

## Chapter 9 Appendix—For Your Consideration: Jean Valjean

Chris, in his capacity as roadtrip storyteller, told us that Swami Prabhavananda had wanted to read Western literature and asked Chris to be his guide. Chris recommended *The Brothers Karamazov*, which Swami appreciated so much that he cited selections from the book in lectures as an example of spiritual self-conversion. Swami wanted more, but Chris said that sadly Swami had started at the top. While Isherwood mentions *Les Miserables* in his views on religious novels, he dismisses it as having only a brief mention of the saint. Now, decades later, after having read both *Les Miserables* and Isherwood's requirements for a successful religious novel, I'm very sad that Swami apparently never read *Les Miserables* and am convinced that the novel fulfills Isherwood's formula extraordinarily well.

In his writings on the religious novel, Isherwood lists the requirements:

- The future saint must be presented as being just like anyone else; this creates a bridge between the saint and the reader so the reader believes that he too can become a saint.
- Rather than make a vague reference to “the war,” for example, the writer must explain the psychology of the turning point satisfactorily while not relying on visions.
- The saint is free to act as he chooses, liberated from his surface ego; but his actions will always be benign.
- Neither the saint nor his struggles should be gloomy.
- The saint should be more than a fleeting character.
- He defines the saint as such: “...a saint is a man, primarily of experience—an experience which has led to enlightenment.”<sup>225</sup>

### The Disappearing Saint

In *The Problem of the Religious Novel* Isherwood lists *Les Miserables* as one of many attempts at a religious novel in which the saint, in this case the Bishop of Digne, Monseigneur Bienvenue, who is the catalyst for Jean Valjean's turning point, makes only a brief appearance. He calls them “brilliant glimpses” and notes the incident of the

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<sup>225</sup> *Isherwood on Writing*, Ed. James Berg, University of Minnesota Press, p. 234.

candlesticks as one such glimpse. But, in fact, *Les Miserables* is lousy with “saints,” the most meticulously unfurled of which is Jean Valjean himself. The entire novel is the painstaking description of the sanctification of Valjean culminating in a religious experience born of perfected selflessness and resulting in enlightenment.

Why was this work overlooked? Perhaps he read the novel early in life, before himself becoming hooked on spiritual life, and therefore the spiritual elements flew below (or above) the radar. Perhaps it’s even the product of his self-confessed Francophobia.<sup>226</sup> Or perhaps the spiritual component of *Les Miserables* may also be a victim of its own popular success. It has many powerful themes and is overwhelmingly focused on injustice and the suffering of the poor, so for those of us with a political bent at the time of reading, the sociopolitical component will probably eclipse other ideas.

Isherwood identifies the most obvious saint, Monseigneur Bienvenue, the Bishop of Digne, and points out that he makes only a brief appearance. He reappears briefly in the story but disappears as a major character after his culminating act of renunciation, which serves as a holy siege on Valjean’s soul. But page one, sentence one of the novel actually begins with the bishop, he is initially the temporary protagonist. Hugo stays on his story long before we meet Jean Valjean or Fantine or Javert or Cossette.

Hugo presents Bienvenue’s backstory not from the omniscient point of view easily available to him as the author and the one he eventually settles into; rather it is a reconstruction of largely speculative village gossip. You demand to see the mechanics of the turning point. Hugo offers not a certain “point of vocation” for Bienvenue but two possibilities, even though, as the author, he’s free to assign one; but the two seem to cover the possibilities. Bienvenue’s renunciation, late in life, is the product either of disappointments in life: the crumbling of his family status due to the French Revolution, horror at the violence of the Revolution, and the death of his wife from illness, “did these inspire him with thoughts of renunciation and solitude?” or “was he suddenly overcome by one of those mysterious, inner-blows that sometimes strike the heart of the man who could not be shaken by public disasters of his life and fortune?”<sup>227</sup> While this may appear to be needlessly vague by Isherwood’s standards, as we’ll see, Hugo’s description of Valjean’s transformation is positively microscopic.

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<sup>226</sup> *Volume One*, p. 292.

<sup>227</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*, translators Lee Fahnestock & Norman MacAfee, based on C.E. Wilbur, Signet, p.2.

Bienvenue not only abounds in the qualities you'd expect in an ideal saint—untiring charity, compassion, affection, humility, equal treatment of rich and poor, unflinching courage in the line of duty, frugality, austerity that he did not perceive as suffering—he is also cheerful and witty. But his spontaneous humor wasn't empty; rather it packed a dose of truth. While well-loved in his provincial parish, he was also considered an odd duck. “Clearly he had his own strange way of judging things. I suspect he acquired it from the Gospels.”<sup>228</sup>

Bienvenue's household was made up of an elderly housekeeper and his sister, who gladly shared his life of poverty and chastity. She is one of several minor characters who twinkle briefly within the narrative on their way to holiness. Hugo describes her thus: “her whole life, which had been a succession of pious works, had finally cloaked her in a kind of transparent whiteness, and in growing old she had acquired the beauty of goodness. What had been thinness in her youth was in her maturity a transparency, and this ethereal quality permitted glimmers of the angel within. She was more of a spirit than a virgin mortal...large eyes, always downcast, a pretext for a soul to remain on earth.”<sup>229</sup>

Was the bishop perfect? Most authors would have been satisfied with their creation. But not Hugo. In the chapter *The Bishop in the Presence of an Unfamiliar Light*, Bienvenue behaves uncharacteristically in begrudgingly accepting a self-imposed duty, visiting a dying man who is a hermit and pariah, despised for his politics. Bienvenue shares the villagers' contempt. Hugo refers to the dying man as a Conventionist, one sympathetic with ideals of the French Revolution and, in Bienvenue's eyes, an atheist. For the first time in the narrative, Bienvenue treats a man with undisguised aversion. Of the inclusion of this incident, Hugo explains, “We must tell everything, for the little inconsistencies of great souls should be mentioned.”<sup>230</sup>

Bienvenue arrives as the man is about to die. A heated discussion about the plight of the poor ensues. While Bienvenue was radically charitable, sacrificing to the bone his own luxury and hounding the rich, including the invariably wealthy clergy, to share with the poor, he took a “thousand points of light” approach, not exploring the role politics plays in either the perpetuation of poverty or the potential alleviation of it. Hugo writes of the discussion:

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<sup>228</sup> *Les Misérables*, p. 14.

<sup>229</sup> *Les Misérables*, p.3.

<sup>230</sup> *Les Misérables*, p. 37.

The revolutionary did not know that he had successfully demolished all the bishop's interior defenses, one after the other. There was one left, however, and from it the last resource of Monseigneur Bienvenue's resistance, came forth these words, in which nearly all the harshness of the opening reappeared. "Progress ought to believe in God. The good cannot have an impious servant. An atheist is an evil leader of the human race."

The old man did not answer. A tremor shook him...He looked up at the sky and a tear formed slowly in his eye...he murmured to himself...his eyes gazing inward: "Thou who art Perfection! Thou who alone exist!"

The bishop was inexpressibly moved.

After a pause, the old man pointed to the sky and said, "The infinite has being. It is there. If infinity had no self then self would not be. But it is. Therefore it has a self. The self of infinity is God." He had spoken these last words in a clear voice and with a quiver of ecstasy, as though he saw some living presence.\*<sup>231</sup>

"Monsieur Bishop...I have spent my life in meditation, study, and contemplation. I was sixty years old when my country called me and ordered me to take part in her affairs...I am about to die. What have you come to ask of me?"

"Your blessing," said the bishop. And he fell to his knees....

The bishop went home profoundly absorbed in thought. He spent the whole night in prayer...From that moment he redoubled his tenderness and brotherly love for the weak and suffering.<sup>232</sup>

Throughout their dialog, the Conventionist is the only one who mentions Christ. Hugo refers to the Divine as the One when It is passively present, as Providence when It takes a hand in the action, and the Infinite when it is the impersonal substratum.

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<sup>231</sup> Another translation was used for this passage. More about that later. This translation: Norman Denny, Penguin Classics, p. 57.

<sup>232</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, translators Lee Fahnestock & Norman MacAfee pp 43-44.

The scene just quoted is similar to the scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* that Swami was so fond of, which Isherwood also often cited, an act of utter self-abnegation, when Father Zossima begs his abused servant to forgive him. Dostoevsky was a great admirer of Hugo and loved *Les Miserables* in particular, so as *Les Miserables* was published 17 years before *Brothers*, it's not a stretch, or an insult to Dostoevsky's genius, to speculate that Zossima's scene was spawned by the one just quoted, which marks Bienvenue's perfection. It may even have been an homage.

We have listed among Bienvenue's virtues courage in the course of duty, but he also exhibited consistent courage by living his mundane life by his principles. Bienvenue refused to lock the door of the house, even overnight. His sister mentioned, "Even if Satan came into the house, no one would interfere... There is One with us who is the strongest."

Enter Jean Valjean

When we finally meet Jean Valjean, he has just been released from prison after serving 19 years of hard labor for stealing a loaf of bread for his widowed sister's starving family of seven children.

Prison has brutalized Valjean, hardening him emotionally and spiritually; but it has also given him preternatural physical strength and agility as well as powerful focus and a seemingly limitless ability to endure suffering, all of which serve him well in the odyssey that lay before him. He is filled with hatred for society, civilization, and humanity itself. What germ of light is inside him is struggling for its life in a dark roiling sea of animus.

Even though he has a little money, no one will sell a convict a bed or food. Bienvenue is literally Valjean's last resort. The bishop treats him with the same respect and hospitality he would show any guest, setting out the best silverware, which along with a pair of silver candlesticks, is the final vestige of Bienvenue's worldly attachment to a bygone life. Valjean, of course, absconds with the cutlery in the middle of the night. Being a suspicious-looking character, the police pick him up in no time and stop by Bienvenue's house to return the silver on the way back to prison with Valjean. The bishop tells the police that he has given Valjean the silverware and reminds Valjean that he has forgotten the candlesticks, which he throws in. Valjean is stunned, but the reader is not, having come to expect an almost Disneyesque goodness from the bishop.

However, what might surprise the reader is Valjean's reaction. The bishop has destroyed Valjean's peace of mind. "He was prey to a mass of new emotions. He felt somewhat angry, without knowing at whom. He could not have said if he was touched or humiliated. At times, there came over him a hard relenting, which he tried to resist with the hardening of his past twenty years. This condition wore him out. He was disturbed to see within him that that frightful calm which the injustice of his fate had given him was now somewhat shaken. He asked himself what might replace it. At times he really would have preferred to be in prison with the gendarmes, and free from this new development; it would have troubled him less."<sup>233</sup>

His knapsack full of silver, his next act is to steal money from a child. It's only after coming to his senses after this depravity that Valjean confronts himself with the choice he himself must make: become Bienvenue or become a monster. He saw Valjean from outside himself, no longer identifying himself with Jean Valjean, and is horrified. His mind conceptualizes the bishop in beautiful imagery as a creature made of celestial light. But the whole time he is independent of the two, knowing he would have to exercise free will to decide who he would become. Has Hugo met Isherwood's requirement of showing the psychology of the "moment of vocation" and without resorting to visions? Let's look at Hugo's precise language (in translation, of course).

This then was like a vision [like a vision, not was a vision, as if Hugo had anticipated the requirement]. He truly saw this Jean Valjean, this ominous face, in front of him. He was on the point of asking himself who the man was, and he was horrified at the idea of asking himself such a question.

His brain then was in one of those violent, yet frightfully calm states where reverie is so profound it swallows up reality. We no longer see the objects before us, but we see, as if outside ourselves, the forms we have in our minds.

He saw himself then...face-to-face, and at the same time...he saw, at a mysterious distance, a sort of light, which he took at first to be a torch. Looking more closely at this light dawning on his conscience, he recognized it had a human form, that it was the bishop.

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<sup>233</sup> *Les Misérables*, p. 105.

His conscience considered in turn these two men placed before it, the bishop and Jean Valjean. Anything less than the first would have failed to soften the second...the bishop grew larger and more resplendent to his eyes; Jean Valjean shrank and faded away...suddenly he disappeared. The bishop alone remained. He filled the whole soul of this miserable man with a magnificent radiance.<sup>234</sup>

I would argue that Hugo has dramatized Jean Valjean's turning point in masterful detail, embracing the task rather than fleeing before the complexity. He has seamlessly merged the psychological work of it and the transcendental element by having the drama play out in the theater of Jean Valjean's mind. And just as Hugo left the ultimate decision to Jean Valjean himself, the reader is free to interpret how much to attribute to psychology and how much to grace.

Were there more like him, or was Jean Valjean the bishop's masterpiece?

### The Bridge

Has the bridge between Everyman, the reader, and the saint-to-be been built? Many readers might think they are much further along the path of righteousness than is Valjean, a hardened criminal. These readers would be the Sunday religionists Isherwood decries in *The Writer and Vedanta*. What they don't take into account, as a more sophisticated reader would, is Valjean's desperate intensity which absolutely gives him a leg up.

So that the reader may identify more completely with the protagonist, after introducing Valjean Extreme, the hardened criminal, Hugo introduces us to Valjean Original. As a young man he has meekly but sullenly accepted the duty he's been saddled with, providing for his widowed sister and her seven perpetually hungry children. He is already spiritually and emotionally muted by the responsibility with neither escape nor improvement in sight. A few outstanding native qualities are present but stifled: he is intelligent, although he doesn't learn to read till prison, but more importantly, he is fair-minded. Once in prison, he doesn't shrink from fearless self-analysis; while condemning society and the harshness of the law and the horrible conditions of the prison, he also recognizes that his act was rash, that there were other possibilities in solving what was not necessarily a fatal problem.

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<sup>234</sup> *Les Misérables*, p. 111.

Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch...

Some years later when we next meet Valjean, he is a new man, now M. Madelaine, affectionately and respectfully known as Father Madelaine. Through ingenuity and diligence, he has prospered and brought up a whole small town, even neighboring towns, with him, a prototype of conscious capitalism, benefiting the worker, the consumer, and the business simultaneously: win-win-win. He enriched his workers and the poor before enriching himself and lived quite humbly while also financing hospitals, schools, and a private welfare system. He is a leading citizen, religiously observant, but rarely socializes or even speaks. He is offered prestigious positions and awards and is eventually invited to join high society but rejects them all. After being offered the position of mayor a second time, he finally accepts it at the urgings of the locals, who want a decent government for a change. However, he also attracts the malevolent attention of Inspector Javert.

While we think of Javert as the villain of the piece, and as much as we want him to back off, you gotta love him. He is certainly merciless, humorless, and rigid, but also has some commendable qualities, chief among them is that he is dedicated to truth. Hugo describes him as “unenlightened, but stern and pure” an “oddly honest man.”<sup>235</sup> His obsessive pursuit of Valjean is the fruit of this fixation; but we see that in situations where he thinks he’s been wrong, Javert unflinchingly offers up his own head in the interest of truth.

As Chris Bohjalian points out in the Signet edition’s Afterword, it is only Javert who fully grasps and most succinctly articulates Valjean’s character:

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A beneficent malefactor, a compassionate convict, kind, helpful, clement, returning good for evil, returning pardon for hatred, loving pity rather than vengeance, preferring to destroy himself rather than destroy his enemy, saving the one who had struck him, kneeling on the heights of virtue, nearer angels than men. Javert was compelled to acknowledge that this monster existed.<sup>236</sup>

As for Valjean’s relationship with the bishop, Hugo mentions that after the bishop’s death, Valjean feels his constant presence. This is how Swami Prabhavananda often described the guru-disciple relationship after the death of one’s own guru—that there is no longer

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<sup>235</sup> *Les Misérables*, 208-9

<sup>236</sup> *Les Misérables*, 1318.



any separation.

“The world’s great sea in its wrath seems shrunk to the puddle  
that fills the hoof print in the clay.”<sup>237</sup>

In other words, small world. Until Javert has focused his energy on Madelaine, Valjean’s story has become tranquil, his further blossoming effortless. But with this attention, tribulations set in. As the massive story unwinds we see the effects of his actions, past and present, both good and bad, playing chess on the field of our hero’s life. His fate is often determined by synchronicities. Isherwood doesn’t call on plot as an important element of the religious novel, but these “minor” miracles of coincidence often play a role in real life as well as fiction. In fact, when recounting the performance of a Bengali play at the Star Theater, Isherwood describes the plot as “Wildly complicated, with old-fashioned coincidences...Sheer Dickens.”<sup>238</sup> For some lucky few, synchronicity plays in their lives frequently and frivolously, like clues from an affectionate playmate in a game of hide and seek. But for many real life survivors of dangerous adventures, they survive solely by divine intervention in the form of synchronicity. Such was Jean Valjean’s case.

He has adopted a child, Cosette. Although he was emotionally deadened by the duty of assuming responsibility for his nieces and nephews as a young man, he accepts Cosette as a duty but soon finds that the child animates his heart. But after years of sweetness, adolescence inevitably rears its ugly head and the once-loving child becomes a brat and is predictably withdrawing from Valjean, which breaks his heart. In the face of this rejection, Valjean overcomes his own self-interest and performs a superhuman sacrifice. To rescue Cosette’s lover, Marius, whom he unequivocally hates, Valjean risks his own life and freedom to flee the scene of a bloody protest, which Valjean was not a part of, with Marius’ unconscious, possibly already dead, body, through the sewers of Paris. Javert is on his tail. In trying to shake Javert, Valjean has entered an area of the sewer where the filth is no longer solid, like quicksand. Neck deep in it, risking a grotesque drowning, he plods on and through and manages to emerge. Hugo writes:

On coming out of the water, he struck against a stone, and fell onto his knees. This seemed fitting, and he stayed there for some time, his soul lost in unspoken prayer to God. He rose, shivering, chilled, filthy, bending beneath this dying man, whom

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<sup>237</sup> From the Prabavananda/Isherwood translation of Vivekananda’s *Breaker of This World’s Chain*.

<sup>238</sup> *Volume Two*, p. 316.

he was dragging on, all dripping with slime, his soul filled with a strange light.<sup>239</sup>

Isherwood requires the character of the saint to have “an experience which has led to enlightenment.” The word enlightenment has a range of meanings, some not necessarily religious, and even in the religious context it is vague but apparently ubiquitous, the Divine Light making its appearance to the holy ones in most, if not all, religions. Vedanta is specific in describing levels of spiritual attainment. An experience of light makes its appearance when the kundalini reaches the heart chakra; and even though the experience isn’t permanent at that level, its appearance revolutionizes the goals of the recipient. Conversely, when Hugo describes Javert, he begins with “unenlightened” before listing Javert’s positive qualities, perhaps indicating why those attributes were insufficient in themselves to redeem Javert.

So to review Isherwood’s requirements: Valjean has been presented as a character the reader can (and does) identify with; Hugo has given an intimate accounting of his conversion; Valjean has exercised free will over his ego; and while an important theme of the story is the misery of the human condition, Valjean has found happiness within himself, even at the times he loses everything.

There are more sacrifices and a glorious death before Valjean, but these few episodes demonstrate that while not necessarily the most obvious elements of Hugo’s compelling story (and a dimension that was dispensed with in most of the many dramatizations), the religious, by its very placement and frequent refrain, was the very armature upon which the edifice of the story is constructed.

### Translation Redux

This expedition into *Les Miserables*, a work in translation, reopened the translation arguments (yes, they are arguments) encountered in writing about *The Bhagavad Gita*. I read Hugo for fun and was fine with the translation until I wanted to share in this appendix the passage “The infinite exists. It is there. If the infinite had no *me*, the *me* would be its limit; it would not be the infinite: in other words, it would not be. But it is. Then it has a me. This me of the infinite is God.” It’s the first passage in the book that made me sit up and take notice. It had all the correct words, and I could reconstruct them to make my own

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<sup>239</sup> *Les Miserables*, p. 1294.

sense. However, they were gibberish as translated in the Signet edition by Lee Fahnestock & Norman MacAfee, based on C.E. Wilbur. Sri Ramakrishna had a saying that to kill oneself a penknife will do; but to kill another, you need a sword. This translation was a penknife.

The French reads: “L'infini est. Il est là. Si l'infini n'aviat pas de moi, le moi serait sa borne; il ne serait pas infini; en d'autres termes, il ne serait pas. Or il est. Donc il a un moi. Ce moi de l'infini, c'est Dieu.”

A second English translation I found read: “The infinite is. He is there. If the infinite had no person, person would be without limit; it would not be infinite; in other words, it would not exist. There is, then, an *I*. That *I* of the infinite is God.”

Google translation: “Infinity is. He's there. If the infinite did not exist from me, the me would be its limit; it would not be infinite; in other words, it wouldn't be. But, he is. So he has a self. This self of the infinite is God.”

I found Norman Denny's the most satisfying: “The infinite has being. It is there. If infinity had no self then self would not be. But it is. Therefore it has a self. The self of infinity is God.”

This is a literary rather than literal translation. This depth of translation is necessary even in French to English, sister languages, on a work less than two centuries old, not millennia.

However, I originally read the Fahnestock/MacAfee and enjoyed it until things got metaphysical. The action story was fine. While the *Bhagavad Gita* is encased in a larger action epic, *The Mahabharata*, the epic shell has been peeled away and the metaphysical essence remains, more so in the Prabhavananda version than in many others. It takes a specialist among specialists and a literary translation to succeed in fully communicating to a contemporary reader.

But I've buried the lead. There's an astonishing statement by Hugo midway through the book that I'm embarrassed to admit I missed the first time around:

“Ce livre est un drame dont le premiere personnage est l'infini.  
L'homme est le second.”

As translated by Norman Denny: “This book is a drama in which the leading character is the Infinite. Mankind takes second place.”

And Victor Hugo drops the mic.