



PROJECT MUSE®

The Prison-House of Revolutionary Memory: The Politics of
Oblivion in Michelet, Hugo, and Dumas

Göran Blix

French Forum, Volume 32, Number 3, Fall 2007, pp. 39-64 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frf.0.0001>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/237542>

Göran Blix

The Prison-House of Revolutionary Memory

The Politics of Oblivion in Michelet, Hugo, and Dumas

Quand on veut oublier les gens, on n'éclaire pas les oubliettes.

Jules Verne, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*

I. Introduction

The French term “oubliette de l’histoire” is one that occurs frequently in modern political discourse to name the violence of forgetting, and to expose the willful repression of marginal memories by institutions of power. To cite a modern French example: the massacre of Algerian demonstrators that occurred in Paris on Oct. 17, 1961 has been called “un épisode de la vie politique française” that was “relégué aux oubliettes de l’histoire officielle.” More recently, the alleged French complicity in the genocide in Rwanda has been described as “[une] vérité . . . que tout, absolument tout, pousse à jeter aux ‘oubliettes de l’histoire.’”¹ That the prison cell should serve as a metaphor for silencing unpleasant voices is not surprising, given the exponential growth of political prisoners in modern times, and the panoptic nature of the mechanisms that regulate modern societies.² Yet the link between imprisonment and amnesia clearly goes quite far back: as the term “oubliette” itself suggests, power has long operated by “forgetting” its prisoners. The dictionary of the French Academy of 1762 defines it as a term used “autrefois”—in the depths of some unspecified past—to name “un cachot couvert d’une fausse trape, dans lequel, à ce qu’on dit, on faisoit tomber ceux dont on vouloit se défaire secretement.” But it was not until the romantic period that the image of the gothic cell would be fully exploited, and that the mainstream culture would

invest it with a dense cluster of meanings, as Victor Brombert has shown in his classic study of the *Prison romantique*.

It is tempting to dismiss much prison iconography as flashy romantic *noir*—one thinks of Gilles de Rais and Joan of Arc, monsters and maidens, a gothic melodrama of bondage and torture³—but I argue here that the *cachot* starts to function in romanticism as a crucial emblem of the concern with recovering buried memories. What consecrates this linkage is the “exposure,” during the Revolution, of the infamous oubliettes beneath the Bastille, which prompted Michelet to view that fortress as the very emblem, not just of arbitrary power (a long-standing cliché), but of the horrors of amnesia.⁴ Torture and death were in his view nothing beside the gruesome plight of oblivion, because expiring in memory was both less necessary and more final than mere death. As religious belief declined, survival in memory slowly displaced the afterlife as a metaphysical consolation, a trend Michelet reflects by reinventing the modern historian as a custodian of the dead.⁵ His own obsession with the *oubliette* betrays a much broader romantic view of the prison, which was increasingly seen, despite its gaudy horrors, as a place of silence, blindness, and opacity. Its spectacular face concealed a more “authentic” cell, one that remained invisible, indeed hypothetical, existing only as a negative space, a vacuum devouring all traces. As the very site where the state obliterates traces, the cell remains almost ontologically unknowable, and can only claim the status of a heuristic hypothesis, a critical fiction which allows us—heirs in this respect of romantic historiography—to revisit the presumed scene of erasure. Indeed, the cell became, for Michelet and others, a politically charged figure of amnesia. Yet the way this icon emerged can only be described as a paradoxical process: first, because the prison’s spectacular horrors masked the actual silence it produced, and second, because this very site of oblivion was so often depicted that it soon became a *lieu de mémoire* itself (in Pierre Nora’s sense), and helped counter the harm it embodied. Remembering the cell: this watchword amounted to no less than a reversal of the prison’s program of erasure. The *cachot* thus became a vital but paradoxical emblem of memory, whose aporias I want to explore here in some romantic texts, notably in Michelet’s treatment of the Bastille, Hugo’s depictions of prisons in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) and *Le dernier jour d’un condamné* (1829), and the *cachot* on

the Île d'If where Edmond Dantès pines away in Dumas' *Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1845–1846). This paper does not draw up a list of motifs, but offers a speculative map of the nexus binding prisoner, power, and memory.

II. “Forgetting” the Prisoner

To imprison someone is to “forget” them—in an active, transitive way—and the prison's function within the larger social topography resembles the role that forgetting plays in the individual psyche. When Claude Frollo, in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, tells Esmeralda in prison that “j'espér[ais] t'oublier si tu ne revenais pas,” the private and public meanings of forgetting coincide—he seeks to suppress his own obsession with the gypsy girl by literally locking her up in a dungeon (421). What is forbidden, dangerous, or taboo, and threatens the equilibrium of society (as certain thoughts do the psyche) can be buried in prison until further notice, and be held in reserve there rather than destroyed, sparing the state the inevitable publicity of a spectacular execution. It is not that, as Hugo points out in *Le dernier jour d'un condamné*, his polemic against capital punishment, the state cannot execute quietly, far from the public square, since “on n'ose plus décapiter en Grève depuis juillet,” and the government of Louis-Philippe has instead set up the guillotine sheepishly “à la barrière déserte de Saint-Jacques” (391).⁶ Hugo reasonably reads this displacement as a lapse in the ostensible logic of capital punishment, which he sees in *ancien régime* terms as a spectacular deterrent. Take that away, and what purpose do executions serve? Indeed, their problem, precisely, is their irreducible publicity, the sovereign violence they inscribe on the public body, whether they occur openly, on the city's margins, or in total secrecy. The use of excessive force in the end always leaves an indelible trace, a remainder and reminder of the repressive act, which risks coming back to haunt the apparatus of authority. The execution is in this sense to memory what the prison is to forgetting—they represent two radically distinct ways of managing threats—and it is the silence of the prison that best corresponds to the social idyll of a liberal society. It permits a slow, painless silencing, a quiet erasure of dissonance, which also grants property a reign untainted by terror.

The prison as a mechanism of forgetting emerges, more broadly, as

a leitmotif in the romantic period, and embodies the way an arbitrary power constructs its own ideal history by erasing dangerous voices from the social landscape. “La justice humaine appelait cela *oublier*,” writes Hugo in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (411). The prison may do many things: punish, control, reform, discipline, contain, and so on, but in this context its function is to *forget* individuals—to airbrush their bodies, voices, and traces out of the social picture. As the magistrate who masterminds Edmond Dantès’ disappearance says in Dumas’ adventure novel: “parfois les gouvernements ont intérêt à faire disparaître un homme sans qu’il laisse trace de son passage” (107). In *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, this means avoiding the publicity of a trial, leaving no paper trail, and then carefully erasing every mark of this process: “le nombre des incarcérés,” we hear, “dont les registres ne gardent aucune trace est incalculable” (107). Michelet echoes the charge that the physical suppression of the prisoner is doubled by an archival erasure: at the Bastille, he writes in his *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1857–1853), “les prisonniers morts étaient enterrés sous de faux noms à l’église des Jésuites” (87).⁷ When he visits the “bagne de Toulon,” a sacred site, in his view, of protestant martyrdom, he laments the lack of any “trace des martyrs de la religion,” and notes that “les registres mêmes, où leurs noms étaient consignés, ont en grande partie disparu” (299). The erosion of the written record may in this case be due to the impact of time, but for Michelet this subsequent erasure is complicit with the first, and only prolongs it; elsewhere he makes this clear: “cruelle envie du temps,” he remarks, “complice de la tyrannie qui s’est accordée avec elle pour effacer les victimes” (180). However, it is not enough that the victim of the state’s “forgetting” should be removed physically, or effaced scripturally; he must then also vanish from people’s minds: “le tuer dans le souvenir” (88), such is the final blow that fulfills the process of oblivion. It is this triple silencing, which comprises the body, the written record, and the social memory, that motivates Michelet’s incessant use of the trope of oblivion to speak of arbitrary power.

Speaking of Louis XV and the alleged guarantees his subjects enjoyed, he states mockingly that while “le roi était trop bon pour couper la tête à un homme,” he could still “d’un mot le faire mettre à la Bastille, et l’y *oublier*” (87). He italicizes the word to stress its critical importance as a political tool, and channeling the voice of power,

parodies the ruler's excitement at the invention of the *lettres de cachet*: "il y a un milieu entre la vie et la mort: une vie morte, entermée. Organisons un monde exprès pour l'oubli" (88). The image of the prisoner's fate as a form of living death of course echoes the familiar trope of the cell as a tomb, and Michelet does speak of "l'oubli de la tombe" (87), calling the prisoner an "enterré vivant" (88), while the broader culture confirms this perception of the prison as a cemetery. Yet this well-founded association also conceals a vicious irony that needs to be unpacked, namely that tomb and cell are here united much more by antithesis than by resemblance. While the overt function of the tomb is to house a dead person, the cell harbors a living one, and while the role of the tomb is to commemorate, the prison, by contrast, forgets. This naïve romantic motif is therefore at heart a perverse one, which links a monument that perpetuates the dead with the manmade abyss that erases the living.

The Bastille, on this score, stands out as an anti-monument—as does the genre of prison architecture more widely, however eye-catching it may be—because as an edifice designed to impose silence and amnesia, it embodies the exact antithesis of the mausoleum. Solid, heavy, and bleak, the prison exhibits publicly and visibly amid the urban spectacle a strange architecture of oblivion. The prison inevitably retains a monumental outward appearance, but this merely accounts for the way its power of amnesia engulfs not just the prisoners within, but the city as a whole, as its walls extend figuratively around society at large. Michelet's text quickly performs this symbolic expansion: why focus on the Bastille, he asks, or on any other prison, when "le monde est une prison" (89)? A vast bell jar appears to impose silence on the world's populations: "vaste silence du globe," he intones, "bas gémissement, humble soupir de la terre muette encore" (89), stressing the point that it is in reality the hearts and minds of people that are *embastillés*, and that the prison's force field extends as much outwards as inwards, silently jailing the minds of the free.⁸

III. Forgetting Oneself

If the prison embodies a social form of forgetting, its force of oblivion also extends inwards, and applies as much to the inmate as to the world outside. The prisoners may initially be the victims of a policy of forgetting, but once they are jailed, they also often become strangely

forgetful of themselves, as if their own minds had proven powerless to resist the weight of the walls. When Maxime du Camp reflected on prisons in his encyclopedic work on Paris, he noted that “des gens s’évanouirent en y entrant.” This comment exposes the uncanny power the carceral space has to overpower the visitor’s fragile consciousness. The sheer negativity of the space, a *trou de mémoire* embedded in the social body, appears to affect above all those whom it engulfs. The gypsy girl Esmeralda whom Frollo has thrust into a subterranean oubliette perfectly illustrates this process of psychic disarray. The feverish images that flash through her mind quickly grow detached from any central organizing consciousness: “le prêtre, la matroule, le poignard, le sang, tout cela repassait dans son esprit . . . comme un cauchemar difforme” (412). There is no longer a self capable of arranging these images into a narrative: “tout cela était mêlé, brisé, flottant, répandu confusément dans sa pensée.” The oubliette here directs its power of amnesia inwards, doubling the prisoner’s original social erasure by an internal process of psychic decomposition. “Elle ne sentait plus, elle ne savait plus, elle ne pensait plus” (412), and if, in this state, vague memories still subsist, they have become detached from any personality. The psychic blow of the death sentence she has received appears to have preemptively paralyzed any consciousness to which it could apply: “elle avait souvenir d’un arrêt de mort,” Hugo writes, “prononcé quelque part contre quelqu’un” (413). But when Frollo asks if she knows why she is in prison, her dissociative amnesia stands out plainly: “je crois que je l’ai su, dit-elle en passant ses doigts maigres sur ses sourcils comme pour aider sa mémoire, mais je ne le sais plus” (415).

What Esmeralda’s case illustrates is a broader symptom that countless literary prisoners in the period exhibit. Through her, Hugo captures the operation of a general structure: similar veils of amnesia seem to engulf almost all prisoners. When Jean Valjean is condemned, early in *Les Misérables* (1862), for a petty theft of bread and enters the *bagne de Toulon*, “tout s’effaçait de ce qui avait été sa vie, jusqu’à son nom” (146). But it is Dantès, in Dumas’ novel, who most graphically undergoes such self-oblivion. When he first arrives at his prison island, he appears “étourdi et chancelant comme un homme ivre,” and falls into “une espèce d’atonie” on being led into his cell (71, 75). His psyche then replicates the negative spatial field of the cell itself,

as his head, like a “cloche vide, assourdie par [un] bourdonnement,” fills up with “[un] bouillon fumant,” and “flott[e] comme une vapeur” (128). He rapidly loses track of time, and thereby loses his place in any historical continuum founded on memory: “depuis qu’il était entré en prison, il avait oublié de compter les jours” (121). The attempt to recover his own identity will eventually require his reinscription in time, so that when Dantès at last overhears a date, he clings desperately to the fixity it offers: “[il] ne l’avait pas oubliée.” Carving it on the wall, he then also made “un cran chaque jour pour que la mesure du temps ne lui échappât plus” (121). A useless precaution, it would seem, since he very soon falls back “dans cette ignorance du temps” (125), forgets how long he has been jailed, and finally loses his fragile grip on reality: “[il] commença à douter de ses sens [et] à croire que ce qu’il prenait pour un souvenir de sa mémoire n’était rien autre chose qu’une hallucination” (121). The prison walls slowly enact an ever more total caesura with the past, and gradually Dantès can no longer “se rappeler son passé presque éteint . . . qui ne flottait plus au plus profond de sa mémoire que comme une lumière lointaine égarée dans la nuit” (177). This poetic portrait of the prisoner only resembles the real images of prisoners from the period too well, such as the inmates that Flora Tristan observed in 1842 on her travels in England: these exhibited “une somnolence apathique,” “vivaient d’une vie d’automates . . . l’âme absente,” and met her inquisitive gaze with antisocial detachment: “tous parurent indifférents à notre entrée” (175).

But the prison can only produce amnesia if someone actively does the forgetting, if an agent knowingly performs the oblivion, and this proves to be the Achilles’ heel of the operation. Hugo’s nameless prisoner falls into “un sommeil profond, dans un sommeil d’oubli” (275) inside his *cachot* just as the jury is deliberating on the death sentence. The coincidence of the jury’s wakefulness and the prisoner’s sleep highlights the close but polar relation between power and prisoner. While the goal of power is to “forget” its victims, such deliberate forgetting must always be artificial, since to succeed power must also secretly remain exempt from its own effects, and hypocritically “remember” what it publicly ignores. No profit can derive from the act unless it is unofficially recorded, inscribed, as it were, in invisible ink. If power should truly forget its own deeds, and no remainder, no trace were left, it would not only forfeit the payoff of its sovereign act, but

also become vulnerable to the opaque space it has unwittingly created. The behavior of Louis XI, in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, when he tours the Bastille—like a perverse pastor inspecting his flock of prisoners—shows this duplicity at work. While listening attentively to a long report on the expense of a sinister cage, he feigns to ignore the lugubrious cries of the bishop of Verdun, who has been locked up inside the cage for fourteen years, and whose pleas for clemency chill even the king's most hardened henchmen. The passage ends with Louis XI asking, as an afterthought, “à propos, . . . n'y avait-il pas quelqu'un dans cette cage?” (554). His duplicity here perfectly captures the double consciousness of sovereign power: it must at once feign ignorance of the violence it produces, and tacitly acknowledge its acts, lest the profits of the action evaporate in forgetfulness.

The counterpart to the prisoner's mental deterioration is thus the sovereign's spotless mind. This necessity of preserving an impeccable but secret record explains why the prison is so often haunted with glimmers of vigilance and flashes of wakefulness, as when Louis Sébastien Mercier, touring the *donjon de Vincennes*, catches sight of the ghosts of the great oppressors of the past: “le spectre de Richelieu m'apparut dans un coin; et je crus voir à côté de lui le père Joseph, cet ex-capucin, qui inventa, pour ainsi dire, les espions et les lettres de cachet” (271). The dungeon is a space haunted as much by the jailers as by the jailed: “tous deux semblaient errer autour de moi, en répétant ce mot terrible . . . *raison d'État!*” (271).

The prisoner's mental dispossession finds its origin in the envelope of silent vigilance that surrounds him; his amnesia is the guarantee of sovereign omniscience, the inverted mirror of power's unflagging attention. The cell's darkness is thus an ambiguous space: a figure of unconsciousness, and of secret oversight, of effacement and inscription, of social disappearance and silent registry in the state's indelible archives. This contradictory relationship can be restated as a devious *quid pro quo*, through which the state succeeds in transferring its false forgetfulness to the prisoner, and obliges the victim to be both the agent and the victim of his own erasure. Authority thereby succeeds in exorcizing itself and in remaining wakeful, while delegating to its own victims the task of forgetting. This process explains why Hugo's condemned man is suddenly haunted, when a guard rouses him from his involuntary slumber, by the idea of “ces douze jurés, qui avaient

veillé pendant que je dormais” (276). The narrator later underscores this contrast between the law’s eternal wakefulness and the prisoner’s lapsing attention: “j’oubliais de dire,” he writes (and this narrative *oubli* deserves to be stressed) “qu’il y a nuit et jour un factionnaire de garde à la porte de mon cachot, et que mes yeux ne peuvent se lever vers la lucarne carrée sans rencontrer ses deux yeux fixes toujours ouverts” (291). This intimate bond between sleep and wakefulness produces the guard who, in Vigny’s *Stello*, fuses both functions: “là dormait et veillait, sans se déranger jamais, l’immobile portier” (130).

This dual structure is precarious, and risks, at every moment, undergoing a sudden inversion; should the sovereign truly forget, then the dungeon’s dim space can become a blind spot in the system, a nucleus of reverse vigilance and freedom that undermines the edifice. If power were to forget its own forgetting—a real danger given its aversion to incriminating records—it might unwittingly disempower itself. The *cachot* would then turn into the locus of a forbidden knowledge, and ironically come to embody the indelible inscription of a subversive memory. There is, in this sense, no space freer than the cell, the only place, precisely, where the threat of curtailing liberty is powerless, and where every social taboo is paradoxically lifted. Sade’s prison writings testify to this, as does Frollo when he at last declares his forbidden love for Esmeralda in jail. The blind spot that her oubliette constitutes in the larger social logic is the only conceivable space of the deacon’s illicit union with the gypsy: “un prêtre et une sorcière,” Frollo tells her, “peuvent s’y fondre en délices sur la botte de paille d’un cachot!” (421). This space of exception, on the margins of the law, is structurally unstable, and functions simultaneously as a space of extralegal oppression and unpoliced transgression. When Mercier goes on an outing with “une jolie femme” to visit the dungeons of Vincennes, the weight of social constraints seems to be lifted from them as they playfully enact a sadomasochistic drama that both mimics the state’s violence and corroborates the erotic liberty the prison permits: “là,” writes Mercier, “j’ai fait le despote: je me suis plu à l’enfermer, malgré ses plaintes . . . et sa voix suppliante m’a demandé *grâce* pendant six minutes.” Emancipation follows this moment of domination: “en levant la *lettre de cachet*, je reçus d’elle un vrai baiser pour prix de ma clémence” (270). In the exceptional space of the prison, love and tyranny, two extra-legal actions that embody

the polar extremes of liberty and oppression, are both equally *arbitrary*, and equally exempt from the laws of social space.

The kinship of the convict and the sovereign, as two antipodal beings who jointly exist *hors-la-loi*, beyond the margins of society, is the inadmissible truth that the dungeon reveals.⁹ Hugo is perhaps the writer whose poetic instincts best capture this unwanted intimacy. When his condemned man is led to the *place de Grève* to be executed, the crowd cheers and applauds, and the man comments that “si fort qu’on aime un roi, ce serait moins de fête,” as if the sacrificial aura surrounding him gave him a royal presence (366). The crowd also screams “chapeau bas!” which Hugo’s text glosses by exposing this secret analogy: “comme pour le roi” (367). The condemned man is himself obsessed with the king during his confinement (“je pense sans cesse au roi” [352]), and intuitively grasps the solidarity of their positions; he writes: “il y a dans cette même ville, à cette même heure, et pas bien loin d’ici, dans un autre palais, un homme qui a aussi des gardes à toutes ses portes, un homme unique comme toi dans le peuple, avec cette différence qu’il est aussi haut que tu es bas” (352). The king evidently stands out as the single person with the power to pardon, but this power also situates him outside the law, like the convict, and makes him at once inviolable *and* vulnerable, as susceptible as his own victim to extra-legal violence (revolution, assassination, palace coup). Both are exceptional beings—sovereigns and scapegoats—who exist only as mutual reflections in a mirror that incessantly risks confusing their identities.¹⁰ Nothing so confirms this proximity as the myth of the *masque de fer*, the legendary prisoner thought to be Louis XIV’s *twin brother*, hugely popular in the romantic period.

The fragile hierarchy of these beings, always capable of inversion, seems evident enough in the case of Frollo and Esmeralda, who undergo a dramatic role reversal in the secrecy of the cell. In his efforts to overpower her resistance, Frollo turns the tables and claims instead to be her prisoner (“je porte le cachot au-dedans de moi”), and envies the king’s sovereign power only as a sacrifice he might humbly place at her feet: “oh! . . . regretter de ne pas être roi, génie, empereur, archange, dieu, pour lui mettre un plus grand esclave sous les pieds” (422–3). In the end, it is Frollo who is compelled, like a fallen demon, to leave the edenic sphere of her presence: “va-t-en, monstre!” she imperiously commands him from the depths of her oubliette, and

thereby effectively condemns them both, sealing his fate as much as her own (425). The *fatalité* that governs Hugo's novel may be precisely this extra-legal law, the sphere of the *arbitrary*, which binds executioner and victim in a single destiny. Frollo's anguished plea, "oh! sauve-toi! épargne-moi!" reveals their inextricable lot.¹¹

The ambiguity of the sovereign-prisoner structure also stands out in the unstable psychology of the prisoner. The prisoner forgets, loses consciousness, spatial anchors, and temporal coordinates, and may eventually drift off into madness. This radical dispossession can be understood as the destructive impact of a huge weight that bears down directly "on" the prisoner's head. Esmeralda is symbolically crushed at the lowest point of a double building, one visible, the other, its mirror image, subterranean, like an inverted pyramid that channels the weight of the entire social edifice on an unknown Atlas. "Un palais, une forteresse, une église avaient toujours un double fond" in the Middle Ages, Hugo explains: "dans les cathédrales, c'était en quelque sorte une autre cathédrale souterraine, basse, obscure, mystérieuse, aveugle et muette" (410). This invisible underground architecture, with its multiple "étages souterrains" that resemble "ces forêts et ces montagnes qui se renversent dans l'eau miroitante d'un lac" (410), forms an inverted image of the social structure, with the prisoner perched, as it were, on the pyramid's subterranean "summit." All its weight also concentrates on this secret foundational spot, where Esmeralda, securing the structure, is pinned in place by "le colossal Palais de Justice sur la tête." The sacrificial victim allocated to this spot "sentait peser sur sa tête un entassement de pierres et de geôliers, et la prison tout entière" (411). When Michelet descends into the darkness of the *ancien régime*, the past itself is this weighty edifice: "pendant que j'écris ces lignes, une montagne, une Bastille a pesé sur ma poitrine" (89). The symbolic weight that the prisoner carries, which strangely resembles the burden the king must shoulder (for Michelet, "la terreur qui pèse du tyran à l'esclave retourne au tyran" [90]), thus appears concretely in Hugo's topology, where it explains Esmeralda's rapid mental deterioration and forgetfulness.¹²

In the unstable logic of the inverted mirror, however, this same weight can also produce the reverse result, namely a sudden intensification of mental processes, memories, and sensations. Dantès thus swings from lethargy to hyper-sensibility, as his senses begin to am-

plify the faintest signals that reach his cell, and he picks up “des bruits inappréciables pour toute autre oreille que pour celle d’un prisonnier,” and acquires the almost prophetic gift to “devin[er ce qui] se passait chez les vivants” (111). Instead of crushing consciousness, then, the prison’s weight can provoke a counter-force, a secret and unexpected illumination from below that usurps the sovereign’s monopoly on knowledge. At the very moment that Frollo and Esmeralda are “écrasés sous la pesanteur de leurs émotions,” and appear to undergo mental meltdown, “lui insensé, elle stupide,” the unspeakable truth also at last sees the light, and an unlikely space of revelation opens up deep inside the prison: “tu vas tout savoir,” Frollo tells Esmeralda. “Je vais te dire ce que jusqu’ici j’ai à peine osé me dire à moi-même, lorsque j’interrogeais furtivement ma conscience à ces heures profondes de la nuit où il y a tant de ténèbres que Dieu ne nous voit plus” (416–7). A knowledge to which not even God is privy: such an illumination could define the counter-sovereignty and subversive wisdom of the cell. Its power to cancel consciousness is itself annulled by a scene of revelation: *wo es war, soll ich werden*, Freud had declared. But what he omitted was that the force of repression is itself capable of provoking this joyous release, or even coincides with it, as when Frollo wishes to derive his ecstasy from the crushing weight of Esmeralda’s foot: “j’ai vu ton pied, ce pied où j’eusse voulu pour un empire déposer un seul baiser et mourir, ce pied sous lequel je sentirais avec tant de délices s’écraser ma tête” (422). He is obliged to proceed without her help, however, and in a paroxysm of ecstatic pain “se martelait le crâne aux angles des marches de pierre” (424).

Nothing illustrates this reversal of consciousness better than the porous border between oblivion and obsession, dispossession and monomania, which so often marks the prisoner’s psychology. In his own mental *cachot*, Frollo is haunted by the gypsy girl, whose indelible image at once eclipses his world and fills it with radiance. Everywhere he turns he is assailed by “toi, ton ombre, l’image de l’apparition lumineuse qui avait un jour traversé l’espace devant moi,” and he falls into a stupor inseparable from illumination (420). Hugo’s condemned man, who sees his prison reflected everywhere around him, exposes another facet of this structure: “je retrouve la prison sous toutes les formes, sous la forme humaine comme sous la forme de grille ou de verrou. Ce mur, c’est de la prison en pierre; cette porte,

c'est de la prison en bois; ces guichetiers, c'est de la prison en chair et en os" (314). Even the jailer is just "la prison incarnée." It is clear that the weight of the prison has produced its own obsessive reflection in the prisoner's mind: "tout est prison autour de moi" (314). The idée fixe that the prison triggers in his head is nothing but the prison itself, the form of his oppression reproduced as content, the structure of the state's violence distilled into a simple image. In this lies the challenge presented by the prisoner's illumination: his consciousness is the site where a secret knowledge of the state's foundation takes form, a site paradoxically generated and solidified by the very attempt to silence it.

The condemned man is the irrefutable witness of his own elimination—long before it happens—and he testifies from that blind spot which must at all costs be kept out of view. His discourse is an impossible speech, a fact Hugo only knows too well, since his novel blatantly carries the condemned man's diary right up to the scaffold itself (against all verisimilitude) and then interrupts it in mid-sentence when the guillotine suspends the flow of discourse. The fuzzy logic of this testimonial diary results neither from a lapse nor from excessive poetic license, but is a structural necessity, imposed by Hugo's deliberate attempt to speak from an unknowable place, not so much from *outré-tombe* as *sous l'arrêt de mort*, that premature passage into death which could be said to form the paradigm of incommunicable experience. The *journal*, in fact, opens with the words "condamné à mort!", so that the words thereafter issue in their totality from this impossible place (273). Hugo indirectly underscores this contradiction again when the prisoner, some ten pages into the diary, against all narrative logic, first receives ink and paper. Faced with the material means of expression, he is forced to confront the true ontological obstacle to his discourse: "mais quoi écrire?" (284) Already at his trial, the depth of his solitude had removed him from human speech: "j'aurais eu, moi, tout à dire, mais rien ne me vint. Ma langue resta collée à mon palais" (280). The real reason that renders his speech impossible now becomes evident: beneath the Medusa-like horror of his condition, there is in fact nothing to say, no message to send, no meaning to share—unless the total rupture of social communion could itself constitute a meaning: "est-ce que je puis avoir quelque chose à dire, moi qui n'ai plus rien à faire dans ce monde?" (285). Hugo thus enters this enigmatic discourse quite consciously, and affirms from the outset its im-

possible closure (“ce journal . . . cette histoire, [sera] nécessairement inachevée” [285]), stressing the singular, aporetic character of its truncated testimony: “[ce sera le] procès-verbal de la pensée agonisante . . . [une] espèce d’autopsie intellectuelle d’un condamné” (286). The diary promises to present an autopsy of thought; and so it does, but an autopsy performed *by* thought itself, as its own powers expire beneath the sovereign threat of death. This reflexive aporia sums up the transgressive literary task Hugo here sets himself.

IV. The Social Nature of Memory

The vertical dialectic of oblivion between prisoner and sovereign has its horizontal counterpart in the social rupture that the prison produces between the inmate and his social milieu. His isolation slowly erodes all the bonds of memory and affection that secure membership in a community: deprived of direct contact, he forgets friends and family, and in turn fades from their minds.¹³ The solid physical walls prove to be a low-tech device to trigger this subtle psychic process, which crowns the work of erasure already performed on the legal plane. A very telling scene occurs, in this context, in *Le dernier jour d’un condamné*, when the condemned man, just prior to his execution, is allowed to receive his daughter, who tragically fails to recognize him, calls him *monsieur*, and assures him naively that “[son papa] est mort” (359). The prisoner has died prematurely in the minds of the living, and undergone a sort of memorial execution that makes his solitude even more absolute: “elle m’a oublié, visage, parole, accent . . . quoi! déjà effacé de cette mémoire, la seule où j’eusse voulu vivre!” (358–9).

Such symbolic death, though apparently an accident, obeys a stricter logic that betrays the prison’s secret *raison d’être*. The jailers, in fact, persistently meddle with their prisoners’ minds to hasten their mental isolation. In *Claude Gueux*, the warden deliberately taunts Claude, who is tormented by the memory of his impecunious “wife,” “que cette malheureuse s’était faite fille publique” (12). He thereby strikes a violent mental blow Claude will recall later in the speech he delivers at his trial: “j’avais une femme pour qui j’ai volé, il me torture avec cette femme” (34). When Esmeralda asks Frolo about Phoebus, the frivolous officer she loves, he hammers his message home: “il est mort!” (425). That such mental manipulations are

purposive acts designed to accelerate the erosion of social bonds is a point Michelet leaves in no doubt; his Bastille inmate, like Hugo's, is communicatively severed from the living: "le mort vivant ne sait plus rien des siens, ni de ses amis" (88). But the social breach here assumes the diabolical character of an event engineered by the jailer, whom Michelet stages in an imaginary dialogue with the lonely inmate eager for news of his wife and friends. "Mais ma femme?" he asks, "et mes amis . . . ont-ils souvenir de moi?", a question which only provokes the jailer's brutal and gratuitous retort that "ta femme est morte . . . [non,] je me trompe . . . remariée" and that "tes amis, eh! radoteur, ce sont eux qui t'ont trahi" (88). The operation of power here consists literally in using the prison to fabricate a mutual forgetting: the spatial rupture is only the prelude, the crude device used to enact that "mort par-delà toute mort," killing a person "dans le souvenir" (88), which the historian in Michelet regards as the clinical form of death. This drama of memorial dissociation attains a climax in *Les Misérables*, where Hugo pathetically imprints oblivion in the landscape, making it the sole but forgetful witness of the family that once lived there. After Jean Valjean is sent to the *bagne de Toulon* for stealing a piece of bread, he gradually forgets his family, as they, too, forget him, an event implicit in their decision to leave the *pays*, disband, and abandon the village that had witnessed their joint existence. If sharing a place, possessing a *lieu commun*, is what guarantees memory, having a *lieu de mémoire*, then this dispersal marks the village as the site of their mutual oblivion. Hugo dramatizes this amnesia by stressing that it cannot even be located in a consciousness, but only attributed to a place: "le clocher de ce qui avait été leur village les oublia; la borne de ce qui avait été leur champ les oublia" (147). The social pulverization of the Valjean family is so total that the only residue it leaves is a *lieu d'oubli*.

What emerges from these examples is the reliance of memory on unbroken social contact. As Maurice Halbwachs argued long ago, memory is never a purely private affair, but always takes shape in a group, collectively, and survives only as an ongoing function of that group and its shifting interests.¹⁴ What these prison tales show, more concretely, is that memory is nourished by direct physical contact, and has difficulty surviving a durable separation; moreover, it is not just the substance of memory that is socially engendered, but also its

carriers' identities, since these are produced within the framework of a collective group portrait that is ceaselessly retouched. The depth of private memory is thus the site where the collectivity resides. The isolation of the prisoner, then, is the direct agent of his amnesia, the poisonous air that dries up his memories, just as company is what oxygenates that faculty. Esmeralda only overcomes her memory loss when Frollo touches her: it is when a physical contact re-establishes a social link that "l'espèce de voile qui s'était épaissi sur sa mémoire se déchirait" (415). Access to her own memory appears to be mediated by her commerce with others, so that even Frollo's icy touch can revive "ces souvenirs à demi effacés, et presque oblitérés par l'excès de la souffrance" (415).

The dialectical relation of memory and community, which the prison disrupts, receives its most detailed treatment in the *Comte de Monte-Cristo*, where Dantès' suicidal descent into solipsism ends precisely when the abbé Faria punctures his cell with a wayward tunnel: "la captivité partagée," Dumas writes, "n'est plus qu'une demi-captivité" (139). Indeed, Faria's tunnel, though it fails to free him, almost performs a more vital task in reconstituting a social "cell." The feverish exchange that follows their encounter shows how the reinsertion into a social context succeeds in anchoring Dantès once more in time, space, and identity. Besides discussing the date and the political context, and reconstructing the outside world, their meeting also enables them to triangulate the precise location of their cells, which Faria had attempted in vain to do alone. A world replete with spatial, historical, and individual coordinates thereby re-emerges around them, and it is only thanks to his interlocutor that Dantès, whose past was fading into a fog of enigmas, succeeds in reconstructing his own story. His betrayal, arrest, and deportation had remained a riddle to him, and it is only by sharing his sketchy data with Faria that he can divine who his enemies are. This dialogical revelation of his own story might be called the social version of Plato's theory of recollection.

This process of anamnesis does not end with the unraveling of Dantès' own story, for the encounter also initiates a vast learning process in which Faria (soon to bequeath him the treasure of Monte-Cristo) transmits the wealth of his erudition to Dantès. The Leibnizian monad, which in its singularity reflects the universe, is reconceived here as a dialogical couple that reconstructs the world. The amnesia of

the cell is reversed through an encyclopedic *apprentissage* as Dantès absorbs a mass of knowledge that explodes the spatio-temporal barriers that have hemmed him in. Physically bounded, his worldly ignorance has also shut him inside a mental prison, since “le passé était resté pour lui couvert de ce voile sombre que soulève la science,” and made his “esprit énergique” unable to “prendre vol à travers les âges,” forcing it instead to “rester prisonnier comme un aigle dans une cage” (123). These temporal barriers (“son passé si court, son présent si sombre, son avenir si douteux” [123]) echo the predicament of Alfred de Vigny’s “iron mask,” who tragically lacks a past and a future, and even ignores the enigma of his own identity. The “iron mask” tells a visiting priest:

Pourquoi venir fouiller dans ma mémoire vide,
Où, stérile de jours, le temps dort effacé ?
Je n’eus point d’avenir et n’ai point de passé.

Memory provides an interior space of freedom, an escape, as Maurice Halbwachs remarks, from contemporary social constraints: “[elle] nous donne l’illusion de vivre au sein de groupes qui ne nous emprisonnent pas” (110). Escape from the prison is thus first and foremost a symbolic broadening of horizons.

It is instructive in this regard that Faria, while tunneling to freedom, “continuait d’instruire Dantès,” as if the acts of mining and learning here mirrored each other: Faria “lui parl[ait] tantôt une langue, tantôt une autre, lui apprenant l’histoire des nations et des grands hommes” (160). It is ultimately this transmission and cultivation of historical knowledge that breaks down the prison and reverses the tide of forgetting. Faria’s own strategy for survival has been to pursue an ambitious historical labor which would lay the groundwork for a political treatise on Italian monarchy. Deprived of all printed resources, he has had to rely on his own memory, and his “research” has consisted in exhuming a buried mental archive: “dans ma prison,” he explains, he recalled the classic works he had once read, “avec un léger effort de mémoire” (145). Access to this internal archive proved as liberating for him as his own teaching was for Dantès: “mes travaux historiques sont, je l’avoue, ma plus douce occupation.” The past allowed him to tunnel out of the prison of the present: “en descendant dans le passé, j’oublie le présent; en marchant libre et indépendant dans l’histoire, je

ne me souviens plus que je suis prisonnier” (146). Salvation from amnesia here quite aptly assumes the figure of forgetting itself, as Faria recovers his nation’s history by “forgetting” the prison that excludes him from it.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, his work on Italy concerns the foundation of a new national community (“*la possibilité d’une monarchie générale en Italie*”), so that his forcible exclusion from the political community is canceled out by his utopian power to dream a new foundation for the collectivity.

This utopia, however, has in a sense already begun the minute the two prisoners’ cells were connected, when memory and society, both mutilated by the prison, mutually reconstituted each other: the world reshaped itself around them, and they, in turn, became father and son, regenerating a basic figure of social continuity. The famous treasure that Faria will bestow on his adoptive son is none other than this providential event: “mon véritable trésor, voyez-vous, mon ami,” says Dantès, c’est votre présence, c’est notre cohabitation” (176). The social dissolution that the prison produces is thus reversed, in the end, by Dumas’ melodramatic plot, which transforms the solitary cell into a scene of social regeneration.

V. La Voix publique

This reverse transformation of solitude into community recalls the volatile bond between prisoner and power, discussed above, in which the prisoner finds a type of counter-sovereignty in his abjection. Beside these two immanent loopholes in the logic of the prison, there is a third form of disruption, one that occurs when the inquiring gaze of a poet or historian on the outside picks up the rumors within. But such an act can never be taken for granted, since the sounds that filter out are usually inaudible or repugnant, and every effort at inquiry meets a double wall of silence and horror. It is as if an invisible shield protected the prison from the curious onlooker. Maxime du Camp refers to “ces prisons que notre imagination est impuissante à se figurer” (300), and Mercier confesses his impulse to shy away from the criminals within: “l’humanité [y] est réellement effrayante et hideuse . . . tirons le rideau” (144). Faced with the spectacle of “les monstrueuses turpitudes de l’humanité,” Mercier also backs off in fright and demands that “les voiles épais qui la couvrent” be lowered; the “main tremblante de l’historien” is in any case unable to

transcribe this scene accurately (144). The book-buying public may be equally reluctant to peer behind this curtain, as a “gros monsieur” makes clear in Hugo’s satirical prologue to *Le dernier jour*, when he complains that the author “nous force à regarder dans les prisons, dans les bagnes, dans Bicêtre,” and quite reasonably adds “[que] c’est fort désagréable” (267). Those who can stomach this horror must contend, moreover, with the prison’s silence, a far more formidable challenge, since its chief purpose may be precisely to repress the flow of speech. The prison presents an opaque façade, a smooth impenetrable surface, which absorbs all voices in its proximity like a black hole. “Rien ne transpire de ce gouffre,” Mercier complains of the Bastille, “non plus que de l’abîme muet des tombeaux” (722). The underground architecture in *Notre-Dame de Paris* is equally “aveugle et muette” (410), and sound is unable to travel in either direction across the prison’s walls: “rien ne pénétrait . . . dans la sombre forteresse,” since “à son seuil expiraient les bruits du dehors.”¹⁶ The symbolic topography of the prison is doubly forbidding, and its dual threshold of silence and horror offers a secular version of the warning on Dante’s infernal gates.¹⁷ The literary odyssey through the prison thus retains a strong flavor of epic initiation, and the writer’s hesitation to enter can never be dismissed as pure rhetoric. It betrays the heavy social taboo designed to protect the prison’s secrets.

The writers determined to lift this veil (Hugo, Dumas, Michelet) obey a secular theology of resurrection which sees the liberation of bodies, voices, and imprisoned truths as a redemptive act. Their reports from the prison’s inferno aim above all to resurrect buried speech, and to undo the memorial entropy which the prison inflicts on the past. It was a commonplace already in the *ancien régime* that the Bastille was a prison of speech.¹⁸ This figuration cast writers in the role of hyper-sensitive observers who sought to register the faint noises filtering through the walls. This prisoners’ speech is, inevitably, a discourse *d’outre-tombe*, even when they are still alive, since the prison always symbolically buries its victims alive. When Dantès first hears Faria, it is as “une voix qui semblait venir de dessous terre,” marked by “un accent sépulcral” and the prestige of the supernatural (133). Despite its sacred character, such speech, feeble and ghostly as it is, must be actively solicited, detected, and amplified. Touring the disaf-

fecté *donjon de Vincennes*, Mercier apostrophizes the silent walls: “répondez, murailles, rapportez à mon oreille les gémissements dont vous avez été témoins” (270). He hopes the demolition of the Petit-Châtelet will at last free the voices trapped in its masonry: “les murs y doivent être encore imprégnés des soupirs du désespoir” (204). The destruction of the Bastille provokes in Michelet an attitude of sacred attention, as if he were a human seismograph capturing the fading tremors within: “on ne pouvait rien voir, mais on écoutait . . . Il y avait certainement des bruits, des gémissements, d’étranges soupirs” (180). He reports that the demolition workers fancied they heard the voices of prisoners still buried alive, and “demaient qu’on recherchât la cause de ces voix lamentables” (180). When the Revolution tore down, opened, or inspected the royal prisons, this gesture amounted to a sacred drama for Michelet, who called it a “jour de résurrection, [quand] le soleil perç[a] les mystères” (253). The vision of the prison as a stony sedimentation of voices derives, of course, from the traditional topos of *saxa loquuntur* (speaking stones), denoting the mute eloquence of tombs, ruins, and monuments, and Michelet invokes this topos: “les pierres parlent, au défaut des hommes” (298). The originality of romantic writing vis-à-vis this tradition is easily overlooked: it lies, in this case, in a total subversion of the motif, which is applied here instead to the dark, mute, and hidden stones whose very function is to silence.

Yet speech is fleeting and precarious, and the gesture of detection alone is insufficient to secure the survival of testimony. For this, inscription is required—the constitution of a durable record. Here the poets find support for their own activity as chroniclers of the underground in another age-old custom: that of prison graffiti. The very cells meant to fabricate silence also serve inadvertently as supports for the inscription of forbidden memories. Besides helping the prisoner keep count of the days (and this grounding in social and historical time is clearly significant), the “stones” here quite literally “speak” of the prisoner’s plight, and transmit crucial traces which the historian can later interrogate. Hugo’s scriptural recovery of such traces in *Le dernier jour* finds an echo in the prisoner’s own reading of the cell’s graffiti, the *ultima verba* etched by a long convoy of condemned men, which briefly dispel his solitude: “Les quatre murs sont couverts

d'écritures, de dessins, de figures bizarres, de noms qui se mêlent et s'effacent les uns les autres," and though he is too distraught to study "ce livre étrange qui se développe page à page à mes yeux sur chaque pierre de ce cachot," it is clear that this *livre en pierre* serves as a figure for the impossible diary Hugo extracts from the cell (291–2). Itself a figure for the executed inmates, this textual grave consists of "inscriptions mutilées," "phrases démembrées," and "mots tronqués," which Hugo compares to the "corps sans tête [de] ceux qui les ont écrits" (292). The content of these underground notes, their final referent, which they succeed in capturing against all odds, is in the end nothing but the very violence that extinguishes such speech. The man almost drops his lamp—his instrument of investigation—when its light finally exposes "une image épouvantable, la figure de cet échafaud qui, à l'heure qu'il est, se dresse peut-être pour moi" (293).

No doubt it is Michelet who makes the most of the improbable prison archive. As a historian, he is haunted by the erosion of the record, even doubly so since he regards historiography as a secular resurrection that grants the dead eternal life in human memory. Prison graffiti has a vital function in this economy of salvation; it provides him with the secular guarantee that all oblivion can be reversed: "rien n'est oublié, nul homme, nulle chose, [parce que] ce qui a été une fois ne peut s'anéantir ainsi" (89). His faith in this recovery is written on the walls: "les murs mêmes n'oublieront pas, le pavé sera complice, transmettra des sons, des bruits;" even "l'air n'oubliera pas" (89). The entire cell turns into a text, and providentially transforms its machinery of silence into a faithful recording device. Similarly, the prison's invisibility, its anti-monumental power, is reversed by its obsessive depiction in romantic writing; Michelet's fixation echoes Stendhal's, Hugo's, Balzac's, and Dumas'. And just as Hugo had imagined a vast underground prison, Michelet fancies an endless regression of prisons, each more deeply buried than the previous one: "curiosité insatiable, qui, lorsqu'on avait tout vu, cherchait et fouillait encore, voulait pénétrer plus loin, soupçonnait quelque autre chose, sous les prisons rêvait des prisons, des cachots sous les cachots au plus profond de la terre" (180). This obsessive, imaginary multiplication of the prison can be read as a symptom of its troubling invisibility and paranoid ubiquity, and serves to compensate for its hazy, hypothetical character, a qual-

ity to which Mercier pointed in assuring his incredulous readers that “ces cachots souterrains existent” (295). It is never certain that there is not one more prison to expose publicly to view: “le monde est une prison” (89). The paranoid impulse to imagine secret prisons everywhere, betrays a deep modern compulsion to reclaim this anti-monument for memory, and to transform a *lieu d’oubli* into an indelible *lieu de mémoire*. As a *topos* of memory, however, the prison remains thoroughly ambiguous, and telescopes into one motif the horrors of forgetting *and* the belief in recollection, memorializing, as it were, forgetting itself.

The discovery of a secret prison archive is a decisive step in the recovery of silenced memories, but the mere exposure of such testimony does not end the poetic assault on the prison. This symbol must itself, in a last step, be reinscribed in the official chronicle of the community, and accorded a privileged place in the construction of national memory. No doubt the Bastille serves as such an emblem in Michelet’s historiography, which purports to have rescued the mute voice of the people of the *ancien régime* from its oubliettes; his entire *Histoire de France* is a sort of scroll peeled from the prison’s walls. But the symbolic centrality of the Bastille as the nation’s archive was not Michelet’s invention. Mercier had prophetically stated, before the Revolution, that the history of France was unthinkable unless one could first peer into the Bastille: “comment écrira-t-on l’histoire de Louis XIII, de Louis XIV et de Louis XV,” he had asked, “si l’on ne fait pas l’histoire de la Bastille?” (I: 722–5). The prospects of obtaining such an unauthorized peek into the secret workings of the monarchy, however, were so slight when Mercier wrote that he could only conclude that “la partie la plus intéressante de notre histoire nous sera donc à jamais cachée: rien ne transpire de ce gouffre” (I: 722). Yet when the Bastille fell, Mercier’s wish was realized: the monument’s destruction transformed it overnight into an imaginary archive that made the writing of a true national history possible. A *Histoire de la Bastille* from 1844 (published a year before Michelet began work on the Revolution, and clearly indebted to Hugo’s vision of architecture as memory in *Notre-Dame de Paris*) starts from the archeological premise that “l’histoire des peuples est écrite partout, dans leurs coutumes, dans leurs moeurs, dans leurs monuments,” but

then gives pride of place to monuments because “ni mensonges, ni flatteries, ni fausses appréciations ne peuvent changer la signification des monuments, incorruptibles chroniques que le temps seul efface et disperse” (1–2). Invoking both Hugo’s “book in stone” and Cuvier’s famous animal reconstructions, the text fancies that architectural remnants are “[des] pages arrachées d’un livre,” from which “le philosophe pourrait reconstruire . . . dans leur ensemble . . . les sociétés antiques” (2). The *disjecta membra* of the Bastille thus become the fossil bones from which an authentic picture of the monarchy might at last emerge. To illustrate this point, the authors propose a sort of thought experiment: “détruisons par la pensée nos annales: que le nom de la France périclisse, que Paris ne soit plus qu’une vaste ruine sans mention et sans souvenir,” yet imagine that the Bastille still stands, “[que] de tous ses monuments . . . un seul est resté debout, cette sombre forteresse”—such a record, the narrator suggests, would still suffice to judge France “comme si j’avais compulsé ses archives” (4–5). The judgment to be deduced from this future reading of the Bastille comes as no surprise: “[cette nation] s’est couchée, comme un chien aux pieds de celui qui le frappe, à l’ombre de cette citadelle qui résume son histoire” (4). There is predictable melodrama here, but what is telling is the radical reduction of the nation’s archive to a mere prison, as if a marginal *lieu d’oubli* were sufficient to recreate the history of France. This inflated but symbolically crucial claim situates the Bastille at the dark center of French history, and turns it into the invisible mirror that reflects the nation’s fate: “l’histoire de la Bastille est presque l’histoire de la France” (12). All the passions, intrigues, and affairs that over the years have constituted the chronicle of the state also “forment les chapitres de l’histoire de la Bastille, où se reflètent successivement la physionomie, les mœurs, les coutumes, les vices de chaque époque” (13). The prison may constitute *l’envers de l’histoire*, in Balzac’s phrase, and serve the state as a useful oubliette, but in the redemptive thrust of romantic writing this underground vault turns into the open quarry of history. Mercier had understandably cheered when the Petit-Châtelet was demolished to “céder son terrain à la voie publique,” since this clearing operation also paved the way for the return of the “voix publique.”

Notes

1. "La Complicité française jetée aux oubliettes?" (March 1, 2000), article available at www.Liaison-Rwanda.com.

2. Foucault's theses on the panoptic society, in *Discipline and Punish*, obviously inform my argument, but what interests me more here is the reverse of surveillance: the occultation of problematic citizens.

3. The transition to the modern penitentiary, in the wake of the reforms proposed by Beccaria and his disciples during the Enlightenment, had very little impact on the prison's literary representation. As Monika Fludernik notes, writers went on exploiting the *cachot* and "dungeon scenario well into the late nineteenth century" (44).

4. These oubliettes were of course more legendary than real, and had enjoyed a long fictional elaboration, as Lüsebrink and Reinhardt show in their *Bastille*. For Michelet, they are an article of faith, both "the ossements trouvés dans la Bastille" (198), and "ces cachots noirs, profonds, fétides, où le prisonnier, au niveau des égouts, vivait assiégé des crapauds [et] des rats" (179).

5. See notably the 1869 "Préface" to his *Histoire de France*. The secularization of immortality, in the modern period, as a purely innerworldly form of memory, receives a striking illustration in war memorials, as Reinhart Koselleck has shown.

6. Hugo was only the most well-known opponent of capital punishment in the early 19th century. Pierre-Simon Ballanche, whose *Ville des expiations* (1830s) proposed a carceral model for the society of the future, pursued the same campaign.

7. Michelet later adds: "ils y étaient enterrés sous des noms de domestiques, de sorte qu'on ne sût jamais s'ils étaient morts ou vivants" (179).

8. At the extreme limit, this "architecture of oblivion" produces an invisible prison, whose existence the authorities deny. The alleged "covert prison system" set up by the CIA around the world to process al Qaeda operatives exemplifies the idea (Dana Priest).

9. Giorgio Agamben offers a trenchant reflection on this couple "outside the law," which secretly sustains normal legal space, in his *Homo Sacer*. Their obscene reciprocity was precisely what, according to Foucault, the *philosophes* had rejected in public executions, and which has therefore been repressed in the modern "soft" execution: "the physical confrontation between the sovereign and the condemned man must end" (73).

10. In *Claude Gueux* (1834), Hugo repeats this symbolic confusion. Claude's authority over his fellow prisoners elevates him to a sovereign inside the jail: "il devait douter lui-même par moments s'il était roi ou prisonnier" (13). Nerval deploys his own version of this myth in the story of Raoul Spifame in *Les Illuminés* (1852): Spifame, the "Roi de Bicêtre" (1839), is a man who bears an uncanny resemblance to Henri II, and gradually comes to believe he is the king. Confined to Bicêtre, this harmless lunatic is allowed to hold court within its sanctuary, where he elaborates a utopian program of political reforms which, as Nerval wryly concludes, "ont été la plupart exécutées depuis" (57).

11. A similar inversion takes place in *Claude Gueux*, where the prisoner, continually harassed by the warden—jealous of his power over the prisoners—decides at last to judge his oppressor in due form before a court of fellow prisoners. Having sentenced him to death, he duly executes him with a hatchet as the prisoners look on, then, recognizing their joint fate, attempts to kill himself.

12. Cf. also the public rendering of this weight when Hugo's condemned man is led before the crowd to his execution: "j'étais ivre, stupide, insensé. C'est une chose insupportable que le poids de tant de regards appuyés sur vous" (369).

13. Rousseau gives the positive formulation of this mutual oblivion during his retreat on the island of Saint-Pierre: "j'aurais voulu qu'on m'eût fait de cet asile une prison perpétuelle . . . de sorte qu'ignorant tout ce qui se faisait dans le monde j'en eusse oublié l'existence et qu'on y eût oublié la mienne aussi" (96).

14. See Maurice Halbwachs' classic study of the social nature of memory, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

15. Cf. also Hugo's condemned man, who tries to undo his social negation by a reciprocal negation, and "forgets" the present by "recalling" his childhood: "j'ai fermé les yeux, et j'ai mis les mains dessus, et j'ai tâché d'oublier, d'oublier le présent dans le passé. Tandis que je rêve, les souvenirs de mon enfance et de ma jeunesse me reviennent un à un" (344).

16. Arnould, Du Pujol, and Maquet, *Histoire de la Bastille*, 2.

17. The allusion to Dante's *Inferno* is inevitably a leitmotif in romantic prison writing. Hugo entitles his chapter on Esmeralda's ordeal "Lasciate ogni speranza." See Victor Brombert's remarks on the intertextual elaboration of the prison through references to Virgil, Plutarch, Seneca, and Dante (*La Prison romantique*, 42).

18. Mercier remarks at the "Donjon de Vincennes" that here "l'orgueil, la vengeance, l'égoïsme" have punished "une chanson, une épigramme, une page d'impression" (270). For Michelet, the Bastille is "la prison de la pensée" (89).

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.

Arnould, Du Pujol, and Maquet. *Histoire de la Bastille*. Vol. 1. Paris: Administration de Librairie, 1844.

Ballanche, Pierre-Simon. *La Ville des expiations*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1981.

Bender, John. *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1987.

Brombert, Victor. *La Prison romantique. Essai sur l'imaginaire*. Paris: José Corti, 1975.

Du Camp, Maxime. "Les Prisons." *Paris. Ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie jusqu'en 1870*. Monaco: G. Rondeau, 1993.

Dumas, Alexandre. *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 2003.

Fludernik, Monika. "Carceral Topography: Spatiality, Liminality and Corporality in the Literary Prison." *Textual Practice* 13.1 (1999): 43-77.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire collective* [1925]. Paris: Albin Michel, 1994.

Hugo, Victor. *Claude Gueux*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

———. *Le dernier jour d'un condamné*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

———. *Les Misérables*. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1973. 3 vols.

———. *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Paris: Gallimard, 2002.

Koselleck, Reinhart. "War Memorials: Identity Formations of the Survivors." *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002.

- Lüsebrink, Hans-Jürgen and Rolf Reichardt. *The Bastille: A History of a Symbol of Despotism and Freedom*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.
- Mercier, Louis Sébastien. "Le Cachot noir," "La Démolition du Petit-Châtelet," "Donjon de Vincennes," "Les Prisons." *Paris le jour, Paris la nuit*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990.
- . "Bastille," *Tableau de Paris*. Vol. 1. Paris: Mercure de France, 1994. 2 vols.
- Mestre, Abel. *La Riposte* (May 2002).
- Michelet, Jules. *Histoire de la Révolution française*. Vol. 1. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1979. 2 vols.
- . "Préface de 1869." *Le Moyen âge*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981.
- Nerval, Gérard de. "Roi de Bicêtre." *Les Illuminés*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- Nora, Pierre. Ed. *Lieux de mémoire*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1986.
- Priest, Dana. "CIA Holds Terror Suspects in Secret Prisons." *Washington Post*. 25 Nov. 2005. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Cinquième promenade." *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1999.
- Tristan, Flora. "Prisons." *Promenades dans Londres, ou l'aristocratie et les prolétaires anglais* [1842]. Paris: La Découverte, 2003.
- Vigny, Alfred de. "La Prison." *Poèmes antiques et modernes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.
- . "La Maison Lazare." *Stello*. Paris: Gallimard, 1986.
- Verne, Jules. *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*. Paris: Pocket, 1999.