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For the Love of God

a continuation of “Golem in the Catacombs”

Alex Gorrion

December 28, 2014

When living beings are separated from their own expressions, gestures, tools, and traditions, they are reduced to golem, mere bodies, and every influence that these things, once a part of their being and now expropriated by the category of “apparatus”, exercise over them is now read as a form of corruption or control. This postmodern trope of the fragility of liberty—all influence is coercion; therefore liberty is a utopian concept—derives from the unconscious assumption that every factor external to a golem has in fact been designed to mold it and guide it through the apparatuses where its miserable life plays out.

The defeated communards of 1871 who had taken refuge in the Paris catacombs suffered a particularly gruesome fate. The victorious Versailles troops, who had received tacit support—in a stirring example of elite internationalism—from Bismarck’s Prussians, dynamited the catacomb tunnels where the refugees huddled, killing thousands. We can only wonder how many survived the initial blast, the earth itself falling in on their heads (the World Turned Upside Down falling back into place?), and wandered the catacombs, emptied of their utopia, in search of some subsistence.

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Later, the Sacré Cœur was built on the butte of Montmartre, the proletarian neighborhood where the insurrection began and where one of the key battles took place in the suppression of the Commune. The extravagant penance, now a major tourist attraction, prevents us from returning to the site of our loss. Long before the science of urban architecture as social control, the Church knew construction as an act of war designed to finish off a defeated enemy, for le Sacre Couer was one of the last of a long lineage. The famous monastery at Mont-Saint-Michel was built atop the most important gathering place of the Gallic druids; unwitting lines of tourists pay it homage today with cameras in hand. Throughout South America, the oldest churches are to be found atop the *waka* of the Aymara or the sacred sites of other colonized peoples.

In literature, another kind of Church was built atop an earlier revolutionary defeat. Victor Hugo's monumental *Les Misérables* is set against the June Rebellion of 1832 (though it must also be read as a fruit of Hugo's troubled relationship with the revolution of 1848). And although Hugo, a leftist, is sympathetic with the revolutionaries, his is above all a tale of redemption. Marius and Cosette may marry and find happiness and security (in the tale's ethical grammar the latter is implicitly proffered as a precondition for the former) with Marius's upper-class family (and, in the original novel, Jean Valjean's factory money), their youthful flirtation with insurrection overlooked. A questioned God smiles on them, revealing in the end His indubitable munificence, with the Happy Ending serving as proof of transformative forgiveness. In an earlier age, kings and tsars had to exercise general pardons—the Jubilee—to appear godlike. This new God need only save one soul—like the lottery winner or the pop star that rises alone out of crowds of miserable millions—to redeem Himself for the spectating masses.

Les Misérables' long run tells a sort of story about the rise and fall of modernity. The original novel sets the archetypes into

play. Love conquers all and heroes find happy endings. Hugo, after all, needed to tack into a new wind after the massacres of '48. He was part of a generation of writers who flirted with revolutionary ideas, only to abandon them when they were put into practice and used as weapons against the old order by "the wretched of the earth." A republican who tended towards pacifism, Hugo spoke out vehemently for the cause of equality and fraternity and even consorted with anarchists, yet he also helped to suppress the 1848 insurrection in Paris. Later, old Victor was not as active as many of his colleagues who would lend their pens to justify the repression of proles and pétroleuses after the Paris Commune. He nonetheless found the utility in a tactful separation between art and life, and class-climbing lovers would provide the perfect protagonists for the modern storyline.

Les Misérables the musical struck the perfect note for a new generation of sell-out artists and failed revolutionaries, remassified and forced to consume their own defeat. The most poignant song in Schönberg and Boublil's musical, opening in Paris and London before becoming a Broadway hit, is "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables." In the lines,

Here they talked of revolution.

Here it was they lit the flame.

Here they sang about tomorrow

And tomorrow never came.

[...]

Oh my friends, my friends, don't ask me

What your sacrifice was for

Empty chairs at empty tables

Where my friends will sing no more

one can almost imagine a recent university graduate, newly thrust into the real world, surveying in his mind the halls in the Sorbonne where the students debated, or the meeting room in Chicago where SDS had their 1969 congress that

would lead to the creation of an armed vanguard, back before the hammer fell.

It is the song of one who has participated in something transcendental, something real for the first time in his life, only to lose it because the community it was born in has been swept away, the other communards either shot down (as in 1832) or robbed by the Spectacle and the prisons (as were the Weathermen and their less mediatic contemporaries). The singer knows not how to find his way back and, re-enslaved by a cruel purgatory, can only blame the foolishness of his braver comrades for having tried to storm heaven.

Finally, the Hollywood remake with Russell Crowe and Hugh Jackman proving—at times painfully—that today's actors can still sing and dance, closes the cycle. Passing through the crass cultural cannibalism of the last years, with which every narrative that ever enjoyed an ounce of success is retailored for the silver screen in a desperate bid to continue producing without creating anything original, *Les Misérables'* love story—at a time when the romantic narrative must arm itself with witty cynicism or worldly nuance to rise above its festering limitations—comes off as antiquated and trite. It must hide behind a grandiose production and the outsider antics of Sascha Baron Cohen and Helena Bonham Carter because it is simply too weak to carry the plot, though in the original musical it is clearly identified as the principal narrative thread, all of Hugo's other subplots and digressions abandoned without hesitation.

The excitement of the insurrection is far more moving than the romance, and here we find another important theme. Of necessity the Spectacle presents us with increasingly numerous renditions of revolution, from *Fight Club* to *Robin Hood*. To serve as operations of recuperation, some of these revolutions defeat themselves through extremism, providing a cautionary moral tale against putting ideals into practice. Others attack one aspect of power, say the banks, while reinforcing another,

eventually the body—that misleading shadow of the false physical world—would reassert itself and require more archaic institutions of state authority to coddle and distract its longings, always in a sphere that did not intersect with matters of the spirit.

So it is today. The golem still dream and cry—but if they are fabricated beings made of the dust of the old world, perhaps Democritus went awry in looking for the atom in the too-small-to-see, for if even dust contains dreamings the atom must be the universe itself—and they must be given something great and out of reach to love and to fear. The subjects of state power are no longer living beings, and there is a cathedral built atop each of our past defeats. To pay homage we are told we must walk in through the doors. On arrival we're not sure it's what we were looking for but we mouth along with the rite to assuage our doubts, just as the last grandiose song in a bad musical tries to divert our dissatisfaction.

But the body cannot walk to the spirit any more than the spirit can wish itself a body.

Work continues, disappointments stack up, hairs go grey and bellies flab, the tables and chairs where we sat in our passionate debates empty out, the street that was a bonfire is an apparatus again and the memory no longer seems worthy of passing on because of the inarticulate confusion it provokes in us. Yet the sense of something greater, immediate and unreachable, something that gives us courage, that could wrap us in the strongest of embraces and protect us through death or defeat, mocks us from all directions.

like patriarchy, and yet others succeed by piercing the conspiracy, revealing the truth, and allowing the peaceful masses or the good institutions to make everything right, leaving the actual transformation to play out off camera. How is the rebellion of 1832 recuperated?

This question is difficult to answer, just as today's spectators might have a hard time placing the story's defeated revolution in the genealogy of their current liberty. The same problem crops up in other films about freedom. William Wallace fights against an evil king—the bad kind of authority—and the voiceover in the final scenes assures us that the Scots eventually won their freedom, a fact that their recent opportunity to vote on independence can only confirm. In one of Mel Gibson's remakes of *Braveheart*, *Patriot*—the one set during the American Revolution—the relation between the heroic struggle portrayed and the audience's consequent lack of need to struggle is even more obvious. But what about an attempted political revolution in 19th century constitutional France? On the one hand, the dissidents' decision to take up arms is an admirable flaw, when they really all should have just married well and joined high society. On the other hand, their rebellion is presented as an idealistic spirit—most purely embodied by Gavroche, the fearless child—that we are meant to believe eventually triumphed, though it can be carried on just as easily by the final scene's marching masses as by armed insurgents.

What makes up for the story's ambiguity with regards to revolution is the parallel plot of redemption. The State is redeemed in Javert's mercy, the Church is redeemed in Bishop Myriel, and the bourgeoisie are redeemed as the guarantors of Marius and Cosette's eventual happiness (suggesting a curious window on the American Founding Fathers' replacement of Locke's “property” with “the pursuit of happiness”).

*Do you hear the people sing
Lost in the valley of the night?
It is the music of a people
Who are climbing to the light.
For the wretched of the earth
There is a flame that never dies.
Even the darkest night will end
And the sun will rise.
They will live again in freedom
In the garden of the Lord.
They will walk behind the plough-share,
They will put away the sword.
The chain will be broken
And all men will have their reward.
Will you join in our crusade?
Who will be strong and stand with me?
Somewhere beyond the barricade
Is there a world you long to see?
Do you hear the people sing?
Say, do you hear the distant drums?
It is the future that they bring
When tomorrow comes!*

The Christian moral—wait, pray, and all will be well—comes through in the final song. And the presence of that moral in the three generations of the telling, at the adolescence, decadence, and twilight of modernity, suggests a continuity that is both obvious and inadmissible.

I don't know how the tale was received by its original audience, but by the third telling, the love that holds up the contradictions in the narrative structure of *Les Misérables* is not the cupidic escapism of its young paramours, but the love of God that provides transcendental weight to the promise of redemption, overwhelming the failed, forgotten revolution's promises of transcendence.

soldiers. Faith can be the release for their madness, a belief in human evil as the non-heretical expression of a manichean nihilism, and they never need to see the inside of an asylum.

The simultaneity of a Christian modality of power with the modality of scientific social control is also evident in the affective allegiance that can only exist for the subjects of a totalitarian state. Even in this age of scientific rationalism, people can experience a transformative rapture when they surrender themselves to the absolute power of a bureaucratic institution.

In the abstract this hypothesis, or any other that could ascribe such passion to a bureaucracy, seems doubtful. But imagine what it was like for the arrestees of the Greenscare, locked up in the dungeons of the State, their entire future in the hands of the FBI. When they broke and agreed to become snitches, did they feel the warm rush of clemency, like the kiss of the papal ring? Giving themselves over to the advances of the long-shunned State, did they suddenly find themselves in the presence of God, as Winston Smith finally found Big Brother?

With the invention of the golem, spiritual matters should have been put to rest. The living world has been utterly destroyed, ground to dust, and our new bodies—our new selves—are made from that dust, constructed in arrangements that suit the needs of power and set to play in a Garden of Eden that is really just one big factory. How could cyborgs dream? Yet dream we do, and become depressed, and sometimes go off the deep end and paint the canvass of our misery with a red more real than acrylic tones can simulate (guns will be blamed, though fortunately in the last few years the disarmed nations have increasingly belied this allegation with enthusiastic uses of knives and automobiles).

I know very little about the old Buddhist states, but I can imagine that if they had grown to install a world system metaphysically organized atop the opposite pole in a similar mind/matter dichotomy, with a capitalism that measured accumulations of peace and duty rather than trade and production,

Church hadn't given them a ready made set of fantasies and bugaboos to fixate on.

I thought I would like the second truck driver more, because I learned early on that he had been a political prisoner. During the first hours of our shared drive, we spoke about the dictatorship, the current government, and the struggle by indigenous people in the region. Then the sun set, he turned off the radio, looked over at me, and asked if I believed in God. The following hours were Hell, as he aggressively tried to convince me that people were evil, and that quinoa was God's way of letting the natives know about Jesus, since the Bible didn't arrive until much later.

When he stopped to help a stranded driver replace a spare tire, I told him, "See, you're a good person!"

"I am not good!" he shrieked, tears forming in his eyes.

A slow learner, I finally decided it was a mistake to try to have a reasonable conversation with him. I will never know what happened to that truck driver in prison, why he hated himself, and to what extent the corruption of his socialist former comrades affected him, but it seemed clear that Christianity mediated it for him. Love of God as hatred of self and hatred of society, but also as an opportunity to do good in a safe, non-projectual way that requires no emotional risk, since the end is already written. Without that, I doubt he would have been able to function as a productive member of society.

Who can doubt that Christianity today is both innovative and on the cutting edge of social control, when they consider the great currency that Christianity has among the mad and insane? While the pills that are meant to regulate the emotional unreliability of the golem remain imperfect, the opiate of religion succeeds in redeeming millions of depressives and psychotics, casualties of capitalism who would otherwise turn to a destabilizing lunacy, as socially useful subjects. After all, good Christians may play out their paranoid persecution fantasies while faithfully serving as snitches, taxpayers, workers, and

We can argue, and with good reason, that during the Enlightenment science replaced Christianity as the religion of the State. We should not, however, forget Christianity's paradoxical persistence. It is a key force in nationalist movements from Ukraine to Venezuela, and an important tool for turning exploited populations against revolution, winning obedience to state authorities, extending capitalist property relations around the world. In South America and Africa in particular, Christian missionaries serve in many ways as advance scouts for logging and mining companies. And Christianity's close cousin, Islam, is effectively building states throughout Africa and Asia in places where European colonialism failed to do so.

Anarchists in this century do not talk as much about religion as an animating force for the apparatuses of control, and if we do, we tend to understand it as a force in the lives of people who have not progressed as far in their civilizational development, whether the backwater under the microscope is South Carolina or Kenya.

We might speak of two distinct figures that represent the exploited during the Christian and then the scientific phases of capitalist accumulation; the zombie who is enchanted and set to work and the golem who is constructed by its master, made of broken material, simple dust. Christianity simply robs people's souls to turn them into workers, confounding its slaves or holding them captive to metaphysical blackmail, while scientific power gives the masters an architectural control over the environment and reproduction of their subjects, not merely enslaving them but creating them out of whole cloth.

But this progression of distinct phases owes too much to the fundamental eschatology that Christianity and Western science share. In practice, the two modalities of power operate simultaneously. In a platonic world where body and spirit have been alienated, in a Christian world where the body has been shamed and the spirit captivated, in a capitalist world where the body has been enslaved and the spirit has been banished,

and in a scientific world where the body has been mechanized and the spirit disproved, the apparatuses of control lack an *animus*.

They (by which I suppose I mean the conduits of apparatuses that exist to evaluate other apparatuses) can measure the power that flows between the conduits and captives of a given apparatus, binding and differentiating them. But they are also aware of the limits of a captive's identification with their apparatus, a certain melancholy among conduits that acts like friction, decreasing their conductivity and even halting production. And they have seen cases of a grim nihilism that arises from time to time, causing captives to act like barbarians and handle their apparatus with brute violence and against its design, or one that spreads more invisibly to conduit and captive alike, causing them to blur and desert their roles.

Even in a well designed apparatus, the flow of power is not enough to motivate the conduits or bind the captives to their role. The threat of punishment is also a necessary element, but too honest to be left in the open for long without delivering diminishing returns and augmenting risks. The people need to be animated through an affective allegiance with an entity that cannot disappoint them by changing the terms of the contract, as any institution of power will eventually do when it capitalizes on whatever trust has been deposited in it. That entity is their own longing, the first glimpse of transcendence, the very substance the State has always worked to control or destroy.

If in its first millennium the Church aimed to keep the spirit out of the commoners' grasp, effectively creating a less spiritual world by enclosing it in Latin scripture and in the Holy See and stamping out one of the most frequent heresies—that the Holy Ghost spoke to everyone who listened—now it is one of several institutions whose purpose is to divert the miserable and the wretched from a nihilistic confrontation with a dead, scientific society by dangling in front of them a new spirituality, controlled as the old one was but not so tightly, for the

new permissible spirit is accessible, on sale, and adaptable to consumer demand.

While traveling recently in South America, I got to see this aggressive marketing firsthand. The evangelists are at the forefront, but is it overly paranoid to assume that one pope was recalled and another was elected to jumpstart a new Catholic evangelism in South America? From one country to the next, billboards announced mega-revivals by visiting evangelists from the US, each eager to expand their fief. And the growth of evangelism goes hand in hand with popular support for snitching, mining, policing, the eradication of indigenous cultures, and development in general. I also came face to face with a revived Christianity's effectiveness at dealing with potentially destabilizing mental illness and subversive cynicism, when I got to know two truck drivers. The first was batshit crazy, and the second was a jaded ex-revolutionary who had been imprisoned during the dictatorship and evidently was not impressed by what the socialists had accomplished in power (a disenchantment that for some people leads to radicalization, but that has driven entire, forgotten generations into the arms of God).

The first driver told about a girl in Brazil who was dead for a week and then got resuscitated. While dead, St. Peter took her to visit heaven and hell so she could tell everyone about it. In hell she came across the Pope, hung upside down for being a Catholic, and Celia Cruz for her lascivious lyrics. She also spied Michael Jackson.

“For molesting children?” I asked.
“For dancing backwards, contrary to the spirit of God,” the driver told me with a straight face. He went on to explain that the King of Pop was surrounded by moonwalking demons, tormenting him to eternity for his linear perverseness. Like I said, batshit crazy, the kind of person who would undermine any rational discourse of social control, if the