

NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS AS A TOTAL WORK OF ART: THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN LITERATURE, GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE AND HUGO'S VISUAL IMAGINARY

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Abstract

The novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, written by Victor Hugo, represents one of the most ambitious literary attempts to transform an architectural construction – the Gothic cathedral – into a living character, central to the narrative, thus anticipating the idea of a "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) formulated by the German composer Richard Wagner. The present study analyzes the way in which Hugo establishes a profound dialogue between literature and the other arts, giving the work a unique dimension. Thus, presenting the cathedral as a "symphony in stone" and as a "book" of humanity before the invention of printing, the study explores the way in which the author transforms the architectural space into a dynamic narrative organism, capable of generating emotion, symbolism, integrating it into the destiny of the characters. On another level, the study highlights the visual dimension of the text through the panoramic descriptions of medieval Paris, the plasticity of the characters (Quasimodo, Esmeralda, Claude Frollo), all of which function as genuine literary tableaux, prefiguring transpositions into engraving, painting and, later, in photography and cinema. Expanding the perspective, the cinematic adaptations of the novel demonstrate its potential as a total work of art through the synthesis of moving image, sound and narrative, amplifying Hugo's visual imagination. In the same logic of total art, the musical *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1998), created by Luc Plamondon (libretto) and Riccardo Cocciante (music), transforms the work into an integrated show of music, dance, light and scenography. In conclusion, Victor Hugo's novel is revealed to us as a work of total art *avant la lettre*, in which literature absorbs and reconfigures architectural, visual, film and musical-choreographic elements to create an integral aesthetic experience.

Keywords:

Victor Hugo, Notre-Dame de Paris, Gothic architecture, visual imaginary, total work of art.

Introduction

The concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* gained notoriety due to the concerns of Richard Wagner and his extravagant patron, Ludwig II of Bavaria, who

dreamed of creating the total work of art. This concept represents a fundamental idea in the history of modern art, which designates an artistic work that integrates multiple art forms (music, drama, poetry, architecture, design, painting, dance, etc.) into a coherent whole. The term was originally used in 1827 by the German philosopher Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahdorff¹ in the essay *Ästhetik oder Lehre von Weltanschauung und Kunst*², but the composer gave it fame in his essays on art and revolution. The ideal model for Wagner was that present in Greek tragedy, in which dance, music, poetry and staging formed a whole of superior value. For him, art should not be fragmented, but a concept that would inspire creators to overcome the limits of a single artistic medium.

One might ask: What is the connection between the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk and Victor Hugo's novel, considering that he published his book almost two decades before (1831) Wagner popularized the term (1849)? We will try to answer in this paper that Hugo sees the Gothic cathedral as a historical prototype of the "total work of art", as a complete synthesis of medieval arts, something we observe in the chapter entitled "Ceci tuera cela" and in which he develops an impressive theory about architecture as the main vehicle of human thought until the 15th century, a fact that perfectly corresponds to the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk. We can even say that Hugo anticipated Wagner, the cathedral becoming for him the total art. We must emphasize a very important fact that the novel stimulated the movement to restore Notre-Dame under the supervision of Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc.³

Regarding the stage of analysis of this subject, the reference work is that of Jean Mallion, *Victor Hugo et l'art architectural* (1962), in which the author demonstrates that V. Hugo had a thorough knowledge of the history of architecture and in this sense analyzes the novel by emphasizing the chapter mentioned above. In another key, Claude Mouchard approaches Hugo's work

¹ German philosopher, aesthetician, and theologian. He is known for introducing the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) in his *Ästhetik oder Lehre von der Weltanschauung und Kunst* (1827), a term later taken up by Richard Wagner to describe the fusion of the arts in musical drama.

² "Aesthetics or the theory of worldview and art".

³ French architect, theorist, and restorer, central figure of the Gothic Revival style. He is considered one of the pioneers of modern architecture due to his theories of structural rationalism.

and life in the broader context of romanticism and historical writings in studies such as *Un grand désert d'hommes* (1855-1885). Victor Brombert in *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (1984, Harvard University Press) sees Hugo's work as a visionary novel, the cathedral being the central character and architecture a metaphor for chaos and order. Another researcher, Kathryn M. Grossman, in *The Early Novels of Victor Hugo: Towards a Poetics of Harmony* (1986) or in *Hugo's Poetics of Harmony: Transcending Dissonance in Notre-Dame de Paris* (1983), focuses on the poetics of harmony in Hugo (as he calls it), namely that of the contrasts grotesque/sublime, chaos/order, past/present, but analyzed from the perspective of a unifying vision. In Romanian critical literature, the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* is analyzed especially in the broader context of European Romanticism and Hugo's influence on Romanian literature. For example, Nicolae Manolescu in his *Critical History of Romanian Literature*⁴ emphasizes Hugolian Romantic hybridism. All these studies converge towards the idea that *Notre-Dame de Paris* is a literary proto-Gesamtkunstwerk, V. Hugo transforming the cathedral into a model of medieval total art, anticipating the Wagnerian synthesis.

The general objective of this paper is to demonstrate how Victor Hugo manages in the aforementioned novel to achieve a synthesis between text, architecture and image, analyzing the cathedral as an architectural and narrative character and highlighting the mechanisms of interdisciplinary dialogue.

1. The historical and aesthetic context of Hugo's creation from *Cromwell* to *Notre-Dame de Paris*

The period between 1827 and 1831 represents the crystallization stage of French Romanticism, in which Victor Hugo moves from the neoclassical poetry of his youth to a revolutionary artistic vision. This transition is defined by two fundamental milestones: the drama *Cromwell* and the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. The year 1827 marks the publication of the historical drama *Cromwell*, whose Preface becomes the official manifesto of the Romantic school, V. Hugo proposing a new aesthetic, based on the freedom of art and the rejection of strict classical units. He divides the history of mankind into

⁴ N. Manolescu observă că scriitorii români (precum Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, Gheorghe Asachi sau Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu) au adoptat libertatea totală de compoziție a lui Hugo, care respingea rigorile clasicismului în favoarea unui amestec de contrarii.

three ages: the primitive one, represented by the ode, the ancient one, by the epic, and the modern one, by drama, the second being considered the supreme form of the spirit that was emerging during that period. What he brought new was the introduction of the binomial sublime/grotesque, arguing that authentic art must mirror the duality of the human being (body vs. soul; animality vs. divinity). In Hugo's vision, the grotesque becomes a necessary contrast to highlight the sublime, being a part of everyday reality:

*"Here we will only say that alongside the sublime, as a means of contrast, the grotesque is, in our opinion, the richest source that nature can offer to art (Nous dirons seulement ici que, comme objectif auprès du sublime, comme moyen de contraste, le grotesque est, selon nous, la plus riche source que la nature puisse ouvrir à l'art.)"*⁵, convincingly describing the impact that "the touch of the deformed" has on art.

Starting with 1829⁶, Hugo diversified his means of expression. Thus, through the volume *Les Orientales* he brings a colorful exoticism and a formal innovation related to a varied metric, demonstrating that the poet is a "master of rhyme". This series of poems is influenced by the romantic fascination of 19th-century France for the Orient, although Hugo never traveled to this area, but he managed through his genius to create exotic and colorful images, describing the Mediterranean, Turkish and Spanish space. The volume is distinguished by an overflowing imagination, local color, varied rhythms and an aesthetic of "art for art's sake", described by Hugo as a "volume of pure poetry". In the preface to the volume, Hugo proclaims the total independence of the artist, stating that *"Everything has the right of a city in poetry"*, thus rejecting strict classical rules and claiming that there are no "forbidden" or unworthy subjects of art. The scenes include passionate descriptions of pirates, Turkish captives, moonlit landscapes on the Bosphorus, and a fantastic vision of the Orient. In keeping with Cromwell's aesthetic, Hugo introduces elements of cruel violence and nightmarish imagery (*Mazeppa*), integrating the "ugly" into the poetic harmony.

⁵ V. Hugo, *Cromwell* [on line], Available on web: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://libretheatre.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Cromwell_Hugo_LT-2.pdf, p. 8.

⁶ The poems reflect the political context of Greece's liberation from the Ottoman Empire.

Another aspect of Victor Hugo's work is that of social commitment. In this sense, *Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné* (1829) represents a manifesto against the death penalty, anticipating the humanitarian concerns that we will find in *Les Misérables*. The work is written in the form of a cell diary, and the reader directly experiences the anguish, terror and vain hopes of the condemned man during his last six weeks of life. In the 1832 edition, Hugo added a preface in which he attacks the legal system, arguing that execution is not an act of justice, but one of barbarity that does not deter crime, but only brutalizes society.

*"As long as there will be, due to laws and morals, a social curse that artificially creates, in the midst of civilization, true hells, aggravating with a human fatality the destiny, which is of divine essence; as long as the three problems of the century: the degradation of man through exploitation, the degradation of woman through hunger, the atrophy of the child through the power of darkness, will not be solved; as long as, in certain strata, social constraints will be possible; as long as ignorance and misery will persist on Earth, books like the present one will not be in vain."*⁷

It is known that he wrote this novel in exile, establishing himself as a theorist of romanticism, defining the freedom of literature in the choice of theme, in promoting attitudes of revolt against tyrannies and solidarity with peoples engaged in the fight for freedom, in the orientation towards direct contact with life. The appearance, in 1862, of the novel would definitively abolish the old Romanian formulas, impressing with the complexity of its composition, in which elements of fresco, feuilleton, social intrigue and historical evocation are found.

Another important moment in the author's literary journey towards the famous novel *Notre Dame de Paris* was the premiere of the play *Hernani*, which marked the definitive victory of the Romantics over the conservative classicists, imposing romantic drama on the stage of the French Comedy. *Hernani* demonstrated that the public was ready for a freer, more passionate art, mixing the tragic with the comic, the beautiful with the grotesque, something that Hugo would apply in the novel through the strong contrast between the characters (Quasimodo – grotesque and sublime; Esmeralda – graceful and pure), the mixture of genres (historical, dramatic, Gothic, social),

⁷ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 16.

the refusal of rigid classical rules in favor of an ample and detailed narrative. Without the success (and scandal) of 1830, the novel of 1831 could have been much more cautious or different in style, so *Hernani* was a kind of artistic "declaration of independence" that opened the way to Hugo's Gothic-Romantic masterpiece.

The appearance of the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* in 1831 completes this stage of aesthetic ascension, being the work that effectively puts into practice the theories presented in the preface to *Cromwell*. The cathedral is a character in itself, the center of the world, the "stone book" of humanity before the invention of printing. Contradictions are what give the core of the action, the relationship between Quasimodo (physical grotesque, but moral sublime) and Esmeralda (aesthetic purity) perfectly illustrating Hugo's theoretical program. The novel also explores the implacable force of destiny on people, a central theme of European romanticism.

Thus, between 1827 and 1831, Victor Hugo manages to transform French literature from a rigid system of rules into a space of total freedom. By overcoming the boundaries between genres and by aesthetically validating the ugly and the grotesque, he prepares the ground for the great literature of the 19th century.

2. Victor Hugo and the consciousness of heritage: From romantic aesthetics to the rescue of historical monuments

The French Romantic movement of the first half of the 19th century represented a significant break with the rigors of classicism, promoting a new sensibility centered on subjectivity, emotion, and an interest in the medieval past. In this context, the Gothic—previously marginalized and considered barbaric in relation to the aesthetic ideals of Antiquity—was reevaluated and revalued as an authentic expression of European spirituality and identity. The rediscovery of the Gothic in France is closely linked to the contributions of authors such as François-René de Chateaubriand, Charles Nodier, and Prosper Mérimée, whose works and activities contributed to the reconfiguration of aesthetic taste and the institutionalization of interest in medieval heritage. Thus, the rediscovery of the Gothic style in France in the first half of the 19th century was not just a change in aesthetic preferences,

but a profound reevaluation of national and spiritual identity, opposed to the rationalist rigors of Enlightenment neoclassicism.

François-René de Chateaubriand, in his monumental work, *The Genius of Christianity* (1802), rehabilitated the Gothic aesthetic, considering it the "natural style" of the French and Christian spirit, proposing a reevaluation of Christianity not only as a religious system but also as a source of artistic inspiration. He argued that medieval architecture, with its high vaults and light filtered through stained glass, evoked the mystery of nature and the depth of divinity, transforming the cathedral into a "forest of stone". Chateaubriand shifted the emphasis from the perfection of classical proportions to the metaphysical emotion provoked by ruins, giving Gothic a spiritual dimension essential to the Romantic Movement. For Chateaubriand, Gothic cathedrals become symbols of a profound collective sensibility, marked by mystery, melancholy, and transcendence. This perspective contributes decisively to changing the attitude towards the Middle Ages, perceived not as an obscure era, but as one that is artistically and spiritually fertile.⁸

Charles Nodier continued this direction through his interest in fantasy, folklore and the medieval imaginary. If Chateaubriand provided the spiritual foundation, Charles Nodier explored the dreamlike and legendary side of the Gothic. Through the series *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France* (begun in 1820), he promoted an "archaeology of the imaginary", where medieval monuments became backdrops for fantastic narratives and explorations of the subconscious.⁹ As librarian of the Arsenal in Paris, he became a cultural mediator, promoting Gothic literature and medieval themes in Romantic literary circles. His writings, imbued with mystery and the supernatural, contributed to the consolidation of an aesthetic of literary Gothic, in which ruins, castles and nocturnal elements became recurring motifs. Nodier thus participated in the creation of a collective sensibility oriented towards the past, in which the Gothic acquired an aesthetic and affective dimension.

Prosper Mérimée played a key role in the rediscovery of Gothic, not only as a writer but also as a heritage administrator, as Inspector General of

⁸ François-René de Chateaubriand, 1828, Available on web: https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/G%C3%A9nie_du_christianisme

⁹ Georges Zaragoza, 2018, pp. 57-68.

Historical Monuments (starting in 1834), applying the Romantic vision in a formal framework, identifying and cataloguing Gothic vestiges in France that were on the verge of degradation.¹⁰ His collaboration with the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc led to important restorations, such as that of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, consolidating public interest in medieval architecture.

These personalities transformed the Gothic monument from a "barbaric relic" (a vision specific to the 18th century) into a symbol of national creative genius, an aesthetic evolution that prepared the ideological climate necessary for the great debate around 1831, transforming literature into an instrument of political struggle for preservation.

The debate over the *Battle of Hernani* (1830) and Victor Hugo's struggle for the preservation of historical monuments, illustrated by the essay *Guerre aux démolisseurs* (1832), are part of a broader context of French Romanticism, marked by a reevaluation of medieval and Gothic heritage as an expression of national identity.

The premiere of Victor Hugo's play *Hernani* on 25 February 1830 at the Comédie-Française degenerated into a violent scandal, symbolizing the confrontation between rigid classicism (supported by academics and conservatives) and the new romanticism, which promoted artistic freedom, the mixing of genres, the promotion of local colour and the passion for expressing emotions. The young romantics, including Théophile Gautier, with his provocative red waistcoat, applauded the play, while the classicists booed it. This victory of romanticism created a favourable climate for Hugo to extend his struggle from the literary sphere to that of cultural heritage, with Gothic architecture becoming a symbol of a Paris threatened by destruction and modernisation.

The publication of the essay *Guerre aux démolisseurs!*¹¹ in March 1832 in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, represents V. Hugo's firm commitment to the preservation of monuments, being a continuation of his previous concerns regarding stopping the destruction of monuments and through which he denounces the systematic "vandalism" that affected the French heritage after the French Revolution (1789) and during the Restoration and the July Monarchy: statues vandalized, cathedrals transformed into "temples of

¹⁰ Colette Becker, 2004, pp. 129-143.

¹¹ "War of the Demolitions"

reason", the Gallery of Kings on the western facade of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris was the victim of a dramatic historical confusion and destroyed,¹² the replacement of medieval stained glass windows with transparent white glass, the addition of Baroque or classical elements that destroyed Gothic harmony etc. Hugo demands the adoption of a law to protect historical monuments, which he likens to a "book in stone" of humanity. In the famous chapter "Ceci tuera cela" he develops the idea that architecture was, until the 15th century, a stone writing of religious, popular and political thought, and that the discovery of printing would lead to the destruction of the building. Published in 1831, the novel enjoyed a positive reception, transforming the cathedral from a neglected building into a living symbol, leading to the generation of a movement of opinion that generated the restoration campaign of 1844–1864, led by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus.

The publication of the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* in 1831 marks the consecration of Victor Hugo as a first-rate novelist and transforms an intellectual cause, the preservation of medieval architecture, into a movement of broad public opinion. The novel appears in a favorable context, as we have noted above in the paper, just a few months after the July Revolution of 1830,¹³ which installed the July Monarchy under Louis-Philippe,¹⁴ and shortly after the *Battle of Hernani* (1830), which affirmed the aesthetic victory of Romanticism. The book was written at an intense pace (approximately six months of actual work, between 1830 and January 1831), the author isolating himself and announcing that he would carry a bottle of ink with him at all times until the manuscript was completed. The novel was a resounding success, enjoying laudatory reviews in which it was pointed out that the main character was, in fact, the cathedral itself. As for the readers, they were won over by the dramatic story, the local color, the romanticism, but also the grotesqueness of the characters. The novel led to Hugo's election to the French Academy (1841) and fueled public debates on heritage, the abolition of the death penalty and the rehabilitation of the Middle Ages. By personifying the cathedral (Quasimodo being described as its "soul"), Hugo

¹² Currently, the original heads, which still retain traces of polychromy, are exhibited at the Cluny Museum (National Museum of the Middle Ages).

¹³ Also known as "The Three Glorious Days" (July 27-29).

¹⁴ Nicolae Liu, 1991, pp. 277-27.

made the public "love" the monument, Notre-Dame going from a neglected edifice, considered old-fashioned or even ugly, to a living symbol of French identity and Gothic genius. The impact did not stop there. Following the fire in 2019, the novel returned to the bestseller lists in France, demonstrating its relevance at the level of symbol and sensitivity.

3. The Gothic architecture of Notre-Dame Cathedral – from monument to literary character

The presentation of authentic Gothic architectural elements in *Notre-Dame de Paris* is one of the most refined and precise aspects of the novel. The cathedral does not just play a role of decoration, but becomes the central character of the book, its structural and decorative parts being described with maximum accuracy, which denotes a detailed knowledge of the architectural field. Hugo insists on the authenticity of these elements, denouncing the revolutionary mutilations and subsequent "improvements" that altered its harmony and that he had already spoken about in his previous studies:

*"The Church of Notre-Dame de Paris is still today, without a doubt, a magnificent and sublime building. But, however beautiful it has remained, as it has aged, it is difficult not to sigh, not to be angry in the face of the damage, the countless mutilations to which time and man have simultaneously subjected the venerable monument, without respect for Charlemagne, who laid its first stone, or for Philippe-Auguste, who laid its last."*¹⁵

In the chapters dedicated to the description of the cathedral,¹⁶ Hugo presents Gothic architecture not as a rigid style, but as a living being, with an ingenious structure and a rich symbolism, demonstrating that medieval architecture "speaks" through stone, forms and lights.

Thus, the **flying buttress**¹⁷ is one of the most emblematic structural elements of French Gothic, and Notre-Dame was among the first cathedrals to use them on a large scale. Hugo describes them as "wings" that allow the walls to be raised and the windows to be enlarged, transferring the weight of

¹⁵ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 101.

¹⁶ Books three and five.

¹⁷ It is an external structural element, specific to Gothic architecture, which supports high walls, taking the pressure of the interior vaults and transmitting it, through an arch, to a massive exterior buttress.

the vaults to the outside. We can interpret this description as a metaphor for liberation from darkness. In the novel, the flying buttresses of the apse are evoked as a "forest" of flying buttresses, giving the cathedral an appearance of an "airship" or a living skeleton, symbolizing medieval technical ingenuity, but also suggesting human aspiration towards infinity.

The **rose windows**¹⁸ are described with admiration as the cathedral's "eyes" or "wheels of fire," filtering light through the stained glass. They illustrate the transition from early Gothic to radiant: more light, more elegance. In the narrative, the rose windows contribute to the mystical atmosphere and the symbolism of the cathedral as a "register" of human thought. Hugo regrets the replacement of medieval stained glass with transparent white windows:

*"And who put cold white windows in place of the richly colored stained glass that made our ancestors' gaze waver between the rose of the great portal and the ogives of the apse?"*¹⁹

The rose windows also represent the passage of time (the months of the year, the signs of the zodiac) and divine judgment. In the context of the novel, the rose windows emphasize the cathedral's role as a medium for the dissemination of sacred knowledge, threatened by the printed "book."

The three portals on the western facade are described in detail and are full of symbols:

"And first, to give just a few main examples, surely few archive pages are more beautiful than the facade on which the three portals cut into ogives, the embroidered and laced cord with twenty-eight royal niches, the immense central window in the form of a rose, flanked by the two side windows like the priest of deacon and subdeacon, the tall and slender Gallery of trefoil arches that holds a heavy platform and its fine colonettes, finally, the two black and massive towers with their slate eaves, harmonious parts of a towering whole, superimposed in five gigantic floors, appear to the eyes one after the other and at the same time together and without irregularities, with the countless details related to the art of statuary,

¹⁸ It is a large circular window, richly ornamented with stone tracery, typical of Gothic architecture. It is usually placed on the main facade of cathedrals, above the portal, with the role of illuminating the interior and symbolizing a rose.

¹⁹ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 103.

sculpture and chiseling, strongly uniting in the quiet grandeur of the ensemble; vast symphony in stone, so to speak."²⁰

Hugo analyzes and deciphers their sculptures as a Gothic "alphabet", highlighting naturalism, expressiveness and biblical narrative. He emphasizes that the portals have suffered mutilation, the statues of the gallery of kings having been destroyed in the Revolution, mistaken for kings of France:

*"But who took down the two rows of statues? Who left the niches empty? Who dug this new and unstylish ogive right in the middle of the central portal? Who dared to frame there the barren and heavy carved wooden door of Louis XV next to the arabesques of Biscornette?"*²¹

The descriptions emphasize the harmony of the proportions of the facade, considered one of the most perfect in French Gothic.

The description of Gothic **sculptures** abounds in the novel, from the statues on the facades, the bas-reliefs representing biblical scenes, apostles, virgins etc., Hugo seeing them as a "popular library" in stone, insisting on their naturalism and vitality, opposed to classical rigidity. A special place is occupied by the **Gargoyles**²² and **Chimeras**,²³ which represent a special place in Hugo's romantic imagination, being associated with Quasimodo, who lives among these hybrid, marginal creatures, integrated into the harmony of the cathedral, as he is: "All the grimaces, all the servitudes surrounded Quasimodo. You would have thought that another church had sent its gorgons, giant dogs, chimeras, demons, the most fantastic sculptures to storm Notre-Dame. It seemed as if a layer of living monsters had climbed over the stone monsters of the facade."²⁴ Hugo describes their authentic medieval state: worn, menacing, but full of life, Quasimodo moving among them like a living chimera.

Hugo does not only describe the elements from a technical point of view, but also animates them: the cathedral "breathes", "sings", "suffers" along with the characters: "Above the flame, the enormous spires, of which

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp.101-102.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

²² A short gutter or downspout for draining rainwater, usually richly ornamented.

²³ Fantastical, often grotesque sculptures placed on medieval cathedrals and churches, starting in the 13th century.

²⁴ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 408.

two very distinct facades could be seen, one completely black, the other completely red, seemed even larger because of the huge shadow they projected up to the sky. Their countless sculptures of devils and dragons had a lugubrious aspect. The restless light of the flame made them move before your eyes. You could see fantastic snakes that seemed to laugh, chimeras that seemed to bark, salamanders that breathed in fire, ghosts that sneezed in smoke."²⁵ Quasimodo moves naturally among all of this, integrating perfectly, forming a common body with the cathedral, being its "soul". This becomes a "microcosm" of the world in which the religious, the popular and the fantastic are integrated.

The scene of the siege of the cathedral remains relevant, architecture now being described as a space of battle. Appealing to architectural animism,²⁶ the spires, galleries, gargoyles, eaves become weapons. Quasimodo throws stones, beams, molten lead and the statues seem to wake up, the cathedral "defending itself" like a giant and wounded animal. The structure of the cathedral formed by a labyrinth of narrow stairs, galleries, platforms and buttresses allows Quasimodo a well-established defense, providing him with an ideal battlefield for a "son" of the cathedral. The attack on Notre-Dame is a revolt against the royal and divine order, Hugo emphasizing that: "churches defended themselves with their holiness".²⁷ The cathedral moves from the role of refuge (right of/to asylum) to the role of living fortress.

4. Hugolian narrative techniques used in presenting the cathedral as a character

Most critics who have analyzed this novel have concluded that the main protagonist is actually the Cathedral, with a historical and symbolic role, highlighted by the other characters: Quasimodo, Esmeralda or Frollo. Hugo has a special talent for transforming it into a living being, with a soul and its own destiny, an eternal witness of/to fatality (Anankè)²⁸ and a space that influences, protects or devours the human beings with whom it comes into contact.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 402.

²⁶ It represents a design approach that treats buildings and the built environment as living entities, endowed with spirit, behavior, and agency, not just as simple inert structures.

²⁷ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 395.

²⁸ Ananke (Greek: Ανάγκη: force, constraint, necessity") is the Greek personification of inevitability, destiny, and relentless necessity.

One of the literary techniques he applies in the novel is **personification**. The cathedral "breathes", "looks", "defends", "vibrates", "feels", being compared to a living organism, a symphony in stone, a mythological monster or a gigantic book written by an entire people, having a deep symbiotic relationship with the characters, especially with Quasimodo. A relevant example appears in the siege scene when the building seems to come to life, becoming a huge, living animal that moves. : "Then it dawned on him that the church was also shaking, moving, coming to life, living, that each large column was turning into a giant foot that was stamping the ground with its wide stone paw, and that the immense cathedral was just a kind of incredible elephant, which blew and walked with the pillars as legs, the two spires as trunks, and the immense black cloth as a tusk."²⁹

The cathedral is not only Quasimodo's home, but almost an extension of his being, Hugo using images of organic fusion to highlight this aspect:

*"Thus, little by little, always developing in the spirit of the cathedral, living and sleeping in it, hardly ever leaving it, constantly feeling its mysterious influence, Quasimodo came to resemble it, to embed himself, so to speak, in it, to be an integral part of Her. His protruding forms were, ..., in the hollow angles of the building; the bell-ringer seemed not only to live in the cathedral, but to be its natural content. One could almost say that he had taken its shape, as the snail takes the shape of its shell. The cathedral was his dwelling, his lair, his covering. [...] The rugged cathedral was his shell."*³⁰ *Quasimodo becomes part of her body, like a snail in its shell or a tortoise in its shell: "For him, Notre Dame had been, one by one, as it grew and developed, the egg, the nest, the house, the homeland, the universe."*³¹

Quasimodo and the bells also form one of the most powerful human-architecture fusions. Deafened by the bells he rings frantically, the hunchback experiences an almost erotic and mystical bliss: the bells become his voice, his only form of communication with the world. This sound fills Paris, makes the entire edifice vibrate, animating it like a gigantic organism, the cathedral coming to life, and Quasimodo finding his humanity only within it.

²⁹ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 347.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

Finally, after Quasimodo's death, Hugo personifies the absence of the spirit: "...for those who know that he existed, the Notre-Dame cathedral is today deserted, lifeless, dead. You feel that something has disappeared from it. This immense body is empty; it is a skeleton; the soul has left it; only the place is visible and that is all. It is like a skull that still has the eye sockets, but not the gaze."³²

Other examples of anthropomorphization are present in the description of rosettes that are compared to the eye of a cyclops, in towers that are described as a gigantic body with legs and a head, or in bells that have a soul in the person of Quasimodo.

Through these techniques, Hugo brings the cathedral to the rank of a romantic character, full of strength, mystery and melancholy, creating an emotional connection between the reader and the monument, which also contributed to the awareness of the need for its conservation.

Another literary technique through which he sheds light on the cathedral is that of **historical and descriptive digression**. The author interrupts the main narrative thread to offer ample passages of evocation, analysis, and pleading. These pauses are not simple digressions, but they create the effect of totality, the novel becoming an epic of a people and an era. Through this technique he manages to evoke the historical atmosphere, placing the action in Paris in 1482, recreating the Middle Ages with documentary precision, but also with poetic vision. At the time of the novel's publication, the cathedral was in an advanced state of decay, mutilated by time, revolutions and unfortunate "restorations", and Hugo uses this literary device to present it as a living monument, but threatened by oblivion:

Digressions appear especially in Book Three, where Hugo dedicates two entire chapters to the cathedral and the city: "Notre-Dame" (chap. I) and "Paris seen from above" (chap. II). These passages slow down the pace, but deeply enrich the meaning of the novel, transforming it into a true romantic manifesto for Gothic architecture and against the destruction of monuments. Hugo combines several techniques to put the cathedral "in the light". Thus, through a panoramic description, he moves from architectural detail (towers,

³² *Ibidem*, p. 147.

portals, sculptures, stained glass windows, eaves) to an overall vision, as if contemplating the monument from different distances and angles. The cathedral is a "symphony in stone", a "huge work of a man and a people", a "gigantic book":

*"...a vast symphony in stone, so to speak; a huge work of a man and a people; one and complex, at the same time, like the Iliads and the Romanceros, to which it is a sister; an astonishing product of the dedication of all the forces of an era, where on each stone one sees gushing forth, in a hundred ways, the fantasy of the worker subdued by the genius of the artist; in a word, a powerful and fecund human creation, just like the divine creation, which seems to have been robbed of its double character: variety and eternity."*³³

The author creates a sentimental flight over Paris in 1482 and creates a historical fresco of the entire city, with an emphasis on its evolution over the centuries. Notre-Dame appears here not only as an isolated monument, but as the historical and symbolic heart of medieval Paris, emphasizing its role as the axis mundi of the Roman world. The digression explains the genesis of the city, its architectural, social and political transformations, the contrast between the three "cities": the Citadel (La Cité), the University and the City proper,³⁴ and the role of Gothic architecture in the history of civilization.

Thus, through descriptive digression Hugo focuses on the cathedral as form, beauty, details, personification, aesthetic emotion, and through historical digression he directs his attention to the urban and historical context: Paris as a whole, its evolution over time, the social and philosophical significance of Gothic architecture. The author intentionally separates them to create that effect of progressive amplification: initially we contemplate the monument in detail, later we understand its historical and collective dimension. The cathedral becomes a symbol of Ananké (fatality), the Greek word carved into stone that the author discovers in a hidden and dark corner of one of the towers, a symbol of humanity's creative resistance. The entire description of the building revolves around the idea of the prison of destiny. The massive walls, buttresses and narrow staircases are not just architectural elements, but physical barriers that force the characters towards their tragic end.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

Architectural symbolism is another way in which Hugo demonstrates that Gothic architecture is the expression of the creative freedom of the people. The cathedral becomes a "Stone Book", the main idea of the chapter *Ceci tuera cela* being that, before printing, architecture was the alphabet of humanity, the main way of writing and preserving the ideas of humanity. Hugo deciphers the elements of the facade and those of the stained glass windows for the reader, transforming the static description into a historical narrative. Religious dogmas, history and philosophical thought were publicly displayed on the facades of the buildings, the cathedral thus becoming an encyclopedia that anyone could "read":

*"Each wave of time deposits its alluvium above, each nation deposits its layer over the monument, each individual brings his stone. So do beavers, so do men. The great symbol of architecture, the Tower of Babel, is a beehive."*³⁵

Hugo creates a symbolic conflict between Claude Frollo (the symbol of the old order, the connoisseur of the contents of all the manuscript books in the library) and Gutenberg's printing press:

*"I tell you, sir, it's the end of the world. The cursed inventions of the century are leading everything to ruin. Artillery, serpentines, bombards and, above all, printing, this plague that also came from Germany. There are no more manuscripts, there are no more books! The printing press is killing the library. The end of the world is coming!"*³⁶

"This" (the printed book) will kill "That" (the stone building), a statement that can be interpreted in several ways. The written word becomes easier to multiply and disseminate, reaching the common people much more easily, who will be "enlightened" through access to education. We are also faced with the triumph of printing over architecture as the main form of expression of humanity. From a technological perspective, the book replaces stone in the transmission of knowledge, and ideologically, it democratizes thought, weakening the institutional monopoly of the church. Another symbolism could be that a stone monument can be destroyed very easily, while a

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

printed book is like a flock of birds that can "fly" everywhere, being impossible to stop. The novel itself demonstrated that a book can save a monument.

The cathedral is also seen as a layered text, a palimpsest, not being the work of a single person, but the product of a collective process, an accumulation of "letters" from different eras, its stones bearing the signs of the absolute authority of the church, but also the signs of the first freedoms of the people, visible in the grotesque of some sculptures: *"Our fathers had a Paris of stone, our sons will have a Paris of plaster."*³⁷ For Hugo, the cathedral is a hybrid between the Romanesque, heavy, theocratic style, and the Gothic, light, democratic. This transition is visible in the structure of the building, which preserves the traces of each transformation:

*"If we had the time to examine one by one, together with the reader, the various traces of destruction imprinted on the ancient church, we would see that the fewest of them are due to time, and the most and most severe are due to people of art."*³⁸

Thus, the Cathedral can be likened to a text that has been "corrected" and "reedited" by successive generations, reflecting the tastes and ideologies of each era. Time itself is a character who has left its mark on the cathedral's facade through erosion and patina, adding that layer of depth that a new construction cannot have:

*"Hence, the prodigious exterior variety of these edifices, at the base of which so much order and unity resides. The trunk of the tree is immutable, the vegetation is capricious."*³⁹

The Cathedral is a living organism. Even if the "foliage" (ornaments) changes, the "trunk!" (spiritual and structural essence) remains the unchanged witness of history.

The stratification is not only physical, but also intellectual. The cathedral is the "book" in which all the layers of thought of the medieval world were deposited before printing took over this role:

"Indeed, from the origin of things to the fifteenth century of the Christian era, inclusive, architecture is the great book of

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 128.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 108.

humanity, the principal expression of man in his various stages of development, whether as force or as intelligence.”⁴⁰

The very structure of the cathedral, which has both catacombs and towers, mirrors the social and moral hierarchy of medieval Paris. The towers symbolize spiritual aspiration (but also Frollo's isolation), while the Square below represents the chaos of the material world. This verticality creates dramatic tension: the characters "fall" morally or physically from the height of the stone. Hugo uses the height of the towers to offer the reader a "God's eye" perspective. Those who live up there, Frollo or Quasimodo, see order from a different perspective. Those down there, in the square, do not have this perspective and will never be able to understand the mechanisms of power. For Frollo, isolation in the towers is symbolic, a prison of the mind, the tower being for him a cell from which he could never leave, a tomb from which he watched life. His isolation at height dehumanizes him. The more he climbs in knowledge, the deeper he falls into the moral abyss. Frollo's fall from the tower actually represents his spiritual fall, with Hugo using gravity as a force of fate that "pulls" him back to the dust due to his lack of morality:

"Everything around him was stone; before his eyes, monsters with gaping mouths; below him, far below, in the square, the pavement; above him, Quasimodo, who was weeping.”⁴¹

Down below, at the base of the cathedral, individual identity is lost. If the tower is the place of introspection, the Square is the place of primal instincts, executions and grotesque celebrations:

"The Palace Square, crowded with people, offered the curious at the windows the appearance of a sea, into which five or six streets, like so many river mouths, poured out waves of heads moment by moment...”⁴²

In Hugo's universe, space defines man: the tower offers perspective, but also madness; the catacombs and the square offer life, but also degradation. The dramatic tension arises precisely from the characters' inability to reconcile these two worlds.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 168.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 477.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

Another literary technique used in the novel is that of the **fusion of setting and psychology**, to illustrate the map of the minds of its characters. In this case, space is no longer neutral, but shapes the souls. The closed and small spaces, the cell and the tower, where Frolo retreats, actually describe his mind locked in a single obsessive fixed idea, Esmeralda. We feel the cardinal's moral suffocation through the description of the cold stone walls that seem to close in around him:

*"Readers have not forgotten the mysterious cell that the archdeacon had reserved for himself in that tower. ... Every day, an hour before sunset, the archdeacon would climb the tower's stairs and shut himself in the cell, where he would sometimes spend entire nights... The cell had only one small window facing the back of the church. [...] He stood there, grave, unmoving, gazing absorbed and lost in thought. He had all of Paris at his feet.... But in all this city, the archdeacon looked at only one point of the cobblestones: the square in front of the cathedral; and in all this crowd, he looked at only one face: that of the gypsy."*⁴³

In the case of Quasimodo, the symbiosis between the body and the edifice is total, almost biological. He does not just live in the cathedral, but becomes the cathedral. Hugo explicitly says that he took the shape of the building, just as a snail takes the shape of its shell. Quasimodo's psychology is one of "stone": hard on the outside, but protective. His kindness is solid as a buttress, and his anger is loud as a bell. To highlight the psychological duality of his characters, Hugo borrows Rembrandt's pictorial technique. The scenes that involve maximum emotional intensity take place either in total darkness (the cell where Esmeralda is imprisoned) or in blinding light (the scaffold scene):

*"...at that moment the sun appeared, and over the edge of the horizon poured such a wave of light, that you would have said that all the peaks of Paris, pointed spiers, chimneys, ridges, had caught fire at once."*⁴⁴

Thus, the space dictates the mood. The long shadows of the cathedrals are not only visual details, but represent the secrets, sins and "deeds of the night" of the characters who wear social masks by day. Through this fusion,

⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 238-239.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 473.

Hugo transforms the reader into an explorer who climbs the steps of the tower not just to travel a physical distance, but to delve deeper into the character's mind.

Through these techniques, Victor Hugo manages to make Notre-Dame a complex character: the protector of Quasimodo, a place of peace but also of commotion for Frolo, asylum for Esmeralda. The novel not only describes the monument, but saves it in the French cultural consciousness, contributing directly to the restoration movement that followed.

5. Hugo's visual imaginary – from word to image

Victor Hugo transforms the word into the ultimate visual instrument, creating a mental architecture that surpasses both the real monument and his autograph drawings. The visual imaginary is not an ornament, but a constitutive component of the total work of art, the binder that unites literature with Gothic architecture. His narrative technique is a "pictorial" one that simultaneously activates several senses, the predominant one being that of sight. The influences are multiple: Rembrandt for the dramatic play of light and shadow (as I pointed out above in the work), Piranesi⁴⁵ for the hallucinatory architectural visions (the engravings in the Imaginary Prisons cycle) and Turner's anticipation⁴⁶ in treating light as a living force. Hugo builds the image through successive layers, moving from the whole to the detail (or vice versa), creating a zoom effect. The sudden change in perspective, from the panoramic view to the grotesque detail, helps him induce that feeling of unease:

*"... the moment when the sun, heading towards dusk, looks almost straight ahead at the cathedral. Its rays, increasingly horizontal, slowly retreat from the cobblestones of the square and climb along the vertical facade of the church, bringing out in relief, through their shadows, the thousands of sculptures, while the large central rose-shaped window sparkles like a burning Cyclops' eye, in the reflection of the fire in the fireplace."*⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) was an Italian artist, graphic artist, archaeologist, and architect, recognized worldwide not as an easel painter, but as the absolute master of etching.

⁴⁶ Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) was an English painter, watercolourist and engraver, considered one of the greatest landscape masters in the history of art.

⁴⁷ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 224.

This description not only renders the image of the cathedral in sunlight, but dramatizes it, transforming it into a vivid, theatrically illuminated scene, Hugo frequently using pictorial metaphors: "like a Cyclops' eye", "like a stone anthill") to make the text easier to "visualize".

Victor Hugo was also an exceptionally talented draftsman and graphic artist, creating an impressive number of drawings, most of them in brown ink, charcoal, soot and even coffee grounds⁴⁸. These are closely related to the universe of the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, reflecting a deep fascination with Gothic architecture and the stone creatures of the cathedral. The author's graphic visions make a direct connection between Turner's dramatic atmosphere and Piranesi's nightmarish geometries (whom Hugo deeply admired, calling him "the black brain"). Although he did not draw *Notre-Dame* directly, in his pictorial creations he uses the Gothic and gloomy aesthetic that he applied to the written description of the cathedral. In the margins of his manuscripts, Hugo drew Gothic spires, ogives and details of stained glass, transforming the act of writing into a total visual experience. For example, the drawings of fortified castles with towers (*Château fort sur une colline*, 1847) correspond to the descriptions of Gothic verticality present in the novel. The monsters and gargoyles in the drawings prefigure the description of the stone counterparts on the cathedral or of Quasimodo, as their human extension. These drawings, some made after the publication of the novel, do not illustrate the novel, but complement it, representing the same creative force that transforms stone into fiction and fiction into living stone.

Hugo's imaginary is centred around three major symbolic axes: Light vs. Shadow, Verticality, Monstrous. Light appears in the novel with its dual function: revealing and destructive at the same time. As revealing forces, we mention the following hypostases: The sunlight entering Claude Frollo's cell symbolizes the thirst for truth and the transition from medieval obscurantism to rationalism; Esmeralda is constantly associated with the golden light of the sun, representing natural purity, grace and hope in a dark world; The stained glass windows of the cathedral filter the external light, transforming the interior space into a visual revelation of divine greatness and human genius; Quasimodo's pure love for Esmeralda reveals his bright and pure soul. As a

⁴⁸ Victor Hugo's Drawings [on line]. Available on web: <https://www.maisonsvictorhugo.paris.fr/en/paris/collections/victor-hugos-drawings>

destructive force, we can say that for Frollo, light becomes the consuming fire of carnal desire, a destructive obsession that destroys his faith and causes his collapse both in figure and in word; The light in Frollo's alchemical laboratory is an artificial, sinister one, associated with demonic forces; The fire caused by the molten lead thrown by Quasimodo from the spires defends the cathedral, but brings death and terror among the besiegers. In turn, the shadow is the space of mystery, crime and refuge. It does not only represent the absence of light, but is a refuge and, at the same time, a spiritual or physical prison. In a first register, the shadow is seen as a space of isolation and decay: Claude Frollo's obscure cell and his secret laboratory are immersed in darkness, symbolizing the transition from the light of faith to the darkness of pagan alchemy; The basements of the Palace of Justice are completely devoid of light, representing here the cruel character of medieval justice; Quasimodo lives and hides in the penumbra of the cathedral which becomes a protective screen against the outside world, his physical ugliness being thus blurred. In another register the shadow is a refuge and a salvation. Thus, the dark interior of the Notre-Dame cathedral becomes a sanctuary of protective shadow for Esmeralda. When Quasimodo asks for "Asylum!", he snatches her from the relentless light of the public square and hides her in the hallowed penumbra of the church; The common grave of Montfaucon, a dark and sinister place, finally becomes the space where the skeletons of Quasimodo and Esmeralda unite. The shadow of death becomes the only place where this impossible love finally finds peace.

Verticality is represented by the spires that "tear the sky", by infinite staircases, by the ascending perspective, symbolizing spiritual aspiration, but also human hubris. Hugo describes the cathedral as a living organism that rises above medieval Paris, dominating the chaotic horizontal of the city. From the top of the towers, the view (the chapter Paris seen from above) offers a panoramic perspective, the city becoming a labyrinth and a mosaic of roofs. In contrast, Quasimodo, hunchbacked, inverts this verticality, he being the horizontal-man, bound to the earth, but vertical from a spiritual point of view, a hybrid being who dominates the heights. He moves with superhuman agility on facades, climbs, jumps, dominates vertical space like no other. Outside of it, he loses this ability and limps. Verticality has an ambivalence: height offers refuge and power, but also vertigo, loneliness and damnation; the depth (the

square, the street, the Grève) is the space of the crowd, of Esmeralda's dance, of carnal life, but also of execution. Medieval society itself is vertically hierarchized: the clergy and nobility live "up", in towers and palaces, the people "down", in the Court of Miracles or in the street. The cathedral is what unites or divides these levels. Thus, the imaginary of Hugolian verticality materializes in the cathedral-character, situated between heaven and earth, between salvation and damnation. The characters ascend towards light and beauty, but are often pulled down by passion, hatred or destiny.

The third axis of Hugo's imaginary is that of the **monstrous**, represented by gargoyles, chimeras, Quasimodo. Hugo rehabilitates the monstrous as romantic beauty,⁴⁹ closely linked to the sublime and the romantic vision of reality, becoming an instrument for knowing human reality, including its dark side. Quasimodo represents the supreme incarnation of the Hugolian monstrous, his physical appearance being hideous (hunchbacked, one-eyed, deaf, lame), contrasting violently with his pure soul, capable of pure love:

*"Do not look at my face/ Young girl, look at my heart./ Often the heart of the handsome lad is a slut,/ There are hearts that do not keep love."*⁵⁰

In contrast, Frollo is the intelligent and spiritual monster who becomes demonic through his passion for Esmeralda. The monstrous is not simply demonized, but contains a "secret beauty". In conclusion, the monstrous is not a defect in the Hugolian imaginary, but the expression of a totalizing vision that refuses to hide the ugly, because only by accepting it does art become truly modern and human.

The three axes described above do not operate in isolation, but intertwine. Light animates the monsters, shadow protects them, verticality elevates them, and the monstrous gives life to the entire ensemble. Through the visual imaginary, literature becomes architecture (monumental structure), architecture becomes literature (stone book), and the techniques used become the binder that allows the reader to "inhabit" the textual cathedral.

Conclusions

⁴⁹ "Next to the sublime, as a means of contrast, the grotesque is the richest source that nature can offer to art."

⁵⁰ V. Hugo, 1967, p. 364.

This work brings a series of original contributions through the integrated and interdisciplinary approach to the novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* as a work of total art *avant la lettre* in which Victor Hugo achieves a profound and innovative synthesis between literature, Gothic architecture and the visual imaginary. Unlike previous studies (Mallion⁵¹, Brombert⁵², etc.), which separately analyzed the architectural, visionary or poetic aspects of Hugo's work, this research achieves a synthesis between the three essential dimensions: literature, Gothic architecture and the visual imaginary.

A special emphasis was placed on highlighting the technical mechanisms through which Hugo transforms the cathedral into a complex narrative character (personification, anthropomorphization, descriptive-historical digression, fusion of decor-psychology, vertical/light-monstrous symbolism), systematically correlating them with his theories in the chapter "Ceci tuera cela" and with his active involvement in the action of raising awareness among the authorities in order to preserve the heritage. At the same time, the work expands the diachronic perspective by analyzing how the Hugolian imaginary fertilized subsequent adaptations (cinematic and the 1998 musical), showing the continuity of the potential for a total work of art beyond the literary text.

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