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Decapitating God: Revolution in Victor Hugo's *Le Livre des Tables* and *Dieu*

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ABSTRACT

Hugo's experience of seances in exile is closely bound up with his protest at the Second Empire and this article studies the visionary images of revolution which appear in the transcripts of these dialogues with the dead, published as *Le Livre des Tables*. It compares a particularly ambivalent image, of revolution as a decapitation of God, to a passage in *Dieu*, a related poetic text of the same period, in order to examine the role played by metaphor and multiple voices in Hugo's depiction of the relationship between the civic and the cosmic, between progress and spiritism.

KEYWORDS

Decapitation; *Dieu*; Hugo; *Tables*; seances; table-tapping; revolution

It is well-known that Victor Hugo was an active participant in the vogue for spiritism which originated in the United States and swept Europe in the 1850s. At the start of his exile to the Channel Islands, he was drawn into table-tapping with his family after being moved by a communication from his daughter Léopoldine, and, between 1853 and 1855, he regularly took part in the seances, of which detailed transcriptions were made in *Le Livre des Tables*.¹ The text consists of a series of dialogues with the dead, which range from homages to Hugo by illustrious spirits (including Shakespeare, dictating verse in French) to revelations by allegorical spirits such as 'La Mort'. It has long been studied as a source for Hugo's metaphysical poetry, by critics such as Gaudon (1969, 220–24), who are often preoccupied with the extent to which revelations from the *Tables* were used as a source for individual poems in *Les Contemplations*, in part because Hugo himself liked to insist that his works were a product of his individual mind. More recently, critics such as Maurel (1996), Guerlac (2000), and Matlock (2000) have read it as a text in its own right, with differing emphases, and cultural historians like Cuchet (2016) have taken an interest in it, on the grounds that it reveals much about the wider preoccupations of the period.² This article will bridge these two approaches, by focusing on an aspect of the collective unconscious which erupts in both the *Tables* and Hugo's verse of the same period: the ongoing reckoning with the revolution, an event which exemplifies what LaCapra describes as a founding trauma, a legitimating myth of origins which is collectively worked through, and acted out, over an extended period (2001: xii). My study will focus on how a particularly ambivalent metaphor from the *Tables*, of revolution impaling God's head on a pike, gives shape to this reckoning, functions as a microcosm of wider preoccupations, and is reprised in Hugo's verse text *Dieu*, a religious epic which he began writing at the same time.

Although the seance transcriptions have a different textual status from poems, the implications of which I shall examine later, there are nonetheless striking textual similarities between the images of revolution in the *Tables* and in Hugo's philosophical verse of the 1850s. Studies reading the *Tables* alongside his poetry generally focus on the metaphysical evocations of death in *Les Contemplations*, but, by examining Hugo's proto-surrealist depictions of revolutionary violence, I shall highlight a lesser known connection between the *Tables* and the images in his verse. Once Hugo had abandoned his royalism of the 1820s, his view of the Revolution remained consistent: he deplored the Terror and campaigned vehemently against the death penalty, but nonetheless celebrated the turning point of 1789 and promoted Republican values. Boulard shows how Hugo's condemnation of capital punishment resonates throughout his fiction in often

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oblique ways (2014), but Hugo also wrote a considerable amount of poetry about 1793. He first took it as a poetic subject at the start of his exile – in ‘Nox’ a meditation on how to punish Louis Napoleon triggers an involuntary memory of the guillotine (1985–86, II, 14) – and it would become an insistent theme in the 1850s, dominating *La Révolution* and *Le Verso de la page* as well as appearing in the passage in *Dieu* which I shall consider here. These verse depictions of revolutionary violence are strangely neglected, and I aim to show how their very formulation transmits the popular consciousness.³ The fact that such images appear in the *Tables*, channelled through a group experience, only amplifies the fact that they are a manifestation of collective thinking about revolution, and, as Gaudon says, the rawness of the *Tables*, freed from the rhetorical syntax of the verse, intensifies the impact of its images (‘Présentation’ in Hugo 1968, 1180).

Although there are socio-political aspects to all of Hugo’s depictions of death, as shown in Cuchet’s reading of *Les Contemplations* in the light of the contemporary fascination with mourning and purgatory (2016, 8–12), the close association of the metaphysical and the political is particularly apparent in images of execution. As Muray says, occultism and socialism are two inextricably linked facets of what he calls ‘dix-neuviémisme’ (1984, 69–73). Hugo, like Michelet, aspired to replace Christianity with a new democratic religion, and, at the same time, sought to disseminate revolutionary values, imagining them extending through the cosmos through reincarnation. He was preoccupied with the unknown, which often bridges the secular notion of the future of humanity and the religious notion of the afterlife.

I shall first set out an approach to reading the seance transcriptions and situate the images of revolution in the *Tables*. I shall then examine in turn the metaphorical passages from the *Tables* and *Dieu* which evoke the decapitation of God. Both texts feature the voices of spirits borrowing human language to celebrate to a human audience the phenomena of Revolution and progress, and I shall show how the force of the figurative language is shaped by this communicative situation, and then how the scenario from the *Tables* is reworked in *Dieu*.

Reading *Le Livre des Tables*

While the records of the seances cannot be read in the same way as works authored by Hugo, they constitute an extremely detailed text which forms a distinct part of his oeuvre. *Le Livre des Tables* consists of transcriptions of messages tapped out by a three-legged table, held by a medium, on top of a larger table. The family psychodrama contributed to the intensity of the encounters, because Hugo’s son Charles proved to be a particularly effective medium and, in this role, appeared to rival his father. The communications were tapped out one letter at a time (using a code of one tap for an A, two taps for a B and so on), with a participant transcribing the words as they appeared. Hugo himself was, both initially and retrospectively, sceptical about the mechanism of the seances, and acutely conscious that openly associating himself with spiritism could damage his political credibility, as emphasised in the diary of his daughter (Adèle Hugo 1968, 106). However, he was fascinated by the experience and by the rich material it generated.

While Hugo did not hold the table or even always write down the communications, the language of the spirits sounded uncannily like him, and the group clearly channelled his way of thinking. There has been much discussion about exactly how Hugo could have influenced the transcription of the spirits’ messages, and whether it is a kind of automatic writing – Mutigny resumes this debate and calculates that it would not have been physically possible to tap out all the letters in the texts, since one series of seances consisting of 4000 letters would have taken three taps per second (1981, 80). Furthermore, Boivin notes how the original transcriptions were subsequently written up, and so the text consists of materials drawn from different types of manuscript (Hugo 2014, 26). However, as Muray points out, questioning the authenticity of the spirits is beside the point, given that smoke and mirrors are integral to spiritism (1984, 576). What is interesting is how the form taken by the experience expresses the preoccupations of its time, and my focus is on the verbal texture of the written record.

The dialogues are not just a manifestation of the participants’ credulity but themselves articulate a struggle between rational secularism and religious mysticism, firstly in the contrast between human voices asking questions and spirit voices offering answers, and secondly in the very formulation of metaphors used by both parties. The transcripts include some poetry, and even the sections in prose are close in style to Hugo’s literary writing. Both seance transcriptions and verse use metaphorical language to combine the mystical and the political, and the concrete images for the Revolution highlight a tension between a human desire to reinvent the world and a belief in divine purpose.

Critics who study *Le Livre des tables* as a text tend either to view the seances as a response to circumstances or to examine the implications of ghost voices for Hugo's conception of literary authorship. I shall outline the rationale of these contrasting approaches before setting out a third way. Contextual readings emphasise that Hugo's turning to spiritism as a refuge from political disappointment was typical of the time, and they explain the seances as a response to the situation of exile in Jersey – spiritism served to establish a community, gather the exiles around a table, and enable them to think of themselves as part of a circle of sympathetic voices spanning many centuries. Matlock's account of the politics of Hugo's spiritism suggests that he viewed talking to the dead as a direct substitute for political activity, a model for rousing a dead country and waking it up to the possibility of a Republic (2000, 67–68). Cuchet argues that the text is not only an example of how spiritism flourished in reaction to the authoritarianism of the Second Empire, but that its very content expresses 'l'inconscient de l'époque' in revealing ways (2015, 168). From Cuchet's perspective as a historian, Hugo's exceptional talent means that his literary works articulate the tendencies of his time in ways which are more visible than in conventional sources (2016, 11–12). Maurel offers an energetic, if sketchy, glimpse of what such a reading might look like, in his description of the *Tables* as 'la malicieuse révélation pédagogique, radiographique' of the revolution (1996, 297).

In direct contrast to these approaches, Guerlac reads the *Tables* in the light of Blanchot, whose idea of writing as an art of death, she argues, helps us take this strange text seriously as writing (2000, 82). She takes literally the gnomic injunctions attributed to the spirit of 'La Mort', who affirms in his communications that 'Tout grand esprit fait dans sa vie deux œuvres, son œuvre de vivant et son œuvre de fantôme' (Hugo 2014, 464), and advises Hugo: 'fais vivant ton œuvre de fantôme' (Hugo 2014, 473). For Guerlac, these are theoretical statements of how Hugo came to see literature itself as a kind of ghostwriting, a symptom of the doubleness of genius (2000, 77). For her, the text of the *Tables* was not authored by Hugo, but was authorised by him (2000, 79). A similar approach has been applied to *La Fin de Satan* by Rogghe, which is valuable in highlighting the complexity of the relationship between the poet who probes mystery and the mystery speaking through him (2019, 66).⁴

The readings which approach *Les Tables* from a socio-political perspective tend not to attend closely to its own verbal texture, whereas those which foreground textuality tend to dwell on the theoretical ramifications of a non-mimetic authorless text. I aim instead to examine how the metaphors and multiple voices in this text convey the century's ambivalence about its own origins, and thereby contribute to an understanding of the function and workings of Hugo's visionary language.

In the *Tables*, Hugo's preoccupation with mortality is closely bound up with his preoccupation with the notion of human progress. Reflecting on death entails recognising the limits of humanity, and he was constantly exploring ways of overcoming such limits, whether by positing the progress of human reason, as in poems like 'Force des choses' and 'Réponse à un acte d'accusation', or by imagining a law of metempsychosis, as in 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', which, as Lovejoy shows, is a way of linking individual continuation with the collective (1936, 245–46), or by speaking to the dead, as in many of the *Contemplations* (including some written long before the *Tables*, like 'Demain dès l'aube'). These elements are all present in the *Tables*, and the preoccupations with politics and spirituality in the dialogues coalesce gradually, over many months, before culminating in the proto-surrealist images of the Revolution.

The early seances tend to separate emotional, political, and mystical questions, and conversations with specific spirits have a clearly defined focus. The exchange with Léopoldine revolves around suffering, love, and God (11 September 1853). An exchange with Napoleon (5 October 1853) resembles a conversation about current affairs, in which Hugo and Napoleon debate the fate of the Second Empire, with Napoleon saying that France will become part of a European Republic once Napoleon III has fallen (Hugo 2014, 136). The communication with the Ânesse de Balaam (27 December 1853; Hugo 2014, 168–74) is the first to set out the vast spiritual scheme of reincarnation driving the ladder of being, which would become central to Hugo's vision in this period, and be elaborated in the dialogue with 'La Mort' (3 October 1854; Hugo 2014, 479–83), and in the poem 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', written between 1 and 13 October 1854.⁵ These supernatural speakers situate humanity in a vast cosmic scheme and are more concerned with insisting that all of creation is animate than they are with human history, but the visions are implicitly political in their emphasis on the freedom of all creatures to determine whether they are punished or rewarded in their next life.

Chénier is the first spirit voice in the *Tables* to describe poetry itself as bridging mortality and politics, and his speeches articulate this connection in dense language. This marks the point at which the language of the *Tables* takes a distinctively visionary turn. Chénier appears at five seances in December 1853 and January 1854, at first dictating poetry and celebrating Hugo as his successor, and then accepting Hugo's request to complete his novel *Le Dernier jour d'un condamné*, which he does by narrating how the condemned man feels after his execution. In the seance of 2 January 1854, Chénier's visceral narration of his own decapitation, begins in the third person but shifts into the first person as it becomes his own story. A description of blood transformed into light – 'Il coule de la lumière dans mes veines transparentes' (Hugo 2014, 186) – anticipates Hugo's poetic images which play on the fluidity of both blood and light to present bloodshed as leading to illumination, as in the description of the Revolution as a winepress in *Le Verso de la page*:

Ô terreur! et l'on vit, sous l'effrayant pressoir,
Naître de la lumière à travers d'affreux voiles,
Et jaillir et couler du sang et des étoiles. (1985–86, 4, 1088–89)⁶

In both the *Tables* and *Le Verso* it is by means of metaphor that Hugo suggests the spiritual meaning of decapitation – Chénier describes the red cut in terms of light: 'Une ligne lumineuse sépare ma tête de mon corps. C'est une plaie animée et sensible qui reçoit le baiser de Dieu' (Hugo 2014, 186). A divine encounter is described in intensely physical terms. Where the third-person account had described the soul escaping from the body, the first-person version describes death as producing two bodies:

La mort m'apparaît à la fois sur la terre et dans le ciel, tandis que mon corps transfiguré par le tombeau s'enfonce dans les béatitudes de l'éternité, je vois, à des distances immenses au-dessous de moi, mon autre corps, que le bourreau jette aux vers, ma tête qui roule dans les ruisseaux, ma plaie qui saigne, ma guillotine qu'on lave, ma chevelure qui pend au bout d'une pique et mon nom qu'on insulte. (Hugo 2014, 187)

The first body is transfigured by eternity and observes the remains of its material counterpart from on high, a perspective which is no longer that of a living human although far from being divine. The second body is broken down into its constituent elements in an enumeration which implicitly narrates the events after the execution – the body is discarded while the head rolls in the spilled blood and is then brandished on a pike and mocked. The description of the head on a pike shows horror at physical violence, whilst elevating the victim spiritually, and such a tension would become a defining feature of Hugo's images of revolution. Chénier's speech presents decapitation as a break which is all at once visceral, political, and spiritual.

Where Chénier is a known personality and poet, with whose vocation Hugo has an affinity, increasingly the spirits who appear at the seances are abstractions like 'l'Ombre du sépulcre' and 'La Mort'. Both human and ghost speakers discuss the significance of the very act of speaking to the dead and the language used for it, and a topic of the dialogues from early on was the *Tables* themselves, giving rise to self-reflexivity. On 2 July 1854, 'un esprit' describes the *Tables* as 'la révélation dans la réalité, du mystère dans le vrai' (Hugo 2014, 421), and on 23 September 1854, Hugo explains to 'La Mort' how he sees the seances as playing a role in the cosmic scheme:

Sans doute la République est une forme humaine, le prévoir est un fait terrestre; mais, dans la République, il y a le libéré qui vient de Dieu, dans le progrès il y a la justice qui est Dieu. Dieu même. Nous les proscrits, nous ne sommes donc pas proscrits uniquement pour une idée, la justice, c'est-à-dire l'azur même de Dieu, étant avec nous. (Hugo 2014, 472–73)

The lived experience of exile is thus intimately related to the universe, and spiritism allowed the exiles to attribute cosmic significance to their contingent experience. 'La Mort' replies to Hugo with the injunction 'Fais vivant ton œuvre de fantôme', which, although often quoted out of context as a metaphysical injunction, is actually the beginning of a series of instructions which are specifically political in nature – 'La Mort' goes on to say to Hugo:

Fais de ton œuvre une des cheminées de l'âme humaine; que la terre endormie ouvrant à demi les yeux lourds aperçoive à l'horizon ton toit couvert d'un nuage d'astres et dise: que fait-il, d'où sort cette fumée inconnue et splendide? Quelle est cette cheminée d'où il jaillit du ciel? Et que le vent réponde à la terre: c'est une des forges de la nuit; c'est là qu'on travaille au soleil, c'est là qu'on déferre les hommes, c'est là qu'on rougit à blanc les noirs carcans pour en faire des planètes; c'est là qu'on décloue Jésus-Christ et qu'on se sert des clous pour mieux attacher le ciel (Hugo 2014, 473–74)

Poetry is an outlet for human endeavour, described as work which will produce a better world. The spirit of death is thus encouraging Hugo to participate in and enable progress, concurring with him that progress is a distinctly human phenomenon. The ‘œuvre de fantôme’ is the work of a human, if not a living one. Hugo had already speculated in ‘Horror’ about whether stars might be nails in a coffin (Hugo 1985-86, II, 507), but here that macabre vision is combined with the forge image which is more often used in his descriptions of progress as an act of construction.

Hugo is constantly aware that, by hearing the spirits express themselves in language, he has not really escaped from a terrestrial perspective. In a seance with Galileo, he reproaches the astronomer for speaking with human words and describing the constellations as seen from earth, from the perspective of which they are an optical illusion, and laments that as a result he never offers his audience direct access to the divine (Hugo 2014, 487–88). Galileo responds that the Tables have to use human and not celestial language in order to be understood by human interlocutors (Hugo 2014, 488–93), and uses a series of almost grotesquely concrete images, which approach the sardonic tone of *L’Âne*, to point out that the absolute is a mystery which cannot be expressed in language: ‘Il n’y a pas de mots là où il n’y a pas de corps’ and ‘Dieu parlant, c’est Dieu langue, Dieu langue c’est Dieu bouche, Dieu bouche c’est Dieu corps, Dieu corps c’est Dieu homme.’ (Hugo 2014, 489). God has neither body nor face and so there is no celestial language: ‘il n’y a pas d’alphabet de l’incrée’ (Hugo 2014, 489).⁷ Galileo speaks in such an energetically terrestrial idiom that at times Hugo’s dialogue with him appears to be a conversation with fractured parts of the poet’s ego, all too preoccupied with contingent realities.

The dialogue with Galileo illustrates well the epistemological uncertainty that Acquisto identifies in Hugo’s verse. In a study demonstrating that Hugo veers between viewing knowledge of the world as being immediately accessible and as being completely impossible, Acquisto argues that the poet merely describes the act of deciphering mystery rather than showing how poetry itself might transcend human limits (2020, 37). Such uncertainty about knowing is evident in the way spirits like Galileo conceptualise the *Tables* as a means of overcoming limits and accessing truth, a function which sounds a lot like that of metaphysical poetry. Both Galileo and Hugo refer to the source of the communications as ‘la table’ in the singular (Hugo 2014, 488), as though this mechanism were the origin itself, thus displacing agency to an intermediary which is neither human nor divine but simply the medium which transmits the communication between the living and the dead. Maurel compares the table itself to a decapitated head, a skull, a piece of furniture which is human (1996, 292). In these exchanges the charged object is certainly invoked as a singular authority. However, the dialogue with Galileo makes clear that talking to the dead cannot overcome limits and generate new knowledge. The concreteness of the language which Galileo uses to insist on the unknowability of the absolute is also central to the later metaphors associated with the Revolution in the later seances which I shall now consider.

‘La tête infâme du Dieu flamboyant’ in *Le Livre des Tables*

The preoccupation with the relationship between the human and the divine evident in *Les Tables* comes to a head in the seances with the spirit of Jesus Christ early in 1855, in which Revolution is a metaphor for the advent of a new religion revealed through spiritism. The seances with Christ reflect on the role of the Tables in visionary language situating political revolt in a cosmic scheme, and it is in this context that the powerful image of the Revolution as a pike impaling God’s head occurs. Christ appears at four seances between February and March 1855 and pursues a multi-part account of the progression of religion from pre-Christian druidism to Christianity, culminating in an affirmation of the role of the Tables as a reinvention of Christianity for the present.

Christ argues on 18th February 1855 that Christianity is oppressive in its belief in the immortality of the soul and the eternity of punishment, and that it offers a tortured view of the cosmos (Hugo 2014, 516–18), a vision which seems to be partly inflected by Hugo’s interest in how punished souls were imprisoned on other planets.⁸ However, above all it is a protest at the way humanity has projected its own punitive instincts onto God, and thus constitutes an attack on the tyrannical aspect of religion. This is a development of the communication previously made by the spirit ‘La Mort’ on 22 October 1854, who had lamented that humans saw the stars as drops of blood – ‘Seigneur votre ciel est couvert de plaies, vos astres sont des gouttes de sang’ – and the sky as full of decapitated heads: ‘vos prodiges [...] ont la tête coupée’ (Hugo 2014, 482).

Hugo had pointed out to ‘La Mort’ that the image ‘Les gouttes de sang que tu rends pour des étoiles’ had appeared in his own verse, although there it served to celebrate heroes who sacrifice themselves for the greater good.⁹ The hesitation between acknowledging and lamenting the role of violence in the revolutionary break constantly crops up in Hugo, and would become central to *Le Verso de la page*.¹⁰ Such hesitation becomes particularly evident in Christ’s image of the decapitation of God on 22 March 1855.

Preceding this image is a metaphorical description of the French Revolution as a horse ridden by man towards the infinite:

Griffon redoutable et splendide, il a Danton pour aile, Robespierre pour ongle, quatorze armées pour écailles, les volcans pour naseaux, les gouffres pour oreilles. La bouche de ce cheval mâche l’infini qui tombe en écume de son mors sanglant; il hennit le réveil, il piaffe l’avenir, il rue le chaos. (Hugo 2014, 531)

Hugo had already used a horse to suggest genius in ‘Mazeppa’, and would go on to elaborate it in ‘Le Cheval’.¹¹ He would also extend it to represent progress, as in ‘Le Satyre’, where a horse represents humanity heroically harnessing elemental forces.¹² The personification in the *Tables* of Revolution as a galloping horse represents historical change extending spatially throughout the cosmos.¹³ Christ dynamises the three revolutionary ideals – liberty, equality, and fraternity – by describing them as physical movements in space, ‘trois bonds, trois violentes secousses dans la parole terrestre’, and asks what will stop them: ‘où s’arrêtera cet échappé de l’ombre? Ce preneur de mors aux dents de l’immensité? Qui sera la barrière?’ (Hugo 2014, 531). He answers his question by affirming that the only thing that can stop them is death – ‘C’est le fantôme et son suaire’ – and specifies the limits faced by the horse of human progress (in these lines ‘il’ refers to the horse):

il tranchera dans la vie et il renoncera devant le mystère; il affranchira les vivants et laissera la mort prisonnier du christianisme. Il aura secoué les carapaces de donjons et il butera sur le sépulcre; sa ruade n’atteindra pas Satan; son aile n’ira pas aussi loin que l’oiseau du cimetière qui s’envole de la croix; il ne détrônera pas le droit divin du châtement éternel; il ne décapitera pas le roi de l’horreur; il ne déposera pas le Tibère de l’infini; il ne portera pas au bout d’une pique parmi les étoiles la tête infâme du Dieu flamboyant. (Hugo 2014, 531–32)

This horse is a dynamic embodiment of humanity’s promethean aspiration and destructive energy. In asserting that mortals cannot behead God, Christ limits the scope of revolution firmly to the terrestrial sphere, and his assertion of divine immunity has some authority given his own resurrection. The image of the ‘tête infâme du Dieu flamboyant’ is the last in a series of noun phrases positing tyrants of the infinite, making God the ultimate conquest. It is not clear whether ‘infâme’ signals hostility to God himself or horror at his decapitation. As Albouy points out, Hugo toys with the theme of killing God at various points, although more often evokes pulling his eyes out (1963, 491). In ‘Nemrod’, a part of *La Fin de Satan* written in 1854, the conqueror dies in his quest to kill God, and all we are told of Nemrod’s attack is that a bloodied arrow falls to earth alongside his own body (1985–86, IV, 36).¹⁴ In *Le Livre des Tables*, Christ denies that God can be decapitated but in so doing conjures a disturbing image of humanity conquering the cosmos. His insistence that revolution cannot compete with God is rooted in the recognition that political insurrection cannot free humanity from death, and paves the way for an argument that the true spiritual revolution will be brought by the *Tables* themselves.

Christ argues that the *Tables* constitute a new historical turning point akin to the Revolution, because, by allowing a dialogue with the dead, they reveal the unity of the cosmos (‘il’ here still refers to the horse of humanity): ‘il ne fera pas la révolution du tombeau; les tables la feront. Elles proclameront le droit du fantôme; elles affirmeront le droit du mort’. (Hugo 2014, 532). The legal language of rights is here applied to the infinite.¹⁵ Interpretations of the ‘droit du fantôme’ vary according to the persuasions of the reader. For Maurel, it affirms the rights of ghosts, without passports, to be vagabonds in the terrestrial sphere, and thereby celebrates plurality (1996, 279), but for Guerlac it is a counterpart to the ‘œuvre de fantôme’ and thus a superhuman analogue for the rights of man (2000, 77). This line advocates in literal terms a change to the way we think about the dead. Christ suggests that humanity has conceived God in its own image, as punitive and tyrannical, and that humanity needs the revelation of the *Tables* to free it from this delusion:

Les *Tables* seront le quatre-vingt neuf des archanges. Elles jetteront des vérités surnaturelles dans le vrai humain. Elles mêleront les atomes et les mondes; elles prouveront la fraternité des hommes avec les bêtes, l’égalité des bêtes avec les plantes, l’égalité des plantes avec les pierres; la solidarité des pierres avec les étoiles. (Hugo 2014, 532)

The logic is that superficial differences are incidental because spirit is all that matters, and the fundamental equality of elements reflects a Republican vision of the cosmos. Jesus Christ specifies that 1789 is his model, rather than 1793, although heads were already being paraded on pikes at that earlier stage. Interpretations of Hugo's analogy between revolution and Tables are divided. Maurel observes that the very motion of turning makes the tables like a revolution (1996, 281) and Matlock takes literally Hugo's linking of revolution to the Tables (2000, 67). On the other hand, Guerlac views the analogy as strictly metaphorical, arguing that the democratisation of death implies impersonality, with the effect that 'revolution and its phantom rights have consequences for language within the text that we read' and that Hugo 'sees himself [...] in what Blanchot has called 'nonexistence become word'' (2000, 78). It is difficult to tell how literal Hugo's images of this kind are, because the utterances of the spirits, like his literary writing, are so full of physical images for change – his poetry often uses bodily imagery to make abstract ideas tangible, and even the idea of 'solidarité' connecting stones and stars here is a spatial metaphor. At the literal level, Christ is extending the human logic of revolution to the cosmos, and making humanity central to the universe, but at another level he is applying revolutionary logic to humanity's thinking about death. The way Christ rejects notions of God as judge, and hell as eternal, enacts the kind of modernisation of religion which Hugo sought, summarised in his response to Galileo that the Tables are the beginning of 'la grande Bible nouvelle' (Hugo 2014, 495). By making an analogy between revolution and the Tables, Christ is stating that the seances will allow humanity to recognise the unity of creation and thus to understand the true nature of the divine. However, the genitive 'quatre-vingt neuf des archanges' does not spell out whether the archangels will offer humanity a supernatural equivalent of 1789 or whether it has the more radical implication that archangels will benefit from humanity's revolt and have a terrestrial 1789 brought to them. Either way, the image suggests there is a prison to be stormed and points to an unknown future change, without specifying whether the source is divine or human.

Christ's description of the *Tables* as a historical turning point anticipates the way that Hugo would later experiment with situating revolution in the cosmic scheme, with envisaging new or imaginary turning points in the future, and with reflecting on how the French Revolution had opened up the possibility of imagining a future radically different from the past.¹⁶ The image of revolution as a pike with God's head impaled thus condenses a variety of tensions which preoccupy Hugo at this time. It makes a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the impossible decapitation of God, with the image of his head on a pike suggesting that revolution is a violent mastery of creation, and, on the other hand, a possibility of a new 'quatre-vingt neuf des archanges', a revolution which would be effected through the Tables themselves, with the seances communicating a deeper understanding of the cosmos. The equal exchange between the living and the dead is a model for such understanding. However, as Galileo points out, insights shared via the Tables remain a very human kind of understanding. They involve a personal encounter with other spirits, not mediated by the authority of God, and constitute a polyphonic series of voices echoing Hugo's own rhetoric. It is striking how subtly these dense and resonant images in Christ's communications articulate the very particular perspective of the son of God observing humanity's attitude to the divine. Of course, perspective is itself an inherently terrestrial metaphor, with its implications of bodies situated in physical space, and the way Christ speaks highlights his humanity rather than his divinity.

Dieu: 'La tête échevelée de la nuit sombre'

A similar image of decapitation appears in Hugo's verse text *Dieu*, a long unfinished religious epic which he worked on in 1855–56 and originally intended as part of *Les Contemplations*. Only published posthumously, it is a demanding work in its expanse and density. Usually read for its theological focus, an aspect which is best illuminated by Jossua's various studies (1969; 1980; 1985), it deals with strictly human perceptions of the inexplicable, the phenomenological quality of which has been usefully emphasised by Fizaine (2004). However, it also includes a number of passages about the present which capture the popular consciousness of historical change, and it is in one of these that the image of a decapitated God from the *Tables* is reworked in verse form. Journet and Robert have established, in their detailed account of the genesis of *Dieu*, that, although it is impossible to pinpoint the exact dates when individual passages were written, Hugo worked on the text in two main phases, firstly in 1855 during the seances on Jersey, and secondly in the period shortly after the seances were abandoned, between his move to Guernsey in October 1855 and some

point in 1856 (1960, 169–70).¹⁷ The passages which concern me, those dealing with historical consciousness, were added during this second phase. A text which had begun as a theological project was thus extended to incorporate material concerned with the legacy of the revolution.

Like the *Tables*, *Dieu* incorporates multiple voices.¹⁸ The vast text is unified by a speaker who undertakes a mental flight into a dark abyss and encounters a series of spirits whose monologues evoke different facets of God by questioning human conceptions of him. A long prologue, *Le seuil du gouffre*, consists of two parts. In the first, the thinker is addressed by a spirit which names itself ‘L’Esprit Humain’ and speaks simultaneously of and for the collective. When the thinker expresses a desire to know God, this spirit explodes into a swarm of voices, and the second part of *Le seuil du gouffre*, ‘Les Voix’, presents thirteen voices which denounce the limitations and folly of human efforts to approach God. The vast main section of *Dieu*, called *L’Océan d’en haut*, consists of eight visions of different religions over the centuries uttered by a series of winged creatures, beginning with a bat who evokes atheism, and advancing through agnosticism, dualism, polytheism, monotheism, and Christianity, before ending in two about Hugo’s own ideas. The penultimate section is by far the longest, and in Hugo’s plans is variously entitled ‘rationalisme’, ‘panthéisme’, and ‘Les révélations des Tables’ (the range of alternatives itself indicating how fluid the basis of the new religion remained).¹⁹ This penultimate section is uttered by an angel whose central message is that humanity has wrongly imagined God to be punitive and that spiritual evolution is operating throughout the universe by means of metempsychosis.

Hugo had always made use of dialogue in his poems, and included voices of supernatural entities or the dead, but it seems that the *Tables* had given him licence to take the exploration of multiple voices to a new level.²⁰ The part of the angel’s speech dealing with cosmic unity and reincarnation was written during the first phase of composition, whereas the hymn to progress reflecting on the present was written after Hugo had moved to Guernsey. Conceptually, there is a tension between these two sections, but Hugo weaves them together in virtuoso visionary images.

The angel addresses a human interlocutor, and is preoccupied with situating human endeavour, including science and revolution, within the broader cosmic scheme, and encouraging it. The key passage personifies first the human mind and then progress itself, before culminating in the image of the severed head:

L’esprit humain, chercheur de Dieu, voit par moments.
 Les rayons s’irriter comme des flamboiements.
 Quand, poussant devant lui la foule coutumière,
 Il va de l’hydre ombre à l’hydre de lumière!
 N’importe! Ne crains pas le progrès rugissant 5
 Pour le sage, le bon, le juste et l’innocent!
 Ne crains pas le progrès dévorant les ténèbres!
 Trouvant les idéals par l’effort des algèbres!
 Montant, géométrie et poésie, à Dieu!
 Ne crains pas le progrès, conquérant de ciel bleu 10
 Suis ce monstre splendide, homme! Car il est beau
 De toutes ces laideurs qu’on nomme Mirabeau,
 Socrate, Camoëns, Cromwell, Tyrtée, Ésope;
 Et, faisant le niveau du cèdre et de l’hysope,
 Il apparaît, mêlé d’Homère, de Newton 15
 Et de Moïse, avec la face de Danton,
 Et monte aux cieux portant la tête échevelée
 De la nuit sombre au bout de sa pique étoilée!
 C’est bien. – (1985–86, IV, 673)

The human mind is personified as being at once bellicose, rational, and seeking God. The process by which the mind advances from dark to light is described in visceral terms as blazing, devouring, roaring, and conquering, and the last two lines cap it with the revolutionary image of progress ascending to the heavens with a decapitated head borne on a pike. The sense of these lines is complex for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the head is an attribute of ‘la nuit sombre’, with ‘la nuit’ connoting the heavens, and thus God, and ‘sombre’ highlighting metaphysical mystery. Given that this image follows lines about seeking and ascending to God, the implication is that the ‘tête échevelée’ is that of God, as in the equivalent passage in the *Tables*. This kind of personification is not infrequent – Hugo had previously attributed foreheads to

both the sky – in ‘Stella’ (1853) the morning star says ‘Je suis le caillou d’or et de feu que Dieu jette, / Comme avec une fronde, au front noir de la nuit’ (1985–86, II, 165) – and to God – in ‘Tout le passé et tout l’avenir’ (1854) humanity is criticised for perceiving God as a masked figure: ‘Dieu, c’est une figure au milieu des ténèbres, / C’est l’horreur difforme au front noir’ (1985–86, III, 459).²¹ The ‘nuit sombre’ in *Dieu* certainly echoes the sense of mystery being frustrating, and this frustration is more evident than in the *Tables*.

Secondly, the preposition ‘de’ is ambiguous. What Cave says about the deceptively simple word ‘of’ in English also applies to its French equivalent: it either literally indicates a property of something or proposes a metaphorical equivalence for it (2016, 86). It is not clear whether the genitive ‘la tête échevelée / de la nuit sombre’ makes the head a *part* of the night or whether it is an assertion of identity, making the night as a whole *like* a head. If the head is part of the night, it is impossible to know what part it corresponds to, since mysteries do not have obvious generic parts, so the phrase does not function as a catachresis but rather creates a monstrous entity. If the head corresponds to night as a whole, it implies that the mystery has been impaled, and replaced by, death, which is a nihilistic vision. It is thus unclear whether the decapitation entails the sacrifice of a part of the cosmic order or a negation of the whole of it. Either way the angel implies that celestial ascent is the consequence of decapitation. These lines are not celebrating execution but using it as a metaphor for humanity’s deciphering of metaphysical mystery, just as ‘Réponse à un acte d’accusation’ had used execution as a metaphor for poetic revolution (1985–86, II, 266). Where the equivalent image in the *Tables* had articulated Christ’s rejection of violence, in order to present the spiritual revelation of the seances as transcending it, the angel’s vision depicts violence and spirituality as more closely bound up with each other. By making night symbolise divine mystery, and the star-studded pike symbolise human insurrection, the angel inverts the usual chromatic image of God illuminating humanity, and hints at the complex relationship between good and evil.

Thirdly, we cannot read these two lines simply as a rhetorical figure, because the image is inflected by the communicative situation of an angel speaking to a human and mediating between divine and terrestrial perspectives. The angel borrows the triumphant rhetoric of human revolt and implies that terrestrial insurrection arises from a misconception that God is above all a pure enigma. However, in contrast to the spirit of Christ in the *Tables*, the angel of *Dieu* suggests that violence has its place, even if it culminates in, or equates to, an attack on God (it is hard to decide whether the relationship here is causal or analogical), and the angel ends simply by applauding violence as ‘bien’, a word he has used repeatedly to praise all human endeavour. This fictional speaker enables Hugo to experiment with expressing the logic of justifying the bloodshed which had founded the modern nation, whilst not himself accepting its necessity.

Fourthly, in engaging with the human view of the divine, the angel is also pointing out that humanity is attacking an outdated conception of God, and indirectly lamenting that this view of divinity was a projection of human impulses, just as Christ had done in the seance communication. The angel is more strident in exposing how humans attribute their own brutality to God, especially in a subsequent description of how humans wish Adam to be punished for the Fall:

Adam l’ingrat, Adam, le coupable suprême,
Ajoutant tous les maux de sa race à ses maux,
Souffrant, tronc monstrueux, dans ses mille rameaux,
Ayant pour cri le cri qui sort des langes,
Seraît exécuté par des bourreaux archanges!
Il serait à jamais supplicié là-haut!
Les hommes, ses enfants, auraient dans leur cachot
Pour plafond le dessous de l’échafaud du père! (1985–86, IV, 674)

This is the kind of archaic logic of revenge that the angel rejects in his image of the decapitation of God, a rejection which anticipates how ‘Le Satyre’ exposes the tyrannical classical gods as a figment of the human imagination. The angel in *Dieu* thus seems to advocate the kind of attack on God which Christ in the *Tables* stepped back from. It is as though the seances extended the possibilities of constructing imaginary supernatural voices to address humanity. The angel, intimately acquainted with human endeavour and sympathetic to its daring, owes something to the dynamic of the seances, in which the living and the dead conversed as apparent equals. Furthermore, as in the *Tables*, the tension internal to the metaphor articulates with great precision the ambivalence of the speaker’s particular stance. Just as the ‘tête infâme du Dieu flamboyant’ conveyed Christ’s fear that revolutionary violence was an attack on the divine, the ‘tête échevelée de la

nuit sombre' seems tailored to convey the angel's more ambivalent hesitation between admiration and criticism.

The angel's celebration of human violence in *Dieu* is transcended by the next voice in the series, 'Lumière', which offers a new perspective by presenting God as a disembodied absolute firmly exterior to human experience. However, Hugo devotes such a large proportion of *Dieu* to the angel's speech, that the angel's admiration of humanity is not corrected until much later, and so is valorised and takes on a life of its own. The decapitation image had an ambivalent density in the *Tables* but is now part of an extended celebration of human revolt. In both the *Tables* and *Dieu*, the images of severed heads in the sky show there is a fine line between criticising humanity for projecting its aggression on to the heavens and celebrating violence as a necessary part of a divine process. In the *Tables*, the image is compressed, as if a momentary revelation, whereas in *Dieu* it is expanded at great length, even if human revolt is still ultimately transcended by the divine.

The two visceral images of decapitating God both display Hugo's preoccupation with the conflicts which underpin the nineteenth-century consciousness of itself. The dense depictions of heads on pikes telescope multiple perspectives, suggesting that revolution is powerful enough to affect the divine, and also that human revolt has been shaped by misconceptions of God as a punitive figure or as intolerably mysterious. Spirits use concrete human language to emphasise to human interlocutors the compromised nature of their physical endeavour. Tensions between the mystical and the political, and ambivalence about historical violence, are thus built into the very structure of both images.

In the *Tables*, Christ suggests that God evades purely human revolt and puts human endeavour firmly in its place in order to promote the revelations of spiritism. Revolution is a metaphor for extending human understanding spatially to the whole cosmos, and also turns out to be a metaphor for the *Tables* themselves, which are a means of overcoming the barrier posed by death. When this freighted image is transposed into the verse of *Dieu*, the emphasis shifts; the angel in *Dieu* is closer to humanity and his speech applauds human revolt, including the violence. It seems that Hugo, in transposing the spirit voice from the seances into the verse of *Dieu*, emphasises the investment of the spirits in human endeavour. During the seances, the spirit of Christ confidently rejected decapitation, to promote the magic of the *Tables* as a superior means of accessing cosmic mystery. However, when Hugo came to process the experience of the seances in *Dieu*, at the same time as he was beginning to think more specifically about the historical turning point of the Revolution, he seems to have experimented with voicing more freely the ramifications of accepting that the present had been inaugurated through violence.

The force of both images is amplified by the fact that they are uttered by non-human voices. The spirit of Christ in the *Tables* declares the political force of mysticism, presenting an intimate encounter with spirits as significant for the whole of humanity, whereas the angel in *Dieu* lies between humanity and God, affirming the spiritual value of human endeavour, before the next voice in the series questions that striving from a divine perspective. In using supernatural voices to view phenomena from different perspectives, Hugo considers human agency from the angle of the divine, and creates voices which are neither living nor human, voices of the in between. Furthermore, by conjuring the voices of spirits, he defamiliarizes human history, viewing it from a perspective in which its significance might be clearer. Both the *Tables* and *Dieu* put human experience in perspective by viewing it from outside, and both present human revolt as needing the approval of a divine audience.

The striking thing about both the *Tables* and *Dieu* is that the impact of ingenious condensed images is amplified by the precise way they verbalise the tensions inherent in the perspective of the two distinct fictional personae, Christ and the angel. In effect, Hugo is playing on the multiplicity of voices to conduct a debate about the agency of change. Since perspective is a human attribute, this is another way in which he brings the divine onto the terrestrial plane. Adèle Hugo notes that Hugo said of the *Tables*: 'ce phénomène respecte la liberté humaine et l'état de lumière auquel le genre humain est arrivé par ses propres efforts. Elle [*sic*] respecte même notre liberté en nous laissant dans le doute' (1968, 107). Hugo's acknowledgement that the *Tables* offered no real answers made it possible for him to emphasise the value of human effort. Of course, this is in part an affirmation of his own imagination – since he did not want his genius to be diminished by any perception that he was recycling messages communicated in the seances – but here he expresses it as a manifestation of collective human endeavour. As so often, it is hard to know whether 'le genre humain' is a grandiose expansion of the poet's unique persona or whether the poet is subordinating

the individual to the collective. Whatever the case, the juxtaposition of these multiple voices presents the reader with a variety of ways of understanding the relationship between the speaker and humanity, and underlines the impossibility of grasping the absolute. Furthermore, Hugo's images in both seance transcriptions and poetry show how voices speaking from different dimensions all carefully weigh up the relationship between human agency and divine agency.

Notes

1. The incomplete and flawed version first published by Gustave Simon in 1923 as *Les Tables tournantes*, and the 'Procès-verbaux des séances des tables parlantes à Jersey' version based on it and included in the chronological edition (Hugo 1968), have been superseded by Boivin's more complete version, published as *Le Livre des Tables* (Hugo 2014), which gives a clearer indication of the source and transmission of the various transcriptions. Maur-el's edition (1996) follows Simon but offers more illuminating commentary on the content than Boivin. It is customary in Hugo scholarship in French to use the capitalised word *Tables* in the same way that Hugo did, to denote simultaneously the voices of the spirits and the practice of table-tapping. I shall use the italicised *Tables* as shorthand for *Le Livre des Tables*, the text in Boivin's edition, and *Tables* in Roman type to denote the practice of table-tapping.
2. Cuchet gives a valuable overview of the spiritism movement more generally (2012).
3. When singled out, they tend to be viewed as a symptom of Hugo's global poetic scheme, for instance Albouy interprets all his images as compressed myths (1963, 151). Laforgue confronts images of violence most directly, although he ultimately views Hugo's verse of the late 1850s as a not entirely successful epic parenthesis within a fundamentally lyric œuvre (1997, 22).
4. Rogghe says of 'La Sibylle', that, to render infinity without betraying its ineffable nature, the text constantly switches positions between questioner and responder, reader and writer, narrator and protagonist' (2019, 67).
5. The dialogue with the Ânesse de Balaam was not included in earlier editions.
6. The 'pressoir' image also appears in 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', in a fleeting reference to the guillotine made in the course of a cosmic vision that all of creation is alive – it emphasises that the blade suffers as much as the victim, and that the 'cadavre au cou rouge' will hear the souls in nature lamenting their suffering: 'C'est une âme que l'eau scie en ses froides lames; / C'une âme que fait ruisseler le pressoir' (1985–86, II, 549).
7. This kind of logic is extended in other images 'l'éternité n'a pas d'extrait de naissance' and 'L'espace n'a pas de regard, le temps n'a pas de pieds' (Hugo 2014, 489).
8. Vianey argues that *Les Contemplations* hesitates between two schemes of expiation, sometimes viewing punished souls as reincarnated in flowers and rocks, as in 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', and sometimes viewing punished souls as imprisoned on other planets, as in 'Saturne', (1922, XXXIX).
9. The poem 'Ma vie entre déjà dans l'ombre de la mort' includes the line 'De leurs gouttes de sang qu'on prend pour des étoiles', *Quatre vents de l'esprit*, dated 13 September 1854 (Hugo 1968, 610). The date has been erroneously given as November (Hugo 1985–86, III, 1335).
10. See Lunn-Rockcliffe (2016).
11. In *Les Orientales* and *La Chanson des rues et des bois* respectively.
12. See Lunn-Rockcliffe (2019) for a discussion of the passage in which the eponymous speaker asks humanity: 'Qui sait si quelque jour on ne te verra pas / Fier, suprême, atteler les forces de l'abîme, / Et, dérobant l'éclair à l'Inconnu sublime / Lier ce char d'un autre à des chevaux à toi?' (1985–86, II, 748). In 'Ma vie entre déjà dans l'ombre de la mort', death is described as a horse, 'j'entends ses noirs chevaux qui viennent dans l'espace' (Hugo 1985–86, III, 1336).
13. The image of a body compared to a landscape also anticipates the miraculous expansion of the body in 'Le Satyre' in *La Légende des siècles*: 'Sa poitrine terrible était pleine d'étoiles' (1985–86, II, 751).
14. In a passage written in 1860, Satan declares 'Je suis le bourreau sombre, et j'exécute Dieu. / Dieu mourra.' (1985–86, IV, 121). In this context, Satan attacks God's goodness as embodied throughout creation, and his revolt is rooted in a fundamental, and all too human, envy of this quality.
15. As Albouy says, because Christianity insists on positing the eternity of hell, Hugo wanted progress to be extended to the dead (1976, 114).
16. *Le Verso de la page* would depict the Revolution as an hourglass turning (1985–86, IV, 1088) and imagine the possibility of a new turning point: 'Ce serait l'étonnement du monde / Et la déception des hommes qu'un progrès / Ne vînt pas sans laisser aux justes des regrets' (1985–86, IV, 1089).
17. Journet and Robert have constructed an intricate and invaluable table with three columns, to give a sense of the manuscript's 'étonnant travail de marqueterie' (1960, 169). The second column indicates changes and additions made to passages in the first column, and the third column indicates the same for passages listed in the second column. A system of asterisks signals additions which were completely new in the 1856 reworking.
18. See Fizaine (1985) on the polyphony.
19. For a summary of the plans, see Hugo 1968, 459.

20. From 'Vision' in *Odes et Ballades*, a dialogue between God and 'Le Siècle' (the eighteenth century) to 'A quoi songeaient les deux cavaliers dans la forêt' in *Les Contemplations*, a dialogue between a first person preoccupied by the feelings of the dead, and Hermann, who is preoccupied by the sufferings of the living.
21. The forehead image would later be given more positive resonance in *La Légende des siècles*: 'La clarté / Brillait sereine au front du ciel inaccessible, / Étant tout ce que Dieu peut avoir de visible.' (1985–86, II, 572) and 'un vague front couvert de diadèmes. Dieu méditait' (1985–86, II, 699).

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