

Do You Hear the People Sing?: Musical Aesthetics and French Nationalism in Alain Boubil and Claude-Michel Schonberg's Adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

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Introduction

In 1936, Walter Benjamin argued that the processes of copying, reproduction, and adaptation strip authenticity from any original work.¹ I seek here to apply this principle to the reformation of French author Victor Hugo's 1862 literary opus *Les Misérables*, as it transforms from novel to Alain Boubil and Claude-Michel Schonberg's 1980 French rock opera adaptation, and again to the highly successful 1985 English production by Cameron Mackintosh. Hugo's original work was in effect a thesis novel,² with its key premise being that post-revolutionary France was intrinsically sacred, thereby elevating the State as a formless ideal towards godhead. I will argue in this article that the extremely popular Anglophone musical adaptation of *Les Misérables* illustrates a number of translation and adaptation choices which minimise and sideline the sacral-national core of Hugo's novel. These changes in turn highlight how the French state is conceived of as a sacral force in the original work - one framed by the unique European French linguistic and socio-historical context that defies transposition to a popular Anglophone discourse such as that of the Broadway musical - by examining the ways in which the contrasting aesthetics of language and narrative form serve to shape and alter meaning. This article addresses the following key questions: how does this theme fare when processed into a different form - the French rock opera of 1980 -

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¹ Kate Griffiths and Andrew Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France: Literature in Film, Theatre, Television, Radio and Print* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 114.

² Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 27.

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and translated into a different language in the 1985 West End production? To what extent are the literary and musical aesthetics of a stage production able to retain the fundamental significance of their source material? How does a transformation in language, phrasing, form, and music through medium, time, and interpretation, add to or detract from the heart of Victor Hugo's opus?

Analysis of this text is situated in the very specific intersection of French Romanticism, literary analysis, linguistics, and musicology. Therefore, after outlining my methodological approach I will briefly outline Hugo's novel, its themes, and the *zeitgeist* within which it was conceived and written. I will then provide a brief overview of the musical form and its aesthetic significance, before moving onto examining the 1980 French concept album and 1985 English West End production in relation to the original themes and significance of Hugo's *Les Misérables*. In doing so I will demonstrate that a comparison of the original novel and the Anglophone production, therefore, indicates how strongly the tenets of French civil religion are rooted in Francophone France, and also further highlights the vitality of aesthetic integrity in framing the core of French nationalism that is fundamental to one's understanding of *Les Misérables*.

The development of nationalism as religious thought: a framework

Les Misérables is firmly situated within the socio-political landscape of French Romanticism. Embedded within both is a complex linguistic struggle between the *patois* of rural France and the developing standardised Parisian French that came to dominate by the mid-twentieth century. This is confirmed in the potent relation of printed matter to national construction as stressed by Benedict Anderson,³ and in the use of narrative to manage and order the structures of large groups as we see in the work of Lisa Zunshine.⁴

This article will employ Emile Durkheim's parameters of the sacred, laid out in *Elementary Forms of The Religious Life* (1912). The crux of Durkheim's definition of religion that is methodologically relevant is the divisive two categories into which he classifies the world in relation

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

⁴ Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

to the individual; the sacred and the profane, framed and identified by their opposition to the other.⁵ Durkheim asserts that, “if religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.”⁶ According to Durkheim, the sacred is that which is protected by the regulations and interdictions of the religious. Therefore, any system of collective thought that protects particular concepts or objects above others must inherently be religious. I have chosen to use Durkheim’s framework because it is concise, controlled and reasonable.⁷ Durkheim’s definition also offers a solid grounding for the concept of civil religion, which first originated in modern Western philosophy with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Du Contrat Social* (though he first defined this idea in *Lettre à Voltaire* in 1756). Rousseau refers to his desire for “une espèce de profession de foi civile.”⁸

However, Rousseau fails to outline specific parameters or to offer a fixed definition of civil religion. The American sociologist Robert Bellah, in observing American nationalism, proposes that while nationalism is not a religious belief in the sense of adherence to the tenets of a traditional religious institution, it nonetheless transcends the political by asserting that the nation holds a divinity superior to its geographical, economic and social confines.⁹ John Coleman, working from Bellah’s framework, offers the following definition for civil religion:

[Civil religion refers to] the set of beliefs, rites and symbols which relates a man’s role as citizen and his society’s place in space, time, and history to the conditions of ultimate existence and meaning.¹⁰

A well-established understanding in relation to linguistics is that language, particularly when influenced by social and cultural history, will shape

⁵ Emile Durkheim and Karen Elise Fields, *Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life: Newly Translated By Karen E. Fields* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 37.

⁶ John A. Coleman, ‘Civil Religion’, *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1970), p. 69.

⁷ Jean-Paul Willaime, ‘La Religion Civile À La Française et Ses Métamorphoses’, *Social Compass*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1993), p. 571.

⁸ “A form of an expression of civil faith.” Jean Baubérot, ‘Existe-T-Il Une Religion Civile Républicaine?’, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2007), p. 4.

⁹ Ronald C. Wimberley and James A. Christenson, ‘Civil Religion, Social Indicators, and Public Policy’, *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1982), p. 212.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Willaime, ‘De La Sacralisation de La France. Lieux de Mémoire et Imaginaire National’, *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions*, vol. 66, no. 1 (1988), p. 127.

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thought.¹¹ The methodological approach that best suits this subject matter is rooted in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity; and, more specifically, in Paul Kay and Willett Kempton's reinterpretation of the aforementioned hypothesis.¹² Sapir states "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group;"¹³ that a particular view of the world is essentially programmed into a language, and is thus disseminated through to its speakers. Essentially, he argues that language acts as a filter that, in shaping the expression of thoughts, shapes the thoughts themselves.¹⁴ There are two main parts of Whorf's hypothesis, as summarised by Roger Brown in 1976:

1. Structural differences between language systems will, in general, be paralleled by nonlinguistic cognitive differences, of an unspecified sort, in the native speakers of the two languages.
2. The structure of anyone's native language strongly influences or fully determines the world-view he will acquire as he learns the language.¹⁵

In this way, it is obvious that language is both a facet of the nation as an ideal, and a method by which the French are able to express a sense of communal divinity. By combining these related frameworks and understandings, my analysis builds on the following methodological approach: in comparing different versions of *Les Misérables* and focussing in particular on their linguistic features, we find that the French language itself proclaims French nationalism a civil religion. In considering the transition of *Les Misérables* in the late twentieth century from text to stage, we see that the French rock opera adaptation brings about a number of changes that nonetheless retain the core values of French nationalism. However, the translation of this production to the English-language West End production completely reverses these and disassociates *Les Misérables* from its original core themes.

¹¹ Julius W. Friend, 'The French Exception', in *Stateless Nations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Willaime, 'La Religion Civile À La Française et Ses Métamorphoses'; Willaime, 'De La Sacralisation de La France. Lieux de Mémoire et Imaginaire National'.

¹² Paul Kay and Willett Kempton, 'What Is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 86, no. 1 (1984), p. 65.

¹³ Kay and Kempton, 'What is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?', p. 66.

¹⁴ Leonid Perlovsky, 'Language and Emotions: Emotional Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis', *Neural Networks*, vol. 22, no. 5–6 (2009), p. 518.

¹⁵ Kay and Kempton, 'What Is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?', p. 66.

The change in medium, moreover, adds another necessary layer of analysis and understanding, as musical text is added to the written script of both French and English productions. My musicological analysis will be based upon consideration of tone (including instrumentation), rhythm, harmony, melody, and texture.

From Enlightenment to Romanticism: the evolution of French nationalism

The explosion of Enlightenment philosophy in eighteenth century France and its culmination in the 1789 French Revolution, posits Alexis de Tocqueville, “*a opéré, par rapport à ce monde, précisément de la même manière que les révolutions religieuses agissent en vue de l'autre.*”¹⁶ Certainly, what emerged in the aftermath of 1789 and laid the foundations for the First Republic (1792-1804), bears all the hallmarks of a religion centred on the French state; not in its reality, but in its potentiality. Rather than merely removing religion from administrative and governmental structures, French secularism (*laïcité*) was a calculated attempt to *replace* religion with nationalism, and to elevate *la France* to godhead.¹⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville states that there are three key elements which combine to form the sort of radical French nationalism rooted in the French Revolution.¹⁸ These are as follows: a doctrine of anti-religion (particularly institutionalised religion); cohesive statehood; and communal universality and equality of man. This understanding is reinforced through an analysis of *Les Misérables* and its antecedents. Two key contributors from the Enlightenment to the development of French nationalism and the deification of the State were Voltaire (born François-Marie Arouet) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who were two of the most prominent French Enlightenment philosophers to impact upon the worldviews of the middle-

¹⁶ “...operated, in relation to this world, in exactly the same manner as religious revolutions act in relation to the other.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'ancien régime et la révolution* (Paris: A. Lévy, 1856), p. 18.

¹⁷ Jean Baubérot, ‘Les Chantiers de La Laïcité’, *La Revue Administrative*, vol. 47, no. 280 (1994): p. 384.

¹⁸ James W. Ceaser, ‘Alexis de Tocqueville and the Two-Founding Thesis’, *The Review of Politics*, vol. 73, no. 2 (2011), p. 219; Cynthia J. Hinckley, ‘Tocqueville on Religion and Modernity: Making Catholicism Safe for Liberal Democracy’, *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1990), p. 326.

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class revolutionaries (along with Montesquieu, Diderot, and Toussaint).¹⁹ Strongly involved in this was anticlericalism, essentially birthed by Enlightenment writers.²⁰ In the theoretical absence of the Church as ultimate arbiter of law and society, Rousseau strongly advanced the position that sovereignty is ultimately derived from the consent of the populace.²¹ Voltaire's play *Brutus* was particularly popular in the revolutionary years, being performed in 1790 to near-rapture. The ferocious patriotism and support for liberty expressed by Brutus in the play resonated with the audience on a level far more profound than that of its debut audience in 1730, when these themes were mere intellectual concepts.²² This process of bringing the discourse of the elite to the middle and working classes had a significant impact on the communication of revolutionary ideas in France through the nineteenth century.²³

National unity was not limited to ideology, but extended to the manner in which this nationalist rhetoric was propagated. The post-revolutionary government, particularly when dominated by the Jacobins, found the existence of over thirty French dialects (*patois*) to be subversive and contrary to their goal of communal French identity.²⁴ Their effective eradication of the public use of these *patois* by the end of the nineteenth century furthered the streamlining of France as a united state.²⁵ This was strongly in line with the adoption of communal law and rights, particularly in the revolution's first declaration of intent. The basis for the religious state is *La déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen).²⁶ Rousseau's notion of popular

¹⁹ Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 38.

²⁰ "...the great materialist atheists of the eighteenth century, Diderot, La Mettrie, d'Holbach, had left behind a heritage of antireligious anticlericalism." Jacqueline Lalouette, 'Dimensions Anticléricales de La Culture Républicaine (1870-1914)', *Histoire, Économie et Société*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1991), p. 129.

²¹ C. H. Lincoln, 'Rousseau and the French Revolution', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 10 (1897), p. 57.

²² Kenneth N. McKee, 'Voltaire's *Brutus* During the French Revolution', *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 56, no. 2 (1941), p. 102.

²³ Raymond Trousson, 'Victor Hugo Juge de Jean-Jacques Rousseau', *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de La France*, vol. 86, no. 6 (1986), p. 980.

²⁴ Friend, 'The French Exception', p. 138.

²⁵ Friend, 'The French Exception', p. 138.

²⁶ Lucien Jaume, *Les déclarations des droits de l'homme: du débat 1789-1793 au préambule de 1946* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), p. 10.

sovereignty resonates strongly in these Articles; particularly that the state (as the representative of communal will) replaces the King, and by extension, God, as the ultimate arbiter of justice.²⁷ The French Revolution, therefore, was the culmination of this radical reshaping of social understandings of the State, leadership, and the overthrow of concepts of the 'natural order'. In overthrowing a monarchical feudal system rooted in institutionalised Catholicism, the revolution set the scene for the forging of a nation with an increasingly defined sense of self, encapsulated by the French motto - *liberté, fraternité, égalité*.²⁸ These ideological changes brought about by the French revolution resonate extremely strongly in Victor Hugo's work; particularly *Les Misérables* (which amplifies and mythicises these themes). The above is considered a sacred scripture for the French state; which holds significant implications when examining *Les Misérables*.

Hugo's *Les Misérables* as a treatise for post-revolutionary France

This reflects the common element of much of Hugo's output; as previously stated, Hugo had always advocated the notion of the epic novel;²⁹ a work that encompassed the entirety of the struggle of humanity.³⁰ Thus, before anything else, *Les Misérables* is a philosophical treatise and mythological retelling of the French revolution as a battle not only for emancipation from the feudal system, but also for liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Therefore, while there are a myriad of major and minor narrative arcs in *Les Misérables*, they all exist within the historical and philosophical context of nineteenth century France. Despite being published in 1862, the time span of the novel's narratives play out over approximately twenty years; from 1812 to the failed student revolts of 1832 (the June Rebellion). This places its events and discourse within the framework of revolution and early

²⁷ Lincoln, 'Rousseau and the French Revolution', p. 57.

²⁸ Of course, notions of freedom, brotherhood and equality were hardly universal (demonstrated by the brutal suppression of the Haitian revolution that was itself inspired by that of mainland France). See David Patrick Geggus, 'Slavery, War, and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean, 1789-1815', in David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus (eds), *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 1-50.

²⁹ Graham Robb refers to the novel, somewhat humorously, as epic purely for its length and the amount of the reader's time it consumes.

³⁰ Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 99.

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Romanticism that characterised the first half of the nineteenth century. This setting allowed Hugo to evoke nostalgia for the revolutionary optimism in the immediate aftermath of the 1789 and 1862 revolutions, and to explore both the events and socio-political context of these revolts, and a much broader thematic narrative that drew upon elements of pre- and post-Revolutionary French history.³¹ Though Hugo was himself religious, and *Les Misérables* figures at all times the presence (or the hope of a presence) of a divine authority with an omnipotence shaded by benevolence which broadly suits the shape of Christianity, it is much more a work that aims to transcend ideas and boundaries of spiritualism and religion to ultimately appeal for a move towards *laïcité*, secularism based upon principles of humanism. In doing so, *Les Misérables* seeks to evoke a desire and call for a new kind of France, one which in its existence serves as the ideal towards which humanity should strive.

It is difficult to thoroughly discuss the intricacies of *Les Misérables*' narrative in its prose form. Though there are multiple interweaving storylines, plot is not the most important part of the book. Moreover, while the novel covers the lives of a vast array of characters, the main character of the book is the narrator - Hugo.³² This is, of course, severely reduced in the musical, which aims rather to depict the most obvious storylines, discarding a number of characters and more complex narrative elements in the process. The focus of the novel is upon the character Jean Valjean, a paroled convict who is the novel's principal character and one of Hugo's key *misérables*; destitute, despairing individuals who encapsulate the overwhelming ignorance and misery Hugo saw as the plight of much of the French population. Hugo depicts Valjean as largely uneducated, unsophisticated, and furiously angry at the world.³³ However, his encounter with the Bishop Myriel of Digne, a kindly and devout priest that Hugo himself referred to the Bishop as "*the most savage satire on the priesthood today*"³⁴ leads Valjean to change his identity in an active attempt to escape the severe social restrictions placed upon him as a victim of nineteenth century France's brutal penal system.

Eight years after Valjean and Cosette arrive in Paris, a group of student revolutionaries undertake an act of civil unrest. The students, who call

³¹ Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, p. 66.

³² Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible: Victor Hugo and 'Les Misérables'* (Cambridge: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), p. 11.

³³ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Le Livre De Poche, 1998), p. 117.

³⁴ Llosa, *The Temptation of the Impossible*, p. 64.

themselves *Les Amis De L'ABC*,³⁵ attempt their ill-fated uprising after the death of General Jean Maximilien Lamarque (a historical figure who had been one of the few influential political figures during the Bourbon Restoration with much concern for civil rights).³⁶ Inevitably, this idealistic attempt fails. Though the students succeed in constructing a barricade and holding off soldiers for a night, they are massacred the next day. The student insurrection is rooted in the physical political history of early 19th century Paris, and is framed as one of the many student uprisings in the failed June Revolution in Paris, 1832. In many ways, this narrative is the one which tethers *Les Misérables* to the socio-political reality of France.

Hugo does not shy away from allowing political opinion to seep through into the text (despite the outrage of his fellow contemporaries); on the contrary, he blatantly flaunts it. *Les Misérables* is, ultimately, a deeply religious text: it envisages for the reader an ideal of France, and an ideal for man as a collective whole. This is reflected by Hugo's peculiar choice to situate *Les Misérables* in the events of the 1832 uprising; a failure which resulted in the deaths of only approximately one hundred students, and which is a comparatively minor footnote in history. However, in the context of the rest of the novel - which aims to serve as a quasi-mythical origin narrative for French civil religion - this choice is perfect. While removed enough from the key historical development of post-revolutionary France, it provides a tangible link to the reality of radical revolution as an expression of dedication to the state.³⁷

The development of the first musical adaptation of *Les Misérables*, and Boubil and Schonberg's 1980 rock opera

Adaptations and sequels of *Les Misérables* were produced from as early as 1872, only a decade after the novel's original publication year. However, the work was not set to music till the composition of the French rock opera by Schonberg and Boubil. It is important to consider the intersection of the rock opera, musical and opera when regarding the transition of *Les Misérables* from book to concept album (and later, to fully-fledged stage production), because

³⁵ This name, which literally translates to "Friends of the ABC" reflects the importance the students place in education. However, it is also a French-language pun: 'ABC' is pronounced in French as *a-bai-ssé* – *abaissé*, or 'abased'. Therefore, *Amis de l'ABC* would aurally translate as "Friends of the Abased."

³⁶ Jill Harsin, *Barricades: The War of the Streets in Revolutionary Paris, 1830-1848* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 58.

³⁷ José Brunner, 'From Rousseau to Totalitarian Democracy: The French Revolution in J. L. Talmon's Historiography', *History and Memory*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1991), p. 61.

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each style has associated connotations and socio-cultural significance.³⁸ The rock operatic form, in particular, is considered unique for its combination of high and 'low' (popular) art;³⁹ it combines the traditional sung-through style of the opera (as opposed to musicals, which frequently feature spoken dialogue) with modern musical styles and unconventional instrumentation. The history of the rock opera/musical as a form is important to understand, because it holds significant parallels to the genre of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. Both combined elements of traditional artistry with innovative forms of expression, subverting normative expectations and aiming to reach wider audiences while simultaneously crafting a genre of extreme artistic significance.

The French edition of *Les Misérables* is scored by Claude-Michel Schönberg, with libretto (script) by Alain Boubil. The artists had previously collaborated on the French Revolution-based *La Revolution Francaise* (1973), the first staged French rock opera, and went on to collaborate on *Martin Guerre* (1996), based on Protestant-Catholic tensions in early modern France. The theatrical adaptation was performed in 1980 at the *Palais de Sports*, in the fifteenth arrondissement of Paris, to moderate success; staging only ended when the lease on the theatre expired. This effort is the basis for the subsequent West End (1985) production. The French concept album has a running time of slightly over 87 minutes, and is comprised of 32 selections from the musical's score (made up of a mix of featured solos and duets, as well as recitative scenes). There are obvious gaps in the narrative line of the concept album, particularly in considering the length of the novel. While they were bridged somewhat via spoken dialogue in the stage show, reviews of the original rock opera indicate that it was intended less as a cohesive narrative, and more as a tableau of scenes following the chronology of the book, intended to represent what Boubil and Schönberg considered the essence of Hugo's novel. In doing this, it makes an assumption that would not be unreasonable in France - that the audience was at the somewhat familiar with the narrative arc of *Les Misérables*, and with its characters. This quality is similar to Hugo's writing style, where narrative was placed within vast scenic tableaux.

The music in the concept album is very firmly placed in the late 1970s/early 1980s musical tradition, with strong rock operatic influences. This is reflected strongly in both the instrumentation and musical score, both of which are quite eclectic. This version is primarily dominated by piano, guitar,

³⁸ Irving H. Buchen, 'Is The Future *Hair*?', *Salmagundi*, no. 12 (1970), p. 96.

³⁹ Martina Elicker, 'Rock Opera – Opera on the Rocks?', *Word and Music Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2002), p. 300.

percussion, winds (flute, oboe, clarinet, and saxophone) and some brass (notably the trombone). While there appears to be a string section, it is mostly relegated to the background of the score, serving mostly to add harmonic and tonal depth. This leads to a thinner, sparser score; where power stems from melody and libretto, rather than through sheer volume and harmonic richness. In some ways this serves to distance itself from the novel, yet simultaneously allows it to resonate more clearly. For instance, scenes occurring within the ABC café, where student revolutionaries gather to discuss politics and plot rebellion, are marked by quasi-disco tones. The rhythm of speech used by Enjolras, the student group's leader, is loose and non-traditional, appropriately-placed within the radical, energetic and fervent early narrative of the student revolutionaries.⁴⁰ The authoritarianism inherent in the strong persistent rhythmic patter that accompanies Javert's insistent denials of Fantine's pleas is almost comedic, yet simultaneously horrific - a clash which strengthens the outrageous dismissal of the poor by French authoritarianism in Hugo's novel.

Moving to the West End

The West End production came into being when the British producer Cameron Mackintosh was asked by the Hungarian director Peter Farago to produce an English-language version of the French concept album and stage production. This translated performance, with lyrics by journalist and lyricist Herbert Kretzmer, opened on the West End in London on 8 October 1985.⁴¹ The translation considerably lengthened the musical; the current Broadway production is approximately three hours long, twice the length of the concept album. Though the success of the Parisian production and Victor Hugo's notoriety attracted a considerable audience, the production was received extremely negatively by the vast majority of reviewers. Francis King's review of the production in the London *Sunday Telegraph* is an apt summary of the majority of critiques; King derided the production as "a lurid Victorian melodrama produced with Victorian lavishness."⁴² In general, the production was accused of being either overlong, or else too short to do Hugo's novel justice.⁴³ The most significant change between the 1980 and 1985 productions

⁴⁰ Ken McLeod, "'A Fifth of Beethoven': Disco, Classical Music, and the Politics of Inclusion', *American Music*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2006), p. 350.

⁴¹ Griffiths and Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 115.

⁴² Michael Billington, 'Twenty-Five Years On, They Ask Me If I Was Wrong about Les Misérables...', *The Guardian*, at <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2010/sep/21/les-miserables-25-year-anniversary>. Accessed 10 May 2015.

⁴³ Griffiths and Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 114.

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is undoubtedly the fact that the latter is intended to provide a cohesive linear narrative for an Anglophone audience (though it does still remove huge swathes of the novel).⁴⁴ The French concept album begins with *La Journée Est Finie*, at the factory in the moments before Fantine's dismissal. The final scene of the album is *Epilogue: la lumière*. The scene closely follows the conclusion of Hugo's novel; Marius seeks a dying Valjean's forgiveness, and Valjean finally reveals his secrets to Cosette, before expiring in front of the couple.

In contrast, the West End production includes a "Prologue" that leads into the factory scene. The "Prologue" features a dramatically reduced version of the novel's opening, removing its damning critique of the Church as a social and political institution. The finale plays out similarly to that of the 1980 album. However, it does not end at the point of Valjean's death. Instead, as Valjean is dying, he is greeted by the ghosts of Fantine and Eponine, who have come to welcome him into heaven, a significantly different and more optimistic ending than Hugo's novel; and, most importantly more literally religious. As Valjean follows them, a reprise of "Do You Hear The People Sing?" begins. In most productions, the stage is flooded with the dead revolutionaries and the ensemble cast, and the musical ends with this triumphant reprise. This is a stark contrast to the 1862 novel and the 1980 concept album, particularly with the added assumption of the afterlife as a concrete part of *Les Misérables*. The portrayal of religion as normative, traditional and Christian, is clearly quite a radical deviation from Hugo's assertion that: "*nous sommes pour la religion contre les religions.*"⁴⁵ This change adds to a transformed aesthetic. However in doing so, it decontextualises the novel from the complexity of social and religious tensions in 19th century France, while also making it more easily comprehensible by an English audience.

Comparing the two productions

The shift from the West End to Broadway in 1987 resulted in further dramatic changes to the score and libretto of the musical, and saw a vastly improved reception; this production won eight of its twelve nominations at the 1987 Tony Awards⁴⁶ (the most prestigious awards for Broadway and off-Broadway

⁴⁴ William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, *Historical Dictionary of the Broadway Musical* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. 230.

⁴⁵ "We are for the religion against religions." Hugo, *Les Misérables*, p. 721.

⁴⁶ Edward Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Miserables* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1993), p. 162.

shows).⁴⁷ Therefore, it seems to have been necessary to make these changes for financial success. The need to hold international appeal has had significant implications for the way in which this musical adaptation, drawn from the original French concept album, has been shaped. As earlier stated, strong influences of late 1970s music are evident in the score of the concept album, as well as the musical conventions established by other rock operas. It is interesting, then, to see how this manifests five years later in the London production. The below table lists the instrumentation for the 1980 French concept album, compared to that of the West End production.

| | 1980 French Concept Album | 1985 West End Production |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Instrumentation ⁴⁸ | Strings, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Saxophone, Trumpet, Trombone, Guitar, Bass Guitar, Drums, Percussion, Keyboard | Violin (I and II), Viola, Cello, Flute, Piccolo, Clarinet, Alto Saxophone, Oboe, English Horn (Cor Anglais), French Horn, Trumpet, Piccolo Trumpet, Flugelhorn, Trombone, Bass Trombone, Guitar, Bass Guitar, Percussion, Keyboard |

As indicated by the above table, it is evident that the West End musical score is written for a larger orchestra, with a far greater tonal and textural variety than that of the concept album. For instance, the string section in the French concept album is harmonically uniform, and is most likely produced by a synthetic keyboard setting, rather than each of the string voices being individually scored. This is a common practice in most rock operas and many musicals, as opposed to the classical art music practice of separately scoring violin, viola, cello and double bass. However, in the later production, I have specifically mentioned each of these string instruments, which indicate one of the main differences between the two scores. Separate parts for each of the strings allows for greater textural depth and complexity. The West End musical, therefore, is scored in a much more traditional manner. While a number of the featured instruments certainly belong more in the contemporary musical traditions (alto saxophone, guitar, bass guitar, and drums), the score also caters for the full array of the late Romantic symphony orchestra (with the notable exclusion of the double bass and trombone). This orchestration adheres to the Romanticist origins and placement of *Les Misérables*; however, the lack of modernisation that the 1980 album has taken on counteracts the revolutionary

⁴⁷ Melissa Boyle and Lesley Chiou, 'Broadway Productions and the Value of a Tony Award', *Journal of Cultural Economics*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2009), p. 50.

⁴⁸ There is no musical score or orchestration list available for either production. The listed instrumentation is based upon my aural reading of the texts.

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intent of Hugo's novel. This is a change which is furthered in the 1987 Broadway production, where most remaining elements of the rock opera tradition (such as the prominent use of the drum kit) which the 1985 score had maintained, are eliminated. The 2012 film's score most clearly indicates this shift towards traditional orchestral sounds, which mutates the music of this revolutionary text from the *avant garde* to the mainstream.⁴⁹

The vocal range casting follows standard musical range traditions (inherited from the operatic tradition), where protagonists typically occupy the upper end of the musical register for their gender, and antagonists and/or secondary characters have parts largely contained within the lower ranges. As the lead male protagonist, Valjean's role is written in the tenor range (the higher of the three standard male voice types). His antagonist counterparts (Javert and Monsieur Thenardier) are assigned to the lower (baritone) range. This vocal casting choice has a particularly clear effect in the relationship between Valjean and Javert: both characters have shared musical phrases, as well as mirrored dialogue in their respective solo moments. For instance, Valjean's solo "What Have I Done?" lies at the end of the Prologue, during which he realises how prison has changed him. The song ends with the following lines:

As I stare into the void/Into the whirlpool of my sins/I'll escape now, from
that world/From the world of Jean Valjean/Jean Valjean is nothing
now/Another story must begin.

This is reprised (both musically and lyrically) almost exactly in "Javert's Suicide" towards the end of the second Act. Javert is driven to commit suicide after Valjean saves his life and he reluctantly allows Valjean to leave the barricades with Marius; the basis of his values (an unwavering adherence to the law) shaken by Valjean's acts of kindness. This scene ends with the following:

As I stare into the void/Of a world that cannot hold/I'll escape now, from
that world/From the world of Jean Valjean/There is nowhere I can
turn/There is no way to go on.

Both scenes have almost identical melodies, and are peppered with mirrored phrases, as per the above. However, while Valjean reaches a life-changing epiphany, Javert's results in his death. This creates a strong polarity between the characters - particularly Valjean and Javert - which alters the dynamic of their shared narrative. In the book, Javert is not an antagonist, simply a dogged adherent of the law. In the musical, however, he becomes a religious fanatic, juxtaposed against Valjean. The musical creates and perpetuates a sense of

⁴⁹ Matthew Westwood, 'Les Miserables Goes beyond the Barricade', *The Australian*, at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/les-miserables-goes-beyond-the-barricade/story-fn9n8gph-1226967684193>. Accessed 6 September 2015.

dualism; Valjean representing inherent good, while Javert stands as his antithesis.⁵⁰ It creates an aesthetic for oppositional religious forces where French radical nationalism is the spiritual light to the warped fundamentalism of authoritarianism. This mirrors the opposition of light and dark in Hugo's novel, but has significantly different implications and loses nuance. Female casting falls along similar lines; Cosette, the nominal female protagonist, is written in the high soprano range. Interestingly, Fantine and Eponine (the other two larger female protagonist roles) are scored for the mezzo-soprano range, despite both characters having much stronger personalities and impact on the narrative. This follows in the musical tradition of casting secondary female characters in the lower range. However, Cosette's role is far less significant to the novel's narrative. This vocal casting is reflective of the greater emphasis placed on the musical on the romantic of *Les Misérables*; to the detriment of far more prominent themes from the novel. This also impacts upon other characters and the extent to which they are able to play the roles they do in the book, something that is particularly evident in the treatment of Eponine in the adaptation. The 1980, and to a greater extent 1985, portrayal of Eponine frames her as Cosette's rival for Marius's affections, enhanced by the vocal range she is allocated to (in many musicals, the female rival figure is written in the lower ranges in order to provide a contrast to the primary couple). However, in the book Eponine is a *miserable* of the novel's title. She transforms from a spoiled, girlish child (where Cosette was neglected and abused) to a Parisian street urchin and petty criminal at the age of sixteen. The portrayal of this fall into misery is marginalised on the West End in favour of framing Eponine as a legitimate competitor for Marius's affections, her character romanticised. In the book, however, she is nothing more to Marius than a pitiable waif, womanhood stolen by misfortune.⁵¹

There are a number of leitmotifs⁵² which appear as anything from fragments to fully-fledged solos in the musical, and which are associated with particular themes and characters.⁵³ In talking about this production, I will refer to two different scenes, each of which illustrates the way in which these key themes of the book are portrayed. I will discuss the placement of each scene within the book, outline briefly the way it is represented in the concept album,

⁵⁰ Daniel Meyer-Dinkgrafe, *European Culture in a Changing World: Between Nationalism and Globalism* (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2004), p. 230.

⁵¹ Charlotte Greenspan, 'Death Comes to the Broadway Musical', *Daedalus*, vol. 141, no. 1 (2012), p. 157.

⁵² A musical phrase which occurs multiple times in a work, often in varied forms.

⁵³ Griffiths and Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 127.

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and then provide a detailed analysis of the scene itself, as well as how it represents the aesthetics of the key religious themes of the novel: *liberté, égalité & fraternité* under the auspices of the state as a transcendent ideal.

Comparing *La Journée Est Finie* (1980) and *At the End of the Day* (1985)

These mirrored songs are the first and second numbers (respectively) in the 1980 and 1985 soundtracks, and are set in a French factory in the early 1800s. The opening of *La Journée Est Finie* is unhurried, with clear aural allusions to the church - a repetitive four note melody on metallic tubular bells (mimicking church bells) and xylophone, with chimes providing a shimmering undertone. The bells are accompanied by slow, long chords on the piano, which further add to the sense of slow, classical grandeur (but one that seems associated not with the *ancien régime*, rather like a small musical tribute to the Bishop, who is otherwise absent in this vastly reduced production). However, this is sharply contrasted as the chorus comes in. The music in this section speeds up considerably, and completely changes instrumentation and mood. A strong percussive beat enters, with accented notes placed so as to disrupt the natural rhythm that had been previously established. This is further reinforced by the presence of unconventional, modern instruments, such as the maraca. Therefore, we see a shift from what seems like a musical ideal - peaceful, grand and melodious - to the clash and crash of atonal melody and harmony, which brings with it an overwhelming sense of chaos and discontent.

The opening of *At the End of the Day* in the 1985 production is faster and dominated more strongly by the strings section. Tubular bells still feature, but there is an overall sense of triumph and pent-up excitement, aided by the use of the French horn (a sonorous and regal-sounding brass instrument). The following discord is still aurally disorienting; however, it is far more restrained than that of the 1980 version. This is aided somewhat by the continued presence of the string section, as well as the lack of the unconventional percussive instruments that *La Journée Est Finie* utilises. Where the 1980 soundtrack uses this song to contrast peace and enlightenment with misery, the 1985 production seems to use it to illustrate a failure of the revolution; switching from the open warmth of the brass to the discordance; and also a sense of rebellion. *La Journée Est Finie*, as stated before, is focussed on factory workers, and uses quite specific language. It displays obvious contempt for the bourgeoisie, weariness over the long work hours, and an overwhelming sense of resignation; that this cycle of toil is permanent, ended only by death:

La journée est finie quatorze heures à la peine/Le nez sur l'établi quatorze heures à la chaine/C'est fini, ça recommence.⁵⁴

The following are comparable lyrics from the 1985 production:

At the end of the day there's another day dawning... There's a hunger in the land/There's a reckoning still to be reckoned and/There's gonna be hell to pay/At the end of the day.

This scene illustrates a recurring element in the English language adaptation of *Les Misérables*; that of misery as a potent and violent force. It suggests vengeance, presumably against institutionalised poverty and misery. However, it offers no concrete solution for this, and no direct plan of action. Moreover, this representation of misery runs contrary to that of Hugo's. Hugo's *Les Misérables* concerns itself with quotidian misery, where suffering is a daily, repetitive and smothering burden that must be endured, which is more accurately depicted in the 1980 concept album and *La Journée Est Finie*.

Comparing *Donnez, Donnez* (1980) and *Look Down* (1985)

The first is the theme of *Donnez, Donnez* (French concept album) and *Look Down* (English productions). Both songs are an appeal from the poor of Paris to the privileged, and they open the third time period of the musical - 1832, several years after Valjean retrieved Cosette from the Thénardiens. The scene features an interlude from Gavroche who proudly states his close kinship with the city, mocks the rich, and predicts the oncoming revolution. However, they are both quite different scenes.

Donnez, Donnez opens with tubular bells and xylophones in the foreground, which provide an almost ethereal sound; a strong contrast to content of the song itself, which is a plea to the rich for money juxtaposed by Gavroche's disdainful mockery of the upper class. This is further emphasised by the heavy use of the xylophone through the scene; a hollow and weak sound, emphasised by the reedy and wavering presence of an oboe. This lends a plaintive tone to the song, emphasising all the more Gavroche's defiance. In contrast, *Look Down* features more complex harmonisation of a traditional, regulated structure, with a call-and-response musical structure, and a much stronger chorus. The presence of a French horn also adds a sense of the grandiose; changing the tone of the song from despairing to stirring and defiant. In the 1987 version of *Look Down*, these changes are further amplified, with a more defined beat, structure and reinforced string section which offer more unity and cohesion to the piece. Once again, this perpetuates the same

⁵⁴ "The day has finished after fourteen long hours/nose to the grindstone, fourteen hours on the chain/it's finished, it restarts." Alain (Librettist) Boubil and Claude-Michel (Composer) Schonberg, *Les Misérables [Original French Concept Album]* (London: First Night, 1980).

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idea of nobility in suffering as *At the End of the Day*, and strongly contradicts Hugo's repeated assertion in his novel that misery and poverty are ugly, and that the true curse of misery is that it strips away dignity.⁵⁵

As in the previous scene, these differences carry through to the language of the scene. The key refrain of *Donnez, Donnez* is:

Donnez, donnez, donnez aux pauvres gueux/Donnez, donnez, c'est prêter au bon dieu/Donnez, donnez, belles dames, jolis monsieurs/Donnez, donner, c'est gagner sa place aux cieux.⁵⁶

Interspersed through this is Gavroche's solo, excerpts of which are below:

C'est pas Versailles pour l'élégance/Mais d'puis qu'on a raccourci l'autre/Versailles, ça manque plutôt d'ambiance.⁵⁷
Vive moi, pas le roi, ça ira, ça ira.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the 1985 version's refrain is:

Look down, and see the beggars at your feet/Look down and show some mercy if you can/Look down and see/The sweepings of the streets/Look down, look down,/Upon your fellow man!

While the following is an excerpt of Gavroche's solo lines:

We live on crumbs of humble piety/Tough on the teeth, but what the hell!/Think you're poor?/Think you're free?/Follow me, follow me!

Through all of the former, Hugo's political intent is certainly very clearly portrayed. His assertions both in *Les Misérables* and in other writings, that by actively participating in the elevation of the poor, the bourgeoisie will satisfy their moral obligations,⁵⁹ echoes strongly through. Mentions of places by Gavroche - "*De la Glacière à Belleville/Et de Montmartre à Montsouris*" situate the scene strongly within Paris; an exclusionary tactic (however unintentional) which requires the audience, as with Hugo's novel, to have a certain familiarity with the geography and history of France. This also recalls Hugo's conceptualisation of architecture as intrinsic to national identity, as well as to his assertion in *Les Misérables* (1862) that "*Paris est synonyme de Cosmos. Paris est Athènes, Rome, Sybaris, Jérusalem, Pantin. Tous les*

⁵⁵ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, p. 987.

⁵⁶ "Give, give, give to the poor beggars/Give, give, it is to loan to God/Give, give, beautiful ladies, handsome sirs/Give, giving is to win one's place in the sky." Boubil and Schonberg, *Les Misérables [Original French Concept Album]*.

⁵⁷ "It is not as elegant as Versaille/but since we shortened the other [executed Louis XVI]/Versaille, it has lost a lot of its ambience." Boubil and Schonberg, *Les Misérables [Original French Concept Album]*.

⁵⁸ "Long live me, not the king, it will happen, it will happen." Boubil and Schonberg, *Les Misérables [Original French Concept Album]*.

⁵⁹ Angelo Metzidakis, 'On Rereading French History in Hugo's *Les Misérables*', *The French Review*, vol. 67, no. 2 (1993), p. 193.

*civilisations y sont en abrégé...*⁶⁰ Moreover, if we take into account Hugo's claim that Gavroche as a *gamin* is the child of Paris, then the character's assertion that he will live where the king will not further indicates this sense of Paris as eternal and transcendent, beyond the temporary rule of particular governments.

Conclusion

Edward Behr believes that "surprisingly little" is left out from transition from book to musical, finding the digressions in the novel on religion, Napoleon, Waterloo, French politics etc. to be self-indulgent, gratuitous, and not hugely relevant to the essence of *Les Misérables*.⁶¹ This point is not invalid - if one considers the key role of *Les Misérables* to be its narrative. While talking about the process of translating Valjean's character from French to English, Herbert Kretzmer (the English librettist) claimed that "...you ignore the sexual jealousy, you ignore the torment, you cut straight to Valjean the Christian altruist."⁶² Neither of these are invalid interpretations; however, both miss the significance of their placement within Hugo's text, and indicate readings that are inconsistent with Hugo's own understanding of his work. Valjean's altruism is not based in Christianity; rather, it is based in his efforts to escape darkness, and to achieve enlightenment in the sense that Hugo intended above. And while there are a myriad of characters, and of major and minor narrative arcs in *Les Misérables*, they all exist within the historical and philosophical context of nineteenth century France.

Both Behr and Kretzmer are concerned with the role and prioritisation of narrative. Moreover, as I have illustrated, narrative is not necessarily the avenue by which Hugo's themes are most strongly transmitted. *Les Misérables* is a thesis novel; this is a point that has been established, and his grandeur is a weapon used to advance his thesis.⁶³ However, in aiming to properly represent the organic nature of theatre while also utilising the full potential of special effects and a West End budget in order to meet the expectations of a traditional audience, the musical unintentionally emphasises the faults of both approaches. The result is a visually and aurally compelling product; but one which seems to represent Hugo's underlying themes as though they are no longer relevant.

⁶⁰ "Paris is a synonym of the Cosmos. Paris is Athens, Rome, Sybaris, Jerusalem, Pantin. Every civilisation is there, in abridged form..." Hugo, *Les Misérables*, p. 813.

⁶¹ Behr, *The Complete Book of Les Miserables*, p. 43.

⁶² Griffiths and Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 128.

⁶³ Lois Boe Hyslop, 'Baudelaire on Les Misérables', *The French Review*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1967), p. 26.

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Therefore, while *Les Misérables* as a late twentieth century musical achieves the goal of financial success, it does not play the didactic role that the novel fills. This is not to say that *Les Misérables* the musical contains no religious idealism, or that there was no pragmatism or commercialism involved in *Les Misérables* the novel. Charles Nodier, one of Hugo's great influences, noted in a review of Hugo's early novel *Han d'Islande* that "Classical writers are approved of, but Romantics are read."⁶⁴ This is why the original 1980 production is interesting to consider, even though it is a largely obsolete score and largely the purview of particularly devoted admirers of *Les Misérables*. The rock opera genre was particularly popular during the 1970s and 1980s. However, rock opera also blurs the lines between genres - incorporating traditional harmonies and instrumentation from classical music - in order to mould new music in a way that straddled the line between intellectual artistry and popular appeal, often with particular social significance.⁶⁵ Of course, the score is not as refined as its later manifestation, and has considerable gaps in continuity. However, stylistically and thematically, it aligns much more closely with the novel. This strongly reflects Hugo's work, particularly in *Les Misérables*, where he used non-conventional forms of character and narrative to more effectively champion the key tenets of French nationalism.⁶⁶ Just as *Les Misérables* the novel assumes a passing understanding of the political landscape of post-revolutionary France, so too does the rock opera. But the rock opera demands knowledge not only of the pertinent history, but also of Hugo's novel. Thus, implicit within the 1980 album and its accompanying stage show is the implication that *Les Misérables* has become a part of the French identity.

Enjolras tells Marius, who is Hugo's representation of his younger and more naïve self, that "...*la France est grande parce qu'elle est la France.*"⁶⁷ This is a blunt proclamation; and it was writing like this which earned *Les Misérables* mostly negative reviews from most of Hugo's contemporaries; the consensus being that the popularity of the work rendered it unintellectual, and therefore unartistic.⁶⁸ Notable critics were Gustave Flaubert, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's public review of *Les Miserables* (which

⁶⁴ Robb, *Victor Hugo*, p. 121.

⁶⁵ James Borders, 'Form and the Concept Album: Aspects of Modernism in Frank Zappa's Early Releases', *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2001), p. 120.

⁶⁶ Isabel Roche, *Character and Meaning in the Novels of Victor Hugo* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007), p. 57.

⁶⁷ "France is great because she is France." Hugo, *Les Misérables*, p. 924.

⁶⁸ Lisa Gasbarrone, 'Restoring the Sacred in *Les Misérables*', *Religion & Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2008), p. 8.

was disingenuous, judging by the scathing loathing he demonstrated for it in private exchanges) “praises Hugo’s ability as a *propagandist* rather than as an artist.”⁶⁹ For Baudelaire, the overt socio-political messages and currents of the novel were far too much to bear; they contravened his aesthetic ideas of the necessary separation between art and politics. Mackintosh’s production does away with the overt specificity and radical nature of the novel to which Baudelaire was so opposed - not only in its language, but also in the aesthetics of musicality within which that language is embedded.

Certainly, the 1985 West End production is far more accessible to those who are not familiar with the novel, and to an international audience with no firsthand knowledge of France and its history. It contains more of the novel’s narrative than its predecessor, and offers a much more cohesive storyline. Moreover, it is far more polished, with a higher production budget and a greater ability to stage the events of the novel.⁷⁰ When considering these elements, the changes made seem logical, and in taking into account the transitional stage of the concept album, do not appear overly dramatic. However, this focus on narrative at the expense of the themes of nationalism and French civil religion means that the musical relies more heavily on normative, globally acceptable themes of romance and Christian universalism. Thus, it fails to convey the same sense of transcendentalism as the book.⁷¹ The radically religious framework surrounding French nationalism is formed by genre, medium, language; and most perhaps most importantly, setting. In shifting towards a more popular and conventional musical and linguistic aesthetic, the radicalism and deeply religious sense of French nationalism from Hugo’s work is lost. The musical, therefore, is not merely a reduced depiction of the novel. It drastically reduces the themes of politics and religion woven through the original narrative - while at the same time being almost excessively indulgent with orchestration and staging.⁷² In doing so, it becomes an inauthentic adaptation of the novel, one which becomes all the more apparent when the two are pitted against one another.⁷³ If Hugo’s original *Les Misérables*, written during and for the emerging modern French nation, is perhaps the most prominent post-revolutionary work of fiction focussing on the new French identity,⁷⁴ then its English language musical adaptation -

⁶⁹ Hyslop, ‘Baudelaire on *Les Misérables*’, p. 26.

⁷⁰ Griffiths and Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 115.

⁷¹ Griffiths and Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 116.

⁷² Griffiths and Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France*, p. 115.

⁷³ Susan Petrilli, *Translation, Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), p. 478.

⁷⁴ Robb, *Victor Hugo*, p. xiii.

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particularly when considered in contrast with its 1980 predecessor - highlights exactly what that identity is not.