

Transformations in Victor Hugo's Cosmic Poetry

One of the central themes of Hugo's visionary poetry is that of the cosmos moving towards a greater harmony. His verse echoes the vast array of thought on this subject which proliferated in the first half of the nineteenth century, absorbing and exploring notions such as the gradual spiritualization of the universe, metempsychosis, and the rejection of hell. This article will show how two related texts translate these ideas of cosmic change into poetic form: 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre' and the end of the 'L'Océan d'en haut' section of *Dieu*.¹ Both are revelations spoken by spirits to the poet and describe the role of reincarnation in the destiny of the universe. It is a critical commonplace that the interest of Hugo's verse lies in the way it takes contemporary ideas as the starting point for elaborating vivid metaphors and I aim to extend this kind of reading by examining more specifically how he uses images to evoke cosmic transformations. Many critics allude to Hugo's preoccupation with movement and change: Gaudon emphasizes how his techniques of proliferation disrupt conventional symmetries to produce a dynamic poetry of becoming (1969), Lejeune shows how he depicts dark and light as being in a constantly shifting relationship (1968), and Riffaterre argues that Hugo's hallucinatory vision alters visible forms but is also attentive to mutability inherent in reality (1971). This article will show how metaphors in Hugo's cosmic poems not only illustrate ideas about progress but also enact the very transformations and movement that are their subject matter.

Before examining the verse, it is important to situate the ideas that Hugo was drawing on in their broader context. The notion that the universe as a whole was undergoing a gradual process of spiritualization reflected a wider belief in this period that nature embodied a principle of freedom and was a concrete manifestation of the divine struggling to reveal itself – typical of this tendency is Boucher de Perthe's assertion that 'la création, toujours vivante, toujours active, serait non une œuvre achevée ni achevable, mais une organisation

continuelle, un développement sans fin, une marche progressive dont Dieu serait le moteur, le guide et la tête' (1838: 154). Indeed, God himself was often described as a process of becoming in this period, while the cosmos was increasingly viewed as structured organically.²

Elsewhere, the spiritualization of the universe was seen in more social terms, as in Ballanche's influential vision of fallen humanity rehabilitating itself through suffering. He sees humanity as 'le même individu, passant par une suite de palingénésies' (1827-29: 13) and asserts that life on earth is just one stage in the process: 'L'homme peut perfectionner son corps, et arriver à le spiritualiser [...] il passera, dès cette vie, de la sphère des substances à celle des essences' (1827-29: 143). Ballanche's system influenced Leroux and Reynaud, who both saw reincarnation as a motor of spiritual change. In *De l'Humanité*, Leroux argues that individuals are reborn as humans on this planet (1985: 173-218), whereas Reynaud extends the possibility of reincarnation to other planets, claiming 'Élançons-nous [...] à l'envi vers ce modèle qui subsiste en Dieu et à travers lequel Dieu se plaît à contempler toutes ses créatures! Poursuivons-le, non-seulement sur la terre, mais partout; et de monde en monde, de transfiguration en transfiguration [...] imitons-le par l'expansion de nos vertus' (1854: 273). Those who believed in progress through reincarnation often affirmed the end of hell. Some, like Leroux, rejected any kind of afterlife because they preferred to dwell on the future of humanity, and others, like Hugo, saw damnation as a temporary condition.³

Ballanche and Reynaud were important influences on Hugo and he preferred their vision of progress extending through the cosmos to the Saint-Simonian emphasis on social progress on earth. Hugo was to criticize Leroux's religion of Humanity by arguing that 'la solidarité des hommes est le corollaire invincible de la solidarité de l'univers. Le lien démocratique est de même nature que le rayon solaire' (1967-70, XII: 50). This preference for the cosmic scale reflects the fact that Hugo was more interested in creating an imaginative

vision of unity than setting out a political doctrine. His cosmic poems of the 1850s, such as ‘Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre’ and *Dieu*, similarly describe progress in highly metaphorical terms. They evoke the transformation of evil into good and hell into heaven using images of matter becoming spirit and organic terms of growth. Strikingly, they not only describe changes in external forms but also convey a fundamentally dynamic vision of the universe.

Of course, both ‘Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre’ and ‘L’Océan d’en haut’ contain their share of didactic affirmations about the evolution of the cosmos. Direct statements are often framed in religious terms, such as ‘Les enfers se refont édens’ (Hugo, 1985-6, II: 550; hereafter *OCP*) and ‘toute terre / Doit devenir Éden et tout ciel paradis’ (*OCP*, IV: 691). Both texts also describe change using conventional metaphors such as illumination and ascent, as well as the cancelling out of differences, as in ‘Les plénitudes sont pareilles à des vides’ (*OCP*, IV: 695), and the union of opposites:

L’âme épouse le ver;
Et le ciel et l’enfer, et la lumière et l’ombre,
Et le rayon splendide et le flamboiement sombre
Se mêlent dans l’éclair. (*OCP*, IV: 696)

Furthermore, the theme of reincarnation generates vivid images of transformations undergone by individuals. Hugo describes the rebirth of souls into forms determined by the crimes of their previous life:

Tout méchant
Fait naître en expirant le monstre de sa vie,
Qui le saisit. L’horreur par l’horreur est suivie.
Nemrod gronde enfermé dans la montagne à pic;
Quand Dalila descend dans la tombe, un aspic
Sort des plis du linceul, emportant l’âme fausse. (*OCP*, II: 540)⁴

Punishments are often based on visual parallels such as ‘La ronce devient griffe, et la feuille de rose / Devient langue de chat’ (*OCP*, II: 542). Elsewhere, the structure is reversed to depict rewards, with God being said to change snakes into roots and vipers into lilies (*OCP*, IV: 692).

However, the most striking passages combine these different techniques for evoking cosmic change, as in the following stanza:

On verra palpiter les fanges éclairées,
 Et briller les laideurs les plus désespérées
 Au faite le plus haut,
 L'araignée éclatante au seuil des bleus pilastres
 Luire, et se redresser, portant des épis d'astres,
 La paille du cachot! (*OCP*, II: 551)

The prophetic 'on verra' allows the future to be conjured in noun phrases like 'fanges éclairées' which do not just juxtapose static opposites but telescope present reality and future ideal into single formulae emphasizing that no attributes are fixed and punishment is not eternal. Oxymoron thus creates an effect of dynamism, illustrating Cellier's contention that for Romantic poets oxymoron reconciles opposites and is thus a way of expressing divinity: 'le poète est celui qui en usant de l'antithèse et de l'oxymoron, passe d'un univers tragique à un paradis, de la dualité à l'unité' (1997: 194). The familiar antithesis of darkness and light is here complicated by the incorporation of two other distinct concrete metaphors: first a spider shining, a visual image which reverses the expected contrast between a dark silhouette and a bright sky, and secondly the straw on a cell floor standing up and bearing ears of wheat which are stars. In both cases an organic image is projected onto the cosmic scale – the spider becomes a source of light and the crop grows stars. Hugo's systematic rhyming of euphoric and dysphoric words is in abundant evidence here and, as so often, does not just emphasize polar opposites. 'Éclairées' alludes to both past darkness and present light; 'désespérées' describes present despair and yearning for a future. 'Araignée' echoes the sound of those dynamic participles, and its liminal position between earth and sky suggests a similar duality. Verbs are foregrounded either syntactically ('palpiter', 'briller', 'se redresser') or rhythmically ('luire' is accented in the line-initial position), making actions more important than states. This stanza thus emphasizes the process itself and suggests its profusion and multiplicity by superimposing a variety of different transformations.

Verbs play an important part in representing change as a process, often underlining transitional movements rather than outlining the shapes taken at any stage in the sequence, as in:

Tout se meut, se soulève, et s'efforce, et gravit,
Et se hausse, et s'envole, et ressuscite, et vit! (*OCP*, IV: 691)⁵

Riffaterre emphasizes how Hugo's poetry depicts transformations as a series of overlapping states (1971: 233-4). He argues that this enacts the mechanism of substitution which constitutes metaphor, and that for Hugo transformation is in effect 'une métaphore en mouvement', which shows the very process by which substitution takes place instead of just giving the completed phrase. This comparison is instructive in many ways, but is based in a traditional view of metaphor as the transposition of the name of one thing to another which resembles it. However, metaphor does not only involve a relationship between two isolated words but a whole sentence which connects two wider frameworks of meaning, as has been shown by theorists as diverse as Paul Ricoeur (1975), Eva Feder Kittay (1987), and Lakoff and Turner (1989). Viewing Hugo's metaphors for change in this perspective further highlights the many ways he goes beyond mere visual parallels. For instance, he often uses verbs themselves as metaphors. It has long been recognized that verb metaphors resist the logic of transposition and Christine Brooke-Rose concisely points out that 'with the noun, A is called B, more or less clearly according to the link. But the verb changes one noun into another by implication. And it does not explicitly 'replace' another action' (1958: 206). In the following description of lower forms dissolving into spirit, Hugo uses verbs literally to denote movement and transformation in the first half, whereas in the second half he uses verbs metaphorically:

On verra le troupeau des hydres formidables
Sortir, monter du fond des brumes insondables
Et se transfigurer;
Des étoiles éclore aux trous noirs de leurs crânes,
Dieu juste! Et, par degrés devenant diaphanes,

Les monstres s'azurer! (*OCP*, II: 551)

According to the logic of transposition, 'éclore' implicitly turns stars into flowers, a conventional metaphor, and 's'azurer' turns monsters into sky. However, more importantly, these verbs structure the process of transformation in specific physical terms. 'Éclore' suggests that cosmic change is akin to organic development.⁶ 'S'azurer' literally describes monsters changing colour but because 'azure' is itself a metaphor for the heavens, it simultaneously evokes physical ascent and increasing spirituality.

Verbal metaphors are also used in 'L'Océan d'en haut', where descriptions of pouring and filling evoke change:

Oui, l'horreur et le mal peuvent aux pieds de Dieu
Se verser tout à coup en urnes de lumière.
[...]
Tous les rayonnements puisent tous les chaos,
Vident la nuit, et font, ravissement des anges,
Des gerbes d'arc-en-ciel avec toutes les fanges! (*OCP*, IV: 691-2)

This draws on the ancient metaphor that Lakoff and Turner describe as life being a fluid in a container (1989: 19). It is not logically clear how the action of pouring transforms evil into light but, because evil and light are both often represented as liquids, 'verser' suggests that physical movement could bring about moral change. Light itself is actively drawing from darkness and thus simultaneously eliminating it and using it as material for something new: the rainbow is visually a fusion of dark and light, and the fact that it comes in sprays lends it the qualities of both liquid and vegetable matter, both associated with life. Progress towards good in this period is often represented as an increase in life, as summed up by Pelletan: 'Le progrès est l'accroissement de vie' (1852: 403), and Hugo expresses this in and through poetic images. Verbal metaphors also tell us something about the agents of the transformation. Here, the reflexive verbs indicate that change comes from within the evolving entities rather than from outside. Although Hugo often attributes the ultimate agency to God, his descriptions emphasize divinity acting throughout creation.

So far I have considered brief extracts taken out of context in order to identify the formal strategies at work, but now I shall relate these techniques to the larger questions raised by the two poems and consider how in their broader structure both texts organize ideas about transforming the cosmos. ‘Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre’ consists of a long sequence of verse paragraphs outlining first a view of the cosmos as a ladder and then describing how creation is in constant flux as the evil are punished by being reborn at a lower level and the good are rewarded by ascent. It ends with a much shorter strophic section triumphantly celebrating evil turning into good. The image of the ladder is a version of the ancient idea of the chain of being. Lovejoy has shown how in the eighteenth century this idea was transformed from a static scheme emphasizing the continuity and completeness of nature to a program which was being carried out slowly through time, and as a consequence the chain was reconceived as a ladder and the destiny of man as an unending progression (1936: 242-48). This kind of ladder is often evoked in writings about the perfectibility of man by contemporaries of Hugo, such as Pelletan:

la vie immortelle aura l’espace infini pour lieu de pèlerinage, l’éternité et l’immensité sont tellement solidaires, tellement dépendantes l’une de l’autre, qu’à peine interpellée et nommée, l’une appelle et attend toujours l’autre, comme son inséparable compagne. L’homme ira donc toujours de soleil en soleil, montant toujours, comme sur l’échelle de Jacob, la hiérarchie de l’existence; passant toujours, selon son mérite et selon son progrès, de l’homme à l’ange, de l’ange à l’archange. (1852: 427)

‘Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre’ translates such ideas into an elaborate poetic vision, in which the specific formulation of metaphors conveys a vitalistic world-view. Early in the poem, the spectre points out a hierarchy in nature, leading up from rocks, trees, and animals to man, and then asks how far this ladder extends:

4 L’échelle que tu vois, crois-tu qu’elle se rompe?
Crois-tu, toi dont les sens d’en haut sont éclairés,
Que la création qui, lente et par degrés,
S’élève à la lumière, et, dans sa marche entière,
Fait de plus de clarté luire moins de matière
Et mêle plus d’instincts au monstre décroissant,
Crois-tu que cette vie énorme, remplissant

8 De souffles le feuillage et de lueurs la tête,
 Qui va du roc à l'arbre et de l'arbre à la bête,
 Et de la pierre à toi monte insensiblement,
 S'arrête sur l'abîme à l'homme, escarpement? (*OCP*, II:537)

The spectre asks his question twice. Line 1 is a self-contained query about whether the ladder is continuous, and lines 2-11 repeat it in an extended form. Initially a ladder, the subject is redefined in line 3 as 'création' and in line 7 to 'vie'. These three different terms for the universe all have slightly different emphases. The ladder suggests a rigid unbroken chain but also a means of climbing and descending. 'Création' implies a creator but is also the subject of verbs denoting movement, suggesting that creation is an active force. 'Cette vie énorme' defines this force more specifically as life, and its activity is redefined as filling containers at different levels of the ladder, playing on the metaphor of life as a fluid.

These three different subjects overlap, for instance in line 3 the ladder metaphor alludes to the literal meaning of 'par degrés', one of Hugo's favoured expressions associated with gradual development. He also makes the metaphors of creation as a ladder and creation as a life force overlap, by describing the form of the ladder as though it were moving, when life is commonly equated with motion.⁷ Lakoff and Turner identify a common metaphorical structure as 'form is motion, in which a form is understood in terms of the motion tracing the form' (1989: 142). Hugo plays on this way of thinking about shapes to foreground the principle of energy. In the course of this passage verbs become increasingly active – 's'élève' in line 4 describes the ladder's direction whereas 'fait', 'mêle', and 'remplissant' imply it has agency and life. Verbs of motion also introduce the dimension of time to a spatial description. Because the same verbs describe both the structure of the ladder and the movements of the life force, creation is personified as being on a journey through both time and space. Hugo turns the chain of being into an active principle, simultaneously evoking a hierarchical spatial order and a universe driven by a life force. He not only shows individual elements of creation

to be animate but also depicts the very concept of the chain in dynamic terms, thus enacting the temporalizing of the chain that Lovejoy has highlighted.

The spectre answers his own rhetorical question to explain that the ladder continues into realms of creation which humans cannot know, both above and below the visible world. In describing these celestial realms, Hugo continues to personify creation and to describe its form as movement:

Non, elle continue, invincible, admirable,
 Entre dans l'invisible et dans l'impondérable,
 Y disparaît pour toi, chair vile, emplit l'azur
 D'un monde éblouissant, miroir du monde obscur,
 D'êtres voisins de l'homme et d'autres qui s'éloignent, 5
 D'esprits purs, de voyants dont les splendeurs témoignent
 D'anges faits de rayons comme l'homme d'instincts ;
 Elle plonge à travers les cieux jamais atteints,
 Sublime ascension d'échelles étoilées,
 Des démons enchaînés monte aux âmes ailées, 10
 Fait toucher le front sombre au radieux orteil,
 Rattache l'astre esprit à l'archange soleil,
 Relie, en traversant des millions de lieues,
 Les groupes constellés et les légions bleues,
 Peuple le haut, le bas, les bords et le milieu, 15
 Et dans les profondeurs s'évanouit en Dieu! (*OCP*, II: 537)

'Elle' refers back to 'cette vie énorme', which is now personified as an intrepid traveller entering unknown realms. It is now the subject of verbs not only of movement ('disparaît', 'plonge') and filling ('emplit', 'peuple') but also of connection ('fait toucher', 'rattache', 'relie'), so life is personified as a communicator linking different levels. States of being at adjacent levels are depicted as encounters, an effect enhanced by the fact that each level is populated by beings who are themselves mobile. Line 8 personifies the 'vie énorme' plunging across the heavens and line 9 is an apposition to it, such that this life is redescribed as an ascent, and thus as motion. The ladder, as metaphor for creation, had originally been the grammatical subject of this passage, but now the agent is life and the ladders are a route on which life is journeying. Hugo thus reintroduces the notion of the ladder as a fixed structure

while simultaneously turning it into something intangible – the plural detracts from any overly linear impression and the ladders are studded with stars.

The description of the ladder extending below earth to a ‘nadir livide’ inverts the features apparent in the upper levels, by limiting movement and negating images of life. At these lower levels, the universe as a whole is twisting horizontally: ‘L’hydre Univers tordant son corps écaillé d’astres’. Movements up and down the ladder are variously emanations (‘Le mal [...] / Dégorge une vapeur monstrueuse qui vit!’), sinkings (‘sombre’, ‘s’engloutit’, ‘tout flotte et s’en va dans un naufrage obscur’), and falls (‘De tout ce qui vécut pleut sans cesse la cendre’) (*OC*, II, 538). The horror is increased by the vestige of life trapped in these images – the vapour is alive, the ashes are the remnants of what once lived. As well as inverting the metaphors of movement, the lower levels also invert those of life as a fluid filling a container. Creation seems to horrify its own container, and as ‘abîmes’ are gulfs whose depth cannot be measured, they are incomplete containers. This negation is reinforced in the description of the space at the bottom of the ladder as lacking edges or walls. The passage culminates in a vision of the whole universe sinking in liquid evil, suggesting that Hugo is evoking the mirror image of God, an entity which encompasses the whole universe rather than just being the lowest rung. It ends in the famous image of the ‘affreux soleil noir d’où rayonne la nuit’, an oxymoron which works by negating a positive value (*OC*, II, 538).

The description of the ladder is a good example of how Hugo blurs boundaries between substance and energy, structure and movement, time and space. The rest of the verse paragraphs of ‘Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre’ outline the scheme of reincarnation, and the stanzas which conclude it are an ecstatic celebration of the cosmos moving towards a final harmony. There is in fact a startling leap between these two sections of the poem. Apart from the initial description of the ladder, which emphasizes the continuity of life reaching towards the spiritual realm, most of the verse paragraphs emphasize reincarnation as punishment

rather than reward. It is only the final strophic section that presents an optimistic vision of evil being transformed into good, an ending which does not seem to be prepared by the frequently stark vision set out in the verse paragraphs. This kind of discontinuity is common in Hugo's long poems and also reflects a contradiction inherent in the thought of the time – the theory of metempsychosis allows for the possibility that the whole of creation could improve, and many thinkers associated the idea that individual creatures were free to move up the scale of being with the idea that the whole universe was moving closer to God.⁸ This logic sometimes led to extravagant assertions: Ballanche stated that, because evil was gradually being eradicated, in the future animals would disappear because all life would become that of man (1831: 103).⁹ Hugo follows this tendency to make analogies between the microcosm and the macrocosm, portraying metempsychosis as operating at a cosmic scale, with planets like earth being prisons containing a multitude of souls (*OCP*, II: 547). In 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', the transition from an exposition of the scheme of reincarnation to a celebration of evil being eradicated coincides with a change in tone from lament to rejoicing. When Hugo suddenly shifts his focus from the particular to the cosmic, there is often an emotional heightening, conveyed initially by exclamations and imperatives and then by a sequence of the kind of elaborate metaphors discussed above.

In the equivalent passage of 'L'Océan d'en haut', the shift to the cosmic scale is less sudden. 'L'Océan d'en haut' consists of eight visions of different religions uttered by a series of winged creatures, beginning with a bat who evokes atheism, and covering polytheism and Christianity before culminating in the two which are relevant to the present discussion:

'L'Ange' and 'Lumière'.¹⁰ 'L'Ange' is a synthesis of early nineteenth-century mystical ideas about the cosmos. Like 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', it consists of two parts, firstly a long sequence of verse paragraphs which in turn reproach man for having conceived of God as a vengeful torturer and hell as eternal damnation, affirm that God wants man to follow his

curiosity, remind man that he is not superior to the rest of creation or alone in having a soul, briefly describe metempsychosis as a form of justice, and finally celebrate the spiritualization of the cosmos as a whole, a process explained simply as driven by God. The second part consists of a much shorter section in stanzaic form repeating elements of the preceding vision and emphasizing that all elements of creation are equal, using the political vocabulary of equality and justice.

The evocation of the cosmic transformation begins towards the end of the verse paragraphs and is introduced by the elliptical formula ‘La loi, sous ses deux noms une dans les deux sphères, / Vivants, c’est le progrès; morts, c’est l’ascension’, which telescopes the temporal notion of progress with the spatial notion of death as an afterlife (*OCP*, IV: 691). By stating that these are two manifestations of the same law, Hugo puts them in a dynamic relationship to one another. Reincarnation, and thus death, comes to drive the progress of the living, just as progress becomes a movement up the ladder and across the whole universe. Again, Hugo presents reincarnation as both a temporal and spatial phenomenon. In the passage which follows, individual expiation is related to cosmic transformation mainly through parallels between microcosm and macrocosm:

D’heure en heure, pour ceux qui se sont faits plus doux,
 La peine s’attendrit; l’ombre en bonheur se change;
 La bête est commuée en l’homme, l’homme en ange;
 Par l’expiation, échelle d’équité,
 Dont un bout est nuit froide et l’autre bout clarté, 5
 Sans cesse, sous l’azur que la lumière noie,
 L’univers Châtiment monte à l’univers Joie. (*OC*, IV: 691).

The parallel between the elevation of individuals in line 3 and of universes in line 7 is underlined by formal parallels. Here cosmic change is accelerated – the penal term ‘commuée’, meaning to change sentence, suggests an instant reprieve, underlined by the structure of the alexandrine, within the space of which the beast becomes an angel. ‘L’Ange’ as a whole ends by emphasizing the fate of individuals rather than the cosmos.

also recalls the topos of a blind man seeing the truth better than others. The acorn metaphor is elaborated in a description of the tree which it already contains. The tree represents a complex whole, combining dark and light, solidity and movement, disputes and marriages. The notion that everything is subject to a single law of change is underlined by the formal echoes connecting the different metamorphoses – a paradigm of vibration, always a characteristic of life, is used in evoking the contents of both egg ('tremblent') and acorn ('frissonant' and 'frémit'). The transformation of 'fange' into 'cristal' in line 15 might seem less obvious as a model of organic growth, but in fact crystal is often cited as a substance lying between stone and plants on the scale of being.¹¹ Like 'Limbes' (being between heaven and hell) and crystal, the chrysalis of line 16 represents an intermediate point, this time in the development of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The chrysalis was a commonplace metaphor for the potential of humanity to free itself from matter and take flight towards a spiritual destiny, appearing for instance in Ballanche and Michelet.¹²

A number of non-organic images are woven into this sequence, such as the mechanical wheel, whose rotation is associated with eternal hell, and the ruins of line 10 which will become eternal pediments, in a reversal of the normal process by which buildings become ruins.¹³ The 'frontons' are qualified as 'éternels' and thus immune to time. If ruins are buildings which are subject to the effects of time, 'frontons éternels' are both architectural and immaterial. This is consistent with a passage which rethinks temporality by declaring that things are already what they will be in the future.

The passage ends with an extended metaphor, asserting that because the butterfly, equated with paradise, exists, there is no caterpillar, equated with hell. Because the analogy of butterfly and paradise is elaborated first and draws on commonplace associations of flight and beauty with the ideal, the analogy of caterpillar and hell is made to seem self-evident in the context of the system of parallels. Furthermore, as the caterpillar emblemized the basic

unit of life (Schlanger: 1995, 116), the metaphor serves to redescribe hell as the starting point of a metamorphosis rather than the opposite of heaven.

Where the start of this passage emphasizes the process of change, and the bulk of it simply uses the future tense to state the inevitability that things will develop into their final forms, the end affirms that the present is negated by this future ideal. This assertion that things are already what they will become is an extreme version of Hugo's technique of accelerating gradual processes, suggesting that God lies beyond time. However, Hugo is also relying on the temporal dimension of the organic images to suggest the inevitability of the spiritual reconciliation he celebrates. That is to say, evil and good are simply opposites, whereas a seed will inevitably grow into a plant, so Hugo is using organic images to motivate a vision of evil turning into good. Grounding the description in organic images lends it the air of a natural law.

Viewing the universe in organic terms is one of the major ways in which Hugo evokes cosmic change. These kinds of images of inevitable organic development reflect an underlying view of nature as a harmonious and stable realm, an eighteenth-century perception which persisted into the nineteenth century despite an increasing emphasis on nature as a dynamic process of becoming. Hugo's writing often manifests a tension between these two tendencies, as was not uncommon. In 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre', the ladder of being is both a hierarchical structure and a dynamic life force. In 'Lumière', the framework of organic growth stabilizes a far-flung affirmation that evil will be resolved into goodness.

Hugo thus transposes into verse the Romantic tendency to privilege the idea of life and particularly to use organic metaphors to link the idea of individuality to the totality of the universe. He describes the structure of the cosmos in terms of motion, blurs the boundary between time and space, and uses metaphor to suggest variously the multiplicity,

inevitability, and speed of change. His verse enacts the very processes that he is describing and, in versifying movement, he dynamizes poetry.

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¹ 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre' was written in 1854, partly inspired by Hugo's experiments with the 'tables tournantes', and included in *Les Contemplations*. 'L'Océan d'en haut' was mostly written in 1855, originally intended to conclude *Les Contemplations* but became part of the separate project *Dieu* and was not published in his lifetime.

² See Judith Schlanger's valuable study of how in the Romantic period, organic metaphors and metaphors of organization were all part of a single discourse of 'organisme' which shaped all fields of inquiry (1971).

³ Leroux denies the existence of paradise because 'le véritable ciel, c'est la vie, c'est la projection infinie de notre vie.' (1985: 178). In an unfinished preface to *Les Misérables* written in 1860, generally known as the 'Préface Philosophique' and published as 'Philosophie Commencement d'un livre' in the chronological edition, Hugo states that hell is 'Éternel en soi, mais momentané en nous. Il est; on le traverse; on n'y souffre qu'un temps; on y entre et l'on en sort. Éternité mais passage.' (1967-70, XII: 31-2). See Albouy (1962) for an excellent account of how this preface takes issue with a variety of contemporary doctrines and articulates the doctrine of immortality of the stars which had been latent in 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre' and *Dieu*. The rehabilitation of Satan is another popular Romantic theme related to the rejection of hell.

⁴ A theme which Cellier identifies as the most surprising feature of this poem (Hugo 1969: 780).

⁵ Pich has pointed out how, as part of a strategy of undercutting narrative, Hugo uses intransitive verbs to denote actions when they are usually used to describe states. (2004: 17).

⁶ Similar to the description of the gaze becoming a star in 'Cadaver'.

⁷ See Nathan for a discussion of how the nineteenth century often conflated movement with life in elaborating the myth of the chain of being. (1983: 572-73).

⁸ See Lovejoy (1936: 246-250).

⁹ The connection between the future of individuals and the future of humanity is easier to explain in a scheme such as Leroux's in which humans are reincarnated only as humans; he argues that 'il y a pénétration de l'être particulier homme et de l'être général humanité.' (1985: 196)

¹⁰ Jossua points out that these last two sections are the only ones not to mark a clear theological advance on the others because the God they represent is still fundamentally Christian, but they do address genuine theological questions of salvation (1985: 196).

¹¹ Pelletan describes it as 'le dernier progrès du minéral' because it has form and colour, both qualities of life (1852: 34).

¹² See Nathan for a discussion of the chrysalis metaphor in this period (1983: 562-66).

¹³ See Tuzet for an account of how wheels are associated with limitation in Hugo (1965: 126-127).