly of the city above, the
larger context of Valjean’s inner conflict suggests that Hugo uses of the allusion to
signify death and resurrection. Though Pike highlights the duality of the city above
ground and its mirror image symbolized in the sewer, he acknowledges a complexity
which adheres to the underworld for which a simple opposition cannot account. He
quotes Mikhail Bakhtin to round out or extend his characterization of the underground metaphor:

The image of the underworld also bears this ambivalent character; it retains the past, the rejected and condemned, as unworthy to dwell in the present, as something useless and obsolete. But it also gives us a glimpse of the new life, of the future that is born, for it is this future that finally kills the past. All these ambivalent images are dual-bodied, dual-faced, pregnant. They combine in various proportions negation and affirmation, the top and the bottom, abuse and praise. (qtd. in Pike 198)

Bakhtin’s insight resonates with Hugo’s text which makes it clear that hatred belonged to Valjean’s past, something “rejected and condemned” at his conversion, “unworthy to dwell in the present,” unwanted, “useless and obsolete.” As such, the underground is where it must go to finally die.

The narrative locates the death of Valjean’s hatred and his resurrection into an existence in which all hatred is dissolved, in the most treacherous part of the sewer, dramatized in his nearly fatal struggle through the fontis. Just prior to Valjean’s entering the fontis, he unburdens himself of Marius for a few moments, checks to be sure he is still living, and takes care, as best he can, of his wounds. Yet, in spite of this apparent care, after all his redemptive activity in the barricade, and his tremendous effort to carry Marius, through the sewer, Valjean still views “him with an inexpressible hatred” (Hugo 1114). Hugo links Valjean’s journey through the sewer, with Marius on his back, to Jesus’ journey to Golgotha carrying his cross, yet reserves Valjean’s metaphorical death on the cross for another section of the narrative. Hugo imbeds another metaphor into this scene, in the powerfully graphic depiction of Valjean’s baptism in the fontis, through which he is purged of hatred. In a baptism like experience, Valjean is immersed in the fontis, and raised again from it, paradoxically cleansed from the contamination of his hatred. Like an inner struggle for resolution which eventually gives rise to an
‘imaginative construct,’ in Loder’s theory, bringing new life in the midst of the void, Valjean’s intense struggle to survive the fontis, is at the last moment granted, as he finds the hidden construct of the underlying floor. This “fragment of floor, partly submerged, but solid, was a real slope, and, once upon this slope” (1120), both Valjean and Marius are saved. Upon reaching “the other side of the quagmire,” having come through the awful muck of his hatred, Valjean “struck against a stone, and fell upon his knees. This seemed to him fitting, and he remained thus for some time, his soul lost in unspoken prayer to God’” (1120). When he rises from this posture of submission, “his soul filled with a strange light” and he sees ahead of him “a good white light,” the plain light of day, not the “demon” light of the sewer. In keeping with the physical way in which Hugo expresses this episode of Valjean’s “interlude for scanning,” his “vision” is also externalized in this light at the end of the tunnel. Upon seeing it, he finds new strength, and no longer feels exhausted or the weight of his burden (Hugo 1120). There is no further reference in the text about Valjean hating Marius, even when Marius completely excludes him from Cosette’s life. Though further depths in this abyss remain, Valjean emerges from the mire of the fontis, his soul purged of hatred, and his transformation nearly complete.

Hugo demonstrates, through Valjean’s experiences, the purposefulness of encounters with the abyss, their function as necessary elements in the process of human transformation, and their essentially spiritual nature. Within each of Valjean’s encounters with the abyss, Hugo implants evidence of God’s gracious presence and activity, his narrative also shows however, the force of fate, or destiny, working against God’s purposes in the midst of these experiences, suggesting that encounters with the abyss may
also be fraught with danger for one’s soul. Just as Hugo shows, through Thénardier’s encounter with Marius, the necessity of grace for the initiation of the transformative process, he shows through Javert’s encounter with the abyss that human cooperation with the Giver of that grace is also necessary to the ongoing process of transformation. Hugo contrasts Valjean’s repeated experiences of the abyss with Javert’s single, and tragic, encounter to demonstrate the importance of the individual’s response to grace. Though the abyss Javert encounters is initiated through a blow of forgiveness similar to Valjean’s, his ultimate refusal of God’s grace leads to his suicide.

Hugo makes the contrast between Javert and Valjean in their response to grace particularly striking by the numerous similarities in their experiences. Like Valjean, Javert’s encounter with the abyss arises from a crisis of identity. His encounter with Valjean at the barricade, like Valjean’s shocking encounter with the bishop, brings the realization that he cannot remain the same person. Yet the rigid ‘axioms’ which govern Javert’s inner ‘world’ make the prospect of transformation inconceivable. Just as Valjean, upon his release from prison, believes that his conviction defines the entire scope of his identity, Javert believes that his birth, in prison, requires his exclusion from society, and that his identity as an outsider is fixed, immutable. In fact, Javert believes all identities are immutable. He perceives the world in black and white. The narrator describes him as “a compound of two sentiments,” reflecting this simplicity, “respect for authority and hatred of rebellion” (148). Javert’s

... very foundation... his element, the medium in which he breathed, was veneration for all authority. He was perfectly homogeneous, and admitted of no objection, or abridgment. To him... ecclesiastical authority was the highest of all; he was devout, superficial, and correct... In his eyes, a priest was a spirit who was never mistaken, a nun was a being who never sinned. (260)
It may be that the superficiality of Javert’s religious devotion springs from the civic nature of his faith. According to the text, “his strong and implicit faith . . . included all who held any function in the state, from the prime minister to the constable” (148-149). He believes “A public officer cannot be deceived; a magistrate never does wrong!” (Hugo 149). To this veneration of authority, Hugo juxtaposes Javert’s “disdain, aversion, and disgust for all who had once overstepped the bounds of the law. He was absolute, and admitted no exceptions.” He believes that those who once trespass “are irremediably lost” that “no good can come out of them.” This axiom of personal immutability, by which Javert perceives the world, and governs his actions, proves too fragile to survive the blow of forgiveness Valjean delivers in the barricade. Javert’s unwillingness to accept the implications of this fragility, and cooperate with God’s grace, given through Valjean, threatens his soul in this abyss. Like Valjean, in the Champmathieu affair, who has to choose between the conflicting aims by which he governs his life, Javert must choose between retaining categorical absolutes, from which the constricted logic of justice without mercy follows, or acknowledge the possibility of human—and therefore his own—transformation, and adopt a new mode of existence based on forgiveness and clemency.

Valjean’s experience of profound confusion, resulting from the bishop’s forgiveness, is echoed by the “catastrophe in the depths of [Javert’s] being” (Hugo 1138) provoked by Valjean’s forgiveness. Valjean’s kindness, and his own in return, plunge Javert into an abyss in which “all that he . . . believed was dissipated” (1143). His antagonism toward convicts, and toward Valjean in particular, makes this situation especially odious. When he finds Valjean on the beach with Marius, “a new thing” has
arisen within him, “a revolution,” which he views as a “matter for self-examination” (1138). Valjean’s actions challenge the reality of the axioms by which Javert governs his life, throwing him into profound confusion, and requiring him to think, “an unaccustomed thing to him” (1139). Javert revolts at his intolerable situation, in which “all the axioms which had been the supports of his whole life crumble . . . away before . . . Jean Valjean [whose] generosity towards him, Javert, overwhelm[s] him” (1140). In this instance, Loder’s theory echoes the terminology of Hugo’s text, speaking of the “axioms” of one’s “frame of reference or experience” as what is disrupted and reordered in the process of transformation (Loder 4). In response to the disruption of his ‘perceived world,’ Javert also engages in what Loder terms ‘scanning activity,’ in which he identifies elements of his crisis, and attempts to identify ways to recompose his shattered world.

Valjean’s forgiveness, implicit in his rescue of Javert from the barricade, holds salvific potential, just as Bishop Bienvenu’s did. Though Hugo often describes Javert in animalistic terms, as a dog, a wolf, or a tiger, suggesting perhaps the absence or underdevelopment of his soul, Javert’s apprehension of God in the midst of the abyss indicates that his experience is as much a spiritual struggle as Valjean’s. However, significant differences exist between Valjean and Javert in their experience of the abyss. Whereas Valjean’s experience demonstrates the chaotic nature, and inherently creative potential of the abyss, Javert’s experience demonstrates the sense of its pervasive nothingness, and destructive nature, which reflect his inner reality. In his discussion of the void, Loder states that one has “difficulty composing out or covering over the nothingness because it is not merely ‘out there,’ it is embedded in the very heart of the
untransformed self” (81). Loder’s comment on the emptiness of the self as self-reflection aptly describes Javert:

As ‘self-reflection,’ the self reflects nothingness everywhere by making everything depend on the ‘I’ and the lived ‘world.’ There is no positive self in this posture; it is only negatively or implicitly present as the person makes an ongoing series of culturally absorbed choices. Absence of the positive self will often seek to diffuse the painful inner sense that being human is empty and meaningless by proliferating meaningless activity. (Loder 81-2)

Although Javert embodies a remarkably palpable presence in the text, his lack of a “positive self” is apparent, for his identity is defined solely in opposition to others. He specifically rejects his parents and with them the criminal underworld, opposing himself to them in his chosen occupation of police officer. He also defines himself by the rejection of society. Though he exists to defend society by enforcing its laws, he remains separate, set apart, and solitary by choice; his only relationships are official, defined by his identity as Inspector of Police. The narrative indicates that “his life was a life of privations, isolation, self-denial, and chastity: never any amusement. It was implacable duty, absorbed in the police as the Spartans were absorbed in Sparta, a pitiless detective, a fierce honesty, a marble-hearted informer, Brutus united with Vidocq” (Hugo 149). In addition to its reliance on the axiom of immutable identity, the stability of Javert’s world depends upon the incessant accomplishment of duty. Vargas Llosa describes him as an “upright, one-dimensional man, who seemed to be made of stone” who possesses an “overwhelming” sense of duty (78- 9). Hugo describes Javert as

. . . stoical, serious, austere: a dreamer of stern dreams, humble and haughty, like all fanatics. His stare was cold and as piercing as a gimlet. His whole life was contained in these two words: waking and watching. He marked out a straight path through the most tortuous thing in the world; his conscience was bound up in his utility, his religion in his duties, and he was a spy as others are priests. (Hugo 149)
Loder’s comment that achievement-oriented people operate “on the profoundly misguided assumption that personal worth is capable of being gained and established by what can be achieved” (82) fits Javert very well. His personal worth is established, not through achievement as such, but by his flawless accomplishment of duty. Hugo writes, “Javert’s ideal was not to be humane, not to be great, not to be sublime; it was to be irreplaceable” (1142). In his discussion of the relentlessly achievement-oriented, Loder asks, what happens when one’s “reputation is ruined or the promotion is denied – then what?” (83). Likewise, one might ask, what happens when duty is slighted, or disregarded altogether, as in Javert’s last encounter with Valjean? Then, according to Loder, one experiences “trauma in which the outer nothingness matches the inner, and the world collapses into the nothingness at the center of the self” (83). This is precisely what the reader sees when Javert disregards his duty to society by releasing Valjean. His failure to carry out his duty crushes him: “He thought himself base. He was a horror to himself” (Hugo 1142). Javert finds himself face to face with “a mysterious justice according to God going counter to justice according to men,” in which there is “no more final condemnation, no more damnation” (1141), a situation he refuses to countenance.

Javert’s situation may be seen from Loder’s perspective as an intrusion of “God the void” (Loder 88) into his hitherto two-dimensional existence. Loder claims that the emptiness of the void is most profoundly felt in “the separateness of the self from its Source” (Loder 81), precisely the situation in which Javert finds himself, for until that day, the thought of his having anything to do with God, let alone God being his superior, never crosses his mind. Though Javert recognizes that “he ought neither to disobey, nor to blame” (Hugo 1143) “this new chief, God” (1142), of whom he is now aware, but
rather to submit, he loses “his bearings in this unexpected presence” (1142), and does “not know what to do with this superior,” who “astonishes him too much” (1143). Though Loder speaks of the ‘Holy’ emerging out of the void, bringing new life with the imaginative vision, and overcoming the nothingness of the void with his presence, he also acknowledges that God’s presence is not always perceived in positive terms. Loder quotes Alfred North Whitehead who he says “characterized all religion” (Loder 88) as “the transition from God the void to God the enemy and from God the enemy to God the companion” (qtd. in Loder 88). Javert’s suicide indicates that he fails to make the final transition from “God the enemy to God the companion.” Javert suddenly apprehends God, yet only sees “a gulf on high,” as chaotic and unpredictable as the gulf “that belong[s] to inferior regions” causing him to wonder if “anarchy is . . . about to descend from on high” (Hugo 1144). According to Loder, such thoughts reflect a common response to genuine encounters with God, whom he claims “retains Otherness and inflicts profound ambivalence” (Loder 89). The feelings Hugo attributes to Javert in this encounter reflect what Loder calls “the experiential mark of the Presence of the Holy” in the real world, which he characterizes as an “ambivalence that both draws and repels us, excites and overcomes us, intrigues and threatens us” (Loder 89). Significantly, Hugo attributes similar feelings to Valjean, especially in his initial encounter with God in his desert experience, suggesting that one’s feelings are much less important than the way in which one responds to the One who provokes those feelings.

Just as Valjean and Javert struggle with similar feelings as they engage in the scanning process, both men also experience the ‘imaginative construct’ of a vision, a moment of revelation which realigns the shattered elements of their ‘worlds’ into a new
and previously inconceivable whole. In spite of the many similarities which exist between the experiences of these two men, they diverge at the junction of their visions. Valjean, because of his repentant spirit, and cooperative attitude, sees visions of light and hope, even though they reveal that he must experience a certain death of self. Javert, on the other hand, rejects a ‘world’ in which human transformation is possible, and therefore sees a “frightful vision” (Hugo 1145), and in response chooses to annihilate himself rather than allow himself to be moved. Valjean accepts the truth about himself revealed in each vision, emerging renewed and transformed, but Javert revolts, utterly rejecting the revelation of his vision. Vargas Llosa claims that Javert has “discovered the existence of contradictory truths, of incompatible values” (79). What Javert’s vision reveals, however, is the death of his pride, crushed by Valjean’s mercy. Though grace is offered, and recognized by Javert, though he even finds that he himself is capable of a kindness he had not thought possible, Javert only sees a certain death of self in the violation of all he holds as sacred. What he finds in Valjean, and shockingly, in himself as well, is the transcendence of his own values. The text indicates that in sparing Javert’s life, Valjean has done “something more” than his duty (Hugo 1142), and that Javert himself has done more than his duty in sparing Valjean in return. This “something more” is not an instance of Javert recognizing “contradictory truths,” or “incompatible values” as Vargas Llosa suggests, but the recognition that the ‘axiom’ by which he lives (Hugo 1140), which says that duty is all, is simply false. Javert not only finds that God, that “gulf on high” (1144), has depths he could not have imagined, but also that people are far more complex than his simplistic view of the world allows. He finally apprehends the mutability of human identity and the truth that human transformation is possible. Javert’s vision, that moment
of recognition, in which the truth might free him from his narrow boundaries and constricted logic, reveals “Javert, the spy of order, incorruptibility . . . the mastiff-providence of society vanquished and prostrated; and upon all this ruin a man standing, with a green cap on his head and a halo about his brow.” Javert’s final “frightful vision” is not of himself as a man renewed and transformed by love, but as “vanquished and prostrated” by this frightful convict turned faithful convert, Jean Valjean (Hugo 1145). Javert “set[s] himself stubbornly in opposition” (96) to Valjean’s “angelic deeds,” and sets his “pride,” which the text calls “the fortress of evil in man,” against God, the incomprehensible, who tempers justice with mercy. Javert utterly rejects the imaginative vision which emerges from the abyss, and embraces death in the void below, rather than embrace life on such terms. Though grace is extended to him, his pride prevents the cooperation of his will, and extinguishes with his suicide any chance of transformation.

Hugo’s portrayal of experiences of the abyss within the novel identifies them as necessary and potentially life-giving components of human transformation. The symbolic context of these experiences connects them to gospel narratives in which God is actively present in the lives of individuals, suggesting that, for Hugo, human transformation is not only spiritual in nature, but intrinsically connected to the Christian gospel. Hugo heightens the potency of the metaphor of the abyss by embedding within its portrayal life-altering visions which Loder’s theory enables the reader to see as instances in the text which evidence God’s redeeming and sanctifying grace. Hugo posits Valjean’s conversion and ongoing sanctification, or growing nearness to God, as directly resulting from his repeated experiences of the abyss and, more importantly, from his encounters
with God in their midst. By setting Valjean’s transformational encounters with the
“Holy” in the midst of the abyss, Hugo answers the central question of the novel about
God’s whereabouts when one is plunged into the inevitable abysses of life. His narrative
unmistakably affirms not only that God is present and graciously active in the abyss, but
also that, for those who respond to his call to a life of sacrificial love for others, even
one’s enemies, his presence means life-giving renewal, even in the face of death.
CHAPTER IV

THE CONVERT

Hugo’s choice of a convict as the primary recipient of God’s grace in his narrative about human transformation is no accident, for Christian conversion, the essence of Valjean’s transformation, is inseparable from conviction. The enduring motif of conviction permeates the novel, functioning as a defining aspect of Valjean’s identity and relationships. His relationship to others at the beginning of the narrative is rigidly categorical; he is a convict, an outcast. The innkeeper who asks, “Shall I tell you who you are?” (Hugo 55), is not only ready to tell him who he is, but entitled to tell him, to overlook his individuality and categorize him. Valjean can never erase his initial conviction, which dogs him throughout the novel, yet once he is touched by the bishop’s forgiveness and spiritual conviction takes hold in him, his life is gradually redefined in its terms. When seen in the light of Loder’s transformational theory, Valjean’s spiritual convictions, though not explicitly stated in the text, become visible as the new ‘axioms’ by which he recomposes his ‘world’ after each crisis experience. Valjean’s incorporation of each new conviction into his identity, and his open affirmations of his transformed life, may be understood, in terms of the final two steps of Loder’s theory, as “release and repatterning” and “interpretation and verification” (4). Though the question of Valjean’s identity and status as a convict attends his introduction into the narrative, the gradual process of his sanctification transforms the question, for it becomes obvious that the
import of *whose he is* far outweighs *who he is*. I argue that Valjean’s status as a convict, which he retains throughout the novel as an enduring part of his identity, is overlaid with new meaning when he is converted, and that Hugo’s narrative portrays the extent of God’s redemptive power and grace, not only as Valjean himself is redeemed, but also by the gradual redemption of Valjean’s original conviction, that is, as the nature of his conviction is transformed from ignominious to glorious.

Hugo begins his novel about the transformation of the human soul with a portrait of Bishop Bienvenu, a transformed man nearing the end of his life, to exemplify what a sanctified life looks like in the text. The narrative of Valjean’s life, which picks up in his middle years, demonstrates what the process of transformation looks like, how one’s sanctification comes about. Hugo’s early narrative of the bishop’s life, almost exclusively, shows the result of his conversion and transformation, the initiation of which is only hinted at in the narrator’s remark about the possibility of his having experienced a “mysterious and terrible blow” in his youth (3). The lived experience of Christian transformation is reserved for the convict Valjean. Hugo paints the early steps of Valjean’s transformation as dramatic and disruptive, consisting of blows, experiences of the abyss, and moments of clarity, encapsulated in some sort of vision in which resolutions to his dilemmas arise. Once each crisis is surpassed, however, Hugo moves Valjean into a time of relative calm in which he begins practices that serve to internalize and solidify the new ‘convictions’ which arise in these crisis times, ‘convictions’ which draw him ever closer to God. Loder identifies such periods in one’s life as the fourth step in the transformational process, “release and repatterning,” a step in which “energy [previously] bound with the conflict” is made available for the establishment of new
patterns of living. A step in which one’s “lived ‘world’ ” (72) is reconstructed upon newly acquired “axioms” (4), which arise with the “imaginative construct” (38) of step three of transformational logic. Seen from Loder’s perspective, life “repatternning” (4) occurs during this phase as the “gain” (Loder 40) derived from the resolution of conflict is incorporated into the individual’s recomposition of the world. The reconstruction of Valjean’s ‘lived world,’ which takes place after he reaches resolution from each crisis, shows him addressing the issue, or issues, which the initiating blow reveals, and incorporating a new conviction into his life, which in some way addresses that issue.

Hugo portrays the first of Valjean’s new convictions as arising from his encounter with Bishop Bienvenu, whose forgiveness challenges his exclusive identity as a convict, and brings about his conversion, suggesting that his efforts at reformation, or life “repatternning,” must address the issue of conviction, and specifically, who he is, his identity as a convict. Loder explains that the word “‘conviction’ draws on judicial imagery and declares that one is thoroughly convinced; the case is incontestable; the conviction will stand as part of a permanent record” (4). He characterizes “endurance through time” as part of its inherent nature, fixing the relationship between “the Convictor, and the convicted person.” Just as Valjean’s conviction stands as an indelible part of his identity, so too, does his conversion and the ongoing relationship between himself and God, his “Convictor.” Valjean moves from one kind of conviction to another, from conviction under the law of society, to conviction under grace founded on love and forgiveness. This second kind of conviction, which is spiritual in nature, is predicated upon freedom, because its root in forgiveness cancels the otherwise inherent element of condemnation. According to Loder, the conviction inherent in one’s conversion frees the
convicted individual to act because he is “thoroughly convinced” (14). The absence of condemnation does not imply an absence of guilt; rather, the spiritually convicted person is fully aware of personal guilt, and “thoroughly convinced” (Loder 14) that, through God’s grace, guilt has been removed. Thomas C. Oden states in The Transforming Power of Grace, that “freedom is the premise of all obedience” and “the incomparable gift of God to humanity” (97). Though undeniably difficult, the choices which confront Valjean throughout the course of the narrative are predicated upon the freedom of his will to respond in obedience to the One whose grace he has received.

The theme of conviction in the narrative naturally lends itself to questions about Hugo’s portrayal of freedom and captivity. Hugo’s characters experience imprisonment in multiple ways; he portrays Valjean, for instance, as a man “dazzled with the idea of liberty” (84), yet upon his release after nineteen years in the galleys, he remains in bondage to his identity as a convict, unable to escape his yellow passport, a captive to hatred and the thought of revenge. In addition to various forms of captivity, Hugosubjects his characters to powerful spiritual forces which exert pressure upon them to influence their choices. The sense of awesome power Hugo attributes to these spiritual forces raises the question of whether his characters have any real choices. Vargas Llosa suggests only a limited freedom for Hugo’s characters, saying that they are only “free at times, in certain circumstances, for fixed periods, for certain things” (35). Otherwise, he claims “they are puppets that are moved by the hand of fate” (53). Katherine Grossman, on the other hand, writes of the “alarming, dizzy vista of human freedom” imposed upon Valjean by Bishop Bienvenu (Figuring 142). Whereas Vargas Llosa argues that Hugo’s characters are simply pawns with no real power to choose, Grossman suggests that they
not only possess the freedom to choose, but that their choices depend entirely upon their own strength of will. She states that “the man who for years was defined by his hatred must now face the full import of the words, ‘you are free,’ indeed, [she says,] he has traded one condemnation for another.” According to Grossman, the bishop “sentences [Valjean] to the freedom of creating a whole new existence.” Though her language is ambiguous, paradoxically grouping “condemnation” and “sentence” with “freedom,” she seems to indicate that the weight of “creating a whole new existence” falls entirely upon Valjean’s own shoulders (Figuring 142). Hugo’s use of a Christian framework for his narrative, however, suggests a third alternative, freedom assisted by grace. Seen in this light, Valjean’s world, which is founded on hatred and the desire for revenge, breaks down when overshadowed by the more powerful reality of forgiving love, for his hatred proves insufficient, in the face of forgiving love, to keep him ‘grounded.’ Loder explains that “the Holy cannot be made manifest without seeming to destroy two-dimensional existence and to fill the void with itself” (90). Seen from this perspective, the ‘Holy’ is made manifest in Valjean’s vision of the bishop as a bright light which grows while he himself shrinks into nothingness. Valjean’s “two-dimensional existence,” based in hatred and desire for revenge, is swallowed up by the void, which in turn is nullified with the advent of forgiving grace. Since hatred and revenge are no longer the only options available to him, Valjean is no longer bound by them, but free to obey the bishop’s charge to become an honest man. When understood in light of Loder’s theory, the conviction which leads to Valjean’s conversion, and the resolutions to his subsequent challenges, may be seen as freely, or spontaneously, emerging from within himself.
through the “imaginative constructs” of his visions (38), yet at the same time arising through God’s assistance (41).

Hugo’s narrative is consistent with a strain of Catholic thought which teaches the necessity of human cooperation with God’s grace. Carolyn J. Beck in her dissertation *Christian Grace as Seen in Western Literature, Music, and Art*, states that in response to the controversies which grew out of the Protestant Reformation over the nature of grace, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent concluded that “humans could cooperate with the grace that inhered in them” (10). She notes that though various interpretations of grace continued within the Catholic tradition, the official Roman Catholic position was that “humans had free will to resist grace” (11). Oden, in a chapter which specifically addresses the dynamics of grace and the human will from a Protestant perspective, offers an insight into the dynamics between God’s grace and the human will. He argues that Christian “transformation does not occur simply by fiat, because it is the will itself that must be transformed,” and he claims that “such transformation can only occur meaningfully by the persuasive cooperation of the human will itself” (95). Loder describes this cooperation between human and divine willing as “the dynamic reality that lies behind . . . convictional experiences, . . . a gracious complementarity between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit” (8). Evidence of this “gracious complementarity” is apparent in Valjean’s life as he gradually internalizes the goodness commanded by Jesus in the gospels, and exemplified by Bishop Bienvenu: love of neighbor, love of enemy, and love of God above and before all else. According to William James, Sainte-Beuve describes an “inner state,” which he claims is “common to those who have received grace,” as being characterized by “love and humility,” “infinite confidence in God,” and
“severity for one’s self, accompanied with tenderness for others” (qtd. in James 145). These characteristics are evident in increasing measure in Jean Valjean’s life as he is gradually transformed throughout the narrative. Though Hugo paints Valjean as an exceptionally strong and resourceful man with a determined will, he also shows Valjean’s need for God’s assistance in the various conflicts and challenges by which he is confronted as his transformation unfolds. The need for God’s assistance in the transformation of the convert is affirmed by Oden, who asserts that “God constantly and sufficiently assists the will to do good” (Oden 98). He quotes Augustine, who states, “Free will is sufficient for evil, but is too little for good, unless it is aided by Omnipotent Good” (qtd. in Oden 98). Contrary to Vargas Llosa’s assertion that Hugo’s characters have no real freedom, and Grossman’s suggestion that Valjean must reconstruct his world entirely on his own, Hugo’s narrative shows Valjean, assisted by grace, freely choosing God’s will, and gradually being transformed with each successive choice.

Oppositions abound in the narrative, expressed in Hugo’s dualism through his depiction of God and destiny, dramatized in the contest between light and darkness, and portrayed in the contrast between places of tranquil domesticity and the cramped and dirty hovels of the criminal underclass. These are just a few examples in which the opposition of negative and positive is played out in the text. Laurence M. Porter, in Victor Hugo, claims that Hugo “frames” Les Misérables “with nesting layers of inversions,” expressed in negative and positive forms. Porter defines the negative form of inversion as “what had seemed good, proves bad” (135), and the positive as “what seemed bad, proves good” (136). He points out, for instance, that “humility can lead to spiritual exaltedness,” as well as giving numerous other textual examples (136). Though inversions and
reversals are significant and abound in the text, I argue that transformation, rather than inversion, is the basic structure on which Hugo builds the narrative of Valjean’s life. Not that Valjean only seems evil in the beginning, and proves, in the end, to be the good after all, but that the convict who hatefully shakes his fist at God in rebellion, is transformed, by the grace of God, into a convert, who in the end loves God above and before all else. Hugo structures the progression of Valjean’s transformation, or redemption and subsequent sanctification, not as a series of reversals, but as a sequence of increasingly difficult challenges, which specifically address his identity and relationships as they change over the course of the narrative. Though oppositions and inversions may be embedded elements within the various stages of Valjean’s transformation, the challenges he faces, and the internalization of new convictions which arise from them, are patterned on the gospel and exemplified in the life of Bishop Bienvenu. The first of Valjean’s spiritual convictions, that he must “become an honest man” (Hugo 92), arises from his encounter with Bishop Bienvenu. His second conviction, that he must “love his neighbor as himself” arises from his encounter with Champmathieu in the courtroom. Valjean’s third conviction, that he must love his of enemy, arises from the devastating realization that Cosette loves another. Lastly, Hugo portrays Valjean coming to love God above and before all else, a conviction which arises from his struggle over losing Cosette’s exclusive love. In addition to internalizing, and living out new convictions, Hugo portrays Valjean’s transformation as being rooted in a progression of relationships of increasing intimacy, an intimacy which is born of the convictions he lives out during the course of his life. The scope of these relationships gradually changes, as he moves from
being a distant but benevolent benefactor of his community, to a final intimacy with God, and the beloved departed, at his death.

Hugo’s narrative insists that Valjean recognize, acknowledge, and repent from his thefts and the betrayal inherent in them. In accordance with the Christian belief which calls for repentance, Hugo’s narrative insists that Valjean must confront his past conviction for theft, and his identity as a thief, before the process of transformation can take hold in him. The necessity of repentance, in itself, affirms that Valjean’s offences do not simply “seem bad” (Porter 136), but that they truly are “bad,” for repentance involves the admission of guilt, of admitting one’s responsibility for wrongdoing, and also involves turning away from it. It is a reversal, an about face, but not an inversion. Porter expresses the concept of repentance as “acknowledging one’s spiritual poverty” and acknowledges that doing so, in Hugo’s narrative, puts a person “on the road of redemptive contrition” (142). It is also important to note that, as in Christian teaching, grace is extended to Valjean prior to, and apart from, his repentance. Oden defines grace as “. . . the divine goodwill offered to those who neither inherently deserve nor can ever hope to earn it . . .” (33). Valjean is freely forgiven by Bishop Bienvenu, who is fully aware of his betrayal and theft. Though it is accompanied with the charge that he “become an honest man” (Hugo 92), the bishop’s forgiveness is not dependent upon Valjean’s repentance. A second element in a Christian understanding of repentance is that it opens the door, as Porter recognizes, not only for transformation, but for restoration as well.

Hugo does a couple of things in framing Valjean’s successive spiritual convictions: first, each one addresses an area of weakness or need specific to Valjean’s
immediate context, and second, it provides for Valjean’s need for restoration, addressing his particular relational needs. Honesty is the first spiritual conviction Valjean incorporates into his life after his conversion. It arises from the bishop’s challenge that he use the silver he has stolen to become an honest man. This challenge is directly related to Valjean’s identity as a thief, his conviction for theft, and his theft of the Bishop’s silver. Valjean’s thefts violate his relationship to society, a relationship which needs to be restored with his transformation. His theft of Petit Gervais’ coin, after being forgiven by the Bishop, confronts Valjean with the reality of his identity as a thief, and convinces him of the need for radical change; in essence, he is ‘convicted,’ in the spiritual sense of the word. This spiritual conviction only takes place once he recognizes God’s claim on his life, after his encounter with the bishop. Though largely economic in nature, Valjean’s offences hide an additional underlying spiritual problem which his transformation must also address. Valjean’s theft of the Bishop’s silver is a betrayal, which reveals a deep-seated disregard for others. The economic nature of Valjean’s crimes makes Bishop Bienvenu’s purchase of Valjean’s soul appropriate. The Bishop however, steps beyond the economic aspect of Valjean’s crimes to address their relational aspect, and the issue of betrayal, by establishing new, more intimate relationships for Valjean. By calling him “my brother” (Hugo 92), Bishop Bienvenu gives Valjean a new identity, drawing him into relationship with himself, and, by extension, changing the nature of his relationship to others. The Bishop goes even further, initiating an even closer relationship for Valjean, and making the issue of belonging personal by claiming that Valjean himself is now the “belonging” of God. This is the ultimate restoration. He tells Valjean, “you belong no longer to evil, but to good,” and takes decisive action with his claim on Valjean’s soul,
proclaiming “I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!” (Hugo 92). The Bishop’s combination of economic and religious language here, of making a withdrawal, and a transfer of Valjean’s soul, from “the spirit of perdition. . . to God,” addresses Valjean’s specific area of weakness, a lack of trust in God to care for his needs. The imperative to become honest speaks directly to this lack of trust and to his identity as a convict and a thief, which, along with the new relationships as a brother to others, and as God’s belonging, sets the parameters for the initial stage of Valjean’s transformation.

Hugo implants evidence of God’s assistance in Valjean’s early efforts to become an honest man in the very nature of the occupation he adopts. Upon arriving as a stranger in Montreuil sur Mer, Valjean has “the inspiration of an ingenious idea” (Hugo 139), revolutionizing the region’s industry, by “substituting gum-lac for resin in the manufacture” of imitation jet work (238). By introducing him as a manufacturer, Hugo indicates that the changes taking place in Valjean reflect the economic aspect of the Bishop’s charge for him to become honest. In a reversal of his identity as a thief, one who takes from others, an operation of subtraction, he becomes a manufacturer, one who produces for others, an operation of addition. This reversal constitutes the redemption of Valjean’s thefts, addressing Valjean’s specific need. His initial repatterning fits the requirement of his initial conflict, a direct change in kind of his identity. However, something more than a change of occupation has taken place here, for redemption always arises out of God’s grace. The text states that Valjean’s success as a manufacturer arises from “the inspiration of an ingenious idea” (139). That such an “ingenious idea” would arise within one who suffers from “the diseased perceptions of an incomplete nature and
a smothered intelligence” (Hugo 80), suggests that a deep-seated change takes place within Valjean before he arrives in Montreuil sur Mer. His mind is no longer smothered, no longer “absorbed in continually looking upon something terrible.” However, this change does not take place upon his release from prison, for even after receiving the Bishop’s gracious hospitality his mind dwells on all the injustice and ignominy of his past (85). His release from “dark thoughts” (92) comes only after he recognizes his wretchedness, and in repentance responds to the Bishop’s forgiveness, accepting the transfer of his soul to God. Seen from the perspective of Loder’s theory, once Valjean is free from “dark thoughts” (Hugo 92) the energy bound up in them is released, allowing creative thinking to arise in Valjean’s once smothered mind. According to Loder’s theory, creative ideas, such as Valjean’s are acts of “esthetic knowing” which arise from “the human spirit” which, Loder says “is characterized by its power to break with the tyranny of the obvious and compose some aspect of the world, in its (the spirit’s) own terms” (56). He further claims that “transformation in esthetic knowing cannot occur in the artist if his or her spirit has been violated, stifled, or perverted” (56). Such violation clearly pertains to Valjean’s “smothered intelligence” (Hugo 80) prior to his conversion. When read in light of Loder’s theory, Valjean’s conversion experience not only releases energy previously bound up in conflict, for the repatterning of his behavior, but also for the generation of new ideas, and creative solutions to problems, because his mind is set free from “dark thoughts” (Hugo 92). Seen from this perspective, Valjean’s “inspiration of an ingenious idea” (139) may be recognized as an instance of grace-assisted freedom, for Valjean’s repentance, in cooperation with God’s will, releases him from mental bondage.
Hugo portrays Valjean’s transformation as a spiritual endeavor, yet he insists that Christian conversion is not simply an interior state of mind or heart, suggesting that genuine faith reaches beyond relationship with God to one’s relationship with and responsibility to others. Hugo portrays care for one’s community, especially for the poor and needy, as a hallmark of Bishop Bienvenu’s life, setting an example for Valjean. In like fashion, generosity emerges as Valjean’s first and most obvious new character trait, materially benefiting his community, as he strives to become an honest man. Valjean’s “ingenious idea” (Hugo 139) provides the means for him to move beyond simple honesty in his dealings with others, allowing him to show an increased trust in God’s provision for him as he generously shares his wealth, especially caring for the most needy in his community. He uses the profits from his invention to “raise the wages of the labourer,” make better goods to the “advantage of the customer,” while making “three times the profit” for himself, “the manufacturer” (138), which becomes “a fortune for the whole region” (139). Valjean spends his time doing “good deeds” secretly (Hugo 143), reversing former ‘axioms’ by breaking in and leaving money instead of taking it. Read from the perspective of Loder’s theory, Valjean’s mode of life in Montreuil sur Mer demonstrates ‘repatterning’ in precisely those terms which his initial conflict requires, the reversal of his identity as a thief, and the internalization of his new spiritual convictions, by practicing honesty and generosity. These character traits also address Valjean’s immediate spiritual need, a growing trust in God’s provision for him. Valjean is able to give to others because he trusts that there will be enough for his own needs, which Hugo paints as surprisingly simple and few.
Even in the midst of his portrayal of Valjean’s remarkable growth toward the reversal of his identity as a thief, however, Hugo begins to delineate the contours of the next issue Valjean must confront. While the repatterning intrinsic to the transformational process is evident in Valjean’s new life, most of the good effects from this process are economic. Though he has a “sort of aspiration towards all the mysteries of the infinite” (Hugo 143), the outward evidence of his growing faith seems confined to reversing his identity as a thief, almost to the exclusion of his need to redefine his relationship to others, for though he is unmistakably generous, he purposefully avoids people, even his own employees. Valjean adopts two new axioms in his life as Madeleine, “to conceal his name, and to sanctify his life; to escape from men and to return to God” (192). Though he generously meets the economic needs of his community, he does not mingle with society nor have any friends (141). Once elected mayor, the text states “he fulfilled his duties . . . but beyond that he isolated himself. He talked with very few persons . . . he smiled to avoid talking, and gave to avoid smiling” (Hugo 142). Though Valjean’s internalization of honesty seems complete, he remains hidden behind an alias, and struggles with the repatterning of his relationships. Taking on the new identity of a brother to others proves difficult. Yet, the text shows that some repatterning on this level does take place. In a slow progression of internalization, Valjean begins taking on this less comfortable aspect of his new identity. He readily joins mourners, especially those who are strangers to him, and publicly mourns the Bishop’s death. When Father Fauchelevent needs assistance, which Valjean is uniquely able to give, Javert’s threatening insinuation causes him to hesitate. He tries to buy his way out of possible exposure. Vargas Llosa asks “why” “nobody takes him up” when he “offers a reward of twenty Louis d’or for one man to try
to lift the cart.” He concludes it is simply “because the plot requires that Valjean himself must lift the cart alone, to illustrate his goodness and strength and to make Fauchelevent morally indebted to him . . .” (37). Though Vargas Llosa makes a good point about the importance for the plot of Valjean being the one who rescues Fauchelevent, I want to suggest, that rather than demonstrating his “goodness and strength,” Valjean’s hesitancy shows his lingering lack of trust in God. His attempt to buy the assistance of others is consistent with his behavior in Montreuil sur Mer, demonstrating his preference for economic relationships over personal ones. When, at the last moment, he throws aside caution and risks himself for the sake of another, he shows growth in his recognition that his responsibility to others has to encompass more than economics, and more importantly, takes precedence over his own safety. Though Hugo prepares the way in this scene for Valjean to enter the convent later on, he is not simply establishing a relationship of indebtedness, but opening the door for Valjean to experience true friendship.

Hugo deftly demonstrates the very personal nature of transformation in Valjean’s struggle over the Champmathieu affair. Though he portrays the importance of care for one’s community in his portrait of Madeleine, he insists that the needs of the individual rise above the needs of the community at large. Not only does Hugo portray Champmathieu’s life and freedom as more important than Valjean’s continuing support of his community, he uses the episode to address Valjean’s own continuing spiritual need by confronting the issue of his betrayal of Bishop Bienvenu. In the courtroom scene, Valjean recognizes himself in the stranger before him, and through his contemplation of Christ’s sacrifice, symbolized in the crucifix displayed in the courtroom, and exemplified in Fantine’s sacrifices for Cosette, he is able to embrace the sacrifice of his own life as
Madeleine for Champmathieu. In so doing, Valjean refuses the temptation to betray Champmathieu, and takes on the bishop’s role of extending salvation to a “brother.” In essence, Valjean’s rescue of Champmathieu redeems his betrayal of Bishop Bienvenu with an act of fidelity. In this courtroom scene, Valjean’s two convictions, the civic and the spiritual, collide and merge in a glorious affirmation of his conversion, and, ironically, the freedom that comes with confession. Read in the light of transformational theory, Valjean’s self-disclosure in the courtroom, which affected Champmathieu’s release, constitutes, in part, the final step of the transformational process, “interpretation and verification,” a step which has inward and outward elements (Loder 4). According to Loder, the individual first inwardly verifies that the resolution reached in step three actually matches the terms of the conflict, and then he or she outwardly confirms the authenticity of the resolution by some sort of public affirmation (4). Valjean’s outward affirmation of inward change is readily apparent when he identifies himself in the courtroom. By confessing who he is, the convict Jean Valjean, as well as by testifying to the court whose he is, openly discussing his conversion and the reformation of his life in Montreuil sur Mer, he submits the solution of his original conflict “to a public test” (Loder 4). Sadly, though the reality of Valjean’s transformation is marvelously apparent in the courtroom, the court’s desire for a convict proves stronger, and Valjean becomes the victim of injustice once again, this time because of his honesty. Even the judge who acknowledges in open court that “even in the man whom the law has degraded there may remain, if divine justice permit, a sentiment of honor and equity” (Hugo 240), agrees that Valjean, who has just proven his point, should be arrested (252). Loder asserts, however, that validation of spiritual conviction is “uniformly established by God’s initiative, not by
generally recognized human procedures” (22). The failure of the court to validate, through some sort of amelioration of Valjean’s predicament, the reformation of his life since his release from the galleys, and the inherent justice of Valjean’s actions on behalf of Champmathieu, in no way invalidates the goodness of his actions or the authenticity of his conversion. Internal validation is also part of the fifth step of transformational logic, requiring the individual’s personal verification that the solution meets the terms of the initial conflict (Loder 5). That Valjean experiences such a personal validation is apparent in his comment to the court as he is leaving; “You all . . . think me worthy of pity, do you not? Great God! When I think of what I have been on the point of doing, I think myself worthy of envy” (Hugo 245). Valjean’s rescue of Champmathieu fulfills this requirement, for the battle in his soul over explicitly exposing himself as the convict Jean Valjean for the sake of another, deals directly with the issues of betrayal and his identity as a convict.

Hugo insists through his depiction of Valjean’s shift from economic to personal, and ultimately loving, relationships, that human transformation does not come about apart from loving relationships with others. Valjean emerges from the Champmathieu affair with the new conviction that he must love his neighbor as himself (as is commanded in Lev. 19.18), and begins internalizing this second spiritual conviction in a slow progression from distant and largely monetary or economic relationships, to the more intimate and familial relationships of father to Cosette and brother to Fauchelevent. Hugo characterizes Cosette as the “dawn of love” on Valjean’s horizon, and moves him into this new relationship to learn what it is to be loved, and what it is to love in return, yet their relationship is established largely on economic terms. The chance encounter between Valjean and Cosette in the woods at night, though it holds no hint of any
economic transaction between them, occurs because of Valjean’s having hidden his funds in the vicinity. Valjean simply, mercifully, assists Cosette with the water bucket and accompanies her through the dark forest, yet once they are among others, his actions on her behalf become markedly monetary. He covers her loss of Madame Thénardier’s coin; purchases her time so she can play; buys an expensive doll for her; and slips a gold Louis in her shoe during the night. His most significant purchase however is of Cosette herself. In essence, Valjean buys her from the Thénardiers rather than claiming her on the authority of Fantine’s note. Though he has worked hard to undo his identity as a thief, and has become, at least regarding possessions and monetary concerns, an honest man, his purchase of Cosette, indicates that the ‘repatterning’ of his life must address the issue of economically based relationships if he is to internalize the conviction that he must love his neighbor. It is significant that Valjean possesses Fantine’s note, which authorizes him to take Cosette and signifies that he has a relationship, however tenuous, with her mother Fantine, and yet chooses to purchase the child. It indicates that as he moves into this new phase of his life he is still more comfortable with distant, impersonal relationships, because to reveal his relationship with Fantine would mean exposing himself to this stranger, putting him in a vulnerable position. Valjean seems to believe that as long as he guards his anonymity, and possesses large sums of money, he can retain a position of power over others. This issue of economics, encompassing the elements of possessions, theft, honesty, and power, especially as it is expressed in the question of who possesses whom, ultimately becomes the central issue to be resolved in Valjean’s life.

Hugo suggests, by his use of location in the narrative, the nature of Valjean’s changing relationships as his transformation continues to unfold in Paris. By placing him
in an isolated corner of the city, which could hardly be called a neighborhood, Hugo shows Valjean’s inclination to remain a stranger, a preference which he must forfeit if he is to learn to love his neighbor as himself. The Gorbeau tenement, with its “scarcely habitable” apartments which were “altogether . . . dark and dull and dreary, even melancholy and sepulchral,” by its very nature suggests that Valjean cannot remain there with the vulnerable child he has brought to the city with him (375). For the man who “had never loved anything,” life ‘repatterning’ which reflects a “dawn of love” requires a suitable environment in which love can bloom and grow (Hugo 380). The love which so naturally blossoms between Valjean and Cosette needs a place in which to be nurtured, something the dark and unnatural features of the tenement cannot provide. Vargas Llosa identifies this tenement as an “irresistible trap,” one of several places in the novel “to which the ‘dark vein of destiny’ irresistibly draws the main characters . . . intense locations, stalked by destruction and death . . . traps [which] are magnets of fate” (43).
The text says that “this neighborhood . . . had something fearful about it. One felt presentiments of snares in this obscurity” which “at night . . . was ominous of evil” (Hugo 378), marking it as an unlikely place for getting to know one’s neighbors, and an unsuitable environment for the growth of love. Though Valjean chooses the loneliness and obscurity of this place for safety’s sake, thinking that he can live hidden in this “fore-doomed, and . . . horrible” place (377), he is soon found out.

Javert’s dangerous discovery of Valjean’s residence comprises one of the episodes in which Hugo demonstrates the transformation of Valjean’s ignominious conviction into a means, through God’s grace, for sustaining his conversion. Though the threat of being taken by Javert prompts Valjean to flee with Cosette, God’s grace is
evident as he guides them through the darkness of the Paris night. The narrative indicates that “Jean Valjean knew, no more than Cosette, where he was going. He trusted in God, as she trusted in him. It seemed to him that he also held someone greater than himself by the hand; he believed he felt a being leading him, invisible” (Hugo 390). According to Beck, Kathleen Norris, a contemporary Christian contemplative writer, characterizes grace as God’s presence in our circumstances (18). Indeed, Norris’s claim that “even when we try to run away from our troubles . . . God will find us and bless us, even when we feel most alone, unsure if we’ll survive the night” (Norris 151), is particularly fitting for considering God’s grace in Valjean’s flight from Javert. Hugo unmistakably portrays Valjean as being found and blessed by God in the midst of his circumstances, the narrative states that

. . . two houses of God had received him in succession at the two critical moments of his life, the first when every door was closed and human society repelled him; the second, when human society again howled upon his track, and the galleys once more gaped for him; and that, had it not been for the first, he should have fallen back into crime, and had it not been for the second, into punishment. (Hugo 499)

Hugo uses Valjean’s status as a convict to redirect the convert, hounding him from the dark isolation of the tenement, and guiding him to the convent where the relationship between himself and Cosette can develop in an environment more conducive to the growth of love.

Hugo’s portrayal of Valjean’s time in the convent suggests that he believes God’s love is comprehended through one’s relationship with others, expressed back into the community through acts of service, and finally offered back to God in prayer and gratitude. Through his choice of a convent as the place for Valjean to learn how to love, Hugo asserts that love, because it is a gift of God, is not a commodity to be bought or
sold, but something that grows when freely given and received. Valjean learns through the nuns that love, especially sacrificial love, is a quality gained through relationship. The transformation of Valjean’s relationships begins in earnest in the convent garden because it is ideally suited to facilitate his work of life ‘repatterning,’ to use Loder’s term, in which he begins to internalize the new ‘axiom’ “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19.18). The convent is also ideally suited to address Valjean’s inclination to maintain distance in his relationships, and to use his money to retain a position of power. Though Valjean tries to buy his way into the convent, initially approaching Fauchelevent with money, he is sheltered there only because of an existing relationship, one which would not have existed had Valjean been able to pay someone else to rescue Fauchelevent in the first place. This is an important turn for Valjean, showing him the strength of relationships based on service to others rather than economics. He finds in the convent that his money has no power or influence, that his relationships must be founded on another source.

In keeping with the Christian context in which Valjean’s transformation is portrayed in the narrative, Hugo uses the environs of the convent garden to portray the nature of love, redirecting Valjean towards works of service. Just as in the ‘repatterning’ of Valjean’s life in Montreuil sur Mer, his life in the convent “takes on the creative, ‘letting-flourish’ nature of being” itself (Loder 93), only in the convent, this “letting flourish” is expressed in the establishment of relationships, specifically those with Cosette and Father Fauchelevent. Though the text does not discuss the relationship between Valjean and Fauchelevent, they live as brothers (Hugo 492) for five years (762), dwelling together in the tiny shack (494) and working daily side by side in the garden.
Grossman notes that “given their seclusion, gardens are the primary loci of love” in the narrative (304). This is evident in Valjean’s experience in the convent garden, as he not only grows in love toward Cosette there, and learns to love God, but also as he contributes to Fauchelevent’s flourishing through daily companionship, sharing in the work, and providing gifts of ready tobacco, which make Fauchelevent happy (493, 494). The text indicates that the two men divide the work between them (492), that “Valjean worked every day in the garden, and was very useful there” for he “found it quite in his way to be a gardener” (495). The convent garden thus becomes another recipient of the “letting flourish” (Loder 93) nature of the transformational activity going on in Valjean’s life, a beneficiary of his growing love. Valjean internalizes the command of Jesus to love his neighbor, as he assists Fauchelevent in serving the nuns of the convent. The narrator’s assessment of Valjean’s secluded life in the Petit Picpus acknowledges God’s part in the convent’s good influence on him, saying, “God has his own ways. The convent contributed, like Cosette, to confirm and complete, in Jean Valjean, the work of the bishop” (Hugo 495). His “pride vanished,” for “he reverted, again and again, to himself; he felt his own pitiful unworthiness and often wept” (498). Working in the garden, sharing the close confines of a tiny home with Fauchelevent; contemplating the “meek and simple” (499) nuns; and watching Cosette blossom into a happy child (495); “led him back towards the holy injunctions of the bishop; Cosette through love, [and] the convent through humility” (498). Valjean thought much about the “inmates of the galleys” and compared them to the cloistered nuns before him. The text says he “thoroughly comprehended the expiation of the first; personal expiation, expiation for oneself. But, he did not understand that of the others, of these blameless, spotless creatures . . . the
expiation for others.” Grossman writes that “the nuns resemble Fantine in their sublime self-denial; they deepen the mystery by their innocence and chastity” (Les Misérables 39). Valjean considers their sacrifice “the sublime summit of self-denial, the loftiest possible height of virtue” (Hugo 497). Thus, in the cloister, humility is added to Valjean’s generosity, and love becomes entwined with gratitude, which grow together in his soul. In time, this God given haven has its effect upon Valjean; the text says, “his whole heart melted in gratitude, and he loved more and more” (Hugo 499). Finally, in recognition of the sacrificial nature of love, Valjean denies his own desires, and leaves the convent for Cosette’s sake, for she needs a garden of her own in which to flourish. Once again, in this sacrificial act of love, Valjean’s original conviction, which would keep him in the cloister to ensure the preservation of his safety, is overshadowed by the Christian conviction to love others as he has been loved.

Though Hugo chooses the seclusion of a convent for Valjean to learn love, he ultimately suggests that, in order to truly flourish, Christian love needs a wider sphere. Though Valjean and Cosette live in isolation in the Rue Plumet, Valjean once again begins practicing love of neighbor in the wider world and teaching Cosette to do the same. He takes Cosette to church where they mingle with the poor and unfortunate (763), following the example of Bishop Bienvenu. The confined environment of the Petite Picpus limited the scope of Jean Valjean’s relationships there. Though there is a place in Christian faith for the inwardness of environments such as the convent, it seems limited to a special calling, for the gospel calls the disciples of Jesus out into the world, to suffer with those who suffer, and to provide for their needs. Hugo’s concerns for the wider world, which are often explicitly expressed in narrative asides and in the political aspects
of the novel, are incorporated into Valjean’s life as he continues the ‘repatterning’ activity of loving his neighbor as himself in this wider and far more risky setting. Unlike his practice as Father Madeleine of breaking into homes to leave money for the poor occupants when they are absent, reflecting his fear of being known for who he is, Valjean now begins combining love with his generosity, reflecting by his actions whose he is. Rather than avoiding all contact with others, he is now “fond of taking Cosette to visit the needy and the sick” (763), deepening with humility his practice of giving alms by mingling with the poor. These changes suggest Valjean’s deepening understanding of the gospel, and his greater willingness to follow it, in spite of the danger of exposing himself.

In this setting, God’s blessing seems complete, having learned to love, Valjean finds that he is loved in return. The text states that

Jean Valjean was happy. When Cosette went out with him, she leaned upon his arm, proud, happy, in the fullness of her heart. Jean Valjean, at all these marks of tenderness so exclusive and so fully satisfied with him alone, felt his thought melt into delight. The poor man shuddered, overflowed with an angelic joy; he declared in his transport that this would last through life; he said to himself that he really had not suffered enough to deserve such radiant happiness, and he thanked God, in the depths of his soul, for having permitted that he, a miserable man, should be so loved by this innocent being. (Hugo 771)

Though this passage shows Valjean’s gratitude to God and his recognition that Cosette is a gift to him, it also shows the beginnings of a new difficulty, in his growing satisfaction with Cosette’s love for him, for in time his love for Cosette replaces his desire to draw near to God.

Hugo suggests Valjean’s possessiveness of Cosette in the setting of the Rue Plumet itself. Though he leaves the convent for Cosette’s sake and finds a home with a garden, it is a walled garden, the “grated gate” of which “always remained closed,” and “padlocked.” Though he enjoyed his work in the convent garden, and caused it to
flourish, he leaves Cosette’s garden “uncultivated.” Hugo describes it as a “very strange and very pleasant” place (764), yet gone back to nature, a garden which “was no longer a garden” but “a colossal bush . . . impenetrable as a forest” (765), a place in which Valjean keeps Cosette in seclusion. Though Valjean lives out, through works of charity, the conviction to love his neighbor as himself, this neglected riot of a garden suggests that his love for Cosette is becoming overgrown and undisciplined. Though he takes her to church, and to visit the sick and needy, he does not seek her ‘flourishing’ by cultivating relationships which could bring her into a sphere of acceptable suitors, rather, they have no friends, and, the text says: “No stranger came into the house in the Rue Plamet” (763). Valjean’s world revolves around Cosette, who “sufficed for his happiness,” and “being near him, seemed to belong to him” (Hugo 997). She becomes his “light,” “home,” “family,” “country,” and “paradise” (1000). Cosette’s love becomes the air he breathes; “loved by Cosette, he was content!” Over time, Valjean’s love for Cosette eclipses his love of God; “had God said to him ‘Do you desire heaven?’ he would have answered: ‘I should be the loser’” (Hugo 773).

Hugo demonstrates through the setting of the house on the Rue de l’Homme Arné, to which Valjean flees with Cosette for safety, the poverty of Valjean’s frantic possessiveness of Cosette. Even the name of the street, ‘the armed man’ suggests his posture toward anyone who might approach, though approach is unlikely in this street of “stagnant oblivion” (996). Significantly, this residence has no garden for the cultivation of nature, or of love; Valjean symbolically removes the possibility of love growing between Cosette and another. It comes as no surprise then that the blow he receives from Cosette’s blotter reveals the presence of hatred in Valjean’s soul. The text says that
Valjean, “the regenerated man, the man who had labored so much upon his own soul, the man who had made so many efforts to resolve all life, all misery, and all misfortune into love,” was still capable of intense hatred (Hugo 1001). This final blow challenges Valjean to confront his pride, and possessiveness, and to learn the meaning of sacrificial love through sacrificing his own happiness for Cosette.

Though Hugo deals with the politics of social injustice in much of *Les Misérables*, he demonstrates through the narrative of Valjean’s life, that human transformation is a spiritual pursuit; yet he does not keep the two spheres entirely separate, for Valjean suffers much injustice in his life. However, even in those instances when the narrative of Valjean’s life coincides with Hugo’s treatment of political and social issues in the text, as in his appearance at the barricade, Hugo uses Valjean’s presence to shine a light on spiritual realities of the situation that might otherwise be overlooked. Porter notes that “Hugo does not reproduce the inner debate that leads Valjean at last to the barricade to watch over Marius and eventually to save his life.”

“Hugo implies,” says Porter, that “Conscience has its mysteries” (134). Valjean’s arrival at the barricade within an hour of his finding intense hatred in the depths of his soul, however, is no accident, nor is it mysterious, though his actions after his arrival there seem so. Just as Hugo uses the narrative of Valjean’s life to demonstrate God’s grace in the unfolding of human transformation, and what it looks like in the life of an individual, he uses the setting of the barricade, in part, to demonstrate the result of hatred. Hugo insists early in the novel, through the life of Bishop Bienvenu, that goodness in the text is measured by the gospel, and he consistently uses increasingly difficult biblical and gospel imperatives to challenge Valjean into more complete conformity with God’s will. Having
learned honesty, generosity, and to love his neighbor as himself, Valjean is challenged by Cosette’s love for Marius to internalize Jesus’ own challenge of the status quo: “You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5.43-44), or, as Luke records it: “I say to you . . . love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6.27-28). The conflict and violence which erupt at the barricade graphically portray what the fomentation of anger and the determination of hatred produce. Though the text is clear that Valjean is filled with hatred for Marius, and is silent about Valjean’s motive for going to the barricade, his behavior at the barricade demonstrates what loving one’s enemy looks like. Grossman notes that Valjean’s “actions . . . speak for themselves,” that Valjean “does not enter the barricade violently” rather he “does everything in his power to protect revolutionaries and government soldiers alike” (Les Misérables 41). She says that “in treating both total strangers and adversaries as if they were ‘brothers,’ he continues to triumph over the . . . the evil that lurks within” (42). Valjean’s presence at the barricade, like his presence in the forest with Cosette, and in the courtroom at Champmathieu’s trial, brings God’s saving grace into the situation. Hugo associates Valjean’s actions with those of God, saying that “thanks to him, everywhere present in the carnage like a providence, those who fell were taken up, carried into the basement-room, and their wounds dressed” (1083). His conviction that he must love his enemy prompts his rescue of Javert, transforming him in Javert’s eyes. Javert can no longer see Valjean as simply a convict. Valjean becomes “venerable” in that moment, and Javert is forced to admit to himself “the sublimity of this wretch” (1140), who uses the tools of hatred and war to thwart
them, and, as Combeferre says, “does kindness by musket shots” (1045). Valjean experiences as much inner conflict over his love for Cosette and his hatred for Marius, as the battle between the opposing forces at the barricade, yet his actions there give positive evidence of whose he is, though they mystify everyone there about who he is (1043-1044).

Just as Hugo uses the barricade to demonstrate what hatred looks like in society, and to represent the conflict raging within Valjean himself, he uses Valjean’s harrowing journey through the sewer of Paris to graphically demonstrate what hatred looks like in a person’s soul. Grossman characterizes Valjean’s journey through the sewer as “his inner struggle between duty and desire” (Les Misérables 42). According to Grossman, “to negotiate his own twisted feelings, he must rely on conscience, that ‘compass of the Unknown’ that enables one to see in moral darkness.” She concludes that “Valjean’s physical trial in the sewer thus corresponds to his inner, ethical ordeal.” Though his determination to follow the gospel takes Valjean into the sewer to save Marius’ life, he is powerfully confronted there by the reality of his hatred, made tangible in the muck and mire through which he carries his burden.

Hugo suggests through Valjean’s experience in the barricade and in the sewer with Marius that loving one’s enemy requires a commitment of active involvement. When Valjean is confronted with the necessity of following the path of faith defined by this new and more difficult biblical imperative to love his enemy, Valjean’s feelings revolt, yet he cooperates with God’s will in the barricade, and in the sewer. What becomes clear through these ordeals is Valjean’s reliance upon already internalized knowledge about loving relationships gained in previous steps of his ongoing
transformation. He knows, for instance, through the Champmathieu affair, that loving his
neighbor demands his decisive action to insure his neighbor’s wellbeing, and that
allowing matters to take their course through inaction is no different from actively
caus[ing] his neighbor’s hurt. Thus, he rescues Javert from the insurgents, and actively
seeks to rescue Marius from the barricade. However, since Valjean still feels an intense
hatred for Marius, even after going to extraordinary lengths to save him from the
barricade, loving him also has to encompass more than keeping him from harm. Valjean
knows, from his contemplation of the self-sacrificing lives of the nuns in the Petit Picpus,
that love requires a personal investment in actively seeking another’s good. Put in terms
of transformational theory, after rescuing Marius, Valjean ‘repatterns’ his life to reflect
“the creative, ‘letting-flourish’ nature of being-itself” in his relationship to Marius (Loder 93).
Valjean’s new conviction that he must love his enemy drives him to do all he can to
assist Marius’ physical recovery from the ordeal of the barricade, and, beyond that, to
bring about Marius’ marriage to Cosette. Though he remains quiet and in the background,
“with a vague and poignant smile” (Hugo 1158), “Jean Valjean d[oes] all, smothe[s] all,
conciliate[s] all, ma[kes] all easy. He hastene[s] toward Cosette’s happiness with as much
eagerness, and apparently as much joy, as Cosette herself” (1163). His efforts to bring
about this marriage, and to secure Cosette’s place in Marius’ family, not only
demonstrate an effort on his part to love Marius, but evidence of a change in his love for
Cosette, which seeks her ‘flourishing,’ above his own happiness.

In the scenes between the wedding of Marius and Cosette, and the final scene
in which Valjean is drawn up into the realm of God, Hugo suggests that the last steps of
one’s spiritual transformation may be the most dark and difficult part of the road. When
Valjean’s conviction to love all, neighbors and enemies alike, compels him to denounce himself by revealing his original conviction to Marius, his confession seems needless, not only to Marius, but perhaps to Hugo’s reader as well. Why, when he is no longer hounded by Javert, when he is welcomed into a family, and a pardon might even be obtained, does Hugo make Valjean’s life so bleak? Why take him to the brink of the grave in grief? Even Valjean sees how his actions must look. He tells Marius, “One would say that [duty] punishes you for comprehending it” (Hugo 1205). Vargas Llosa suggests that Valjean’s “idea of duty coincides with those moralists who are convinced that the road to perfection lies in systematic self-punishment, in emulating the lives of martyrs.” He also suggests that perhaps the answer lies in Hugo’s dualism, that Valjean’s “martyrdom” in some way “represents the ancestral fight to the death between two timeless metaphysical and religious principles: good and evil, God and the Devil, heaven and hell” (69). Hugo does incorporate the spectre of destiny into Valjean’s last battle with his conscience over denouncing himself to Marius. The narrator asks, “It is true, then? The soul may be cured but not the lot. Fearful thing, an incurable destiny” (1194).

Valjean’s original conviction is here, as elsewhere, associated with destiny. According to the text, even after all the good he does for others, especially for Marius and Cosette, destiny dictates that Valjean retain his status as a convict. Though Valjean is transformed through God’s grace, his conversion does not erase his original conviction. These are plausible reasons for Hugo’s insistence that Valjean withdraw from Cosette after her marriage.

I want to suggest, however, that Hugo implants another reason for the misery of Valjean’s later days, in statements he makes earlier in the narrative about having
earned the right to keep Cosette to himself. When Valjean first perceives Marius’ interest in Cosette, he withdraws from the Luxembourg, and ceases to walk there with Cosette. He justifies himself saying:

I shall have been mild, although the world was harsh to me, and good, although it was evil; I shall have become an honest man in spite of all; I shall have repented of the wrong which I have done, and pardoned the wrongs which have been done to me and the moment that I am rewarded, . . . the moment that I have what I desire, rightfully and justly; I have paid for it, I have earned it; it will all disappear, it will all vanish, and I shall lose Cosette, and I shall lose my life, my joy, my soul, because a great booby has been pleased to come and lounge about the Luxembourg. (Hugo 779-780)

When these words appear in the narrative, not long after Valjean’s five years in the convent learning how to love, they seem overblown; it seems that Valjean exaggerates his goodness and misunderstands the nature of love. However, after all he does in the barricade and the sewer, and in making Cosette’s marriage possible, they seem to express what the reader feels for Valjean: that he deserves a break, that he has, after all, earned his place in the household. However, the idea Valjean expresses here, that happiness with Cosette is some kind of “reward” for his goodness, that he has somehow “earned” and “paid for” his happiness, suggests that he does not understand the nature of grace. James Gould in “Earning, Deserving, and the Catechism’s Understanding of Grace” states that “grace in general is—as the Catechism says—‘God’s favor towards us’” and that “this favor takes many forms” (379). A beneficent and happy existence with the people one loves may be taken as one form of such grace. Though he writes specifically about God’s “creating” and “saving” grace, the principle of the unearned nature of grace applies to its other aspects as well. Gould explains that “salvation is not an achievement of human effort” or a “reward for good works or obedience to the moral law,” that “salvation . . . has nothing to do with . . . what we do” for salvation is gift (382). In other words, grace
by its very nature is unearned. Over time, Valjean comes to understand his situation differently. When Marius tries to understand Valjean’s refusal to continue living under his assumed name as a part of the family, giving and enjoying the happiness of family life, Valjean responds with a question: “Have I the right to be happy?” (1204). The remainder of Valjean’s comments about duty to Marius suggest that he is beginning to understand the nature of grace. He no longer sees his relationship with Cosette as an entitlement, no longer considers her his possession. What he tells Marius suggests that he finally understands that the “rewards” of duty, or of living by the dictates of one’s conscience, are not those he had previously supposed, happiness in this life with the one he loves above all else. Valjean finally recognizes that his relationship with Cosette is not a reward, or something he has earned, but a gift of God’s grace to teach him love. Though Valjean’s withdrawal from Cosette seems harsh, Valjean himself understands his suffering as “a hell where you feel God at your side” (1205), indicating that even when faced with his worst fears and greatest heartaches, Valjean’s desire is to be near God.

By slowly loosening Valjean’s connection to Cosette, Hugo insists that the highest good in life, though it may be obtained through pain, is closeness to and communion with God. Gould affirms the centrality of this concept in Christian teaching, stating that “union with God is our proper and intended telos, the end that fulfills our natures as spiritual beings,” that “our supreme end and deepest fulfillment” are found in “loving communion with God” (379). Throughout the process of his transformation, Valjean is repeatedly challenged to anchor himself in God’s love and commit himself to purposes which reach beyond himself to others, and ultimately to God. By the end of the novel, Valjean successfully internalizes the “great and foremost commandment” (Matt.
“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22.37). As Les Misérables draws to a close, Hugo portrays Valjean actively removing himself from Cosette’s life, and slowly withdrawing from life in this world. Though he continues to desire Cosette’s companionship, in her absence Valjean’s heart begins to shift beyond the realm of the physical into the spiritual world.

Valjean’s purchase of a crucifix for his room, an item he did not have in the Rue Plumet, indicates his turn toward God and the spiritual realm. Throughout the text, in situations in which the crucifix appears in Valjean’s life, it symbolizes grace, not in altering Valjean’s circumstances, but in God’s presence with him in them, working to bring about his own good purposes. Though Valjean hardly notices the crucifix in the Bishop’s home, he becomes keenly aware of the symbol’s potency after his conversion. Loder speaks of the “cruciform image of Christ” as symbolizing a “combination of physical pain and the assurance of a life greater than death,” which “gave objective expression and meaning to the sense of promise and transcendence that lived within the midst of [Loder’s own] suffering” (11). This sense of connection between suffering and transcendence resonates with Hugo’s depiction of Valjean’s experience of the crucifix whenever it appears within the text. Valjean contemplates the crucifix in Fantine’s room, while praying for her as she lay dying. He recognizes in its symbolism of sacrificial love, God’s active presence in Fantine’s life, in her self-sacrifice for love of her child. Though her outward circumstances are tragic, Valjean assures her of the blessedness of the griefs she has endured for the sake of love (174), drawing a parallel in his mind between her sufferings and those of Christ. Valjean also notices the crucifix in the courtroom at Champmathieu’s trial (233). The symbolism of the crucifix once again indicates God’s
presence in that place, and his activity which is affected through Valjean’s sacrificial
denouncement of himself to rescue a wretched stranger. The significance of these
previous appearances of the crucifix in the text, suggest that Valjean’s purchase of “a
little copper crucifix,” to hang in his room and “look upon” (Hugo 1233) suggests that his
suffering turns his mind and heart toward God. In terms of Loder’s theory, Valjean
actively ‘recomposes’ his life in terms of this final ‘axiom,’ by internalizing the foremost
commandment to love God with all his heart, and soul, and mind (Matt. 22.37). He has
come full circle, back to Bishop Bienvenu’s decisive action on his behalf when he
forgives him, claims his life for good, and gives his soul to God.

Hugo affirms, through his narrative of Jean Valjean’s life, God’s involvement
in human transformation. He insists through his depiction of Valjean’s trials and
suffering, that relationship and union with God are the ultimate goals in life. Valjean’s
final conversation with Marius and Cosette reveals the changes in his heart which have
come about through this time of contemplating God’s presence and activity in his life. He
is once again filled with the humble gratitude he experienced during his stay in the
convent. Seen in the light of Loder’s transformational theory, Valjean accomplishes the
final step of transformation, interpretation and verification, during the course of this
collection, by relating all the relevant details of his story to Marius and Cosette. He
finally acknowledges the whole of his identity, not only that he is the convict Jean
Valjean, but also that he is Father Madeleine, the convert, and the man who saved both
Javert and Marius from certain death in the barricade. The confession of his full identity
to Marius and Cosette reveals Valjean’s original conviction through the filtering light of
his conversion, overlaid with new meaning and transformed by God’s grace. Like the
hostile innkeeper at the beginning of the narrative who would gladly tell Valjean who he is, a convict and an outcast, Marius, in a perfect reversal of that beginning scene, now tells Valjean whose he is, a member of his own family (Hugo 1254), not a condemned outcast but a “an angel” (1253). Valjean, however, in keeping with the humility he at last internalizes, deflects any glory from himself, directing it back to God for his goodness. Though he had thought he would die without seeing her again, he now admits that his fears discounted God’s never failing goodness to him, exclaiming to Marius, “was I not silly, I was as silly as that! But we reckon without God. God said: You think that you are going to be abandoned, dolt? No. No, it shall not come to pass like that” (1252). Even in speaking of his impending death, Valjean proclaims God’s goodness, telling Marius, “God knows better than we do what we need” (1254). Valjean extends this affirmation of God’s loving care to Cosette and Marius as well, telling Cosette, “how good your husband is, Cosette! You are much better off with him than with me” (Hugo 1256).

While his love for and delight in Cosette remains, Valjean’s possessiveness has evaporated. He admits his error in having thought of Cosette as a possession, someone he could retain forever. While he reminisces about her fleeting childhood, and the joy she has brought him, Valjean tells Marius, “I imagined that all that belonged to me. There was my folly” (1259).

In Hugo’s narrative, sanctification, or becoming like Christ, means not only following Jesus’ teaching to love, but also martyrdom, because the love Jesus taught and exemplified on the cross was sacrificial love, wholly giving of oneself for another. Valjean’s transformation is a gradual internalization of this kind of love, a slow and often painful process of learning to die to himself, for the sake of others. In his final moments,
Valjean removes the crucifix from the wall, and brings it over to the table where Marius and Cosette await him. He exclaims to them “in a loud voice, laying the crucifix on the table: ‘Behold the great martyr’” (Hugo 1256), directing their attention to the one whose command to love has directed and accompanied him through numerous heartaches and difficulties. As he thinks of all his trials, as well as the joys of his past, he turns his attention once again to Cosette’s childhood, and, though he truthfully acknowledges the Thénardier’s wickedness, he forgives them. After forgiving this final enemy, Valjean turns for a moment back to worldly concerns and chides Marius, gently, for not enjoying the financial legacy he has given them, explaining its legitimacy, and then bequeaths the Bishop’s silver candlesticks to Cosette. Turning once again to spiritual matters, Valjean finally tells Cosette about her mother, Fantine, saying, “She suffered much. And loved you much. Her measure of unhappiness was as full as yours of happiness. Such are the distributions of God. He is on high, he sees us all, and he knows what he does in the midst of his great stars” (Hugo 1259). Valjean finally comes to love God above all else, and to completely trust in his goodness, recognizing that God not only sees, and knows all circumstances, but affirming, again, that “God knows better than we do what we need” (1254). Valjean’s final admonition to his children is to “Love each other dearly always” telling them, “there is scarcely anything else in the world but that: to love one another” (1259). This affirmation of Jesus’ commandment to his disciples on the last night of his life, that they should “love one another” (John 13.34), confirms Valjean’s final sanctification. Not only is he now completely transformed into such a disciple himself, but his original conviction, which had filled him with hatred for God and for his fellow man, has also been transformed into an undying conviction that to love God, and
love each other, is all that matters. Hugo’s text affirms his own belief that such a love transcends death. His narrative of the great convict’s life ends with the affirmation that, “without a doubt, in the gloom some mighty angel was standing, with outstretched wings, awaiting the soul” (Hugo 1260), signifying that such a love awaits Valjean beyond the grave, and that what matters in the end is *whose he is*. 


