

## Poetry and History: The Two Levels of *Ninety Three*

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### Introduction

In 1962, Ayn Rand was commissioned to write an introduction for a new translation of Victor Hugo's novel, *Ninety Three* (*Quatrevingt treize* in French). In 1971, she considered this introduction important enough to be included in *The Romantic Manifesto*, a collection of essays about the philosophy of literature. The principal goal of *The Romantic Manifesto* is a revival of Romanticism as a school of literature and art. The introduction to *Ninety Three* is the only section in *The Romantic Manifesto* that is devoted to the analysis of a literary work. Rand upholds *Ninety Three* as an exemplary work of Romantic literature, the type of novel that a Romantic revival should promote and emulate.

*Ninety Three* is the story of the clash between the royalists and the republicans in Northern France in the aftermath of the French Revolution—and the three children who survive amidst the fighting. The novel's background is the War in the Vendée—the insurrection of the royalist peasants in 1793, led by aristocrats who returned from exile for a desperate attempt to restore the monarchy. The specific events and characters of the novel, however, are fictional. As the story begins, a battalion of republican soldiers spares a helpless royalist widow and her three starving children. The royalist leader, the Marquis de Lantenac, orders a massacre of the same republican battalion, leaving the peasant mother for dead and taking the three children hostage. The republican commander Gauvain is suspected of leniency toward the royalist rebels, so a government-appointed delegate, Cimourdain, is sent to the battlefield to supervise him.

As it happens, Gauvain is Lantenac's great-nephew and Cimourdain's former student and the only man Cimourdain ever loved. During the fighting between the armies of Lantenac and Gauvain, Lantenac and several rebels take refuge in the tower of Lantenac's former mansion. They have the three children with them and threaten to kill them if not allowed safe passage. The republicans ignore the threat and continue their assault on the tower. A dying rebel sets fire to the tower and the three children are about to be burned alive, as the Marquis de Lantenac escapes through a secret tunnel. Upon emerging into the open, however, he is transfixed by the scream of the children's mother, who has arrived at the tower in her search for them, and is watching them helplessly from below. Lantenac returns to rescue the children, thus surrendering to the republicans. Cimourdain prepares to execute Lantenac, but Gauvain is overwhelmed by the nobility of Lantenac's act and secretly sets him free. Cimourdain is obligated to order Gauvain's execution as a traitor, but as the guillotine's blade hits Gauvain's neck, Cimourdain shoots himself.

In her analysis of the novel, Rand upholds *Ninety Three* as a perfect example of the principle that she considers "the most important principle of the esthetics of literature" (80), the principle endorsed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*:

[T]he poet's job is not to report what has happened but what is likely to happen: that is, what is capable of happening according to rule of probability or necessity . . . the difference lies in the fact that the historian speaks of what has happened, the poet of the kind of thing that can happen. Hence also Poetry is a more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. "Universal" in this case is what kind of person is likely to do or say certain kinds of things, according to probability or necessity.<sup>1</sup> (9.51a36–9.51b10)

Rand dismisses the historical aspects of the novel, which, she asserts, "is *not* a novel about the French Revolution" (156). She upholds the

novel's philosophical theme, "man's loyalty to values—whatever these values might be," as the one aspect of the novel that matters—the one aspect with which a proper, Romanticist interpretation of the novel should be concerned.

Rand uses the contrast between the historical interpretations of the novel and her own interpretation as a manifestation of the disparity between two opposite schools of literature: Naturalism, which presents things as they are (or were), and Romanticism, which presents things as they can be and ought to be. This alleged rivalry between history and fiction, however, was not proclaimed by Aristotle or by Victor Hugo. The nineteenth century was the heyday of the historical novel as a Romantic literary genre. Literary historian Claudie Bernard (1989) regards the period of Romanticism as the time before Positivism, when literature and history still communicated through their common ground—myth. Positivism severed the link between history and literature and subordinated them to the supremacy of the social sciences. Since the goal of *The Romantic Manifesto* is to stir up a revival of Romanticism, it might have been useful to reinstate the link between these two disciplines rather than perpetuate their separation. Nevertheless, Rand insisted on keeping Romanticism free from the limitations of historical perspective in order to safeguard its grand philosophical scale.

### The Poetry-History Dichotomy

In "Basic Principles of Literature," Rand (1971) contends that the historical sections in Hugo's novels obstruct the reader's proper aesthetic experience. A novel's historical level is concerned only with "things as they were" and as such has no literary value. In her introduction to *Ninety Three*, Rand calls upon the reader to break away from the limitations of concrete time and place and to ascend to an abstract philosophical vista. Familiarity with French history is not only unnecessary—it may be detrimental for an appreciation of the novel's abstract grandeur. *The Romantic Manifesto* upholds Romanticism not only as a superior form of literature, but as the only proper form of literature. Rand rejects Naturalism as an improper, journalis-

tic form of literature that only records a slice of the present or the past. Thus, any attempt to analyze the novel from an historical perspective constitutes an aesthetic defection to the Naturalistic camp.

Nevertheless, Hugo's own statement about the role of history in *Ninety Three* suggests a different view. "The Vendéan War cannot be completely explained unless legend completes history; history is needed for the overall picture, legend for the details" (1983, 152). Rather than a conflict between opposites, Hugo regarded the relationship between poetry and history as an integration of complements. Hugo was one of the founders of the Romantic literary movement. Rand upholds him as the greatest of all Romanticists. Yet, she attempts to impose on his novel her own view of Romanticism, which divorces literature from history. According to Hugo's intention, there is no either-or choice between the historical and literary levels in *Ninety Three*. The two levels are inseparable. The more the reader delves into the historical sections, the more he can comprehend and appreciate the novel's greatness as a Romantic and historical novel.

At first reading, Hugo's statement that history provides the background of the novel while legend provides the details, appears to be the opposite of Aristotle's statement that history deals with particulars while poetry deals with universals. Nevertheless, Aristotle and Hugo agree on the complementary relationship between literature and history. Aristotle's statement about the superiority of poetry to history does not advocate the exclusion of the historical level from literary analysis as recommended by Rand. According to Aristotle, poetry articulates the universals behind particular historical events. Hugo's notion that history cannot be understood without legend actually resembles Aristotle's view. The Aristotelian scholar Samuel Henry Butcher reaffirms the similarity between Aristotle and Hugo's positions when he writes:

The world of the possible which poetry creates is more intelligible than the world of experience. The poet presents permanent and eternal facts, free from the elements of

unreason, which disturb our comprehension of real events and of human conduct. (1955, 63)

According to Aristotle and Hugo, poetry may be superior to history, but it is not independent of it. Rand's defense of Romanticism in her "Introduction to *Ninety Three*" is founded on the notion that literature is independent of history even when it uses historical material:

To a Romanticist, a background is a background, not a theme. His vision is always focused on man—on the fundamentals of man's nature, on those problems and those aspects of his character, which apply to any age and any country. (Rand 1971, 156)

According to Rand's perspective, the theme of *Ninety Three*, "man's loyalty to values," could be expressed just as effectively against another historical background. The French Revolution is merely the vehicle for telling the story and as such, purely optional. Aristotle's view of poetry that uses historical material is different. When Aristotle presents the *Iliad* as a work of poetry that uses historical material, he points out that Homer's creative genius consisted of selecting the most important events from the entire history of the Trojan War (*Poetics*, 23.59a30–35). Aristotle does not attempt to separate between the historical and poetic levels of the *Iliad*. He simply explains why historical poetry is still poetry:

Hence even if it happens that he puts something that has actually taken place into poetry, he is none the less a poet; for there is nothing to prevent some of the things that have happened from being the kind of things that can happen, and that is the sense in which he is their maker. (9.51b29–32)

### Historical or Non-Historical Novel?

Rand argues that literary scholars have been inclined to analyze

the novel as a historical novel about the French Revolution and failed to grasp its abstract philosophical level and Romantic grandeur. She observes that when *Ninety Three* was first published in 1874, the French public did not receive it favorably. The reason, according to literary historians, had been that:

[T]he French public was not sympathetic to a novel that seemed to glorify the first Revolution, at a time when the recent blood and horror of the Paris Commune of 1871 were still fresh in the public's memory. (Rand 1971, 156)

Rand scoffs at this explanation as irrelevant for a novel that is *not about the French Revolution*, but she does not provide an alternative explanation for the fact that the French public, familiar with Romanticism and enthusiastic about it, turned its back on Hugo's last novel. Several literary historians, however, provide an explanation that is actually similar to Rand's view. According to critics Georg Lukács, Matthew Josephson, Elliott Grant and Samuel Edwards, by the 1870s Naturalism became the dominant school of literature in France. Hugo was not in favor of this literary development and attempted to turn back the tide by writing another Romantic novel—but the French audience did not follow his lead. In the words of Georg Lukács ([1937] 1962, 256–57):

In a certain sense *1793* is a last echo of the Romantic historical novel. . . . The very fact that, at a time when it is considered particularly modern to slander the French Revolution—both in scholarship (Taine) and in literature (the Goncourts)—Victor Hugo writes a glorification of it, shows how these tendencies work against the general current.

Rand would have agreed with the view that it was not the French Revolution as such, but Hugo's Romantic portrayal of it, which the French readers rejected. This explanation, however, is missing from her analysis. She merely points out that the common explanation,

that the French public was not sympathetic to the novel's historical background, is wrong. Unfortunately, Rand does not utilize the literary history of *Ninety Three* when she makes her case for a revival of Romanticism. In *The Romantic Manifesto* (as well as in her novels), Rand was following Hugo's attempt to reverse the advance of Naturalism. But she appears to dismiss the literary history of *Ninety Three* in the same manner in which she dismissed the novel's historical background.

It should be noted that Rand did not reject the genre of the historical novel as such. In *The Art of Fiction* (as well as in *The Romantic Manifesto*), she applauded the "skillful integration of plot to theme" in *Gone with the Wind* (Rand 2000, 18), while asserting that this novel's theme "is historical, not philosophical" (15). The profound intellectual level of *Ninety Three* sets it apart from historical novels like *Gone with the Wind*. Nevertheless, the question that should be addressed is whether *Ninety Three* can be approached as a non-historical novel, without taking into account the events, personalities and *ideas* of the French Revolution. The question is whether the story of *Ninety Three* could be extracted and told against a different historical background, while still preserving its intellectual power and Romantic grandeur. The answer is that it is virtually impossible to isolate the story of *Ninety Three* from the historical events of the French Revolution. According to literary scholar Sandy Petrey (1988, 172), if the historical level of the War in the Vendée is extracted from the novel, what is left can be summarized as "children separated from their mother —> children reunited with their mother."

In "Basic Principles of Literature," Rand (1971, 86) claims that the historical essays Hugo inserted in his novels interrupt his stories and "can be omitted without affecting the structure of the novels." Rand regards the historical essays as "a very bad literary error," the only justification of which is that it was the literary convention in Hugo's times. However, the historical essays in *Ninety Three* fulfill a literary function. For example, the historical account of the trial of King Louis XVI foreshadows the fictional trial of the republican leader Gauvain. The reader is expected to compare the two trials and draw the parallels and the contrasts. Another example is the

turbulent session of the Revolutionary Convention, with its fusion of hard-nosed and utopian speeches. These speeches provide the ideological background of the war. According to *Gone with the Wind*, the American Civil War is fought over the Southern way of life. According to *Ninety Three*, the War in the Vendée is fought over the ideas of the French Revolution. In the words of Victor Brombert (1984, 214):

If Hugo devotes a long section of the novel to the tumultuous meetings of the Convention, it is less a display of historical documentation than a way of encompassing the dimensions of political hatreds. The historical hall is a place of strident denunciations and verbal battles that reveal the deadliness of words. . . . In *Quatrevingt treize*, political language signals an even wider gap between the aims of the Revolution and its destructive reality.

The inflammatory speeches at the Convention are indispensable to the structure of the novel. They articulate the ideological frenzy of the period. They explain why the royalists and the republicans are locked in a deadly battle. The speeches at the Convention prepare the ground for the intellectual climax of the novel—the speeches of the royalist leader Lantenac and the republican leader Gauvain. Rand criticizes the philosophical level of these speeches: “The characters’ speeches are not expressions of ideas, but only rhetoric, metaphors and generalities” (Rand 1971, 159). Nevertheless, these speeches provide a powerful intellectual climax for the novel, regardless of their philosophical shortcomings, and they are structurally connected to the speeches at the Convention.

In “What is Romanticism?” Rand explains her aversion to historical Romantic novels:

[T]he impossibility of applying altruism to reality, to men’s actual existence, led many Romantic writers to avoid the problem by escaping into history, i.e., by choosing to place their stories in some distant past (such as the Middle Ages).

Thus, the emphasis on action, the neglect of human psychology, the lack of convincing motivation were progressively dissociating Romanticism from reality. (115)

This description does not fit *Ninety Three*, where Hugo’s emphasis is on human psychology rather than action and where the characters’ motivation is convincing, according to Rand’s own analysis. The novel’s historical level does not consist of concrete, motiveless action, but provides the background of the action, as well as the background for the characters’ motives. Nevertheless, Hugo did “escape” to 1793 rather than write about his own time. History is not necessarily an impediment to great Romantic literature.<sup>2</sup>

### *Ninety Three and We the Living*

Rand’s first novel, *We the Living*, was also written against a historical background—the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917. In her introduction to the revised edition of *We the Living*, she wrote:

*We the Living* is not a story about Soviet Russia in 1925. It is a story about Dictatorship, any dictatorship, anywhere, at any time, whether it be Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, or—which this novel might do its share in helping to prevent—a socialist America. (1958, vii)

In the section “Journalistic References” in *The Art of Fiction*, Rand admits that she had to include references to the specific time and place in which *We the Living* is set:

In *We the Living*, I had a lot of journalistic references: specific dates, the Lenin-Trotsky split, and so forth. But that novel deals specifically with the politics of a certain period, so there such references were legitimate. When you deal with history, you obviously mention the concretes of the period. (2000, 163)

In *We the Living*, Rand attempted to combine a vivid, convincing historical background with a non-historical philosophical theme. She intends to infer such a combination in *Ninety Three* as well. However, her writing style and Hugo's were not identical. In a journal entry, circa 1930, Rand talks about the description of Petrograd in *We The Living*: "[G]ive a picture and feeling of Petrograd as a city—not any city, but Petrograd" (1997, 63). In an interview in 1961, Rand admitted that the description of Petrograd in *We The Living* was too influenced by Hugo: "It is the one passage that shows Hugo's influence. The style is not mine—it is not the method natural to me" (63). Whereas it was natural for Hugo to describe the streets of Paris or the forests of the Vendée as specific locations, it was not natural for Rand. She intended her novels to be unrestricted by specific time and place. In *The Art of Fiction*, she describes how her novels became progressively more abstract: In *The Fountainhead*, she originally included references to Stalin and Hitler in Roark's final Court speech, but following the advice of her friend Isabel Paterson, she omitted them (2000, 163). *The Fountainhead* still deals with "the fight for modern architecture" that "occurred in a specific historical period," but *Atlas Shrugged* is "of no period and therefore had to be kept the most abstract" (163). It appears that Rand approaches *Ninety Three* as if it were written by her, not by Hugo, who did wish to portray specific locations and periods in his novels.

In *The Ideas of Ayn Rand*, Ronald Merrill points out the strong influence of Hugo on Rand's first novel. Merrill (1991, 34) writes that both *We the Living* and *Ninety Three* depict three main characters, caught in the strife of war between two opposite ideologies:

In both books, the theme involves a conflict between the political beliefs and the personal moral values of the protagonists. And both novels climax with a series of intense personal confrontations between the three heroes.

However, *Ninety Three* takes place during the culmination of the civil war that followed the French Revolution, while *We the Living* takes place after the fighting is over. *We the Living* is told against the

background of everyday life under Communism, while *Ninety Three* is told against the background of *historical* battles, which are led by the *fictional* characters. In *Ninety Three*, Cimourdain is summoned by the historical leaders Danton, Robespierre and Marat to be assigned as delegate of the Committee of Public Safety. In *We the Living*, Andrei Taganov has no dealings with historical figures like Lenin, Stalin or Trotsky. The themes of the two novels may be similar in their Romantic outlook, but their treatment of history is different. The story of *We the Living* could be extracted and told against another historical period. In *Ninety Three*, as in *Gone With the Wind*, the war is more than a background—it is a part of the plot.

*We the Living* is indeed not about the Russian Revolution *per se*. Rand, echoing Kira, did not sympathize with the Reds or the Whites and did not attempt to influence Russian politics in any way. In contrast, Hugo was actively involved, on the Revolutionary side, in the historical developments in his country. The admiring French people called him "Father of the Republic." *Ninety Three* was published after Hugo's triumphant return to his homeland following nineteen years in exile for his revolutionary activity. He wrote his novel as his message of hope for the Third Republic. According to one biographer, after living in Britain and Belgium, Hugo believed that France "was the one nation in Europe where men were willing to die for their political and philosophical convictions" (Edwards 1971, 290). The assertion that *Ninety Three* is not about the French Revolution might have been offensive to Hugo. He wrote in his correspondence that his purpose in writing *Ninety Three* was "to cast on that terrifying figure, 93, a ray of appeasement . . . to stop people from being frightened of progress" (quoted in Robb 1997, 481). The title *Ninety Three* deliberately points to the nadir of the First Republic—the Dictatorship of Robespierre. Although Rand (1971, 155) defines the events of 1793 as "the Revolution's climax," Hugo intended the story to redeem the French Revolution from the Terror of 1793, and to reconcile the royalists and the republicans, who were still fighting in his time. Literary historian Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1998) writes that in *Ninety Three*, Hugo used the past to illuminate the present. The novel is "Hugo's legacy of the Revolution

to the Republic" (71). Ferguson maintains that the novel, ostensibly about the First Republic, has much to teach us about the Third Republic, particularly about the political strife rampant in Hugo's day and the way current affairs influenced the novelist's reassessment of the Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

It is a testimony of Hugo's literary genius that he could recreate the atmosphere of 1793 so vividly without having lived through that period. Hugo was looking at the French Revolution with clemency, willing to forgive its failings. Rand, in *We The Living*, was looking at the Russian Revolution with contempt. The Romanticism of *We The Living* derives from the characters that defy the historical period in which they are trapped—and transcend it. Kira, Leo, and even revolutionary Andrei (as he finally realizes) do not belong in the Russian Revolution—the story revolves around their personal lives. The Romanticism of *Ninety Three* derives to a large extent from the historical period in which the novel is set. Lantenac, Cimourdain and Gauvain belong in the French Revolution—the story revolves around their public lives in the service of the Monarchy or the Republic. They have no personal lives.

### Naturalism, Socialism and the Old Left

Rand's analysis of *Ninety Three* equally rejects historical and Naturalistic approaches to the novel. Defining Naturalism as a school of literature that is limited to statistics and the trivia of everyday life, she writes:

To criticize Hugo for the fact that his novels do not deal with the daily commonplaces of average lives is like criticizing a surgeon for the fact that he does not spend his time peeling potatoes. To regard as Hugo's failure the fact that his characters are "larger than life" is like regarding as an airplane's failure the fact that it flies. (Rand 1971, 155)

Rand's case against the Naturalistic critics of *Ninety Three* consists of citing two modern biographers of Hugo: Matthew Josephson and

Andre Maurois. Josephson disapproved of the "unrealistic idealization" of the characters, while Maurois approved of the theatrical dialogue and sublime poses of the characters, but for the wrong historical reason—because the French Revolution was indeed theatrical and sublime. Rand's presentation of Josephson is misleading. Josephson's comment about Hugo's unrealistic characters is made in the context of explaining the unfavorable public reaction to the novel. According to Josephson, when *Ninety Three* was published Romanticism was losing ground to Naturalism in France, which was why Hugo's unrealistic idealization of the characters did not appeal to the public taste any more. Notwithstanding his disapproving remark about Hugo's excessive idealization, Josephson did not write his 500-page biography of Hugo, subtitled *A Realistic Biography of the Great Romantic*, in order to denigrate Hugo for being unrealistic. In his introduction, Josephson (1942, viii) acknowledges the power and advantage of Hugo's grand perspective:

Victor Hugo lived in a time much like our own, and he lived through it courageously. His example is one of hope. . . . He was a poet and had a clairvoyance that went farther than the vision of men of affairs.

Josephson's biography was published in 1942, during the worst period of World War II, when Nazi Germany was at the height of its power. He presented Hugo's vision as a source of inspiration and hope for another nadir in human history. Far from attacking the Romanticism of Hugo's novel, Josephson's analysis integrates Hugo's Romanticism with the historical subject he was writing about:

In his romantic-symbolist style Hugo gives a picture of the night of horror and chaos over France in 1793; he describes both parties to the conflict, Royalists and Revolutionaries, as fanatically brave and celebrates the heroes and martyrs of each in many lyrical pages. . . . Hugo's novel proclaimed, one might say, the triumph of the French Revolution—as a religion. The Republican Convention is represented, after

all, as "the Summit" of human history. (485)

Josephson is in agreement with Maurois about the greater-than-life scale of the French Revolution. In *Olympio: The Life of Victor Hugo*, Maurois expresses his deep admiration for Hugo's "bird's-eye view" of the War in the Vendée in 1793. According to Maurois, Hugo managed "to display in either camp, royalist and republican alike, grandeur and savagery, cheek by jowl" (1956, 410). Josephson and Maurois actually agree with Rand that *Ninety Three* presents the grandeur of men when they fight for their values, regardless of which side they are on, regardless of what any man's particular values might be.

There is a possible explanation for Rand's misrepresentation of Josephson. More than a literary scholar, Josephson was a political historian with strong left-wing leanings. His books include such titles as: *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists*, *Sidney Hillman: Statesman of American Labor*, *The History of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union*, and *Al Smith: Hero of the Cities*.<sup>4</sup> Rand naturally regarded Josephson, an avowed Socialist and an associate of the Dada literary movement, as an enemy. Furthermore, Josephson was a member of the Old Left that appropriated Hugo and exploited the stand he took against social injustice. Georg Lukács, Hungarian Communist and prominent literary scholar, upheld *Ninety Three* as follows: "Victor Hugo's development led him away from Romanticism and made him into a forerunner of the humanist revolt against the growing barbarism of capitalism" ([1937] 1962, 280). While the scholars of the Old Left attempted to enlist Hugo's novels in the service of their cause, Rand attempted to liberate Hugo's work from its association with altruism and socialism. In her introduction to *Ninety Three*, she writes on Hugo: "A professed altruist, he worshiped man's greatness, not his suffering, weaknesses or evils; a professed advocate of Socialism, he was a fiercely intransigent individualist" (Rand 1971, 160). The new translation of *Ninety Three* provided an opportunity for a fresh look at Hugo's work, a look at his individualism and heroism, rather than his political views. This was probably why Rand wished to separate *Ninety Three* completely

from the French Revolution that became associated so strongly with socialism. Her timing was right, as evidenced by the fact that the scholars of the New Left subsequently repudiated Hugo—as we will soon see.

### The Romanticism of the French Revolution

Unfortunately, Rand's attempt to separate *Ninety Three* from the French Revolution in order to celebrate its Romanticism may in fact diminish the novel's greatness. Equating a historical perspective with Naturalism is wrong. When the historical background consists of a revolution, it is not concerned with the trivia of everyday life. The history of the French Revolution was dramatic and overwhelming, full of grand aspirations for all mankind. The daily existence during that period had an aura of grandeur that could not be recaptured by any other period. In the words of George Steiner (1971):

No string of quotations, no statistics, can recapture for us what must have been the inner excitement, the passionate adventure of spirit and emotion unleashed by the events of 1789 and sustained, at a fantastic tempo, until 1815. Far more than political revolution and war, on an unprecedented scale of geographical and social compass, is involved. . . . Even in the mind of contemporaries, each successive year of political struggle and social upheaval took on a distinct, graphic individuality. 1789, Quatrevingt treize, 1812, are far more than temporal designations: they stand for great storms of being, for metamorphoses of the historical landscape so violent as to acquire, almost at once, the simplified magnitude of legend. (12)

In the novel, when the republican leader Gauvain spares the life of the royalist soldier who attempted to kill him, he says: "You'll live. You tried to kill me in the name of the king; I'm granting you pardon in the name of the Republic" (Hugo 1983, 188). This gesture is not just an abstract loyalty to values as such; it is loyalty to the Republican

ideal of extending civil rights to everybody, royalist rebels included. Hugo was not naive or evasive about the horrors of the War in the Vendée. In fact, he chose the lowest point of the French Revolution to dramatize the enduring power of the Revolution's ideas. According to one critic, Hugo's fundamental arguments in the novel are the tenets of the French Revolution: "All men are entitled to liberty and equality, but the nature of man is such that neither right can be taken for granted. Both must be earned. If they are neglected or contravened, they will be lost" (Edwards 1971, 294). Gauvain is just the type of idealist to fight and die for these tenets.

In *The Romantic Manifesto*, Rand defines Romanticism as "a category of art based on the recognition of the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition" (99). The characters of *Ninety Three* manifest their power of volition through ideological transformation. Each character makes a choice that exceeds his current set of values once he recognizes a higher value. Cimourdain the priest and Gauvain the aristocrat become ardent republicans. The sailor Halmallo realizes that his loyalty to his brother, whom Lantenac ordered to be shot, should be surpassed by his loyalty to Lantenac the royalist leader. Gauvain realizes that his loyalty to the Republican regime goes against his loyalty to his family (Lantenac is his great-uncle) and to the ideals that Lantenac's humane action exemplifies—and sets Lantenac free. The most dramatic transformation is that of Lantenac, who saves the three children at the cost of surrendering himself and renouncing his war. The exchange between Cimourdain and Lantenac when Cimourdain arrests Lantenac is a powerful statement of Lantenac's transformation: "I arrest you." — "You are right." Later, in his final speech, Lantenac defiantly defends the monarchy and attacks the ideas of the Revolution. However, when Lantenac is set free, his future course of action is left open.<sup>5</sup> The ideological transformations of the characters are manifestations of Romanticism, which Brombert defines as: "This principle of a dramatic conversion allowing freedom of choice, rather than of a socially or atavistically determined political consciousness" (1984, 105).

Ideological conversions between the republican and the royalist

sides were commonplace during the War in the Vendée. Historian Michael Ross (1975) recounts the numerous cases of shifting loyalties between the warring factions and of relatives fighting on opposite sides. A typical case is that of Duke de Biron, an aristocrat turned revolutionary whose son led the republican army. He was accused of treason after his battalion's defeat and was executed by the republicans. His last words on the scaffold were: "I am faithful to my God, to the nobility and my King. I die repentant and filled with remorse" (202). As a Romantic writer, Hugo portrays the process of ideological transformation not as betrayal or defection, as a Naturalist writer might have done, but as an illumination. At the core of each conversion, there is the dedication to a higher value. Ultimately, the highest value in *Ninety Three* is the value that the French Revolution was meant to stand for: universal humanity.

### The Triumph of Universal Humanity

Rand regards the abstract, philosophical theme of *Ninety Three* as the one aspect of the novel that matters and is worthy of discussion:

It is not any specific code of values that concerns [Hugo] here, but the wider abstraction: man's loyalty to values, whatever any man's particular values might be. . . . The emphasis he projects is not: "What great values men are fighting for!" but: "What greatness men are capable of, when they fight for their values!" . . . [E]very event features the theme, every event is an instance of man's violent, tortured, agonized, yet triumphant dedication to his values. (Rand 1971, 157)

Rand juxtaposes the various political values of the characters, which belong on the historical level, with an abstract loyalty to values that belongs on a philosophical level. Yet the various loyalties of the characters are exceeded by loyalty for one particular value: humanity. Each of the three major characters of *Ninety Three* performs an act that defies his political convictions: Lantenac surrenders himself in

order to save the three children he believes to be of the republicans; Gauvain sets Lantenac free; Cimourdain commits suicide as soon as his order to execute Gauvain is carried out. These acts do not compromise, but reaffirm, the integrity of the main characters. Their loyalty to particular political values is surpassed by loyalty to the human values that unite them. Universal humanity was a major value advocated (if not practiced) by the French Revolution. It is a part of the ideological historical background of *Ninety Three*. In the words of George Steiner:

The eternal "tomorrow" of utopian political vision became as it were, Monday morning. We experience something of this dizzying sense of total possibility when reading the decrees of the *Convention* and of the Jacobin regime: injustice, superstition, poverty are to be eradicated now, in the next glorious hour. The world is to shed its worn skin a fortnight hence. (1971, 14)

The quality of humanity that transcends political loyalties is manifested by minor characters as well: The republican soldiers adopt the royalist mother and her children; the beggar Tellmarch saves Lantenac from the pursuing republican soldiers and then saves the mother whom Lantenac ordered to be shot. There is no disparity between the concept of abstract loyalty to values and the concept of loyalty to universal humanity, since both transcend the level of concrete political loyalties. However, the tenet of universal humanity addresses the savagery and barbarity of the War in the Vendée, while abstract loyalty to values as such glosses over these atrocities. Men may be great when they fight for their values. But is Lantenac great when he orders a massacre of republican prisoners of war, including two women? Are the royalists great when they hold three children hostage and threaten to kill them if not allowed safe passage? Are the republicans great when they ignore this threat and proceed with their attack? Is the royalist Imânus great when he sets fire to the tower where the children are held? The characters manage to maintain their dignity in spite of their horrible actions because they are motivated by

dedication to their convictions. Hugo absolves them of moral culpability in the name of their allegiance to their cause, whatever their cause might be. The turning point in Hugo's moral leniency occurs when Imânus sets fire to the tower. Imânus tells himself that the death of the three children will avenge the death of Louis XVII, but Hugo condemns him: "He had just been a hero, he was now only a murderer, and he was about to die" (Hugo 1983, 272). At this point, humanity enters the scene as the only true value where political values have failed. Lantenac is ready to give up his fight for the restoration of the monarchy in order to save three children. Gauvain is ready to defy the decrees of the Republic in order to reward Lantenac for saving the children. Cimourdain attempts to follow the decree of the "Committee of Public Safety" and executes Gauvain for releasing Lantenac. But he cannot live with the demand to sacrifice the only man he ever loved—and kills himself. Gauvain's vision, the French Revolution's ideal of universal humanity, endures.

The harshest critics of *Ninety Three* have been Marxists who repudiated the idea of universal humanity that transcends social classes. They criticized the incongruity between Hugo's professed socialist views and the humanistic thrust of his story. Brombert (1984) observes: "It is hardly surprising that ideologically oriented critics have found Hugo unsympathetic to the political thrust of revolutionary thinking and have accused him of 'bourgeois' utopian idealism" (225). Lukács already suggested an ideological criticism of *Ninety Three* in the 1930s. Although he admired and praised Hugo's literary skill, Lukács pointed out the limitation of "abstract humanism" that can only lead the characters to their doom. Like Rand, he observed that Hugo presented a humanistic ideal that could not be implemented in real life. Rand writes in her introduction: "With so magnificent a view of man and of existence, Hugo never discovered how to implement it in reality. He professed conscious beliefs which contradicted his subconscious ideal and made its application to reality impossible" (Rand 1971, 158). Lukács supports Hugo's professed conscious beliefs while Rand supports his subconscious ideals, but they agree about the conflict between the two that made either one impossible to achieve.

The New Left scholars were not as generous toward Hugo as Lukács. Jeffrey Mehlman (1971) writes that the level of universal humanity in *Ninety Three* sets off a series of class betrayals on the part of the main characters, and demonstrates the bankruptcy of Hugo's political thought. Pierre Barbéris writes that Hugo never really understood the underlying socioeconomic problems of the French Revolution, or rather did not wish to understand them, and his "ideology of reconciliation" was essentially an attempt at justifying bourgeois liberalism (quoted in Brombert 1984, 225).

The New Left disowned Hugo and his notion of universal humanity as incurably individualistic. A Romanticist revival can reclaim Hugo as well as this notion and the historical period with which it is associated.

Many literary critics observed the significance of universal humanity in *Ninety Three*. They pointed out the juxtaposition between a historical value-system and a "higher" non-historical value-system. Each critic provides his own interpretation for the non-historical level. Lukács calls it "abstract humanism." James F. Hamilton calls it "a philosophic altitude of general human truths." Sandy Petrey calls it "the Universals of Family, Nature and Humanity." Richard B. Grant calls it "an allegory of a utopian society." Rand calls it "man's loyalty to values." The non-historical level may be superior to the historical level, but it is not independent of it. It redeems the historical level—the horrors of the year 1793—by reminding the reader what the Revolution was initially about.

In the most abstract philosophical sense, "man's loyalty to values" is indeed the theme of *Ninety Three*. However, a novel is not a philosophical treatise but a concrete story. *Ninety Three* tells the story of three children being saved in the midst of ferocious fighting. The theme of "man's loyalty to values" is insufficient to encompass the philosophical meaning of *Ninety Three*: the triumph of universal humanity. Furthermore, loyalty to values as such may not be the best inspiration the novel can provide. Graham Robb (1997) writes the following on the character of Cimourdain:

His manic ideological purity made a deep impression on a

young Georgian seminarist called Dzhugashvili who was confined to his cell for reading *Quatrevingt treize* and later changed his name to Stalin. (481)

The historical level in *Ninety Three* provides the horrors of man's ruthless fanaticism. The fictional story demonstrates how man can rise above this fanaticism. The power of the story depends on the horrors of the historical period in which it is set. If Romanticism presents things as they could be and ought to be, then the instances of humanity in a savage war are Romantic. If the political warfare in the Convention and the brutal killings in the Breton forests provide the level of things as they were, then the actions of humanity provide the level of things as they could be and ought to be.

## Conclusion

Rand was correct to applaud the sweeping intellectual and emotional power of *Ninety Three*. It is the most philosophical of Hugo's novels, as well as the most secular. A new Romantic movement should indeed promote this novel for the sake of a Romantic Renaissance. However, when such a promotion attempts to exclude the historical aspects of the novel, it undercuts its power and its greatness. *Ninety Three* did not enjoy the recent popular success of *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. It is too intellectual and somber for a Broadway musical or a Disney animated movie. The power of the novel lies in its attempt to redeem a terrible time in French history. The novel can take hold of the serious reader only if the reader grasps the ideological intricacies of the period in which it is set.

## Notes

1. Rand (1971, 80) misquotes Aristotle's statement in the *Poetics* as: "[H]istory represents things as they are, while fiction represents them as they might be and ought to be." Cox (1986) first observed this disparity.
2. Another literary work that does not fit Rand's description of historical Romantic literature is one of her favorite plays: *Cyrano De Bergerac*. Written in 1897, it is set in the seventeenth century and its hero is based on an actual historical figure. Nevertheless, the play has more characterization than action.

3. There is a debate among literary historians as to whether Hugo's preference to write about the past represents an attempt to confront the present or to escape from it. In 1872, a year after his triumphant return from exile, Hugo renounced his political activity. He resigned from the National Council in frustration and disassociated himself from the Paris Commune. Two years later, he published *Ninety Three*. During these two years, Hugo publicly criticized the Paris Commune and offered help to its victims, so it is more likely that his novel was an attempt to confront the present rather than escape from it.

4. Sidney Hillman (1887–1946) was the first president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and is regarded as organized labor's foremost "statesman." Al Smith (1873–1944) was the Governor of New York and the Democratic presidential nominee in 1928. Smith worked closely with social reformers and sponsored bills to regulate wages, work hours and workplace conditions.

5. After Gauvain releases him, Lantenac wanders silently for a while and then exclaims, in the French original: "Ma foi!" Lowell Bell translates this expression as: "After all, why not?" Such a reaction to his deliverance and to Gauvain's gesture portrays Lantenac as a shallow opportunist. The actual meaning of the French expression is "Good God!"—which is more characteristic of Lantenac's grand stature. The reaction of incredulity leaves Lantenac's future course of action open. He may hesitate before ordering another massacre.

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