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Seeing Time: Writing, Drawing and the Vision of Attention in Hugo and Valéry

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47g933th>

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Publication Date

2004

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Suzanne Guerlac

Seeing Time
*Writing, drawing and the vision of
attention in Hugo and Valéry*



University of California, Berkeley
2004

Morrison Library Inaugural Address Series

No. 24

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Series Editor: Carlos R. Delgado

Morrison Library: Alex Warren

Text format & design: Mary Scott

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ISSN: 1079-2732

Published by:

The Doe Library
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-6000

*We wish to thank The Department of French
for supporting the lecture and the publication
of this issue.*

PREFACE

The goal of this series is to foster scholarship on campus by providing new faculty members with the opportunity to share their research interest with their colleagues and students. We see the role of an academic library not only as a place where bibliographic materials are acquired, stored, and made accessible to the intellectual community, but also as an institution that is an active participant in the generation of knowledge.

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Editorial Board

SEEING TIME:

WRITING, DRAWING AND THE VISION
OF ATTENTION IN HUGO AND VALÉRY

Etes-vous visionnaire comme moi? Avez-vous éprouvé cela? (Hugo)

Moi... je veux tout voir. (Hugo, *Le Rhin*)

Victor Hugo est surréaliste. (Breton)

My return to Hugo has been prompted by the Surrealists, and what I call their poetics of the “useless image”—images that are readable or figurative, instead of being abstract, but which are not mimetic, not to be taken as referential or real. They are readable images, but without names. Think, for example, of Magritte’s image entitled *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. These “useless images” have been neglected by histories of modernism, which for decades now have shown disdain, if not contempt, for surrealist art—or for anything else that might lie too far afield from the royal road to modernist abstraction.

The surrealists were fascinated by the status and force of the visual image, in relation to both writing and the visual arts. “Mais qui dressera l’échelle de la vision?” Breton asks in *Surrealism and Painting*, “longtemps, je pense, les hommes éprouveront le besoin de remonter jusqu’à ses véritables sources le fleuve magique qui s’écoule de leurs yeux, baignant, dans la même lumière, dans la même ombre hallucinatoire, les choses qui sont et celles qui ne sont pas.” Here, where it is a question of painting, as in his short essay “The Automatic Message,” where it is a question of automatic writing, Breton alludes to Hyppolite Taine’s definition of perception as “une hallucination vraie”—as a hallucination which turns out (upon verification), to be true. In *De L’Intelligence*, Taine portrays the human mind as a “*véritable polypier d’images*” and proposes a theory of the mental image—“*survit intérieure d’une sensation directe avec le monde extérieur*”—as fundamentally hallucinatory. When perception is linked in this way to memory—truth becomes a matter of time.

I approach Hugo through Taine, and Breton, in order to displace the question of the visionary at the juncture of

the modern. A pre-modern visionary tradition implies a spiritual “seeing” which penetrates beyond this world to glimpse visions of transcendence. The visionary implies direct contact with the absolute, a mystical experience of a higher order of truth which enjoys the immediacy usually reserved for ordinary seeing. Against such mystical impulses, recent literary criticism has tended to reduce visionary poetics to rhetorical technique—as if the visionary dimension of Hugo’s writing could be adequately accounted for as a linguistic practice.

Against this mode of criticism, I want to insist that we take the act of seeing literally as we follow Victor Hugo in his travels down the Rhine and explore with him a more secular visionary practice: seeing the past. “On n’a qu’à ouvrir sa fenêtre sur le Rhin,” Hugo writes in his text by that name, *Le Rhin*. “On voit le passé, le passé est là en ruine.” Seeing the past displaces the visionary experience both from the religious realm and the pathological register (the register of hallucination). Though it involves seeing what is not there—*ce qui n’agit plus* as Bergson might say—the vision nevertheless attaches, in some sense, to the real.

Le Rhin, published in 1842, belongs to a genre of travel literature fashionable in the wake of Napoleon’s defeat. A trip down the Rhine, in particular, was *de rigueur* for romantic poets, given the force and popularity of Mme de Stael’s important book, *De l’Allemagne* which portrayed Germany as a land of poetic reverie and philosophical contemplation. Charles Nodier, Lamartine and others had already made the trip.

The form of Hugo’s text is epistolary. A series of letters mark the traveler’s progress down the Rhine, letters Hugo compares to so many windows “par lesquelles vous puissiez voir ce que je vois.” Often the letters convey a sense of immediacy with cinematic authority—“J’ai regardé dans le tombeau,” we read, “Je suis entré dans cette chambre

par une meutrière ... j'avance en me trainant sur les genoux ... Je vais monter par un escalier d'herbe dans une espèce de salle haute—J'y suis ... je fais le tour extérieur du château par le fossé—L'herbe glisse—Je vais rentrer dans la ruine... J'écris sur une petite console de velour vert que le mur me prête" (286-89). The letters then, are windows onto the traveler's soul that allow us to see the past—"On n'a qu'à ouvrir sa fenêtre sur le Rhin ... on voit le passé. Le passé est là en ruine."

The letters that make up the text appear to follow a continuous itinerary in documentary fashion, to provide a simple account of *choses vues*. Actually Hugo made a series of voyages between 1938-1940, accompanied by his mistress, Juliette Drouet. The letters, for the most part, were addressed to his wife who was left behind. The itinerary of *Le Rhin* involves a composite of these various trips, the last one having been undertaken with the explicit purpose of producing a book. The book includes texts written during these various voyages, revised and supplemented with material written upon his return to Paris. A curious conclusion has been added to the book. For during the period of these various voyages, passions had become heated concerning the future disposition of the Rhineland. By the time the book is ready for publication, France and Germany appear to be headed for war. Hugo addresses the political question in a short preface and, at length, in his conclusion that is replete with nationalist sentiment.

In his preface, Hugo maintains that it was simply a need for distraction, and a certain antiquarian curiosity, that prompted his journey. At the very first sight of the Rhine River, however, this simple desire "s'est transformé en volonté de voir ... dans un but déterminé, ce qui fit passer la rêverie en pensée." The voyage becomes a journey of contemplation, for it is precisely in these terms that the act of contemplation is defined—a sort of chemistry, Hugo writes, thanks to which "une pensée sort de la rêverie."

The preface suggests that the river itself catalyzed the act of contemplation, to the extent that it “laiss[a] entrevoir, sous la transparence de ses eaux, le passé et l’avenir de l’Europe.” Hugo takes it upon himself to examine the Rhineland from this double perspective—the past and the future—in an effort to “résoudre amicalement une question de haine.” This, in any case, is the way he frames the body of his text—the letters, the windows onto his soul.

Hugo travels down the Rhine. “Du haut du schloss on a une vue immense et l’on découvre dans les embrasures des montagnes cinq autres châteaux en ruine.” (299) His route is perforated with ruins that rise up from their sites, and hollow out a vertical dimension of time. It is as if the flow of time has precipitated into ruins that become objects of a particular sort of attention—“magnetic fields,” as Breton might say—initiating the poet into a specific mode of poetic attention: contemplation. “*Je restai longtemps l’œil fixé sur cette pierre, l’esprit abîmé dans les hypothèses sans fond,*” he writes (221). “*Je ne pouvais m’arracher de cette ruine.*” (289) “*Je suis resté longtemps assis là sur une pierre, regardant en silence passer cette heure sombre où le crêpe des fumées et des vapeurs efface lentement le paysage ... et où le contour des objets prend une forme fantasque et lugubre...*” (290).

Hugo’s “hallucinatory” writing of the *fantasque* and the *lugubre*, has been analyzed by literary critics—Michael Riffaterre in particular—in terms of specific rhetorical codes and gestures—anthropomorphism, abrupt changes of tempo, verbal infusions of mobility into descriptions, metaphors in, etc.—and we find many of these techniques at work in *Le Rhin*. But I want to insist that we take the act of seeing **literally** in the case of *Le Rhin*, not only because Hugo—*le grand regardeur*, as he is known—was apparently “obsessed” with vision—but because of the drawings he produced on his trip down the Rhine. His graphic art came into its own during these voyages, and the motif of the

Rheinish Castle haunts his production for years to come, well into the 1850s, when, in exile, he produces his strongest work.

In *Le Rhin* Hugo speaks of drawing everything he sees. The drawings were never meant to serve as illustrations of the text. Drawing and writing were parallel, equally frenetic, and at times competing activities. Could it be that the mode of attention that will develop into the poetics of contemplation during the years of exile is cultivated through the practice of drawing and the literal act of seeing it engaged? Or, more precisely, does the practice of contemplation develop through an **articulation** of drawing and writing, an interaction of verbal and visual processes? I am going to turn to Valéry to support this hypothesis.

* * * * *

In a project worthy of M Teste, Valéry gives an account of what it might mean to become aware of the act of awareness itself. Attention is “*une affaire de vue*,” he writes in his *Mémoire sur l’Attention* (1905). We pay attention to what we look at; we see because we pay attention. But all of this happens automatically, in physiological response to outside stimuli. The eye focuses. External excitations and the muscles of the eye accommodate one another until the moment when the eye can pick a distinct object out of the incoherent chaos of immediate experience—“*l’incohérence informe du réel immédiat*”—and recognize a coherent image. Perception (ordinary seeing) performs a passage from incoherence to coherence. This is what happens all the time thanks to the sensitive muscles of our eyes—and we are not even aware of it.

But what if we want to become aware of it? What if we want to turn our attention to this act itself? To analyze attention, it is necessary to stage an act of vision that imposes itself on our awareness. Valéry turns to the act of

drawing—*voir le crayon à la main*—which, he argues, lets us see the event of vision itself. Drawing is not just a physical act; it is an intentional one, and, as such, it is autonomous. “*Il faut vouloir voir,*” writes Valéry, “*et cette vue voulue a le dessin pour fin et pour moyen à la fois.*” The drawing is the end, or product, of attention; but the act of drawing is also the means by which we accede to the act of attention itself—hence its pertinence to Hugo’s voyage down the Rhine.

If *voir le crayon à la main* lets us see the act of vision, it is not only because it prolongs it, but also because it strategically interrupts it. The activity of the hand interrupts that of the eye, which has to refocus each time it shifts back from the hand to the object it draws. And each time this interruption occurs, memory kicks in, in order to hold onto what the eye has just seen long enough for the hand to record it. “*C’est alors du souvenir que la main sur le papier va emprunter sa loi du mouvement,*” writes Valéry. This is precisely why the act of attention, in the strict sense Valéry now gives to the word, is autonomous, why it is a free or voluntary act—a *voir voulu*, instead of an automatic response to physical stimulus.

Valéry’s analysis reveals that in the *voir voulu* of attention, memory is interwoven with acts of perception. “J’ai lu Bergson aussi mal que j’ai pu,” Valéry is reported to have remarked. And here he does not mention the philosopher by name. But of course Bergson has theorized precisely such an interweaving of perception and memory in his account of attentive recognition in *Matière et mémoire*. It is precisely because the act of perception takes time, Bergson argues, that memory is required for perception to take place. And the more complex an organism’s sensory apparatus, the more time is required, because perception will then involve the articulation of a number of sensory systems—sight, and the sense of touch, for example.

Thus, Valéry’s example of the system of the eye having to be regulated with the system of the hand by the central

command of *la volonté*, recapitulates (or stages) a fundamental element of Bergson's analysis. According to Bergson's theory, it is this supplement of time—this gap—that breaks the determinism of automatic response and opens up the possibility of voluntary action in response to outside stimuli. Freedom from determinacy depends on memory, i.e. on the possible accumulation of past time. Memory is not only essential to perception, according to Bergson, perception itself is above all “an occasion for remembering.” Hugo's *Le Rhin* stages this insight over and over again in its account of the traveler's contemplation of the ruins he lays eyes on: “j'avais passé toute une journée en présence de ses grands et austères souvenirs, il me semblait que j'avais sur moi la poussière des siècles” (250). Attention, then, introduces a factor of time into the act of seeing. It does so not just because it prolongs the gaze, but also because of the infusion of memory it introduces into the act of perception. Hugo's visionary practice—his *voir le passé ... le passé ... là en ruine*—entails an encounter with time in the sense in which Bergson will theorize time as duration a few years after Hugo's death: i.e. time as the dynamic fusion of succession and simultaneity.

In *Le Mémoire sur l'Attention*, Valéry introduces a term that both conveys the radical nature of time as duration and characterizes the visual effect of Hugo's most celebrated drawings: *la dé-cohérence*. If ordinary seeing marks a passage from incoherence to coherence (in the production of the image of an object), attention in the more rigorous sense of a *voir voulu* marks a passage from coherence to what Valéry calls *dé-cohérence*. It is a term that both captures the force of Hugo's drawings and suggests the path of intuition according to Bergson, the movement *à rebours*, as it were, from coherence organized on a spatial framework for the sake of action in the world (i.e.. for survival) to the intuition of duration—an experience of time as confused multiplicity, as heterogeneous fusion of simultane-

ity and succession. “*Il faut vouloir rêver*,” Bergson writes, of the task of philosophical intuition, but it is an unusual kind of dreaming that he has in mind, one that requires significant effort. Similarly, according to Valéry, the attention of the *voir voulu*—*voir le crayon à la main*—pulls apart the coherent framework we associate with objectivity. And in both Valéry and Bergson, one arrives at the event of *dé-coherence* not by going *beyond* the coherence of ordinary vision (as in a moment of visionary transcendence) but by entering into a relation with time. In Valéry’s account, one arrives at the event of *dé-cohérence* by a movement of temporal return—a reprise of the first movement of vision: *le crayon à la main*. In both Bergson and Valéry, a force of time enters into the act of attention. I want to suggest that in Hugo’s visionary practice, through an articulation of seeing and drawing, but also of drawing and writing, attention (or contemplation) makes contact with an event of Time.

Although Bergson and Valéry both write after *Le Rhin* (1842), it is not farfetched to invoke a theory of attention in connection with Hugo’s practice and poetics of contemplation. Schelling comments as early as 1812, on the power of Mesmeric sleep *to develop visionary talent*. Attention becomes an increasingly acute problem in the course of the 19th century as classical models of cognition and visual coherence are called into question through developments in philosophy, science, and technology. At the same time, movements in the social sciences attempt to shore up the basic principles of the classical model.

Bergson writes his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* in 1889, four years after Hugo’s death; *Matière et mémoire* follows in 1896. In both works Bergson challenges developments in the social sciences that attempt to rationalize the classical model in a deterministic manner. Associationist psychology takes hold in France in the 1840s. In the 1850s, Fechner, the inventor of psychometrics, attempts to measure relations between external stimu-

lation and subjective mental experience in consciousness. Herbert Spenser, the founder of “social darwinism,” argues that experience is a passive response to external stimulation. These are the positions Bergson targets, the positions against which he formulates his theory of duration in the 1880s and 1890s, around the same time that Freud abandons his neurological model of consciousness in favor of a metapsychology. As Jonathan Crary puts it in his study *Suspension of Perception, Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, “the more one investigated, the more attention was shown to contain within itself the conditions for its own undoing—attentiveness was in fact continuous with states of distraction, reverie, dissociation and trance” (45-46). Hugo’s drawings would appear to bear this out. But what then of Valéry’s analysis of attention that staged a scene of classical drawing—of *voir le crayon à la main*?

If you are familiar with Hugo’s drawings, you may already be formulating an objection to my line of argument: Hugo’s most celebrated drawings bear no resemblance to the kind of classical drawing activity Valéry obviously had in mind when he spoke of the calculated interaction between eye and hand in the act of *voir le crayon à la main*. In fact, the “revolutionary” force of the drawings done in connection with the Rhine Valley voyage has precisely to do with the fact that it was on this voyage that Hugo began to abandon classical mimetic draftsmanship, that he gave up drawing with steel pen or sharp pencil, shifting instead first to pastel crayons, charcoal and brushes, and subsequently to more idiosyncratic practices—lavis or washes concocted of coffee grounds mixed with ink, resin, and other materials, stencils, cut outs, pliages, scratching of the surface, and collages, and even, eventually, photocollages.

I have an answer to this objection, but it will require a substantial detour, for which I now ask your patience. Henri Focillon observed that the visual effects of Hugo’s drawings—specifically the atmospheric play of tonalities

of black and grey—recall the effects produced by techniques of aquatint engraving that had come back into fashion around 1830, specifically in the context of architectural and archeological subjects. What Focillon does not mention, however, is that the techniques Hugo uses in the production of his drawings might be considered adaptations of various techniques of reproductive engraving (especially of the *eau forte*—the aquatint and the mezzotinte, referred to as *manière noire*)—their adaptation to works on paper made directly by hand, a medium that better suited a traveler crawling around in ruins “drawing everything he saw.” The *estompe*, the *lavis*, the stopping out action involved in stenciling, transfer techniques, the scratching techniques, all belong to practices of print production.

The important point in relation to the analysis of Valéry is twofold. First, the renaissance of the *eau forte* (and the popularity of an emerging technology of lithography) occurred principally in the context of reproductive printing, i.e. in the production of *copies* of drawings or paintings. To refer back to Valéry’s analysis, then, if drawing involved a kind of meta-vision, a reprise or copying of the act of vision, the reproduction of drawing by engraving simply takes this self-reflexive process one step further. The *voir voulu* Valéry invokes is taken to the second power.

The second point, however, is that, even after having abandoned the *telos* of the mimetic project, Hugo often started out with a classical drawing, which he then effaced, inundating it with a wash, in order to then draw again, more freely, in a second moment. So the “attentive” process as Valéry has analyzed it—the *voir le crayon à la main*—remained a moment of the facture of his drawings. One might even say that the two layers of operation play out the shift already taking place in the concept of attention itself as it moved precisely toward the visionary features of *contemplation* or the energies of what Valéry called *la décohérence*.

I have already mentioned that *Le Rhin* belonged to a genre of travel literature very popular in this period. It is precisely in this context—in the context of *voyages poétiques* and *voyages pittoresques*—that the technology of print reproduction flourished. Travel literature evolved into a genre of the illustrated book of which the *Voyages Pittoresques*, edited by Charles Nodier, was the most ambitious example. It was in the context of a commercial market for the illustrated book (the *Voyages Pittoresques* were sold by subscription) and the development of techniques of lithography that made reproduction both faster and less costly, that the impetus was also given to the development of technologies of photography. Daguerre, Lemaître and early photographers such as Bacot, were all involved in the project of the *Voyages Pittoresques*. Both Hugo's text and his drawings belong to this context.

* * * * *

Commentators often remark how expressive they find the dark atmosphere of Hugo's drawings, which evokes a mood of romantic melancholy that suits the theme of the ruin. But isn't this atmosphere a bit *too* black for the nostalgic mood of the romantic discourse of the ruin - the *ainsi donc périssent les ouvrages de l'homme* of Volney, and its avatars in Chateaubriand?

Instead of asking what the blackness *expresses*, we might ask how it *functions*. It is produced through a wash, a *lavis*, that usually washes over a figure without entirely effacing it. A sort of phantom figure comes through the *lavis*, but because of the wash it is hard to locate in any single spatial frame of reference. The *lavis* liquefies the limit between figure and ground, and in so doing problematizes the spatial structure of the *tableau* inherited from classical perspective and theorized in formal terms by Diderot. The wash, in other words, interrupts—

or de-coheres—the framework of spatial representation—the horizon of presence—such that the figure engages us in an encounter with time.

The relation between subject and object should be considered not in terms of space, but of time—Bergson affirmed. “We acknowledge the existence of things that lie outside our consciousness when it comes to objects in space,” he wrote “... we attribute powers of conservation to space that we are not willing to grant to time. We assume that space holds things while time does not hold psychological states in succession there. We accept a horizon of objectivity because we consider space to be its guarantee.” This is what Bergson calls the “obsession with space” that in his view dominates Western thought. We could say that in Hugo’s drawings the *lavis* operates as a mechanism of what Valéry would call *déshabitude*. It interrupts the habit of thinking in terms of space, instead of time, and invites us into an experience of time through the “dé-coherence” of these images of ruins.

When we experience Hugo’s drawings, wrote Henri Focillon, “nous subissons le vertige du Temps plus terrible que le vertige de l’espace.” What I am suggesting is that the ruin, in *Le Rhin*, is not simply a theme—a motif to be re-presented. It is an *occasion for remembering* the “*être là en ruine*” of time itself. In slightly more technical terms, we could say that, in both his drawings and his text (as we shall see momentarily), Hugo gives us a mode of the image that operates as an event of temporal synthesis. And the vertige du temps noted by Focillon implies an *être-là en ruine* not only of the past—but of the image itself—a *dé-coherence* of the image (not in a movement toward abstraction but a dé-coherence of the image, i.e. performed through the figural image itself).

* * * * *

“Si la monotonie est une faiblesse, là est sans doute le défaut principal du *Rhin*.” Jean Gaudon writes a bit coyly of Hugo’s text, to which he nevertheless ascribes a “revolutionary” force in relation to the development of Hugo as a writer. “On dirait que chaque chapitre doit nécessairement se terminer par une description crépusculaire,” he continues, “En dehors du nocturne grinçant de Givet et du nocturne grandiose d’Aix-la-Chapelle, il y a , dans le voyage de 1840, treize visions nocturnes.”

In *Le Rhin*, Hugo provides a strikingly similar analysis concerning the monotony of history itself:

Après de longs intervalles ... les mêmes fait effrayants ... reviennent, comme des comètes, des plus ténébreuses profondeurs de l’histoire. Ce sont toujours les mêmes embûches, les mêmes trahisons, toujours les mêmes naufrages aux mêmes écueils; les noms changent, les choses persistent.

What I call a kind of *écriture de pochoir* suits the monotony of history, reveals it to us, demystifying its narrative surface and inviting us into contact with time. The *pochoir*, or stencil, is another technique Hugo uses in his drawings (a technique related to reproductive printing processes) and it is one that also informs Hugo’s visionary writing in *Le Rhin*. It acts as a block, like the ground of an eau forte. Hugo sometimes uses it to block the lavis, the way a ground blocks the bite of acid in an etching. But it could also be said to block the mimetic path from image to thing because it functions in iteration, *like a word*. It interposes itself between the gaze of the viewer and the thing seen, replacing both with an emptied form. It blocks the gaze that would look for a referent in the external world and deflects that gaze back to the reserve of memory. It imposes a visual blockage in favor of an image of *déjà vue*.

In *De l’Intelligence*, Taine affirms that when we use a word it is accompanied in our minds by a precise image,

not a general one. If we say the word “tree” for example it is accompanied by the mental image of a particular kind of tree—a fir, for example, or an elm, or an oak. Hugo suggests that his visionary language works just the other way around. “Les arbres de cette forêt de mes rêves,” he writes, “n’étaient ni des sapins, ni des ormes, ni des chênes, c’étaient des *arbres*.” In visionary discourse the word functions as a word type, a textual equivalent of the stencil or transfer procedure used by Hugo in his visionary drawings.

If we read *Le Rhin* for narrative, or even touristic value—for its account of *choses vues* by the sophisticated eye of the antiquarian—monotony is indeed the principal defect of Hugo’s text. But attention to the drawings—to the operations of the *lavis* and the stencil, to take just these two examples—teaches us to read differently. Without narrative expectations, we enter into the singularity and qualitative nuances of each encounter. We attend to what Valéry calls the *timbres d’attention* and to the qualitative nuances of tone in Hugo’s writing.

I would now like to examine a short passage from *Le Rhin* that makes time itself into a visual artist and textually performs an event of temporal synthesis.

Comme j’approchais de Soissons, le soir tombait. La Nuit ouvrait déjà sa main pleine de fumée dans cette ravissante vallée où la route s’enfonce après le hameau de la Folie, et promenait lentement son immense estompe sur la tour de la cathédrale et la double flèche de Saint-Jean-des-Vignes. Cependant, à travers les vapeurs qui rampaient pesamment dans la campagne, on distinguait encore ce groupe de murailles, de toits, d’édifices, qui est Soissons; à demi engagé dans le croissant d’acier de l’Aisne, comme une gerbe que la faucille va couper. Je me suis arrêté un instant au haut de la descente pour jouir de ce beau spectacle—Un grillon chantait dans un champ voisin, les arbres de chêne jasaient tout bas et tressaillaient au dernier vent du soir avant de s’assoupir; moi je regardais

attentivement avec les yeux de l'esprit une grande et profonde paix sortir de cette sombre plaine qui a vu César vaincre, Clovis régner et Napoléon chanceler. C'est que les hommes, même Cesar, même Clovis, même Napoléon, ne sont que des ombres qui passent; c'est que la guerre n'est qu'une ombre comme eux qui passe avec eux... (45-6).

Hugo presents what he sees from the window of a carriage—a diligence—he takes “afin de regagner du temps perdu,” time lost in contemplation of a ruin. The carriage races down into the valley as night falls, already encroaching on evening. Time is passing. With the *fumées* the evening releases as it passes into night, time appears to wash the evening with night as the *fumées* condense into *gouttellettes fines*—and night “promenait lentement son immense estompe sur la tour de la cathédrale.”

I want to emphasize two things about this passage. First, the way in which visual and verbal operations intertwine in this moment of contemplation. The village of Soissons—its buildings and walls grouped together as a *gerbe*—is still discernible (*on distinguait encore*) “à demi engagé dans le croissant d’acier de l’Aisne.” The visual aspect of the curving, silvery river engenders the image of the *faucille* poised to cut the architectural *gerbe* as night falls, throwing the scene into darkness. But the notion of the harvest is suggested by the word Soissons, which, with one change of letter, would read Moisson. And the *faucille*, visually suggested by the lines of the river, stands in for the *estompe* manipulated by nightfall. Its incipient cut would cut off appearance altogether, throwing it into darkness.

At this liminal moment the scene gathers itself together into an image. “Je me suis arrêté un instant ... au haut de la descente pour jouir de ce beau spectacle.” The temporal interval of nightfall condenses into an instant which immediately dilates through the auditory dimension (*chantait, jasaient, etc.*) to become an extended moment

held by the attentive gaze—the *voir voulu*—of a moment of contemplation: “Moi je regardais attentivement avec les yeux de l’esprit.” The *beau spectacle*, however, has already been given (harvested, as it were) in the preceding sentences which brought us to the cutoff point of the loss of visibility marked by the impending “va couper” of the scythe. What the mind’s eye sees is rather what Taine would call an *image fantôme*—the shadow (or perhaps the photo negative) of a hallucinatory vision—“moi je regardais attentivement... une grande et profonde paix sortir de cette sombre plaine qui a vu César vaincre, Clovis régner et Napoléon chancelier.” The gaze is displaced to the plain such that the successive moments of history associated with the names Caesar, Clovis, and Napoleon are evoked as past, a pastness inscribed as a having been seen. But if the river inscribes the scythe visually, it is of course the name of the river (l’Aisne) that introduces the question of war and peace through the homonymie with the word “haine.” What I want to emphasize is that the visual and verbal registers are working in tandem in this event of contemplation. The visual smudging of contours by the estompe of night is accompanied by a verbal smudging of limits which occurs through the pronominal passage from *je* to *on*, and through the indefinite adverbs (*déjà encore*) that blur the temporal limits of this scene which hovers between description and narration, engendering a fusion of heterogenous moments—a fusion of successive states—which performs an act of temporal synthesis in accordance with both Valéry’s definition of attention (*fusion d’états successifs*) and Bergson’s definition of duration.

* * * * *

This passage of *Le Rhin* serves as a prelude to the innumerable descriptions of ruins that follow. It reveals their temporal structure as synthesis of past-present-future, that

will be performed or invoked a number of times in relation to the experience of *être-là en ruine* or *être dans la ruine*. Here successive states of nightfall are held together in a *beau spectacle* which gathers together the successive states marked by the names Cesar, Clovis, and Charlemagne. “Rien ne ressemble à une ruine comme une *ébauche*,” Hugo writes in *Le Rhin*, an insight that will be rephrased in the later essay, *William Shakespeare*, as the temporality of the abyss, *déjà, pas encore* associated with genius. Throughout the pages of *Le Rhin* the ruin operates this articulation of the “double aspect of past and future” revealed, as we mentioned earlier, by the river itself. My argument is that the ruin is not just a theme but the concretization of the temporal structure that marks the visionary experience itself—the experience of *voir le passé*.

The most dramatically striking visionary moment in *Le Rhin* is the vision of Charlemagne that occurs in Aix-la-Chapelle: “il me semblait voir l’ombre de ce géant que nous nommons Charlemagne se lever lentement.” I will return in a moment to the status of the Ombre. But first it is important to follow the temporality into which this vision is embedded. Hugo describes the church of Aix-la-Chapelle as a hybrid, an agglomeration, a fusion of heterogenous styles: “le romain, le roman, le gothique, le rococo et le moderne se mêlent et se proposent sur cette façade... sans affinité, sans nécessité, sans ordre.” Hugo enters the church and sees the reliquary that holds the bones of Charlemagne’s body. He considers the body that has been dismembered so as to be distributed to various reliquaries, and imagines that it will be pieced together again—not as a body, a relic, but as *fantôme*. But notice how he phrases it: “ce fantôme qui aura été Charlemagne.” And he adds, “Ce sera une grande apparition pour quiconque osera hasarder son apparition.” Here the future anterior tense attaches to the reconstitution of Charlemagne—as *image fantôme*—as *ombre*. But if this reconstitution is projected

into the future, we also read that Charlemagne “est encore là tout entier... il résume dans sa puissante unité les disparités de cet édifice.” So the survival of the past—*encore là*—is articulated with the “aura été Charlemagne.” It is this temporal articulation which leads up to the vision itself: “il me semblait voir l’ombre de ce géant que nous nommons Charlemagne se lever lentement.”

Hugo tells us in *Le Rhin* that, as a child, his German nurse had placed an image of the *Tours des Rats* over his bed. This image haunted the young Hugo, because of the legend that surrounded it. As he writes in *Le Rhin*, the image entered into his dreams. On his voyage down the Rhine, Hugo visits this ruin: “Enfin, j’y étais, elle était devant moi et j’allais y entrer... Entrer dans ce cauchemar...” (327). “Je sentais que j’approchais de la Mausethurm et que dans peu d’instant cette mesure redoutable, qui n’avait été pour moi jusqu’à ce jour qu’une hallucination, allait devenir pour moi une réalité” (325). We could adjust Taine’s definition to say that perception is hallucination come true! Is he disappointed by what he sees? Not at all! “Je tenais donc mon rêve,” he writes, “et il restait rêve...l’apparition était sous mes yeux.” (325) Entering into the *Tours des Rats* he describes this scene: “Une chambre qui a encore la figure d’une chambre et dont le plafond a été enlevé par une main invisible comme le couvercle d’une boîte, devient une chose lugubre et *sans nom*... Ce n’est pas une maison, ce n’est pas un tombeau. Dans un tombeau on sent l’âme de l’homme, dans ceci on sent son *ombre*.” “*Je tenais donc mon rêve et il restait rêve!*” This is the structure of *ombre*, or *fantôme*, that characterizes the visionary moment in *Le Rhin*, the moment of *voir le passé*. It correlates precisely with the structure of the ruin as, in Hugo’s words, “*monde qui n’est pas et qui est.*”

* * * * *

“Il peut paraître étrange de parler de contemplation, au sens le plus fort du terme, à propos des oeuvres qui restent dans leur intention figurative,” writes Jean Gaudon, the celebrated Hugo scholar, of Hugo’s drawings. My intention has been to deepen precisely this embarrassment and to redirect a line of inquiry into the visionary in Hugo towards the figural image. We have considered Hugo’s trip down the Rhine in relation to both his drawings and his texts in order to emphasize the importance of taking the act of seeing literally, and to suggest that an articulation of verbal and visual processes is crucial to what Hugo calls “contemplation” (as it is for the surrealists), a visionary practice that involves a particular relation to time established through the deployment of figural images.

But, as the note of embarrassment we detect in Gaudon’s comment suggests, this is not how the visionary experience in Hugo is usually read. Whether or not it is reduced to a rhetorical practice, the high visionary moment in Hugo is usually identified as an encounter with invisibility; this is what we find in a number of the “meta-physical” poems of *Les Contemplations*. We find these moments—and they are powerful—in some of the strongest poems of *Les Contemplations* and it is to these moments that critics point when they want to emphasize the *modernity* of Hugo (as opposed to the “banality” of his romanticism). They are Kantian moments—presentations of the unrepresentable that belong to a modernist visionary sublime, and as such, find their place in histories of modernism, on the royal road to minimalist abstraction. We might think, for example, of the painter Robert Ryman.

For the reasons I indicated at the very beginning of this talk, my interest has been to retrieve a visionary moment that is both visionary *and* figurative, a moment I have located in connection with the voyage down the Rhine because it includes both visual and textual production. To retrieve this moment, then, not because the visionary

practice of Hugo should be reduced to the figural practice, but because Hugo's engagement with figuration in a visionary mode extends what I call the "poetics of the useless image" beyond surrealism, and, to this extent, shores up the surrealist critique of modernism articulated by Breton in his essay on the photocollages of Max Ernst and, independently, by Magritte in his essay "Lignes de Vie." I feel this critique has still not been fully appreciated because criticism itself has been imbued with the spirit (and the blindspots) of modernism.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest another approach to the modernity of Hugo: his fascination with photography. As Stephen Bann has argued, the technologies of the daguerrotype and the photograph evolve in the cultural and commercial context of reproductive printmaking we have already examined briefly in relation to Hugo's drawings—the context of new technologies of lithography, new markets for travel literature, commercial ventures such as the *Voyages Pittoresques*, *Le Rhin* and the drawings associated with it. Daguerre makes public his discovery of the daguerrotype in 1839—while Hugo is traveling in the Rhineland. The work of Fox Talbot is introduced in France in 1847.

Hugo's involvement with photography was more than circumstantial. It exerted a fascination on him, especially during the years of exile. Jean-Jacques Sebatier, another exiled Republican, teaches Hugo the rudiments of both photography and daguerrotype production. Edmond Bacot, a celebrated photographer in the early decades of the new technology, also linked to the republican milieu, and engaged in projects of architectural engraving and photography, was close friends with Hugo. The two men exchanged photographs and drawings on a regular basis. Bacot admits to having been influenced both by the text *Le Rhin* and by Hugo's drawings, which the exiled poet sends him periodically. In 1852, Hugo sets up a photo

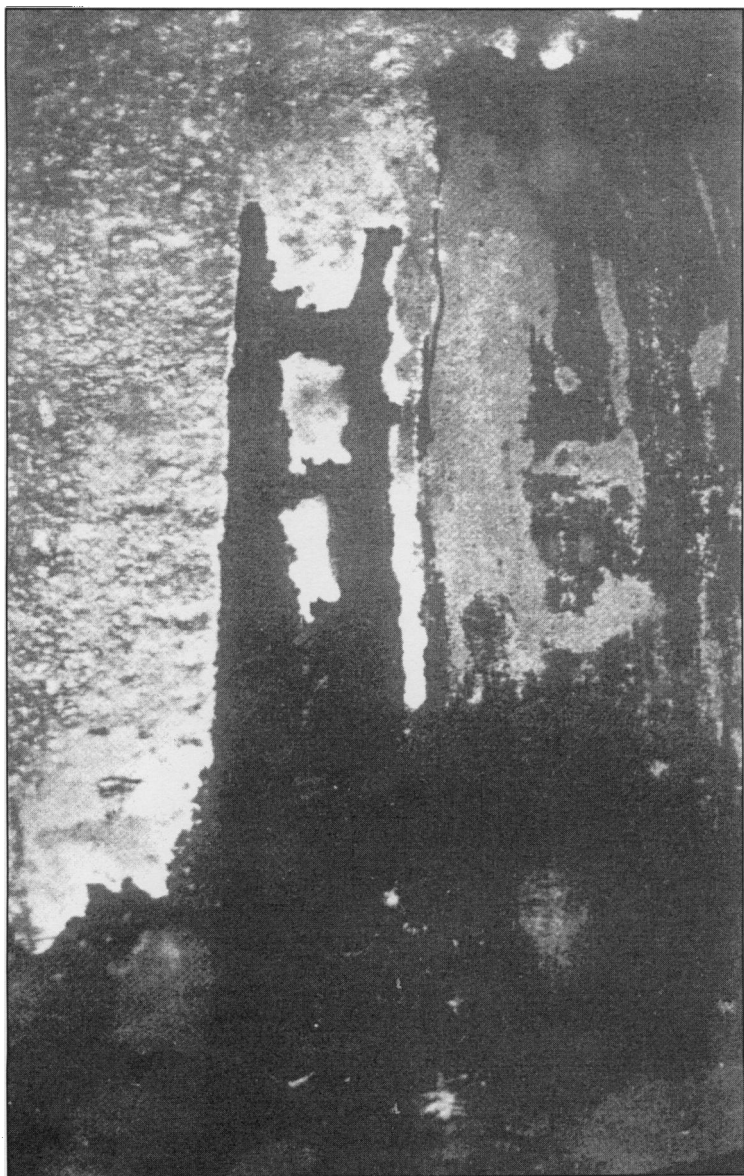
studio in Jersey, ostensibly in order to give his son something to do, but he was himself directly involved in staging many of the photos that would be taken by his son. In 1853 he writes to his Belgian publisher, Hetzel: “C’est justement la lithogrpahie, la lourde, et inepte et pateuse lithographie qu’il faut tuer par la main de sa souer, plus scabreuse à prononcer, mais infiniment plus belle, la photographie. C’est la revolution de la photographie que nous voulons faire (en attendant).” Hugo is also one of the first French writers to become enthusiastic about the idea of publishing books with photographs. He launched a number of projects which never saw the light of day. Among them were photo-illustrated editions of both *Le Rhin* and *Les Contemplations*.

What this tells us, I think, is that the figurative or readable dimension of the visionary practice of “contemplation” cannot be dismissed. This is further confirmed by the fact that Hugo integrated photographic processes into his drawings which he continued to make through the years of exile, producing some of his greatest masterpieces during these years. Sometimes he draws from photographs. Sometimes he photographs his drawings. Sometimes he draws **over** photographs and sometimes he draws from photographic *negatives*. He also inserts photo images in collage drawings—not exactly what we could call photo-collages, of the sophisticated variety of Max Ernst—but a step in that direction.

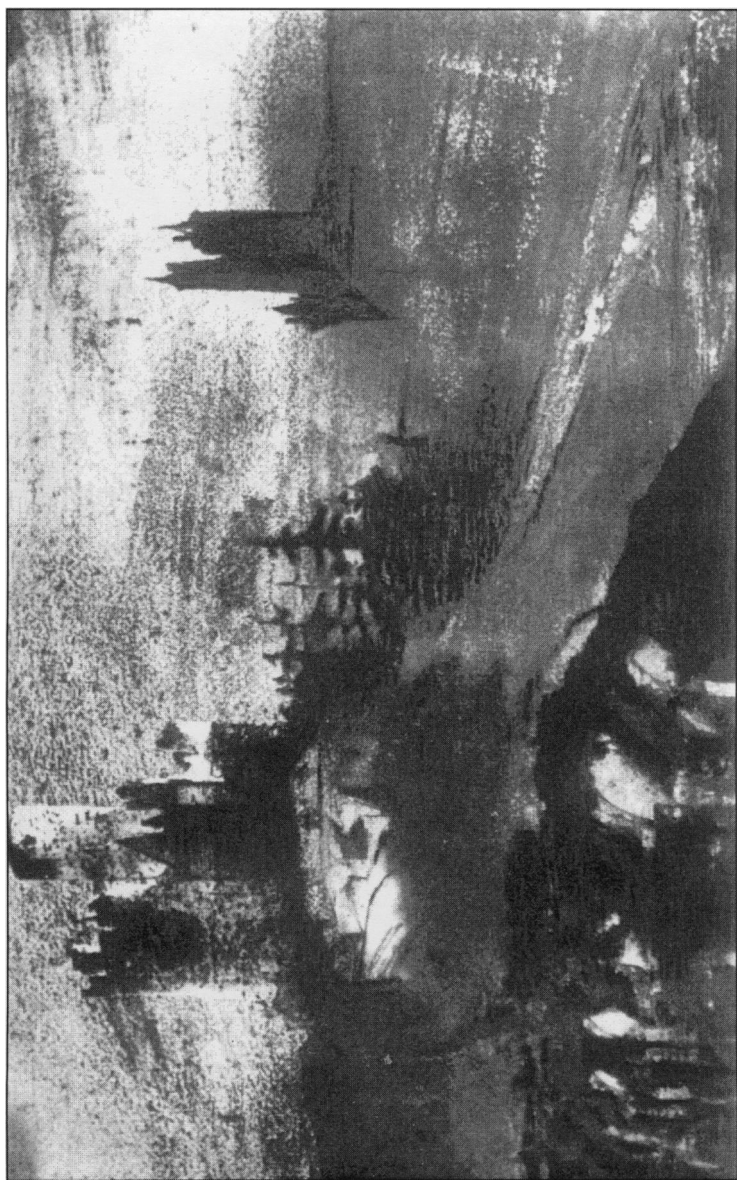
“*Je tenais donc mon reve et il restait rêve!*” This is the structure that characterizes what I call the “useless image.” Photography materializes this structure. Hugo is fascinated with photography because it gives an imprint of light and shadow. The photograph writes in ombres, the very medium of the visionary image as useless image—the image that does not refer, that is, as it were, *sans nom*; the image as *survit*, *survit* of *ce qui n’agit plus*. Photography also materializes the *regard*. I think what matters for Hugo

is not the indexical value of trace analyzed by Barthes as a having been there (a kind of guarantee of presence) but rather the fact that the photograph registers an event of having been seen—like Cesar, Clovis, and Charlemagne in the plain near Soissons. This is the structure of *voir le passé* and of *être là en ruine*.

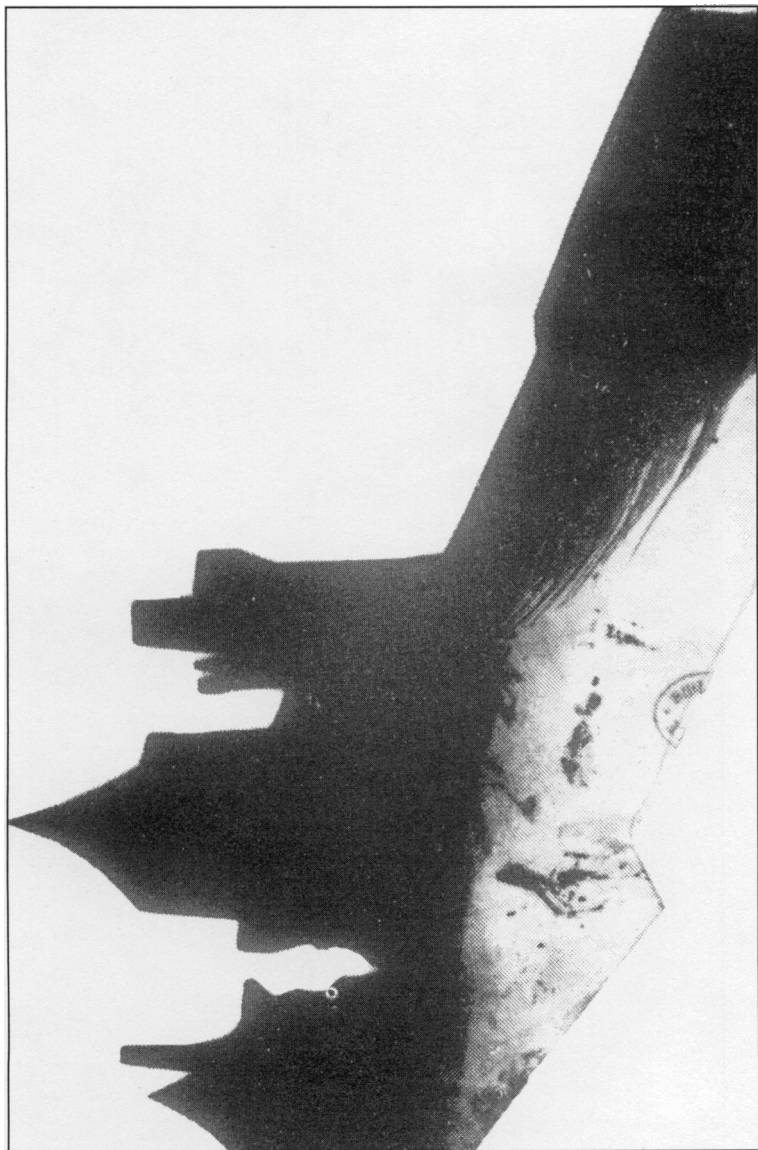
One version of the visionary aspires to see into the spiritual world of transcendence. Kant provides the modern or secular translation of this aspiration—to get past the phenomenal to the realm of the noumenal. This is the project of the sublime: the attempt to present invisibility itself. But in the period shortly after Hugo's death Bergson calls into question Kant's attempt to locate the absolute beyond the reach of time. Bergson, like Breton after him, locates the absolute closer at hand. To reach the absolute, writes Bergson, one should try not to go beyond time, but to go more deeply into it. This is a lesson I feel Hugo understood very well. It was central to his visionary enterprise of *voir le passé*.



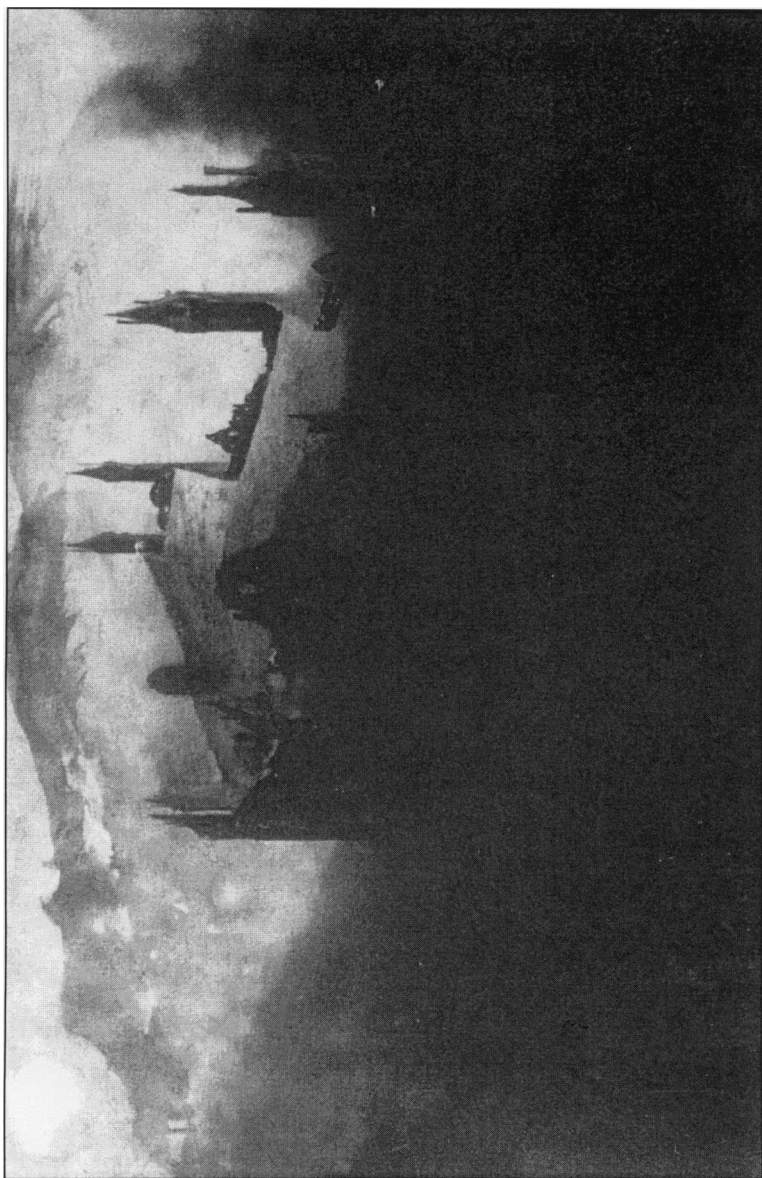
Ruine



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