

Hugo, Hegel, and Architecture

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Abstract

This essay aims to contribute comparative points of contact between two influential figures of nineteenth century aesthetic reflection; namely, Victor Hugo's artful considerations on architecture in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* and G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical appraisal of the artform in his *Lectures on Fine Art*. Although their individual views on architecture are widely recognized, there is scant comparative commentary on these two thinkers, which seems odd because of the relative convergence of their historically situated observations. Owing to this shortage, I note that, while certainly not identical, Hugo and Hegel share an aesthetic family resemblance in how they hold similar ideas on architecture's symbolic function, cognitive content, and, ultimately, how the artform's ability to remain a standing paragon of meaning was razed by successive modes of cultural communication. Consequently, the essay works to show some congruent aesthetic affinities between these two great figures, but which appears to be overlooked in the literature.

Keywords: Architecture, End of Art, Hegel, Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*

Hugo and *Notre-Dame de Paris: The Work Hangs Interrupted*

Published on 16 March, 1831, and more commonly known to readers outside of France as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Hugo blended fictive and reflective voices to write in, and of, *Notre-Dame de Paris*:

No doubt she's still a sublime and majestic edifice, the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. But however much of her beauty she may have retained with age, it's hard to avoid groaning, it's hard to avoid growing angry at the countless degradations and mutilations that have been inflicted on this venerable monument by time and humanity, without any respect for either Charlemagne (who laid the first stone) or Philippe Auguste (who laid the last) (Hugo 2004b, 53).

On 15 April, 2019, groans turned to cries as all the world watched the 850-year-old Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris burn to ruin, which seared in our minds the indelible image of its roof and spire in a towering geyser of flames.¹ Draped by a darkening twilight, the nightmarish catastrophe appeared as if the infernal waves of *Phlegethon*, as could be imagined in the mythological mindsets of the ancient Greeks,² still profluent in Virgil's moat of rolling fire and Dante's retributive river of boiling blood,³ and from which Hugo himself drew as the incendiary metaphor on whose ashen shores washed up the as yet to be baptized foundling Quasimodo (Hugo 2004a, 143), ensured that Our Lady of Paris's story will need further retelling over time.

Hugo's telling of *Notre-Dame de Paris* was itself a transitional narrative that imagined a sixteenth century tragic romance from a nineteenth century political perspective, and it not only skyrocketed his career, but its widespread popularity also fulfilled the author's ulterior motive to propel fervent demand for the renovation of the then withering cathedral. Although Hugo had already appealed for Notre-Dame's restoration six years earlier in his 1825 remonstrative pamphlet *Guerre aux démolisseurs!* (War on the Demolishers!), « *Quelquefois on sauve une admirable église en écrivant dessus* » (Sometimes you save an admirable church by writing about it),⁴ he continued to use his novelistic skills to amplify the intersecting lines of aesthetic and political obligations, thus offering a kind of architectural apologetics which gave action to his convictions.

Hugo's 1831 belief in *Notre-Dame de Paris* over the power of art to ameliorate the rupture between the present and the past, thereby presenting a connecting chronology of French struggle, unity, progress, and purpose remained a guiding thread in his work, as we see confirmed in the 1862 epigrammatic Preface to *Les Misérables* wherein he adopted an encompassing, far-seeing historical viewpoint to reassert his confidence over the utility of art and the agency of artists to effect social transformation.⁵ Hugo, perhaps the most extolled novelist France ever produced, writes with the fervor of a religious revivalist who viewed the great cathedral not only as a revered House of God to restore solemn adjuration in the multitudes but, even more so, as an accretive reflection of French history: "Notre-Dame de Paris isn't what could be called a complete, definite, classifiable monument....Every side, every stone of the venerable monument is a page not only of our country's history, but also of the history of science and art" (Hugo 2004b, 63).

The surfaces and partitions of Notre-Dame, its many blocks and subdivisions, are taken by Hugo as carefully curated *précis* of human progress, each one communicating a brief hypothesis, an experiment, a conclusion, or perhaps evoking a judgment of taste. Accordingly, the multifaceted building of the famous cathedral displays an amalgam of activity which Hugo believes can bridge the gap between "the history of science and art," or what C.P. Snow called the "two cultures,"⁶ by builders and spectators perceiving, as described by George Steiner, how architecture can construct a relation in which "Archimedes joins Michelangelo"⁷ in polymathic union: "While Daedalus, who is force, measured, and Orpheus, who is intelligence, sang, the pillar which is a letter, the arcade which is a syllable, the pyramid which is a word, simultaneously set in motion both by a law of geometry and a law of poetry, formed groups" (Hugo 2004a, 190).

For Hugo, the story of human progress, from brutish nature toward civil society, is a rich, multilayered *roman d'apprentissage* (or *Bildungsroman*) always working through the growing pains of increasing experiential stages: "The social instinct succeeds the nomadic instinct. The camp gives place to the city, the tent to the palace, the ark to the temple....The human intellect is always on the march, or, if you prefer, in movement, and languages with it."⁸ Architecture communicates the growing complexity of human experience as a coming-of-age story disclosed not only in ideas and words, but also in the assemblage of deeds; moreover, the fragmented, ongoing construction of great monuments like Notre-Dame captures the continuity of Hugo's proleptic optimism in how it entails that the parade of ideas, words, and deeds is constantly forging ahead: "Progress is the mode of man. The general life of the human race is called Progress; the collective advance of the human race is called Progress. Progress marches on" (Hugo 2013, 1232).

At their best, great monuments, like great societies, serve as visible symbols of our progressive history to give us a fuller socio-cultural reading of the past to better

understand the stories we tell about ourselves in the present. As Hugo told them, with architecture as foreground, these stories are anything but straightforward by calling our attention to how the commingling of science and art produces an ever-emerging historical hybrid, an artifact whose distinctive contributions supervene on a constitutive whole that is always more than the sum of its features:

So Romanesque abbey, philosophical church, Gothic art, Saxon art, heavy round pillars reminiscent of Gregory VII, hermetic symbolism of the kind that made Nicolas Flamel a forerunner of Luther, papal unity, schism, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, are all fused and combined and amalgamated in Notre-Dame. This central, seminal church is a sort of chimera among the old churches of Paris: it has the head of one, the limbs of a second, the rump of a third—bits and pieces of all of them (Hugo 2004b, 63).

Hugo's extraordinary passage aims to convey the transition from Romanesque to Gothic architecture as a magnificent *mélange*, whose collected traits are equally retained and nullified in the grand synthesis called Notre-Dame. It also speaks to the power of art and science to collect and communicate knowledge and understanding of specific historical stages of human activity.

Grand architecture does not stand independent of its builders and spectators, who are both children of their times, and thus articulate systems of belief, *visions du monde* or worldviews, in how it codifies narratives of human history in which no one voice can claim final authority:

Indeed, many a massive tome and often the universal history of mankind might be written from these successive weldings of different styles at different levels of a single monument. The man, the individual and the artist are erased from these great piles, which bear no author's name; they are the summary and summation of human intelligence. Time is the architect, the nation the builder (Hugo 2004a, 129).

The *visions du monde* expressed by monuments are agglomerations of human community; they join together, rather than isolate. Hugo sees architecture as showing discrete packets of time collected into a visual artform that conveys prevailing ideas, atmospheres, and feelings. It is an interpretation that found a resonant echo in Martin Heidegger's association of architecture with *World*.⁹ For Heidegger, the notion of *World* serves as a *frame* of reference for a community's experience, and can be interpreted as a nexus of relationships and organizing framework that reveals historically situated being. Just as with Hugo's exhibition of the French Catholic cathedral as a structure that can bind (*reliigare*) communal living, Heidegger uses the example of the Greek temple, which he views as an object that "sets up" or structures the values, beliefs and worldviews of a given culture to itself, "The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world.... The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves."¹⁰

As *World*, the temple opens up a first look to how *Dasein*, Heidegger's term of art for the unique existential state of human self-consciousness, relates to itself and its needs as historically situated being. Karsten Harries puts it as follows, "So understood, architecture, as opposed to mere building, has an essential public function: its task is to help gather scattered individuals into a genuine community by presenting the powers that preside over its life."¹¹ Thus, in the case of the Greek temple, Heidegger argues that the structure conveyed to the ancient Greeks their own particular onto-semantics, that is, what it *is-means* to be an ancient Greek.

Similarly, to appreciate Hugo's metaphor for recognizing the accumulative deposits of French history in Notre-Dame's "standing there," requires a kind of onto-semantics revealed by the ability to see above and beyond the proximal altitude and ambit of one's eyes: "When you know how to look, you can discover the spirit of an age and the physiognomy of a king even in a door-knocker" (Hugo 2004a, 149). Thus, in order to read the prevailing *Zeitgeist*,¹² one must be able to see from an elevated standpoint that can discern the "successive weldings" of the many *Geister* summed up in an age.

However, this is no small task. Because historical human activity is both interspersed and blended in paroxysmal fits of construction, Hugo relates that epochal shifts are never clean and neat. The lines of demarcation that would subtend the opposing sides of one age from another must be drawn light and thin rather than dark and thick, and the study of transitions weaves a guiding hermeneutic much like an Ariadne's thread which, instead of leading out of a vertiginous maze, reminds us that our work in the labyrinth of time is always unfinished:

Each wave of time lays down its alluvium, each race deposits its own stratum on the monument, each individual contributes his stone. Thus do the beavers, and the bees; and thus does man. The great symbol of architecture, Babel, is a beehive. Great buildings, like great mountains, are the work of centuries. Often architecture is transformed while they are still under construction: *pendent opera interrupta*, they proceed quickly in keeping with the transformation. The new architecture takes the monument as it finds it, is incrustated on it, assimilates it to itself, develops it as it wants and, if possible, finishes it (Hugo 2004s, 129).

Notre-Dame, like the novel itself, is an encyclopedic work, incorporating a vast collection of ideas that, while attempting to explain the world, will always find itself inadequate to the task of capturing its growing complexity, thus requiring periodic updates and revisions.¹³ The phrase "*pendent opera interrupta*" or "the work hangs interrupted" appears in Book 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and speaks to this ongoing project; specifically, when Queen Dido, possessed by her increasingly beguiled and blinding passion for Aeneas, neglects due attention to Carthage's fortifications, leaving towers and walls half-built.¹⁴ For Hugo, the phrase speaks to the fundamentally incomplete nature of human society, which, though always struggling to overcome impediments to progress, cannot afford to forsake its obligation to build on its legacies. *Ignis aurum probat*, and it will also presently test our capacity and determination to contribute our "own stratum" in the renewal and reinvention of Notre-Dame.

Fortunately, the transformation of the majestic cathedral is underway. Aline Magnien, director of the Historical Monuments Research Laboratory (LRMH), the organization charged with conserving all of France's monuments, claims with optimism that, "Notre Dame will be restored! Its artwork, stone, and stained glass will be cleaned; it will be more luminous and beautiful than before... Notre Dame will come out of this experience enriched... And so will we."¹⁵ *Petit à petit l'oiseau fait son nid* (little by little, the bird builds its nest). Notre-Dame's radiant beauty will shine again because it was, and is, more than a standing colossus of old stones and picturesque glass. Hugo's admiration of the monument has, on my reading, always reflected the Goethean commission rendered so eloquently by the historian Jaroslav Pelikan, "What you now have as heritage, now take as task, for thus you will make it your own."¹⁶ Although it was recently besieged by a harrowing Covid-19 interruption, the task to rebuild and preserve Notre-Dame is newly taken and guided in the early twenty-first century by the enduring spirit of French and worldwide human resilience with French President Emmanuel Macron projecting a reopening in 2024 to coincide with the celebration of Paris hosting the Summer Olympics.¹⁷

Hugo and Hegel

As we have seen, for Hugo Notre-Dame was more than a towering *mise-en-scene* in which to situate his story of the doomed Esmeralda and her sympathetic bellringer. It is a monument that stands before us as a mirror of its architects, builders, and caretakers, with all of its “fused and combined and amalgamated” historical elements consolidated for sublime philosophical reflection and promotion of sensible practical maxims. With this dual power in mind, in *Les Misérables*’ many narrative digressions Hugo writes exuberantly about the power of philosophy to turn theory into practice, “Socrates should enter into Adam and produce Marcus Aurelius—in other words, bring forth from the man of enjoyment the man of wisdom—and change Eden into the Lyceum” (Hugo 2013, 516). The metamorphosis from Eden into the Lyceum depicts man’s departure from nature to spirit, from impulse to thought, and from mechanism to freedom. Sensuous amusements might well befit non-contemplative dispositions, but human self-consciousness pursues a higher pleasure fueled by the capacity of philosophical thinking to contemplate and then *actualize* “the ideal.”

This activity, whose results might come to nothing, is still experienced as a joyous attempt to reveal how elements which seem materially dispersed can still be cognized as a totality. Moreover, Hugo considers that “Philosophy is the microscope of thought; everything wants to escape it, but nothing can. Turning your back on it is futile. What side of yourself do you display when you turn your back? The shameful side” (Hugo 2004b, 397). Within Hugo’s lifetime, various philosophers did not turn their backs on attempts to unify disparate forces of human experience. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who died two weeks before Hugo turned two, applied the regulative use of transcendental ideas as heuristic guides beyond experience to formulate standards of historical phenomena in their totality,¹⁸ as well as positing the possibility of unified aesthetic judgment in his notion of *sensus communis*.¹⁹ However, the nineteenth century philosopher who is perhaps most famous for attempting an understanding of ourselves and our world as a unified whole is G.W.F. Hegel.

At first blush, Hegel and Hugo would seem like strange bedfellows which might explain the scant number, if not a lacuna, of comparative commentary.²⁰ On the one hand, we might have the greatest dialectician among philosophical system builders, but maybe the “ugliest” prose stylist in the German language;²¹ on the other hand, perhaps we have the most belletristic of modern French novelists, but also, as noted by Graham Robb, a writer whose “idiom...was a model of the world of opposites he had grown up in, characterized, notoriously, by its heavy use of antitheses.”²² Antitheses, tensions, polarities, the beautiful and the ugly, the bestial and the spiritual, the holding together of opposites were all constitutive, *poietic* elements not only of art but also of society. Hence, it would appear that chance has a taste for forging unexpected, yet suggestive, connections between historical contemporaries who imprinted the stamp of their belief in the elevated products of human self-consciousness and keen observations of antisyzygous relationships on their monumental works. We note, for example, that Hegel (1770-1831) died when Hugo was twenty-nine, near the end of the same year that saw the novelistic birth of *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

However, more importantly, Hugo shared with Hegel the sentiment that architectural monuments disclose crucial steps toward an understanding of ourselves and our world through a dialectical birth of cultural formation. Hugo’s keen observation of the formative dynamics behind a culture’s architecture, and his acknowledgment that monuments collect

the residual deposits of a communal language, comports with Hegel's identification of the same artworks as formative products (*bildenden*), and more fully as the results of a process of "formative education" (*Bildung*) (Hegel 1977, 16).²³ Hugo took seriously the idea that architecture possesses a kind of *readability*. In the sixteenth century, Galileo famously introduced the metaphor that the book of nature is read through the language of mathematics.²⁴ Hugo considered that before this point, the legibility of humanity was written most clearly within the old stones of monuments. Before books there were buildings, so the elucidation of humanity begins with architecture:²⁵

In fact, from the origin of things up to and including the fifteenth century of the Christian era, *architecture was the great book of mankind*, man's chief form of expression in the various stages of his development, either as force or as intelligence (Hugo 2004a, 189: my italics).

For Galileo, the universe was an enormous book; for Hugo, humanity was an enormous edifice of spatio-symbolic associations etched in buildings that served as reflective texts. Architecture, and indeed the plastic arts in general, presages prosaic modes of communication that write and speak to us but not by actually writing or speaking. Instead of offering literal communication, the language of architecture, far more than merely weaving *narratives* of symbols, words, sentences, and stories, worked to form visible *paradigms* of figurative meaning. In this sense, Hugo relates how he viewed architecture as offering a combination of descriptive accounts (narratives) and explanatory models (paradigms) of discursive activities by which the primary means of cultural communication was conveyed through a legible system inscribed in stone. Thus historical works of architecture represent eloquent legacies of art and history in which the sum of their figurative parts, their covers, spines, bindings, and pages are unified in a meaningful idea of a whole text.

Before Hugo, Hegel also understood architecture as straddling the illuminating grounds of art (*Kunst*) and history (*Geschichte*) by standing against us as discursive objects (*Gegenstanden*) of past cultural experience for our reflective contemplation. Architecture reveals edifying narratives whereby common bonds and normative modes of human transaction were formed, which is exemplified in Hegel's rendition of cultural homogeneity before the great scattering from the Tower of Babel (Hegel 1975b, 638). Although Hegel does not share Hugo's assessment of architecture as the chief form of fifteenth century cultural expression, along with Hugo, he also perceives it as possessing a certain kind of legibility, in fact, as the first artform (*Kunstform*) to inscribe the story of humanity (Hegel 1975a, 83-84).

For Hegel, the deciphering of this symbolic form of art is performed by a dialectical hermeneutic which begins to tell a story about the need of Spirit (*Geist*), i.e., of rational, self-conscious, self-determining humanity that gradually develops in history by gathering greater knowledge of its essential freedom, to come together in community. Initially, as the first of the arts,²⁶ architecture's formation is a mix of function and harmonious rules of geometrical "regularity and symmetry;" namely, the gathering of nature's resources to safeguard Spirit.

Individuals and communities seek to rise above the precariousness of natural life by gathering within the shielding integument of cultural enclosures. Thus, for both Hegel and Hugo, the legibility of architecture discloses the needs of human communities. This perceptive reading reveals both the goal and the task for Spirit. The goal is revealed insofar as a work of architecture gives shape to the external environment of Spirit. As

primitive representations of art, Hegel argues that buildings signify culture (*Bildung*), but only in its outer or external form, which bespeaks only to Spirit's inchoate needs. However, in its final stages of development, architecture, specifically temples and churches adorned with higher arts (e.g., sculpture, painting, and music), will gesture toward the immaterial and spiritual, which suggests the inherent freedom of Spirit to ultimately transcend any encasement in inorganic form.

In this respect, human engagement with architectural forms is experienced not only with an understanding of their protective and unifying social utility, but also, if received by spectators capable of performing a certain kind of hermeneutic excavation, for aesthetic and philosophical profit. As an example, with regard to his artful addition of formerly missing passages in an updated volume of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Hugo imagines his ideal readers as philosophically interested. Although art can be experienced and enjoyed in various ways, for Hugo, as for Hegel, artifacts are never truly separated from human understanding, but are always standing open for "willing" interpreters who can "complete" the artwork by raising to consciousness a deeper, hidden stratum of meaning: "Each tradition was sealed beneath a monument" (Hugo 2004a, 189).

As an example of unearthing the meaning concealed beneath appearances, Hegel observes how the Egyptian Pyramids express two-aspects, one is external, the other is internal.

Here Hegel utilizes an archeological hermeneutic to disclose a kind of hidden presence lying underneath the magnificent appearance of Pyramids; namely, a necropolis of tombal associations that can help us grasp the whole meaning of an artifact, thus bringing to light what he terms the Unconscious Symbolic (*Die unbewusste Symbolik*).²⁷ However, the work of having to call to presence what is hidden or secret is a major drawback in architecture's aesthetic form, e.g., by the Pyramids concealing their real purpose as one-sided monuments of the pharaohal afterlife, it is stuck at a stage of aesthetic development that is too alien, uncanny, and impoverished to convey to Spirit its more immediate content of self-understanding.

Hegel argues that because architecture, at any stage of development, cannot ever shed its utility as a structure for some purpose other than its own, it is incapable of aesthetically reflecting the self-sufficient Idea, i.e., the perfect harmony between matter and Spirit. As a result, architecture is judged as inadequate to the task of bringing Spirit before itself. Although it usefully reflects mind, it does so only symbolically. For Hegel, the stamping of symbolic meaning is not without value but is only a first stage of shaping the exterior world to reflect inner Spirit, however inadequate to the task. Moreover, consonant with Hugo's view that monuments express *visions du monde*, Hegel notes how some structures disclose worldviews that outlast the times of their productions. Architecture has always held value for its extant expression of the needs and values of historical beings, if merely symbolically. Similarly, Hugo also relates the commensurate development of architecture and mind as a beginning stage in which mind inscribed symbols to read itself: "Architecture thus evolved along with the human mind; it became a giant with a thousand heads and a thousand arms, and fixed all this vacillating symbolism in a form at once palpable, visible and eternal" (Hugo 2004a, 190). Like Hegel, Hugo never abandoned the notion that architecture is an expressive means of conveying cognitive content and cultural value. However, both thinkers also came to the same conclusion that this mode of meaningful conveyance has historically run its course.

The Pastness of Ar[t]chitecture

With regard to the conveyance of cognitive content, specifically, human self-conscious reflection on itself, both Hegel and Hugo propose theses over the so-called deaths of art and architecture, in which contents of Mind are handed off to more modern modes of cultural communication. Hegel's thesis is more complex than Hugo's and requires some technical explication. At the heart of Hegel's moribund assessment is the view that art can be studied as a philosophical science which is capable of revealing truth (*Wahrheit*). In this sense, philosophy and science are inextricable. Philosophy is a science insofar as its purview is conceptual thought (what Hegel calls *the Concept* or *der Begriff*). Hence artworks lend themselves to scientific study, but only as objects (*Gegenstände*) that exemplify Concepts (*Begriffe*) for Spirit's reflection into itself. Artistic truth (*künstlerische Wahrheit*) arises out of the concomitant mediation between an object and its constituent Concept, and if an artwork exhibits truth, it does so by revealing to Spirit the Concept in its presentation as a sensuous object.

The triune interrelationship between *Gegenstände*, *Begriffe*, and *künstlerische Wahrheit* cannot be overemphasized in a study of Hegel's aesthetic theory. For the unity of Hegel's artistic trinity explains not only the reason Hegel thinks that there can be a systematic inquiry of truth in "the wide realm of the beautiful," but also why definite aesthetic truth is had at the expense of "the beauty of Nature" (Hegel 1975a, 1) which, being driven by external forces, provides reason with criteria that are too indefinite, too arbitrary, and too vague, to comprise the proper subject matter for a science or *Wissenschaft* of art. Artistic truth necessarily reflects Spirit and is not found in the one-sided domain of nature, which by itself is wholly characterized by chance and transience.

Thus, scientific discussions of art cannot be made under the aegis of accidental, arbitrary, and "bad, transitory world" (Hegel 1975a, 11), whose substantial element is grounded in external and contingent forces. Rather, scientific discussions of art are able to reveal truth only under the *Gestell* of *Geist*, that is, under the rational frame of the philosophy of Spirit. For Hegel, only Mind is capable of grasping truth by recognizing the necessary mediation between *Gegenstände* and their corresponding *Begriffe*. Therefore, since a *Wissenschaft* of art cannot ensue from studying the accidental and contingent, its destitute and Mind-forsaken "sensuous element" precludes the scientific discussion of artistic truth. By Hegel's lights, the truth that art expresses can only be shone by objects that embody conceptual thought, and whose categorical truth is capable of being apprehended by self-conscious subjectivity, which by reflecting on the mediation between object and concept recognizes itself.

The 'three in one' framework of *Gegenstände*, *Begriffe*, and *künstlerische Wahrheit* discloses the fundamental logical structure of a given artistic, indeed historical, period, and this triad is exactly what Hegel takes architecture, in any of its developmental stages, to lack. Architecture, comprised of stone, clay, and metals, is not the proper medium to reflect Spirit.

At most, architecture hints toward, but does not embody, the Concept of Spirit. Consequently, we come to Hegel's famous conclusion that not only architecture, but also artworks in general, no longer serve as torchbearers of cultural value:

[I]t is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone, a satisfaction that, at least on the part of religion, was most intimately linked with art....Consequently the conditions of our present time are not favourable to art....In all these respects art, considered in its highest

vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place (Hegel 1975a, 10-11).

The time when artworks had the power to convey substantive ideas has long since passed the torch to philosophy (Hegel 1975a, 13). Not only is the art of the past incapable of revealing to Spirit its inner truth, but so too with contemporary works of art:

Thus the '*after*' of art consists in the fact that there dwells in the spirit the need to satisfy itself solely in its own inner self as the true form for truth to take....This is the case in our own time. We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit (Hegel 1975a, 103).

In the development of Spirit, ar[t]chitecture served its purpose, it helped to point the way to self-conscious awareness of self-determining freedom, but it was left behind by higher cultural forms like religion and, ultimately, philosophy. Spirit created art, but ultimately replaced its pride of place in society by outgrowing its representation in materially available media.

Similarly, though much less technically, Hugo articulated a similar shift in aesthetic and cultural influence in the fifth chapter of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, titled "This Will Kill That" (*Ceci tuera cela*). Using the villainous perspective of Claude Frolo, the archdeacon of Notre-Dame, architecture's ability to convey meaning is mournfully anticipated:

The archdeacon contemplated the gigantic cathedral for a time in silence, then he sighed and stretched out his right hand towards the printed book lying open on his table and his left hand towards Notre-Dame, and looked sadly from the book to the church: 'Alas,' he said, 'this will kill that.' The book will kill the building....It meant that one art was going to dethrone another art: it meant: printing will kill architecture (Hugo 2004a, 187-89).

This (the capacity of the printing press to disseminate ideas) will end that (the power of massive stone monuments to capture and direct the collective mindset). On my reading, instead of announcing a 'death of' or 'end of art thesis,' both Hegel and Hugo actually posit a *senescence of art thesis* without really proclaiming the finality of its demise. Hegel, as we have seen, hoped "that art will always rise higher and come to perfection" (Hegel 1975a, 103), which does not so much certify art's death rather than reposition its weakened cultural value. For his part, Hugo view of architecture likewise refrains from pronouncing the former while also announcing the latter:

This is not to say that architecture will not now and again have a fine monument, an isolated masterpiece...The great accident of an architect of genius might occur in the twentieth century just like that of a Dante in the thirteenth. But architecture will no longer be the social, the collective, the dominant art. The great poem, the great edifice, the great creation of mankind will no longer be built, it will be printed. And in the future, should architecture accidentally revive, it will no longer be master (Hugo 2004a, 200).

Thus, for both Hegel and Hugo, the move is one of displacement rather than of effacement. With Hugo, this shift reflects a modern gesture toward a growing literacy that can understand itself through books as used to be done through architecture. Moreover, this new etching of humanity into the bible of paper is, as Hugo viewed Notre-Dame, a "prodigious edifice [that] remains perpetually unfinished" (Hugo 2004a, 201). However, for all of their aesthetic resemblances, it is exactly here that a comparison of similarities between Hugo and Hegel must come to an end. For Hegel, the end of ar(t)chitecture is

indelibly inscribed in stone and in paper, while for Hugo, it should be noted, the rise of the book is not without its own drawbacks, sounding the alarm for a potential second Tower of Babel (Hugo 2004a, 202). In heralding this caveat, the artful novelist uses his own inscription within the bible of paper to hopefully usher in a consequent age in which architecture can again take center space in the town square of human discursive practices not through a recycling of the past, but rather, because the “ceaseless” and “indefatigable” work hangs interrupted (*pendent opera interrupta*), there is still hope that a perpetually engaged process of architectural progress can capture and approximate toward the goal of humanity as I am sure he would see taking shape in the current efforts to revivify his beloved Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris.

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Notes

- ¹ An electrical malfunction is suspected to have started the destructive flames.
- ² *Pyriphlegethon*, the flaming river of Tartarus. See, Plato, *Phaedo* in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper, trans. GMA Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 96.
- ³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Frederick Ahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 146; Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 149.
- ⁴ Later published in Victor Hugo, “Guerre aux démolisseurs,” *Revue des deux mondes* 5 (1832), 607-22.
- ⁵ Victor Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 12, argues that Hugo “believed that writers had a mission, that they were the educators and leaders of the recently awakened *peuple* (people), that they were to regenerate society, prepare the future, and write, as it were, on paper and in life, the immanent epic of humanity’s progress.”
- ⁶ C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- ⁷ TheNexusInstitute. “George Steiner on How to Reform the Humanities. Universitas? Part III.” Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, February 22, 2013. Web. Accessed: December 2, 2019.
- ⁸ Victor Hugo, “Preface to *Cromwell*” in *Romanticism*, ed. John B. Halsted (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 102-03, 116.
- ⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York & San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977), 170.
- ¹⁰ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 169.
- ¹¹ Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 279.
- ¹² In his Introduction to *Notre-Dame de Paris* (2004a), John Sturrock relates how Hugo was “preoccupied with what in recent years in France has come to be known as the ‘history of mentalities’, or the state of mind of a population at a given historical period” (xiii-xiv).
- ¹³ Brombert, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, 84, identifies a “dynamic of undoing that Hugo reads into the processes of nature and creation,” which dwells on the notions of “ceaseless reconstruction” (118).
- ¹⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 79.

- ¹⁵ Christa Lesté-Lasserre, "Scientists are Leading Notre Dame's Restoration," *Science Magazine*, March 12, 2020. doi:10.1126/science.abb6744.
- ¹⁶ "Was Du ererbt von Deinem Vätern hast, Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part 1*, trans. Peter Salm (New York: Bantam, 1985), 54; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Faust the Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 28
- ¹⁷ Austin Horn, "Work is Started on Removing Damaged Scaffolding Around Notre Dame Cathedral," *NPR.org*, June 8, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872372221/work-started-on-removing-damaged-scaffolding-around-notre-dame-cathedral>.
- ¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), KrV A771/B779. Kant appears in Hugo's long poem *L'Ane* or *The Ass* in which a seemingly immortal, worldly-wise donkey encounters "My old Kant" (*mon vieux Kant*) and begins to recite his beast song (*mon chant de bête brute*) to, *inter alia*, denounce Kant's transcendental idealism, which can speak about scientific knowledge but remains quiet on the experiential matter of knowing God. See Victor Hugo, *L'Ane*, ed. Calmann Lévy (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1880).
- ¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:293.
- ²⁰ Jean Mallion, *Victor Hugo et l'art architectural* (Paris: PUF, 1962), briefly mentions certain affinities in only four, scattered pages, the most substantial of which relates how Hugo joined Hegel in thinking "le contenu de l'art es constitue par l'idée, représentée sous un forme concrète et sensible [the content of art is constituted by the idea, represented in a concrete and sensitive form]" (558).
- ²¹ Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.
- ²² Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 170.
- ²³ Hegel employs the term *Bildung* to express rich connotations of culture, formation, and education, all of which are interrelated. *Bildung* is as much a *process* of cultural development as it is a *product* of cultural values.
- ²⁴ Galileo, "The Assayer" in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, trans. Stillman Drake (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 237-38.
- ²⁵ Indra Kagis McEwen argues that "all of Western thinking was first grounded in architecture," and reminds us that Plato's Socrates claimed his family's lineage back to Daedalus the inimitable architect, and that his father, Sophroniskos, was himself a skillful stone mason. See Indra Kagis McEwen, *Socrates' Ancestor: An Essay on Architectural Beginnings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 130, 2, respectively. For the Plato, see Alcibiades (121a) and Euthyphro (11b-c) in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
- ²⁶ In increasing dialectical order: architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry.
- ²⁷ Cf. F.W.J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World: Book One, The Past*, trans. Joseph P. Lawrence (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 68.

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