A Laugh that Hides Sadness: French Romanticism and Victor Hugo

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"*O come and love*

Thou art the soul,

I am the heart."

(2004: 409)

Romanticism (also known as Romantic era) was a cultural movement originated in Europe (starting in the 17th century with the German "*Sturm und Drang*[2]") that exalted (mostly polarized) feelings as loci of aesthetic[3] (**αίσθησις**) experience. In France, this multifocal movement (embodied in literature, visual, science and social studies) promoted spirituality over rationality, unpredictability against order, distancing itself from the previous "*Siècle des Lumières*[4]". The

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[2] It was a German philosophical and artistic phenomenon. See "Sturm und Drang" by Alan Leidner (1992), published by Bloomsbury Academic

[3] Aesthetic (**Αισθητική**) was a part of Greek philosophy that studies the notion of beauty. In 1750, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten gave the word a new usage (modern one), enlarging the studies of beauty itself to an analysis that engulfed a notion of human knowledge based on sensation. Beauty was relegated to a minor part of a spectrum that structures perceived reality on an emotional base.

[4] The Age of enlighten was a European philosophical movement that prioritized logic and rationality over sensations.

Romantic era framed a literary turnover where boundaries are blurred by juxtapositions of styles and narrative structures. During this era, societies started promoting autonomous national thrusts and reciprocal cultural independence; this momentum was noteworthy expressed by J.G. von Herder in his "*Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker*" (1773). In Herder' analysis, poetry and epos create the cultural substratum in which nations are built; poems are instruments of ethical subjectivism and nationalism. Henceforth, Romanticism moved against Weimar Classicism[5], wherein cultures were interpreted as parts of a common framework. One of the greatest interpreters of this epoch was Victor Hugo, a French dramatist and playwright (1802-1885). Knowing the philosophical magnitude of his work, I would like to introduce the reader to a romance or rare beauty: "*The man who laughs"*. It is a moving fictional work on medieval English society and its ethical fallacies. It is a tale of love, struggle and humanity. Victor Hugo was a fierce republican activist and his opera reflects clearly his thought and aversion for inequalities and injustice, thereof the book can be interpreted as a political work. The prose is complex and set on a specific historical framework, the 17th century, where poor peasants fought in a social uprising against a corrupted royalty. The tale can be read by everyone but a complete understanding needs background knowledge of European history and philosophy; readers should always be conscientious about the cultural gap between Asian and Western societies.

[5] Weimar Classicism (Weimarer Klassik), a German humanism based on the assumption that cultures are networked and share a common origin

Note for the reader:

✓ Some vocabularies and phrases of this text are not written in English (I copied verbatim part of Ancient Greek and German texts), but a translation is always present.

✓ I will analyze "The man who laughs" by Victor Hugo, 2004, Project Gutenberg (FREE ONLINE EDITION)

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS: PART I

RICTUS

"A face that no one could look upon without laughing."

(2004: 174)

The romance brings us to bay of Portland, precisely to the stormy night of January 26, 1690, where an abandoned child wanders with uneasiness on a desolate land, against an "*obstinate north wind"* (2004: 26). This lost soul is presented to the readers as barefoot, wrapped in wretched cloths, walking slowly, towards a worms eaten gibbet bearing the dead body of a hanged criminal. He is alone, consumed by hunger, fighting against a "*disastrous cold weather*" (2004: 26), looking like a haunted animal, "*a fugitive before Fate"* (2004: 26). The night was starless with an ominous opacity embracing everything. His steps echo in the silent vastness while whirls of fine snow were dancing on the frozen ground. His desperation was abyssal, a heaviness caused by the dreadful uncertainty that was growing inside him, he was a waif

lost in a wintry penumbra. The hanged cadaver was corded up to the tree, its skull was savagely smashed and it had no eyes, only two pitch black holes. Raven had feasted on its body, leaving it disfigured but its mouth was still preserving some teeth. It was a disturbing canvas; engulfed by a disquieting stillness, the infant was staring at death. Terror strangled his strength leaving him prey of the night. The motionless scene was broken by the arrival of ravens with their charcoal wings. In a blink of an eye, the skeleton disappeared under a flock of hungry phantoms, lusting for the remains of its flesh, for its last resemblances of humanity. There was something grotesquely funny in what was happening; the skeleton with its cracked swings, looked like a frenzy black puppet, in a burst of unnatural excitement. The stupor made our hero gasped for air, he was trembling, he wanted to run away. The fright was overwhelming and so he did the only thing he was still capable; a desperate flight into darkness. Fear can obliterate rationality and so he run blindly, zigzagging like a drunken man, until breath failed him. It was inside again a terra incognita with flakes of snow covering his clothes, the horizon was opaque and a feeble line of condensed breath was coming out of his mouth, he was lost again, doubtful but save. He kept journeying when, suddenly, an effete lament spelled out his loneliness, "*The cry--perhaps a first breath, perhaps a last sigh--was equally distant from the rattle which closes life and the wail with which it commences. It breathed, it was stifled, it wept, a gloomy supplication from the depths of night*" (2004: 97). The child tottered, not knowing what to do but curious, attracted by the miserable moan. The inarticulate echo bemoaned from a point beneath the snow, not far away but yet so distant for our weary traveler. There, lightly covered by snow, a dead woman laid whose "*hair was mingled with the*

snow" (2004: 98), whose arms were hugging something, a "*little body--thin, wan with cold, still alive"* (2004: 98), it was a bambina. It was a stroke of serendipity that brought to an end the boy solitude. Victor Hugo drew a magical encounter between two foundlings with "*the mother lay there, her back to the snow, her face to the night; but perhaps at the moment when the little boy stripped himself to clothe the little girl, the mother saw him from the depths of infinity"* (2004: 100). He lifted her, a little ball of tattered clothes and warmth and, in hugging her body, he timidly bestowed a kiss. The founding brought a lukewarm calm inside his body, together they started to cross the frozen valley, nourished by a renewal of hope. The apparition of homesteads and farms, almost "*a city painted in white on a black horizon*" (2004: 101) infused new energy to his exhausted legs, "*thenceforward there would no longer be night, nor winter, nor tempest*" (2004: 101). There are different kind of deserts that can beset us; some are made of stones and sand, some are made of frozen lands but the most abhorrent are built on human desolation and heartlessness. Dear readers, there is nothing worse for a wanderer who painfully seeks his brethren, to find hope of some company, only to have it taken away by the cruelty of misanthropy. He screamed, moving to and fro, knocking violently, even begging but none answered his calls. The city and its inhabitants were untouched by his distress.

"The child felt the coldness of men more terribly than the coldness of night. The coldness of men is intentional. He felt a tightening on his sinking heart which he had not known on the open plains. Now he had entered into the midst of life, and remained alone. This was the summit of misery. The

pitiless desert he had understood; the unrelenting town was too much to bear." (2004: 105)

Left alone, he miserably walked inside that forlorn city, bereft of sympathy and pity. After a mile spent wandering on those deserted streets, he saw an old wagon, a caravan where a timid light lulled a dog laying on its threshold. His aroused curiosity and the paucity of his last meal, made him venturous but it was soon hindered by the now awaken beast and its intimidating growl, berating the child impudence. The wilderness of the groan made him to step back, hushing his presence, when, suddenly, from the old van, a voice uttered "*Come in*" (2004: 107). Benumbed by fatigue, he climbed up the steps and having trusted his faith upon the stranger' voice, he entered (2004: 107). *"The child, in fact, was entering the house of Homo and Ursus. The one he had just heard growling, the other speaking"* (2004: 108). He was bewildered by the man' grumblings and strange soliloquies but hunger won his astonishment and so he accepted an offer of food twined with a goblet of water. I like the vivid description of Ursus and his domesticated wolf Homo (homo means man in Latin) whose name recalled the Hobbesian "*De cive, Epistola dedicat*oria", where men are compared to ferocious wolves[6]. Ursus is a peculiar character; a vagabond, a quaint philosopher, a poet in love with nature and a bizarre medic. A solitary man who shared his meager life with a Christianized wolf. It is thanks to the word of this traveler that we understand the shocking deformity of the infant and the blindness of the baby. Adoptive ties and parental

[6] Hobbes quoted the Latin writer Plautus, "*lupus est homo homini"* (man is a wolf to man), Asinaria, a. II, sc. IV, v. 495.

longings were created between the homeless children (Isabel Roche, Character and meaning in the novels of Victor Hugo 2007: 142) and Ursus. It was an idyllic group where aberrations and infirmities are bygone, left behind, where empathy was valued more than diversity. Ursus' love and his fatherly acceptance watered the bitterness of their existence, inside that odd caravan a warm family was born.

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS: PART II

ODI ET AMO, QUARE ID FACIAM, FORTASSE REQUIRIS?
NESCIO, SED FIERI SENTIO ET EXCRUCIOR[7]
(Catullus, Carmen 85)

"If he wept, he laughed; and whatever Gwynplaine was, whatever he wished to be, whatever he thought, the moment that he raised his head, the crowd, if crowd there was, had before them one impersonation: an overwhelming burst of laughter."
(2004: 175)

Fifteen years have been elapsed since the nighty encounter and many things time has changed: the child has become an adult whose qualities of mind and soul would have pleased the Latin Cicero and the Greek Socrates.

[7] I love and I hate but I cannot tell you why because I do not know. I feel it and it is tearing me apart.

The motherless baby is now a young girl blessed by supernal beauty, a delicate flower of rare fragility their curses were antithetical to their own virtues; a pensive soul concealed by a joshing mask, a girl who could perceive the goodness of men was unable to see the light of the sun. Together with Homo and Ursus they travel all around Great Britain, sojourning in villages and townships, taking part in feasts, carrying out representations, fascinating crowds with Gwynplaine's disfigurement. "*He was avoided by folks in mourning, because they were compelled to laugh when they saw him, without regard to their decent gravity*" (2004: 174), "*His face laughed; his thoughts did not*" (2004: 175). People have always had a crack at deformities or anomalies, ugliness can be derided and for many, if not personal, it is funny. Betwixt banquets and carousals, Ursus the mountebank, entertained spectators and passersby with his wisecracks and sagacity, while Gwynplaine and Dea performed melodramatic plays on their traveling theater. Their nomadic life was not perfect but it was serene, and serenity is what tormented souls seek.

People looked at him as a horrific creation of art rather than a work of nature (2004: 176) and wonder about Dea' brilliant eyes, "*they were mysterious torches lighting only the outside. They gave light but possessed it not*" (2004: 177). Their bodies banned them from a normal life but Gwynplaine and Dea were in love; he was devoted to her affection and she admired his gallantry. It is important to note that all fictional characters of Victor Hugo love passionately but chastely, there is only a spiritual communion and never a carnal one. They endow with a full measure of heart and soul but it is a loved consumed almost in mid-air, where the emotional transport ended with timid kisses or whispered words. Descriptions show sometimes literary nerviness but feelings are always

exquisitely described, there aren't uncouth or rough-hewn sentimental constructions. The tension can be unfathomable because it is created by a longing for an impossible unchaste corporality. It was a "*chimerical and virginal content",* an *"innocent union of souls", a" celibacy taken for marriage*" (2004: 188). Unlike Honore de Balzac, who made an extensive use of realistic details to describe the lives of his characters (see his unfinished *Comédie Humaine, 1851*), Victor Hugo preferred describing them through their emotions, coloring them with their passions (Emile Zola criticized him for that). In reading "*The man who laughs*", we pour hope in an unrealistic love between Gwynplaine and Dea, an affection made great by its dramatic destiny. We see in Hugo' work a resemblance of Greek tragedies, where heroes are raised by their suffering; happiness cannot bring greatness. They were madly in love, they live in an illusion, a twofold blindness (2004: 188). For Dea, to be ugly meant only to do wrong, therefore Gwynplaine was handsome (2004: 188), for her "*to see is a thing which conceals the true*" (2004: 188). The fissure happened one windy day, with the appearance of the spoiled duchess Josiana, tired of the court routine and the coming of a royal wapentake, intoxicated by power. The duchess was an illegitimate daughter of the King of England and she was beautiful, like an aurora (2004: 230). I like the description made by Victor Hugo of her voluptuous corporality, of her powerful appeal.

"*To be "the flesh" and to be woman are two different things. Where a woman is vulnerable, on the side of pity, for instance, which so readily turns to love, Josiana was not. Not that she was unfeeling. The ancient comparison of flesh to marble is absolutely false. The beauty of flesh consists in not being marble: its beauty is to palpitate, to tremble, to blush, to bleed, to have*

firmness without hardness, to be white without being cold, to have its sensations and its infirmities; its beauty is to be life, and marble is death." (2004: 132)

She went to the park where Gwynplaine was acting, out of boringness, and, impressed by the show, she remained. They felt immediately attracted to each other; she liked the esthetical rapture of his body, he noticed her unbounded femininity.

"*A warm and living skin, under which one felt the circulation of passionate blood; an outline with the precision of marble and the undulation of the wave; hair of the colour of the reflection from a furnace; a gallantry of adornment producing in herself and in others a tremor of voluptuousness, temptation seasoned by the glimpse of perdition, a promise to the senses and a menace to the mind; a double anxiety, the one desire, the other fear*." (2004: 234)

She was like Μέδουσα (Medusa) with the power to petrify every single onlooker who stares at her eyes and he was no Περσεύς[8] (Perseus). It was heaven against hearth, spirituality against corporality. When the day was over, she also left the scene and, in a week time, the memory of this "*angel of darkness*" (2004: 234), who almost saturated his heart, fell into oblivion. We should not be impressed by a fire ignited by love for hideosity (2004: 245); the contrast of his well-formed body and the disequilibrium of his face fascinated the duchess. It was a spark created by tedium, a desire for someone who was different. It was not love, people like the duchess seldom feel it; they call love

[8] Perseus was a mythological Greek hero who won Medusa in a fight.

what we call lust. Weeks passed by, when suddenly a wapentake came to summon Gwynplaine. It was an official call and his friends could do nothing against it, because "*to insult the king is to put oneself in the same danger as a girl rashly paring the nails of a lion* "(2004: 219). It is known that in Medieval time, when facing royalty, poor men had only silence as a friend (2004: 219) and so, abiding the law, Ursus and Dea did not utter a word when he was taken away.

"*Gwynplaine looked at Dea. She was in her dream. She was still smiling. He put the ends of his fingers to his lips, and sent her an unutterable kiss*." (2004: 251)

He was ushered to a torture chamber in London, to meet a condemned doctor called Hardquanonne, half alive and half dead. In that nightmarish place with blood encrusted walls, the man recognized him as the lord Fermain Clancharlie, a noble abducted and disfigured 23 years before. In looking at Gwynplaine, "*he burst into a horrible laugh" (2004: 271)*, recognizing and deriding the insanity of his work. The revelation confounded our hero leaving him speechless; he was now a peer of England. The following days, he was called to present himself to the house of Lords but, when he unflinching condemned royalty for its violations over downtrodden people, he was laughed. Demoralized and humiliated by his brethren who maliciously grinned at his clownish figure, he abruptly renounced his title. After having left his peerage, he went searching his old truthful family, the only place where his heart was secured with love. He did not find them immediately, he spotted them only later on a boat leaving England. He saw Dea on the deck, looking at the sky. In hugging her, he confessed his origin and his spiritual misery but she died

almost immediately, consumed by grief, abandoning life in his warm embrace. He was on his knees and "*she lay in his arms, lifeless, like a piece of linen; her hands were hanging down helplessly*" (2004: 413). Ursus tried to help but everything was superfluous. People said that he was still holding the girl when he threw himself into the deepness of the ocean; he renounced his life in her name. There was no star visible that night (2004: 416) and the boundless silence was broken only by a wolf owling at the water and the sobbing of an old man.

ET NOX FACTA EST

(And There Was Night[9])

"Dea assisted Gwynplaine in his performances. If human misery could be summed up, it might have been summed up in Gwynplaine and Dea. Each seemed born in a compartment of the sepulchre; Gwynplaine in the horrible, Dea in the darkness. Their existences were shadowed by two different kinds of darkness, taken from the two formidable sides of night. Dea had that shadow in her, Gwynplaine had it on him. There was a phantom in Dea, a spectre in Gwynplaine. Dea was sunk in the mournful, Gwynplaine in something worse."

(2004: 178)

"L'Homme qui rit" is one of the most grotesque and iconic works of French dramatist Victor Hugo. It is a nocturnal work, a philosophical reflection

[9] Title of a poem written by Victor Hugo, from the collection "*La Légende des Siècles*", 1859.

on (English) aristocracy, depicted as amoral and depraved. A society that found in physical abnormalities, something to laugh of, and in parading wrecked people, profitable entertainment. A pervasive schadenfreude strongly criticized for its obnoxity and malice. The romance is focused on the struggle of English villagers and peasants against the economic and political vexations of their landlords, during the 17th century. The title "*The man who laughs*" is an echo of the disfigured face of the main protagonist, Gwynplaine, cursed into a perennial grin. His misfortune generates abashment and his repugnance is a mask that cannot be taken away. Gwynplaine is a product of the loathsome art of "*comprachicos*" ("Those who buy children", a neologism invented by Victor Hugo), a fictive group of Spaniards, specialized in mutilating infants and forcing them to work as freaks or jesters. Deformed minstrels were commonly employed in the "Middle Ages", by aristocratic households or circuses, for their ridiculousness. Noteworthy, the Proto-Germanic etymon of the English word "fool", means spoiled, rotten or ugly. In English literature, he is often symbolic of secretive wisdom and enlightenment, a trait that makes him a potential advisor or plotter. Free from illusions, he can uncloak the transience nature of power and reveal it, while laughing at the pettiness of courtesan hypocrisies. He is the only character that uses honesty as a touchstone for people' actions. His physical ugliness conceals his inner cleanliness, making him a victim of his own body, a sympathetic soul entrapped in a carnal prison. Precious element inside the king' court is, nevertheless, victim of the whimsical cruelty of his masters. Nowadays, we can still reflect with disbelief, upon the words uttered by the King Lear' buffoon:

"They'll have me whipped for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipped for lying, and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o' thing than a fool. And yet I would not be thee, nuncle. Thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' th' middle. Here comes one o' the parings." (William Shakespeare, King Lear, original edition, act 1, scene 4, pg. 11)

There is no bigger despair than being laughed of our own misery, than being de-humanized into a dwarfed funny thing. There is nothing ironic when humiliation encroaches life, when people make jokes out someone's hell, because "*Moral wounds have this peculiarity - they may be hidden, but they never close; always painful, always ready to bleed when touched, they remain fresh and open in the heart*" (Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, chapter 86: 357). As human beings, we share an emotional kinship, a subtle affinity, and so to free ourselves from despair, we can "*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break*" (William Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act 4, scene 3, page 9). Words can heal, becoming *pars destruens* of inquietude and in eliminating bitterness, they are *pars construens* of a new moral catharsis. We should always remember Philip K. Dick, who found in logos a hidden thaumaturgy, a wonderworking that can heal or destroy us (Valis, 1981) and Fyodor Dostoevsky who saw in sarcasm and auto-irony a medicine of people "*whose souls have been coarsely and impudently invaded*" by the bitterness of life ("Notes from Underground", 1864: 118).

HOMO SACER

"One might almost have said that Gwynplaine was that dark, dead mask of ancient comedy adjusted to the body of a living man. That infernal head of implacable hilarity he supported on his neck. What a weight for the shoulders of a man--an everlasting laugh!"

(2004: 175)

The fool is an archetypal figure that represents on his own flesh, on his own persona, the degradation of humanity, whose suffering can be expressed by "*the inaudible language of the heart*" (from a speech of Martin Luther King JR, December 11, 1964) and those "*feelings cause us pain because they remain*" (Haruki Murakami, 1992: 40). He is a *homo sacer*, an *ausnahmezustand* (Giorgio Agamben, 2005: 30). The expression "*homo sacer*" refers to a juridical category in Roman law, where an individual unworthy of life could be killed by anyone (without consequences) but who could not be sacrificed due to his *animus malus*. His status is a reminiscence of the Biblical Cain (Genesis 4, 1-15), the cursed son of Abraham, guilty of fratricide, loathed by God and his brethren. This specific *elementum* of the Roman *iura* (ius-iura, law-laws) can be understood through a bio-politic prospective (Rudolf Kjellén, 1920), where guiltiness ends social existence (*civitas* or citizenship) and in tearing it off, changes the individual (cives) into "*naked life*" (Agamben, 1995: 13), making him an **ἄπολι** (apolidi/stateless)

A legal phenomenon that the Italian thinker elevated to theoretical concept and **εὑρίσκω** (heuristic) medium, a gnosis to interpreter (and denounce) society. The particularity of this juridical figure is given by its role as a

cornerstone between logos and life (Agamben, 1995: 11). The concept is also a reminiscence of the Greek notion of **νόμος** (nomos/law, originated from the verb **νέμω**/nemein, to appropriate or to possess). Simon Weil in her "*L'Enracinement*" (1949, Paris), wrote that if we fathom the (original) legal definition of rights, we could see that the right to ownership was based on the freedom to control and ab(use) subject property, as an *accepted animus contrahendi*. Unfortunately, as Well noted, human beings were also considered goods. It is important to remember that inside Greek philosophy there is an important semantic distinction between "naked" life, based on natural laws (**ζωή**, zoe) and "social" life (bios) created upon a cultural substratum (praxis). Agamben underlines this difference as a fundamental guidepost that leads us to understand the political state of exception of a life deprived of its politicity. In his outstanding work, he uses as *experimentum crucis*, the German concentration camps, where inmates were placed in a jurisdictional penumbra, spoiled of human rights (thus devolved them into zoe or homines sacri), a conditio inhumana. For Aristoteles ("Politics", book 7, section 1326b or Nichomachean Ethics, book 1, section 1095 b, lines 15 to 20), men are animals (**ζῆν**) that seek a happiness (**εὐδαιμονίαν**) in life (**εὖ ζῆν**, eu zen) though a **πολιτικός** (political) apparatus. Aristoteles theorized that (moral) goodness in life is synonymic of happiness, "**τὴν γὰρ εὐδαιμονίαν καὶ οἱ πολλοὶ καὶ οἱ χαρίεντες λέγουσιν**", henceforth unhappiness was meant as a possible product of a mischievous or hideous nature. The moral man (Aristoteles quotes Hesiod) can "**αὐτὸς πάντα νοήσῃ**" (Nichomacean Ethics, book 1, section1095 b, lines 13 to 14) advises himself while the ignorant/deluded will not pay attention even to someone else knowledge "**ὃς δέ κε μήτ᾽ αὐτὸς νοέῃ μήτ᾽ ἄλλου ἀκούων ἐν θυμῷ βάλληται, ὁ**

δ' αὖτ' ἀχρήϊος ἀνήρ". Originally μανία (folly) is absent in Greek philosophy, being it based on a materialistic theoretical paradigm where the idea of a psyche (soul) disjointed with the body did not exist yet. The Italian writer Roberto Calasso highlighted in his "Literature and the Gods" (1999) that only later, in the 5th century, the Orphic-Pythagorean school (and Plato) came to represent the notion of soul as independent element, and not as an eidolon (image) of the body. In "Iliad", when Achilles met the shadow of his beloved friend Patroclus (who was killed by Hector) in a dream (Homer, Iliad, book 23, lines 62 to 64), his phantasmal form is specula of his lost soma (body). Inside the Odyssey (Odyssey IV book, line 787), we witness the same structure, with the apparition of Athena in Penelope' dreams; another worthy example can be found inside the nineteenth book of Odyssey (line 535). As Maximillian Pohlenz underlined in "Die griechische Tragödie" (1961: 16), in Homer, psyche was not coincidental with the "ego", thus makes a conceptualization of madness (even in its clinical form) impossible. Folly was interpreted only as a temporary change of mental energy, in the same way, there is no intelligence but collection of thoughts. Hellenistic philosophy called θυμός (thymos/spiritedness) the core of all human volitions and pathos. Inside it ἔρως (eros/desire) and ἄτη (até/rage) work against each other. Plato in "Cratylus" wrote "τῆς θυσεως καί ζεσεως τῆς ψυχῆς" (Pl. Cra. 419e), where desire/love and rage were considered parts (affections) of the body. Shakespeare recalled the latter in his tragedy Julius Cesar as an invocation of passionate violence (Julius Cesar, Act 3, scene 1, page 13), "*With Ate by his side come hot from hell*". Madness was considered to be caused by lack of equilibrium, often a product of divine intervention. The fool, like any homo sacer is an outlaw and "*Since his biological life is at stake*",

he (cursive mine) "*experiences the law in its most abstract, formal, excluding, and death-carrying capacity*" (Nikolopoulou 2000; 124-125). An urphänomen (archetypal phenomenon) in which sacrifice and profanation constitute the principal poles on a historical discourse that sees deranged individuals as liminal (corrupted) forms of humanity.

The Middle Ages interpreted madness within the classic contraposition of good and evil, as intrinsic element of human nature, hereby the fool (even if derided) was not alienated but integrated within the social spectrum. His bizarre figure was seldom considered to be repository of arcane powers. Desiderius Erasmus (of Rotterdam) in 1509, wrote a well-known elegy to madness, "*The Praise of Folly*" (*Stultitiae Laus*), a satirical work. In this encomium, to a world suffering of ephemerality, the Dutch philosopher oppose the grandiosity of Madness who bring relief to our manifold sorrow, *"sprinkling in a bit of pleasure here and there, that I bring mankind some relief from their accumulated woes"* (Erasmus, Desiderius, and Hans Holbein. In Praise of Folly. London: Reeves & Turner, 1876: 31). It also let us know that "*none is happier than that class of men whom we commonly call fools, idiots, morons, and simpletons*" (1876: 35). Madness inverts social stances and make light of our hypocrisies, opening the door to a vernacular subversive judgment. In this Medieval "*festa stultorum*", the fool can preach us "*with his sane conversation*" (Anatole France, 1908: 10). Ernesto Grassi (1988: 50), saw in Erasmus the strength of a philological approach to madness, a rigorous semiotic logic that use metaphors to convey the paradoxes of our existence, an analogical dimension that alludes symbolically to the last and ultimate truths. The "elegy" is structured on the classic poetical locus of "*velamen*", a semantic shroud that

covers deeper philosophical meanings. The mundane world is transformed into one whose essence is unmasked by the carnivalesque speeches of madmen and buffoons.

Hitherto, life comes to be represented through a thespian analogy where folly with its anagogic speeches uncovers the lies we live by. It is a great epistemological turnover of infima and summa, where jesters "*have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends*" (Shakespeare, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*", Act V, scene I, line I), their aberrant words were considered to be deceiving but not erroneous. Medieval men were sympathetic to folly, they included it within the spectrum of social acceptability.

Only later, with Michel de Montaigne and Rene Descartes, the allegoric interrogation of insanity was undermined by a more rational (medical) approach. For the first time, ailment was considered an infectious disease, a social burden. In 1967, inside "*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*" (originally published in 1961 with the French title "*Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*"), Michel Foucault analyzed mental aberration and derangement through discourse analysis. In his peculiar opera, the deranged is both the passionate man, the depraved and the mentally ill, the first affected by amorality and the latter by an afflicted mind.

"The constitution of madness as a mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords the evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of

reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence." (Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 1967: 10)

Gwynplaine is an afflicted soul, an outcast, a hero whose face reproduces his inner ailment. The pathos of his figure is immense; he incarnates the suffering of the oppressed, an agonized soul petrified into a mocking hilariousness.

He is loved dearly by his friend Dea (her name means goodness in Latin), an innocent girl and a diaphone creature with *eyes full of light, yet blind*, who can see true beauty through her soul. Victor Hugo majestically portrayed the delicacy of her persona, a nymph with a compassionate spirit, like the Greek deity Akeso (Ἀκεσώ)[10].

"A captive of shadow, she lighted up the dull place she inhabited. From the depth of her incurable darkness, from behind the black wall called blindness, she flung her rays. She saw not the sun without, but her soul was perceptible from within." (2004: 177)

There is a subtle affinity between them (similar to the ones in "*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*"/"Elective affinities" or "Kindred by Choice", by German author Goethe), both are cursed by abnormalities made of flesh that hide candor, both were lost travelers who found home and acceptance inside the heart of the lover. For Victor Hugo, the abnormalities of their bodies are eidola of the world they live in, and their desperation reflects the tragedy and the solitude cored inside humanity. Patrick Marot ("*La littérature et le sublime*", 2006: 312) found in them two interlacing allegorical figures while French novelist Emile Zola

[10] Daughter of Asclepius (Ἀσκληπιός), God of medicine

(1869, Le Gaulois) and Parisian professor emeritus Guy Rosa (Paris, 2009), interpreted "the man who laugh" as a revolutionary manifesto with its visionary baroque symbolism, a romantic bildungsroman.

Unfortunately, being a political performance (against absolutism and exploitation) based on strong unsolvable dualisms (for example, evildoers against nonpareils of justice) and lacking a *deus ex machina* to solve the conflict (ending with the death of Gwynplaine), the characterization is sometimes unbalanced and hardly believable. The narrative shows a large use of agnitionis, a fictional tool that unveils the characters' identities, ab initio.

Victor Hugo' opera was uniformly denigrated during the nineteen century (Isabelle Roche, 2007: 55), from Gustave Flaubert (Œuvres de jeunesse, 2001, p. 305) who condemned the moral characterization of his dramatis personae (in both plays and fictional works), to Emile Zola who denounced their invairsemblance and lack of originality. Inside the prolegomenon of Cromwell, Victor Hugo affirmed that the zeitgeist of romanticism is created by the dualism of body and soul. This antithesis cored the tragedy of human existence and it is the starting point of his aesthetic, a meta-method that analyzes and identifies human conflicts and relationships.

"Du jour où le christianisme a dit à l'homme: « Tu es double, tu es composé de deux êtres, l'un périssable, l'autre immortel, l'un charnel, l'autre éthéré »; de ce jour le drame a été créé." (Cromwell, p. 16, 1827)

Even if the narrative plot is not perfectly chiseled, the almost one-dimensional linguistic and semantic characterization do not invalidate the great pathos of his tragedies or the epistemological soundness of his studies on human society. The *modus scribendi* is never perfunctory, showing exquisite

baroque and grotesque stylizations. Knowing the great political and literary importance of his corpus we can truly forget some observations of Theophile Gautier (who indeed had a filial esteem for the dramatist) on the unconvincing textual itineraries of his works. Victor Hugo, in his "*Littérature et philosophie mêlées*" (1834) emphasized the parallelism betwixt literature and society and the need of a cultural revolution that could empty the prison we live in. He said, specifically, that le "*corollaire rigoureux d'une révolution politique, c'est une révolution littéraire* "(1834: 70).

AEGRI SOMNIA[11]

(A sick man' dreams)

The author, published the romance in 1869, after being exiled from France, due to his liberal positions and aversion for the absolutist regime of Luigi Napoleone Bonaparte. In his *corpus literari*, individuals are mutilated of freedom and dignity, forced to suppress agony under fake smiles, for the self-righteous arrogance of the upper class. The miserable existence and the yearning for a more egalitarian system are classic loci of these political writings. There is something eschatological in his works, in his heroes and heroines upholding their beliefs against injustice and sorrow. Solitary figures who seek redemption, teaching us that even the brutality of misery cannot extinguish hope. A world painted with the blood spattered colors of a *via crucis*, a penumbra, where darkness is broken only by the humane tenderness of unbroken spirits. During the 19th century, Victor Hugo, revolutionized the French

[11] Horace, "Ars poetica", Liber 7.

aesthetic of prose and poetry. He aimed to free literature from the previous hermeticism that innerved meanings, living words lifeless. He wanted to loose the soul of the text, creating a sympathetic connection with the reader. Logos and pathos were interpreted as a twofold experience.

Victor Hugo was a great dramatist, able to paint human life and its inner struggles with vivid colors, he was one of the greatest interpreter of French Romanticism and the importance of his writings is truly immortal. His artistic drive and mental dexterity created an opera where ridiculousness coexists with sublimity, where monstrosity can veil beauty. Throughout life, he combined a strong yearning for political freedom to a cultural metamorphosis in literature. We can describe him as a pensive philosopher, a militant poet who fought for "*les miserable*s"[12], those who like Jean Valjean[13] suffered social oppression.

This work is meant to be a tribute to his memory.

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[12] "*Les miserables*" is also the title of one of his dramas, published in 1862.

[13] Main character of "*Les Miserables*", culprit of having stolen a piece of bread (out of hunger) and for that imprisoned

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