

The Convent: A Place of Refuge in *Les Misérables* and *Histoire de ma vie*

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, amidst the rise of anti-Catholicism in the Western world, narratives served as a persuasive medium to influence the reading public. Anti-clerical sentiment was conveyed in various forms of text, often depicting the Catholic convent as a place of sinister confinement. This thesis offers an alternative representation of the French nineteenth-century convent. Considering the prevailing social, economic, and political environment in France, along with the conception of social space, I argue that the convent represents a place of sanctuary and opportunity for some women and girls. Further, in view of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, I examine the representation of the convent as a place for rebirth. Likewise, in analyzing George Sand's autobiography *Histoire de ma vie*, I explore the representation of the convent as a haven for reviving creativity. Thus, by close reading and critical examination of these literary representations, I contend that the nineteenth-century convent can provide a place of refuge.

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## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Following the French Revolution of 1789, two opposing ideologies gathered momentum in France: monasticism and anti-clericalism. Beginning in 1815, enlistment of nuns in religious congregations doubled every fifteen years until the end of the century. During this period, anti-clericalism remained a potent political and social force. As with any institution of power, narratives served as a persuasive medium to influence the reading public. Anti-clerical sentiment was conveyed in various forms of text, often depicting the Catholic convent as a place of sinister confinement. These diverse depictions of the convent as a nefarious enclosure seem to contradict the growth and appeal of female religious orders during the epoch.

This thesis offers an alternative representation of the French nineteenth-century convent. Partially owing to prevailing social, economic, and political structures that limited women's opportunities, convents attracted women from middle- or upper-class families who desired to serve in the public domains of healthcare and education. Considering this environment in France, along with the conception of social space, I argue that the convent represents a place of sanctuary and opportunity for some women and girls. Further, in view of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, I examine the representation of the convent as a place for rebirth. Likewise, in analyzing George Sand's autobiography *Histoire de ma vie*, I explore the representation of the convent as a haven for reviving creativity. Thus, by close reading and critical examination of these literary representations, I contend that the nineteenth-century convent can provide a place of refuge.

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One should never underestimate the potential consequences of enthusiastic instruction coupled with engaging learning activities. Five years ago, an undergraduate professor, Dr. Benoît Leclercq, introduced our French class to an intriguing, yet often neglected, portion of text in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. In this text, Hugo transports two of his main characters into the social space of the French nineteenth-century convent. A creative storyboard activity followed by multiple literary analyses of the text instantly triggered my curiosity in this social space, a space at that time relatively unknown to me, particularly given my Protestant background and viewpoint. I would like to express immense gratitude to Benoît for kindling my interest in this space. His teaching methodology, that consistently demonstrated competence and encouragement, greatly influenced my future academic pursuits.

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## Introduction

The convents have been  
judged and condemned.  
Excessive inquisitiveness,  
bigotry and hypocrisy,  
monastic nonsense and  
claustal prudishness reign  
there.  
— Louis-Sébastien Mercier  
(qtd. in Rapley 26)

Following the French Revolution of 1789, two opposing ideologies gathered momentum in France: monasticism and anti-clericalism. Beginning in 1815, enlistment of *religieuses* (nuns and sisters)<sup>1</sup> doubled every fifteen years,<sup>2</sup> and as historian Claude Langlois observes: “aussi ne souffriront-elles que peu de l’anticléricalisme qui précède et surtout suit la Révolution de 1830” (“Le Catholicisme” 36). Indeed, during the nineteenth century, over 400 religious congregations were either created or restructured, without interruption (39). In the aftermath of the Revolution, the Catholic Church strived to remain the dominant religion, to reestablish its political and social power and to renew its presence in daily life, particularly in the home and the classroom.

During this period, anti-clericalism remained a potent political and social force. As with any institution of power, narratives served as a persuasive medium to influence the reading public. Anti-clerical sentiment was conveyed in various forms of text, often depicting the Catholic convent as a place of sinister confinement. As an illustration, Alfred Villeneuve’s narrative fiction, *Les Mystères du cloître* (1846), recounts the tale of a tyrannical mother superior who incarcerates a nun in a gloomy cell behind the ramparts of the Abbaye-aux-Dames (Verhoeven “Sad Tale” 109). Novels illustrating dramatic rescues of women imprisoned behind a convent’s impassable walls were also prevalent in France.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in July 1869 the

international readership of newspapers,<sup>4</sup> including the *Journal des Débats*, learned of an appalling incident of confinement at a convent. According to these press reports, a nun named Barbara Ubryk was liberated from a dingy cell in Cracow where she had spent twenty-one years (104). Yet, the extent to which the Ubryk accounts were understood as simultaneously extreme and exemplary by the public became apparent when an editorial in *Journal des Débats*, dated August 10, 1869, insisted upon state supervision of convents: “nous demandons seulement qu’ils soient soumis au droit commun, et que la surveillance de l’autorité puisse s’exercer à toute heure dans ces mystérieuses retraites” (*Journal*). In this particular case, one person’s story became an exemplary narrative on which generalized claims were made (Verhoeven “Sad Tale” 104).

In *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Susan Griffin examines fictional texts that narratively make their arguments against Catholicism, exploring what Jonathan Loesberg calls the “ideology of genre”—“a possible congruence between the narrative structures of ideology and the generic and narrative structures of literature” (2). In her close analysis of over a dozen examples of “the genre of the escaped nun’s tale” (18), Griffin suggests that these narratives function as “instances—rather than reflections—of the meaning-making that is ideology” (2) and often consist of “little more than a doctrine wrapped in a fictional cover” (2). Moreover, these narratives reflect anxieties about the relative independence of women who choose celibacy over marriage within the patriarchal hierarchies of the State and the Church. Whether considered authentic or fictitious, sensational anti-Catholic literature expressed a persistent message: “that the convent was a physical and spiritual prison in which young women were stripped not only of their freedom, but of their feminine identity” (Verhoeven “Sad Tale” 104). Beyond enlightenment, the narratives advanced ideological perceptions of the convent as a formidable space—an ideology which permeated into “sermons, legal testimony, parliamentary



proceedings and newspaper reports” (Griffin 2). These diverse depictions of the convent as a nefarious enclosure seem to contradict the growth and appeal of female religious orders during the epoch. In this thesis, considering the conception of social space, I offer an alternative representation of the French nineteenth-century convent. Through the lens of social space, I analyze representations of the nineteenth-century convent in two selected works: Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862) and George Sand’s *Histoire de ma vie* (1854). In each work—written by two of France’s most prominent and best-selling authors<sup>5</sup>—both authors chose to not depict the social space of the convent as a place of sinister confinement. Rather, they represent the convent as an edifying, sacred place of refuge.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the convent as a space for sanctuary and opportunity for many women and girls, albeit to those who willingly pursued the monastic life and had access to sufficient financial resources. Assuredly, there existed some circumstances in which family members or community leaders forced orphaned, illegitimate, wayward, or unwanted females to be involuntarily sequestered at a convent. In these cases, the convent likely was a place of sinister confinement, serving essentially as a prison. During the nineteenth century, a father could use Article 375 of the French Civil Code to compel a civil tribunal to “correct” and detain his daughter for a limited duration, without question of justification (Schnapper 325). Under the *correction paternelle*, a daughter under sixteen could be confined for up to one month, renewable in the case of a repeat offence; a daughter over sixteen could be confined for up to six months, with the right of renewal (325). In Paris, the *Couvent de la Madeleine* accepted girls under the *correction paternelle* for a daily compensation (327). This convent also welcomed orphaned girls and young delinquents, placing them in a regimented program of “moral education” which consisted mostly of laborious manual labor such as sewing

or ironing (327). Likewise, the numerous religious congregations of *Bon-Pasteur*<sup>6</sup> located across France accepted young girls and women placed there by a civil court, by public assistance, or by paternal authority under the *correction paternelle* (Taron 127). A typical day for a *pensionnaire* at *Bon-Pasteur* consisted of sewing garments to be later sold in the public market; work was performed mostly in silence under the nuns' authority (130-31). Instruction and professional education were minimal. For example, a State inspection that took place in 1888 at Bon-Pasteur de Cholet revealed that girls aged from seven to ten worked on average three hours a day; older girls worked on average nine hours a day (132). Moreover, as various contemporary critics noted, the religious congregations did not compensate the *pensionnaires* for their laborious efforts; the convents claimed that these funds were necessary for operating their establishments (131, 135). While these aspects of the space of the convent existed during the nineteenth century, I have limited my discussion to convents with a *pensionnat* (boarding school) where aristocratic and bourgeois families sent their daughters for an education. The representation of the convent in both Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and George Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* depicts a similar space.<sup>7</sup>

The availability of financial resources also played a significant role in the types of opportunities available to women within the convent. Even in this enclosed space, a social stratification, mirroring the division outside the walls, persisted. Inside the walls, two class distinctions existed: the *sœur choriste* (choir nun), usually from a middle- or upper-class family, managed responsibilities and held the right to vote within the convent, whereas the *sœur converse* (lay sister), typically from a poor family and less educated, performed domestic tasks within the convent. According to Langlois's extensive research on nineteenth-century female religious congregations, a majority of the *religieuses* served as *sœurs choristes*. For example,

statistics collected from all departments in France, dated February 3, 1825, indicate that less than 12% of the nuns served as *sœurs converses* (Langlois, “Effectifs” 51-2). In both *Les Misérables* and *Histoire de ma vie*, the characters that I analyze in this thesis interact primarily with *sœurs choristes* during their time within the convent.

Admittance as a *sœur choriste* usually depended on payment of a dowry which would provide financial support for the religious community. Upon entry to a convent, a dowry contract was normally executed, ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 francs (Gibson 116). Payment was deferred until the eve of solemn profession when both the postulant and the members of the religious community agreed upon her commitment; in the meantime, her family agreed to pay an annual pension (Rapley 164). The decision to enter a convent was based upon various factors such as religious commitment, philanthropical concerns, or professional aspirations; yet, the necessity of a dowry existed even for *une épouse du Christ*. Nonetheless, as Porter notes: “a nun’s dowry to support her residence in a convent cost far less than the dowry and ceremony for an upper-class marriage” (76). Moreover, the absence of a dowry did not mean exclusion from the convent; rather, the lack of money typically determined rank and divided “servants” from “brides” (Rapley 191). In general, the monastic life for a female from the lower class was limited to arduous manual labor as a *sœur converse*.

Religion could function as an empowering belief system influencing the course of many *religieuses*. Likewise, the convent could serve as a sacred space for religious connection—individually and collectively. Thomas Barrie discusses the mediating roles performed by sacred space and phenomenology in architecture:

Sacred architecture was traditionally believed to have the capacity to connect one with a deeper understanding of oneself, one’s relationship to others, and to one’s place in the

cosmos. However, it was through the practice of participation with sacred architecture that its often-nuanced meanings were more substantively accessed. (81)

Abounding with symbolic meanings, the nineteenth-century convent served as a devotional space where women could discover and fulfill a sense of purpose beyond the traditional feminine norms. For some, the convent provided, through its seemingly impenetrable walls and doors, a haven from the outside world and a new familial home. In view of philosopher Gaston Bachelard's concept of *l'espace heureux*, introduced in *La Poétique de l'espace*, chapter one of this thesis will explore how the convent represented for many choir nuns "le rêve le plus profound où [elle] veut arbriter son bonheur" (77), an enclosed refuge "solide et profondément enracinée" (77).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, influenced by post-revolutionary sentiment, increasing industrialization, and the severance of the workplace from the place of residence, the ideology of a separate private and public sphere emerged (Accampo 99, 105). Essentially, the public sphere consisted of the public space of work, politics, and social activity, whereas the private sphere consisted of the home and family. A prevalent discourse developed that served to establish distinct gender roles through the relegation of women to the private sphere (Rogers, *Salon* 84). Considering this relegation of women to domesticity, Freedman and Hellerstein observe: "The doctrine of separate spheres, as elaborated in literature, law, medicine, and religion, prescribed that women's personal lives center around home, husband, and children" (118), thus relegating women to tasks such as housework, childcare, food preparation, and cultivation of produce. In other words, for bourgeois women, work outside of the domestic sphere was not acknowledged, encouraged, or celebrated. As Accampo notes, "Increasingly over the course of the nineteenth century, motherhood became the only 'legitimate' occupation for

women” (121). Throughout all classes of society, most prevalent with the bourgeoisie, the image of the “angel in the house” predominated; the ideal woman allegedly provided the “stable refuge” of home from the turmoil of modern life (Freedman and Hellerstein 118). This doctrine created a “dichotomy between woman as homemaker and woman as worker” (2).

Partially owing to these prevailing social, economic, and political structures that limited women’s opportunities, convents attracted women from middle- or upper-class families who desired to venture beyond the domestic sphere to serve in the public domains of healthcare and education. Consequently, *religieuses* were often considered by anti-clericals as a threat to gendered conceptions of appropriate female behavior (Rogers, “Retrograde” 147). In its institutional form, the Church represented an unwelcome symbol of patriarchy; however, paradoxically, through the space of the convent, it offered “unique opportunities for women to pursue professional goals and acquire substantial power in a period when they were severely restricted in their career choices” (Kselman, “Langlois’s Vision” 71). In view of philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s concept of *la production de l’espace*, chapter one of this thesis will further explore how the space of the convent was a social and political product. Despite the circumstances in which this space was governed by a male-dominated Church, I argue that the convent offered singular opportunities for many women, in particular for those from the middle or upper class.

The following chapters analyze an alternative representation of the nineteenth-century convent in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862) and George Sand’s *Histoire de ma vie* (1854). In chapter two, I will examine rebirths of two central characters in Hugo’s novel, Jean Valjean and Cosette, along with resulting consequences from each character’s rebirth. Hunted by the chief inspector of police and his patrol through the dark alleys of Paris, Valjean covertly scales a

high wall and evades capture by entering the fictional convent named *le Petit-Picpus*. Chapter two of this thesis explores Valjean's unintentional invasion of a space in a patriarchal society inhabited by nuns and the resulting reactions of the community in that space. During his five-year asylum there, Valjean's initial impression of the convent's space dramatically changes. In extreme contrast with the convents represented in escaped nun narratives, *le Petit-Picpus* serves as a place of refuge for Valjean where he progressively completes his spiritual transformation from a person who was gradually returning to a hatred of mankind to one who entirely devotes his life to the love and protection of others. His primary purpose in life results from his promised care for Cosette—an orphaned, illegitimate, and abused nine-year old girl. During his escape into the convent, Valjean physically hoists and carries Cosette into this fortress of protection. At *le Petit-Picpus*, Cosette also undergoes a rebirth, enabling her to discard the misfortunes of her childhood. Within the narrative of Valjean's and Cosette's profound renewals at the convent, Hugo employs various narrative devices: free indirect discourse, an authoritative presence of an omniscient narrator, and an extended and seemingly disconnected digression regarding the contradictions within the space of the convent. Through these techniques, the reader can reconstruct and formulate interpretations of the narrative elements. This chapter analyzes how Hugo uses these narrative devices to express his ideological concerns regarding the relevance and status of the nineteenth-century convent.

While the second chapter of this thesis analyzes Hugo's representation of a fictional convent, chapter three examines Sand's autobiographical portrayal of the *Couvent des Dames anglaises*, situated at that time in Paris. In this chapter, I will explore how the convent represents a space for reviving creativity. In her autobiographical work *Histoire de ma vie*, Sand devotes a significant portion to her experience at the convent—nearly two hundred pages. After the death

of her father in early childhood, Sand lives with her grandmother. The continuous conflict between her grandmother and mother exasperates Sand, who often plays the role of mediator, following the footsteps of her father—albeit as a child. Even though Sand’s grandmother, Marie-Aurore Dupin (Madame Dupin), ridicules the Church, preferring the Enlightenment philosophy of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, she sends Sand to the *Couvent des Dames anglaises*. At the convent, Madame Dupin intends for Sand to receive an education, to gain discipline, and to acquire etiquette considered necessary to secure a profitable marriage and prominent social position. After a year of rebellion, Sand undergoes a mystical experience that eventually leads to her considerably desired tranquility. During her convent years, Sand revels in an “adoption maternelle spéciale” (6: 203) by Mother Marie Alicia, who plays a significant role in Sand’s adolescent development. Throughout her autobiographical account, Sand repeatedly claims that the memory of her years at the convent are “les plus tranquilles, les plus heureuses de [sa] vie” (6: 213-14). In view of Bachelard’s concept of “topophilia,” the experience of happiness in a space, I analyze how the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* was for Sand a “paradis sur la terre” (7: 82) where creativity is nurtured.

Thus, by considering the prevailing space of the nineteenth-century convent as a space for sanctuary and opportunity, and by critical examination of literary representations by Hugo and Sand, I contend that the nineteenth-century convent can provide a place of refuge.

## Chapter 1

### A Space for Sanctuary and Opportunity

Les congrégations féminines  
ont incontestablement leur  
place dans l’histoire de  
l’Église. Elles appartiennent à  
l’Histoire, plus largement.  
— Claude Langlois  
("Le Catholicism" 52)

In the beginning of the long nineteenth century—a period of unprecedented political, social, and cultural upheaval in France between the years 1789 and 1914—the fate of the French convent was uncertain. For over a millennium, Catholicism had been established as the official religion of France. During the *Ancien Régime* of the pre-Revolutionary monarchy, the clergy comprised the first estate of the Estates System, wielding immense wealth and power. Although the clergy constituted about 0.4 percent of the population, they owned roughly ten percent of France’s surface area from which they received a significant income supplemented by tithes and fees (Accampo 96). Yet, as early as the mid-eighteenth century, bolstered by intense criticisms from prominent *philosophes* and writers such as Voltaire and Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Enlightenment ideology led to a declining influence of Catholicism among the educated elite. As the nineteenth century began, resentment of the extensive authority of religious institutions intensified and anti-clericalism spread to all classes of society. Monasticism was considered incompatible with the new social order, and as Jo Ann McNamara notes, “the helpless young nun, coerced by her parents, whose tyranny was reinforced by a brutal monarchy and a pitiless church, became a favorite symbol of oppression” (555) for the anti-clericals. Moreover, hostile critics questioned the practicality of monks and nuns who spent continuous days in prayer and contemplation, secluded in their cloisters separated from society.



Thus, the French Revolution (1789-1792) was a major turning point in the history of Catholicism in France, challenging the idea that Church and State were inseparable. One of the goals of dechristianization during the French Revolution was to remove the Church's influence on public policy and to force religious observance into the privacy of the home. With France on the verge of bankruptcy, the Constituent Assembly abolished the Church tithe in November 1789 and nationalized Church property to be sold as a means for reducing State debt. According to anti-clericals, the Church's ideology kept the people in ignorance as a way of maintaining its power. To eliminate all that was deemed "useless and irrational" according to Enlightenment principles of utility, the Assembly decreed in February 1790 that perpetual vows taken in religious orders would no longer be allowed. Commissioners, directed by the Assembly, began an inquest of every religious community, offering the members "freedom" from the cloister with a small life pension, while at the same time making an inventory of their property that would be confiscated in the future (Rapley 26). Likewise, with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, promulgated in July 1790, the French government gained jurisdiction over the Church.

As a final blow in October 1792, the Assembly abolished all religious orders, thus evicting monks and nuns from their cloisters. Harsh measures were taken against those suspected of being "enemies of the people." At least 794 priests and 126 nuns were sent to the guillotine by the Revolutionary Tribunal (Gibson 52). Tensions mounted and destruction escalated, as Thomas Kselman describes in "State and Religion":

By 1793 militant supporters of the Revolution were convinced that they were confronted with a powerful and conspiratorial opposition of devout Catholics manipulated by a fanatical clergy. Faced with this, and with the additional threat of foreign invasion, an all-out assault was mounted against Christianity . . .

[Dechristianization] was characterized by the closing of churches, the removal of bells and sacred vessels, the abdication of the clergy, and iconoclastic attacks on statues, shrines, churches and cemeteries. (70)

During the Reign of Terror (1793-94), supporters of the Revolutionary Tribunal diverted convents to prisons and churches to warehouses. These transformations can be called a *détournement*, as formulated by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, in which an existing social space is diverted and reappropriated for a different purpose (167). In the case of French convents, the supporters of the Revolutionary Tribunal briefly occupied these circumscribed spaces of the dominant social order, using the terrain or elements for a transformed purpose (Ross 50). As a result, a different meaning for the space replaced the original.

For over a decade, religious communities were dismantled and *religieuses* dispersed throughout France and Europe. In his text, Lefebvre questions what would remain of the Church if there were no churches:

What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies? What would remain of a religious ideology—the Judeo-Christian one, say—if it were not based on places and their names: church, confessional, altar, sanctuary, tabernacle? . . . More generally speaking, what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and in its production, and by thus taking on body therein. (44)

Yet, despite these catastrophic events and *détournements*, Catholicism survived and remained the religion of the vast majority of French citizens throughout the nineteenth century. The response of nuns to the commissioners' inquiries of 1790 demonstrated their resolve to continue religious life at a convent: "whatever the reason (and various explanations have been offered), the

overwhelming majority did not wish to leave” (Rapley 27). At least a third of the pre-Revolutionary religious communities endured clandestinely (McNamara 567). In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the Church continued its pursuit for influence on public policy, participating in political debates that would continue throughout the nineteenth century.

The Napoleonic Concordat of 1801 recognized the religion’s majority status, but Catholicism was not made the official religion of France. Added the next year to the Concordat, the Organic Articles brought the Church under the authority of the State and attempted to pacify tensions caused by religious conflict. As a result, the Church received modest compensation for its lost property and was allowed to reclaim, reoccupy, and restore many of its buildings. With Napoleon Bonaparte hostile to the reestablishment of religious orders in France, the fate of the convent remained uncertain. However, given the ability of the religious congregations to efficiently respond to society’s needs in the two fundamental areas of education and healthcare, *religieuses* were recognized as a potential benefit to the State. Commencing in 1815 under the Restoration, membership in feminine religious orders expanded for most of the century, slightly declining in the 1880s with the Third Republic’s policy of secularization. In his extensive research on the proliferation of religious congregations in the nineteenth century, Langlois observes:

[En 1880] la France dispose de plus de religieuses et surtout de congréganistes qu’elle n’en a jamais eu : plus de 130 000 personnes en France [...]. Jamais le pays ne comptera autant de religieuses et de congréganistes par habitant : sept pour mille femmes, presque 1 % ! (“Le Catholicisme” 39)

Instead of becoming an inevitable casualty, women’s religious orders flourished for a majority of the nineteenth century.

## A Space for Sanctuary

How was the restoration and upsurge of religious orders possible when dechristianization and anti-clericalism were simultaneously rising? Recently, historians have highlighted the gendered dimension of religious revival in the nineteenth century: while men increasingly turned away from the Church during this time, women progressively turned toward it (Rogers, *Salon* 91). Marian piety, a devotion which emphasized “purity, innocence, modesty, and virginity as valuable feminine characteristics” (Curtis 93), was reestablished during the century and the sanctuary of the convent offered a space for its consecration. In this space, women actively chose to forsake all worldly possessions and personal desires, in an emerging capitalistic culture, and to instead seek a life that emulated Christ’s self-sacrifice, suffering, and humility. Following the footsteps of their matriarchs from the previous thousand years, women from all classes of society pursued a call to spiritual consecration of mind, body, and soul, and the convent provided a space for this call. As an illustration, Thérèse Martin (1873-97), who was raised in a devout Catholic petit bourgeois family of Normandy, lost her mother in early childhood. After recovering from an extended illness, partially attributed to extreme grief from her mother’s death, Thérèse experienced a conversion. Shortly thereafter, at the age of fifteen, she joined her two biological sisters at the Carmelite convent in Lisieux.<sup>8</sup> Once at the convent, she claimed an overwhelming sense of peace, joy, and purpose that sustained her, even during her years of painful suffering due to terminal illness (Hellerstein et al. 107-08).<sup>9</sup>

For women who were unwilling or unable to marry, the convent offered an alternative space. In the nineteenth century, marriage rates in France were high, approximately 85 to 88 percent (Freedman and Hellerstein 121). The expectation for economic security, social status, and motherhood placed a significant pressure on women to marry. Unlike in the past, some

women exercised a personal freedom in the selection of a spouse; notably, “among the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, arranged marriages were becoming relics of the past” (Freedman and Hellerstein 121). However, some women perceived the debutante process, presentations of young women of marriageable age to high society, as boring, frivolous, and superficial *bazars matrimoniaux*, as expressed in an 1862 letter written by Marie Denis du Péage to another debutante:

—Et moi, je pars pour Paris, je cours au lieu du tumulte et des plaisirs du monde [...] La capitale m’est connue et plus que jamais j’apprends ce séjour qui remplit l’âme de je ne sais quel vide que forment toutes ces futilités mondaines. (qtd. in Arnold 27)

For those who did not wish to marry, the convent offered an alternative space to discover and fulfill a sense of purpose outside of the traditional feminine roles of marriage and biological motherhood. In the nineteenth century, an unmarried woman without family financial support, social status, or economic self-sufficiency faced monetary hardship and social marginality. For women who had little or no dowry, the convent provided physical and social security.

Likewise, many convents offered a refuge for orphans and indigent children “jetés dans le sein de la société sans soutiens, sans guides, comme un vaisseau lancé en mer sans gouvernail” (Arnold 178). A daily responsibility of some nuns consisted of nurturing infants; other *religieuses* instructed school-age children in basic educational and vocational skills, as discussed later in this chapter. Often, when a young girl entered a *pensionnat* after the death of her parents, she would transfer her status from *pensionnaire* to postulant upon reaching the minimal age and remain at the convent as a permanent place of home. Such was the hope of the religious community for the character Cosette in *Les Misérables*. The convent also provided a sanctuary

for widows and elderly women from the middle and upper classes who wished to seek asylum, to care for the sick, or to educate young women in the *pensionnat*.

The process to become a permanent member of a religious community was long and arduous. Initially, a novice served at least two years as a postulant. In the first year, she was introduced to the strict discipline of *les règlements de vie* (the monastic rules) and the basics of the convent's teaching vocation. In the second year, a postulant deepened her understanding and commitment to *les règlements de vie* and began her assigned tasks at the convent. Then, if accepted by a plurality of votes from the choir nuns, the postulant made a solemn profession and received her white veil (Rapley 177). The newly professed nun returned to the novitiate for a further four years (or more) of religious and vocational training (181). Finally, at the end of the novitiate, the choir nun took her perpetual vows and received the black veil.

When a nun made a lifetime commitment to the religious community, she took the solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These three binding pledges formed the fundamental pillars of the religious community of the convent.<sup>10</sup> The vow of poverty was not necessarily a denial of resources, as Rapley observes: "For them, poverty meant not physical neediness but a personal surrender of all rights of ownership" (131), thus not permitting any private possessions. The convent served as a space to equally share each person's resources and talents within the community. This lifestyle of extreme simplicity detached the nuns from the riches of this world. Poverty was not considered a detriment by the religious community, but instead a sanctification. Through the common bond of a solemn vow of poverty, the *religieuses* learned cooperatively how to live and to be satisfied only on essentials. Secondly, the vow of chastity rendered a *religieuse* incapable of marriage and sexual relations with another person, consecrating her instead as *une épouse du Christ*. For many *religieuses*, celibacy liberated time

and energy for divine service, creating “une liberté nouvelle pour les femmes qui, jusque-là, ne pouvaient avoir d’autre vocation que le mariage” (Arnold 150). Lastly, the vow of obedience required a nun to submit to all authority expressed in the rules of her religious order. At the onset, a postulant received a set of monastic rules. *Les règlements de vie* explicitly defined the physical architecture and components of the religious community, the minute details of its values and rituals, its regimented schedule, and the behaviors which were to be continuously observed.

The monastic rules also established organizational hierarchies and strict principals of authority, similar to a corporate structure. For example, in religious orders with *pensionnats*, a prioress (mother superior) presided within the convent and acted as the spokesperson with ecclesiastical and political authorities (Rogers, *Salon* 145). In the convent where George Sand was a *pensionnaire*, the mother superior received these types of guests in a private grilled parlor. The mother superior, usually elected by her peers for a specified term, appointed positions within the order. She was often aided by a governing council composed of an assistant, a treasurer, a novitiate mistress, and a counselor (145). Below the governing council, the professed nuns ranked highest in authority, followed by the novices and postulants, and lastly by the lay sisters.

Typically, *les règlements de vie* obliged the nuns to remain within the physical barrier of the convent’s walls. As the following chapters show, a convent normally consisted of the following assortment (and sometimes hodgepodge) of buildings that were constructed, renovated, or acquired by a religious community over hundreds of years: a church; a sacristy, used for the storage of sacred vessels; a parlor; rectangular cloisters, connected by covered passageways with colonnades opening onto courtyards; a library; a kitchen; a dining hall; a school for novices; a school for *pensionnaires*; cells for the nuns; and dormitories for *pensionnaires* (Arnold 52-54). The *chauffoir* (warming room) was often the only place in the

convent that was heated (52). For a nun, the cell provided a place for solitude, meditation, prayer, and sleep. *Les règlements de vie* meticulously detailed their spartan cell, down to its precise dimensions and its furnishings: a bed, often with a straw mattress and rough linens; a table; a water pitcher and basin for bathing; two chairs; and a crucifix (50-52). This standard of austerity aggravated health issues, in particular, the minimal heating throughout the convent, as detailed in chapter three.

Cloistered within a convent's walls, many women made an active choice to occupy this space and to spatially segregate themselves from the outside world:

Qu'elles soient contemplatives ou actives, que leurs fonctions d'enseignantes ou d'infirmières les appellent à l'extérieur ou les maintiennent dans leur couvent, qu'elles soient cloîtrées au sens strict ou non, les religieuses se veulent totalement séparées, spirituellement et matériellement, de ce qui fut leur vie antérieure.

Cette rupture totale, bien concrétisé par leur entrée en religion, et un genre de vie tout à fait nouveau, est l'image la plus fréquente et la plus spontanée qui vient à l'esprit quand on parle des couvents à cette époque. (Arnold 23)

The demarcation of physical boundaries distinguished the sacred from the profane (Barrie 80). In its origin, strict enclosure was perceived by the Church and some members of society as a means to ensure female sanctity and to protect women from potential temptation. From this viewpoint, "the cloister was a defense against ill repute and a haven of respectability for unmarried daughters" (Rapley 117). Considering this perspective, the immense burden of remaining chaste required walls high enough to close off any view, whether from within or from without, barred windows, and double-locked gates, with the keys securely held by the mother superior. Communication with persons outside, available only in the parlor, was conducted and supervised



through an iron grille, thus preventing any physical contact. Further, a black linen cloth covered the iron grille to avoid visibility on either side. Outsiders, including female non-members, rarely entered this space of sanctuary, with the exception of the bishop and female *pensionnaires*. On the rare occasion when a male entered the cloister—to attend the dying, to repair a building, to shutter an exterior window, or to provide food supplies—he was always accompanied by senior nuns (116). As an example, the character Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* only interfaces with the mother superior and always wears a bell tied around his knee in order to “alert” nearby nuns of his proximity. Both works analyzed in the following chapters depict the physical barriers and other confining aspects of the cloister.

This space of sanctuary consisted of more than physical boundaries. In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, social anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen propounds that boundaries, which are largely symbolic in character, encapsulate the identity of a community (12). A boundary may be physical, such as those delineated by a convent wall, a large body of water, or a mountain range. However, a boundary may also be symbolic, simultaneously forming a perimeter of meanings or rules to which members of the community ascribe (12). This set of rules often determines standards such as who may cross the boundary or what behaviors are acceptable within the boundary. Inside this perimeter, recognized symbols enable members of the community to formulate their own personal meanings, speak a common language, and distinguish themselves in a significant way from other communities. A code at once architectural, urbanistic, and political, constitutes a common language—a code which allows space not only to be ‘read’ but also to be constructed and produced by social forces (Lefebvre 7, 31). Thus, coupled with the visible, physical boundary of the wall, the rules of the convent formulated a symbolic margin. In other words, the religious beliefs, appropriate behaviors,

individual and communal rituals, and social interactions of the nuns, guided by *les règlements de vie*, played an essential role in defining the space of the convent.

Communal rituals formed an essential element of the convent's space. They served as "mediums of transition from one mode of being to another" (Barrie 82), and the sacred architecture of the convent served as a setting for these rituals. As an example, one distinctive rule of the religious order regulated the clothing—the religious habit—worn by novices and members. Wearing the religious habit exemplified an outward expression of simplicity and an inward indication of spiritual commitment. For the postulant, the ceremony for receiving the religious habit symbolized her marriage to Christ, with the white veil presented as a sign of the purity of her new life (Arnold 66). Whereas for the perpetual profession, the clothing ritual symbolized a passage from death to resurrection in Christ; symbolically, the novice died to the secular world and was reborn into a transformed life (66). Often the candidate to the religious order prostrated herself before the church altar while a funeral pall was draped over her body (66). Further, the black veil that she received during the ceremony signified charity and a *rempart* (wall of protection) against the world's seduction (66). Other elements of the religious habit offered various meanings: "le scapulaire signifie le joug de Dieu; la ceinture, la chasteté; le bandeau, l'obéissance" (68). All of these elements were intended to serve as a daily reminder of the promises given to the nun and the obligations declared by her. In chapter two, I will examine the reaction of the character Jean Valjean when first witnessing a communal ritual.

Behind the walls of the convent existed a world of *régularité* that was strictly governed by *les règlements de vie*, and precisely signaled by the convent's bell. According to the indicated hours in the monastic rules, each ringing of the convent's bell summoned the members of the community to the daily scheduled activity. A highly structured and disciplined environment was

enforced in an effort to instill purpose, to guard against idleness, and to avoid unsupervised activity. In general, a convent's schedule consisted of the following: seven hours of sleep; one hour of silent prayer; three and one-half hours of vocal offices (a mixture of prayers and readings to sing or recite); one hour of Mass; two hours for morning preparation and meals; five hours for work; two hours of recreation; and two and one-half hours for reading (45). For nuns who served in a profession, such as teaching or nursing, the rigors of the monastic rules and vocation were combined. Typically, eight to nine hours of their day were spent in their occupation, consequently decreasing time for sleep or recreation.

During the evening hours, speaking was forbidden, even in hushed tones. With the exception of recreation time, members of the community, including *pensionnaires*, were encouraged to speak with a quiet voice for the remainder of the day: "On peut dire qu'en général au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle la vie conventuelle est un silence qu'entrecoupent de rares moments de récréation et les exigences des fonctions assumées" (Arnold 39). More than an absence of speech, silence consisted of emptying the mind of vain thoughts and the heart of futile desires, hence filling both with the presence of the Holy Spirit (40-41).

Regimented schedules, peculiar rituals, uncompromising rules, restricted speech, extreme seclusion, and austere enclosure: many anti-clericals in the nineteenth century viewed a space containing these attributes as an embodiment of female imprisonment. Even if a discontented nun wished to leave the cloister and managed release from her vows, she would most likely face economic hardship and social marginality once outside the convent. Thus, a few chose to resign themselves to their situation, rather than embracing it. As Rapley justly notes: "The rarity of appeals by religious women for annulment of their vows may indicate the great majority's

contentment in religion, but it may equally reflect a practical reality—that there was no longer anywhere for them to go” (178).

Yet, the convent as a space for sanctuary is supported and affirmed by numerous written testimonials from the nuns themselves. For example, in her autobiographical memoir, Thérèse Martin notes her impressions upon entry at the Carmelite convent in Lisieux:

Quelques instants après, les portes de l’arche sainte se fermaient sur moi et là je recevais les embrassements des sœurs chéries qui m’avaient servie de mères et que j’allais désormais prendre pour modèles de mes actions... Enfin mes désirs étaient accomplis, mon âme ressentait une paix si douce et si profonde qu’il me serait impossible de l’exprimer et depuis sept ans et demi cette paix intime est restée mon partage, elle ne m’a pas abandonnée au milieu de plus grandes épreuves. (ch. 7)

Thérèse eagerly enters the convent’s enclosure through an archway. Behind her, the doors under the arch close, isolating her from the outside world and introducing her to a new dwelling space. More than a passage, the doors framed by the arch serve as a transitional object, as Lefebvre observes in *The Production of Space*:

Consider a door. Is it simply an aperture in the wall? No. It is framed (in the broadest sense of the term). [...] Transitional, symbolic and functional, the object ‘door’ serves to bring a space, the space of a ‘room’, say, or that of the street, to an end; and it heralds the reception to be expected in the neighbouring room, or in the house or interior that awaits. (209-10)

Thérèse’s serenity of life at the Carmelite convent derived from a sense of purpose and from the support of her biological and spiritual family. Historian of religious communities, Dominique Dinet suggests similar reasons for contentment: “stability, the support of a spiritual ‘family,’

[and] security” (qtd. in Rapley 118). Similar to numerous *religieuses*, Thérèse devoted the remainder of her life within the convent to the service of humanity, a calling to which she referred as *la vocation d’Amour Miséricordieux*.

For many nuns, the cloister provided a stable, secure, and intimate space for dwelling—their ideal familial home. For them, the space of the convent represented philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s concept of *l’espace heureux*, the inhabited space that one loves. In *La Poétique de l’espace*, Bachelard explores the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the home. He begins his study by investigating the phenomenology of the imagination, a study of the phenomenon of the poetic image when it emerges into our consciousness (Bachelard 2). According to Bachelard, the creation of this poetic image results from a synthesis of memory and imagination: memory constitutes the “théâtre du passé” (27) while imagination detaches from the past as well as from reality and faces the future (16). In his phenomenological analysis, he introduces the simple images of *l’espace heureux* or *l’espace louangé*—inhabited space with its protective and imagined values that may be defended against adverse forces (17). For Bachelard, the house represents a quintessential entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inhabited space (23).

For many *religieuses*, this space for sanctuary represented Bachelard’s concept of *l’espace heureux*. On the one hand, the cloister furnished the unique physical needs of the religious community. Strict enclosure and protection within the convent’s walls ensured spatial segregation of the nuns from the secular world. This vital, inhabited space was their “coin du monde” (24), “vraiment un cosmos” (24), “le non-moi qui protège le moi” (24). As represented by Bachelard’s *l’espace heureux*, the convent comprised “un corps d’images qui donnent à l’homme des raisons ou des illusions de stabilité” (34). On the other hand, the space of the

convent fulfilled the religious community's spiritual needs of individual and communal rituals. As previously discussed, the cloister consisted of more than a physical boundary or inert box; its inhabited space transcended geometrical space (58). As symbolized in the ritual of a perpetual profession, the convent represented a place of rebirth for the nun from a previous life to a transformed life. The nun's home of rebirth at the convent corresponded to how Bachelard conceived of the home of birth: "la vie commence bien, elle commence enfermée, protégée, toute tiède dans le giron de la maison" (26). According to Bachelard, the home of birth is physically inscribed in a person (32); it is the well-tempered matter of the material paradise, the environment in which the protective beings live (27). Like poetic images, memories of the home of birth move us at an unimaginable depth (25). In this intimate space of sanctuary, a nun could find refuge and commune with God.

### **A Space for Opportunity**

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre theorizes that space is produced through the mutual coexistence and cohesion among a triad: *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces* (33). The first of the triad, *spatial practice*, "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (33). The second of the triad consists of "conceptualized space," (38) "hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes" (33). The third of the triad embodies space as "directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols," (39) space as produced and modified over time, and hence the space of *connaissance* (33-34). According to Lefebvre, the elements of the triad should be interconnected so that the "subject," the individual member of a given social group, may move from one to another without confusion (40). Socially created space serves as a tool of thought

and of action; it is also a means of control, and hence of domination and power (26).

Accordingly, the space of the convent in the nineteenth century was partially motivated by cultural, political and historical phenomena.

In the aftermath of the Revolution of 1789, the Church strived to remain the dominant religion, to reestablish its political power, to renew its social presence in daily life, and more specifically, to reassert influence over future generations through dominance in education.

Amidst France's progressive urbanization and industrialization, the establishment of a universal system of education in a space away from home was deemed essential for France's economic and political progress. Education was the "preferred battlefield of the persistent and widespread conflict between Catholics and anti-clericals" (Grew and Harrigan 91). Both parties acknowledged education's ability to combat illiteracy and to teach skills useful for the workplace; however, they also recognized its power to impose political and social ideology. Acknowledging its importance, the State passed numerous educational laws throughout the century. These statutes served as essentially unfunded mandates since few regimes before the Third Republic (1870-1940) provided the necessary labor force, infrastructure, and financial resources for implementation, as historian Sarah Curtis indicates:

The Guizot Law of 1833 required every commune in France to maintain a [primary] school for boys, and the Falloux Law of 1850 extended that requirement for girls in communes with over eight hundred inhabitants (reduced to five hundred inhabitants in 1867). But beyond these mandates, the central government did little to furnish the administrative expertise or material resources to implement them. It was on the local level that money had to be found and teachers employed. (26)

In order to prevail in the educational campaign, it was mandatory to provide school facilities, a network of teachers, efficient administration, and a relevant curriculum—all at a minimal cost to local communes. Responding to this demand, as well as fulfilling its own religious mission, the Church sought to administer and staff schools throughout France, relying financially on the conjuncture of religious philanthropy and cost-effectiveness (7, 19). In the Church's view, the space of the convent, with its abundant resource of teaching nuns, efficiently supported the requirements of an educational system, especially in the neglected area of girls' schooling.

Influenced by Revolutionary ideas for universal education, Napoleon Bonaparte instituted centralized control of the public educational system through a decree that subsequently created *l'Université de France*. Notably, the decree prohibited the establishment of a school without *Université* approval, required a *brevet* (teaching certificate or degree) for teachers, and gave jurisdiction over the *baccalauréat* to the *Université*. As detailed in a quantitative analysis prepared by Grew and Harrigan, the annual compound growth rate of primary schools flourished early in the century (1829-1837) at a rate of five percent per year on average, and then gradually declined after 1843, remaining slower but steady thereafter (31).<sup>11</sup> During the Second Republic, most of the provisions of Napoleon's decree were annulled or altered by the Falloux Law of 1850. Provisions of the Falloux Law increased the role of the Church in education and encouraged the establishment of primary schools administered by teaching nuns. In particular, the law broadened the control of the clergy and notables over local primary schools through their membership in educational councils. Further, the law exempted teaching nuns from the requirement of obtaining the *brevet*. In order to minimize costs, municipal councils were given the option to assign their obligation to maintain public schools to religious orders, and many did so. Moreover, the law removed restrictions that had previously made it practically impossible for



the Church to open its own secondary schools. Thus, the Falloux Law enabled the increase of the proportion of teaching nuns to lay teachers: “Catholic schools, which had accounted for 29 percent of all elementary school enrollment in 1850, held 44 percent of the total in 1876” (Grew and Harrigan 96). Moreover, Catholic schools accounted for 80 percent of the enrollment growth in this time frame (96). Expansion particularly occurred where the population was growing, yet the number of schools was lacking. During this same time period, Catholic secondary schools increased by 121 percent (Harrigan 59). Throughout the nineteenth century, demand for teaching nuns far exceeded their supply. In reaction to these developments, anti-clericals frequently expressed a sense of threat.

Thus, between the Restoration (1814-1830) and the Third Republic (1870-1940), one of the most assured ways for a woman to enter the teaching profession was to join a religious congregation. The Church’s response to educational demands was extensive: three out of four nuns worked as teachers (Kselman, “State and Religion” 77). Further, the Church dominated girls’ education in the nineteenth century (77). A majority of *religieuses* who seized this vocational opportunity were previously *pensionnaires* at their convent. Thus, relationships, familiarity, and expectations between the teaching candidate and other members of the religious community were already firmly established prior to the novitiate period for the teaching candidate.

Prospective teaching nuns were trained by the novitiate mistress in the basic primary school curriculum of that epoch. During training, a novice was considered for a future teaching opportunity if she displayed sufficient aptitude in the curriculum, absolute submission to authority, and a firm commitment to the monastic rules. Current research of previously unexplored religious records, such as archives of teaching orders, diocesan archives, and Vatican

archives, has revealed numerous details on the pedagogical training and structures that were increasingly implemented in convents by the second half of the century. Some archives reveal “a community of teaching nuns who were neither as ‘ignorant’ nor as detached from the modern world as their critics claimed” (Rogers, “Le Catholicism” 88). Despite the fact that teaching nuns were not required by the State to obtain the *brevet*, many religious orders nonetheless required it. Some established professional guidelines and inspection procedures which included examination of the school facilities and teaching materials (Rogers, *Salon* 151). Until the 1870s, teaching nuns were usually judged poorer teachers than graduates from the *écoles normales primaires*, but better than independent lay teachers (Curtis 55). Few lay teachers, until the latter part of the century, had any formal training or support. One factor for this deficiency was the lack of access to pedagogical training; even by 1872, only nine *écoles normales primaires* existed to train women for the teaching profession (Harrigan 73). However, by 1882, the number increased to 41 and continued to grow until the end of the century (73). Historians such as Sarah Curtis and Rebecca Rogers argue that it was not until the State made a concerted effort to train large numbers of secular teachers that the convent schools appeared inadequate.

Primary schools were often attached to the convent; thus, novices could gain firsthand experience in training for the teaching profession. Yet, the attrition rate during the novitiate varied greatly amongst teaching orders. According to Langlois’s research, it ranged between 14 and 20 percent of prospective nuns (Rogers, *Salon* 142). Three main explanations for the failure to continue religious life within the teaching order were the novice’s health, lack of aptitude for teaching, and difficulties following the monastic rules.

In general, nineteenth-century French society deemed standards of discipline and order as essential in the public and private spheres. Following a strict schedule and regulated procedures

was considered as a necessary skill in an expanding industrial society. In spite of the intense debate for ideological control of the educational system, both the Church and anti-clericals considered it imperative that moral instruction, order, subordination, and authority be maintained within the classroom (Prost 8). Similar to the highly structured and regimented environment enforced by the monastic rules of the convent, a teaching nun enforced these disciplines in the classroom. As Gibson argues, in order to make ‘docile bodies’ and ‘obedient students,’ convents adopted the techniques of regulation of bodily activities and constant surveillance in the Foucauldian sense; namely, teaching nuns never let students leave their gaze (87). Thus, the regulation of physical and temporal space in existence within the convent could be used to impose this aspired law and order.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the French educational system remained segregated by class. Middle- and upper-class children attended preparatory schools leading to secondary education; lower-class children were restricted to primary schools, typically until the age of thirteen, and were not able to enter secondary education (Curtis 178). Tuition for secondary education varied from 600 to 1,000 francs per year, effectively barring the lower- and lower-middle classes (Rogers, *Salon* 51). As historian Antoine Prost notes, students were divided between two schools, *l'école des notables* and *l'école du peuple*:

L'institution scolaire reproduit la division de la société en classes antagonistes. Aux classes dirigeantes, la culture classique ou scientifique dont elles ont besoin et qu'elles peuvent payer ; pour le peuple, des rudiments suffisent, pourvu qu'ils soient imprégnés de moralité et inculquent l'obéissance. (10)

Courses taught at primary school usually included religious and moral instruction, reading, writing, French, arithmetic, and the metric system. Emerging gradually in the 1830s, industrial

enterprises in France required skills in textile, metals, silk, and clothing production. The Church discovered new ways to serve its industrial constituents by offering specialized courses, such as industry hygiene, sewing, embroidery, lace making, and porcelain painting. These vocational courses were occasionally added to the curriculum with the intent to train students for their anticipated future vocations; however, instruction was not meant to change a student's social or economic circumstance.

Secondary education was also segregated by gender. Boys could attend public or private schools which prepared them to take the *baccalauréat* for university admission; girls' secondary education was limited to private institutions without *baccalauréat* preparation. Until 1880, if a family wanted their daughter to receive a secondary education, a *pensionnat* was effectively the only choice. Legislation maintained the view that distinctive schools for girls were essential and "public attitudes toward having religious women teachers were undeniably favorable in the wake of the Revolution and the concomitant association of women with religion" (Rogers, *Salon* 50). Thus, most girls were educated in schools run by the Church; by 1863, religious orders controlled 73 percent of them (Gibson 123). The core curriculum taught by the teaching nuns primarily prepared girls for the relegated private sphere of motherhood and domesticity; it typically included studies in reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, the arts, and needlework.<sup>12</sup> All subjects in the curriculum had a moral or practical agenda, communicating the particular religious viewpoint of the Church. For example, in an arithmetic lesson, the domestic space of the home was used to formulate a mathematical word problem. After a typical eight-hour day of classroom instruction, the students retreated to their separated yet continuously monitored area of the convent. Typically, the monastic rules forbid *pensionnaires* access beyond

their designated space or communication with nuns not assigned to their care. Nonetheless, as described in chapter three, this internal segregation was not always maintained.

The space of the convent provided other opportunities for women to discover fulfillment in a profession. Similar to a corporate structure, a wide variety of managerial and administrative positions existed for the choir nuns. As an illustration, in order to serve as treasurer on the convent's governing council, competency in mathematics and bookkeeping were required. Other positions in the convent included overseeing the laundry room, managing the kitchen, supervising the lay sisters, handling the surveillance of students, instructing the teaching nuns, and supervising the infirmary (Rogers, "Retrograde" 159). The opportunity to provide healthcare to those who were afflicted—in a time when pain medications and effective treatments were severely limited—appealed to many *sœurs infirmières* (nursing sisters). Jointly, the opportunity to provide healthcare treatment to those who were marginalized by society inspired many nuns. Before the Third Republic, healthcare support was severely lacking in many departments in France; consequently, "le cléricisme social répond[ait] aussi à des urgences locales, populaires et spontanées que les notables et les contribuables [étaient] trop heureux d'escamoter aux moindres frais" (Léonard 888).

Centers for the elderly, called hospices, and infirmaries for the ill were often integrated within the walls of the convent. The convent, with its vast supply of dedicated nursing sisters, offered an economical and acceptable solution for local healthcare. Typically, *la sœur infirmière* rose early in the morning in order to accomplish the following daily routine: administer prescribed medications; coordinate with the hospital's pharmacist; change the patients' bed linens; distribute meals, helping those who were unable to feed themselves; assist the visiting doctor or surgeon; bathe the patients; and read devotions to the patients (Arnold 204-206). The

convent's infirmary often included a pharmacy, and some nuns were trained as apothecaries. The ability to develop or produce medications was a highly valued skill within the convent. Other valued skills included knowledge, cultivation, and harvesting of medicinal plants grown in the convent's gardens. Outside of the social space of the convent, these opportunities were rarely available to women.

## Conclusion

Challenging the perception of the cloister as a formidable space, many women and girls in the nineteenth century eagerly pursued monastic life; for them, the social space of the convent represented a space for sanctuary. As examined in the next chapter, Hugo explores the convent in *Les Misérables* as a space for sanctuary through some of his characters and his omniscient narrator. Other women chose the path of the *religieuse* for access to professional opportunities rarely available to them. Some *religieuses*, such as Sister Marie Alicia Spiring, introduced in George Sand's autobiography, mutually experienced the convent as a space for sanctuary and as a space for opportunity. Paradoxically, the enclosed space of the convent offered unparalleled professional opportunities for women who were in large part barred from participation in the public sphere by a patriarchal society. Historian Rebecca Rogers surmises:

Taking the veil was not seen as an act of independence or autonomy, but rather as an acceptable solution for women who might not marry. Female orders were under the spiritual authority of male clerics, who emphasized women's fundamental docility, weakness, and subservience. These characteristics, however, could be put to good use in teaching or in socially useful activities. As a result, young women were attracted to these

institutions, which offered opportunities to do good apparently without challenging the tenets of domestic discourse that associated women with the home. (*Salon* 137)

In the space of the convent, training for certain vocations in the fields of education and healthcare was made available to women. As the century progressed, these vocations were transformed into acknowledged professions, professions created by women “oddly stamped with the character of religious vocations” (McNamara 625). Due to this religious aspect, a difficulty existed in separating and acknowledging the professional dimension and contribution of nuns in these fields. Ironically, their achievements in the fields of education and healthcare “undoubtedly contributed to the tenacious idea that certain jobs were feminine” (Rogers, “Le Catholicisme” 84). During the latter part of the century, as training became more methodological and institutionalized, these occupations ultimately were upgraded to a recognized professional status outside of the convent. Nonetheless, the process was painfully slow. It was not until the Third Republic that the State established secular training colleges in each department for female primary school teachers, thus providing the necessary infrastructure and financial resources for implementation of a universal system of education outside the Church. Further, it was not until the Third Republic that the government established four secular nursing schools in Paris which offered professional training.<sup>13</sup>

## Chapter 2

### A Space for Rebirth in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

*Les Misérables* m'exaspèrent  
et il n'est pas permis d'en  
dire du mal : on a l'air d'un  
mouchard. ... Et les  
digressions ! Y en a-t-il ! Y  
en a-t-il !  
— Gustave Flaubert,  
Correspondance

In the spring of 1862, following an unparalleled marketing campaign in which the author was intimately involved, Victor Hugo's first volume of *Les Misérables* (*Fantine*) was released. Readers across cities, spanning from Saint Petersburg to London, flocked to bookstores in order to purchase the latest volume of his highly anticipated work. Hugo's characters, their sketches widely displayed on storefront windows, became household names even before release of the fifth and final volume (Robb 378). Conceived as *Les Misères* in 1845,<sup>14</sup> Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* (1862) poignantly depicts human suffering, social injustice, unconditional love, the hope for transformation, and the search for redemption.

Critical reactions from the literary community abounded. Edmond and Jules Goncourt admonished Hugo's feat as a "fortune gagnée à la sueur de la misère d'autrui" (Ozouf 40).<sup>15</sup> Publicly, literary colleagues such as Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert praised his work; privately, the same individuals, along with other writers, expressed their disapproval. Baudelaire, after having praised the first volumes, became exasperated with the incessant hype surrounding the book's publication (Moisan 81). The predominance of the Catholic Bishop Myriel in the first book of *Les Misérables* troubled George Sand and Jules Michelet (81).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Barbey



d'Aurevilly expressed contempt for “cette morale évangélico-niaise” (Ozouf 40), and Alphonse de Lamartine referred to Hugo’s novel as “l’épopée de la canaille” (Gasbarrone 8).

In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean, the novel’s protagonist, is condemned to five years in the galley for breaking a pane of glass and stealing a loaf of bread for his sister’s seven children. His four escape attempts from the galley extend his sentence to an additional fourteen years. This prolonged, senseless period of intense suffering in prison transforms his outlook from one of utter despair to one of bitterness towards all mankind. After his release in 1815, it seems that all society condemns Valjean except for the compassionate Bishop Myriel. During the night, as a guest of the bishop, Valjean steals his silver; however, Myriel enables Valjean’s release from his subsequent arrest by claiming that the silver was a gift and therefore not stolen. With his immediate pardon and his gift of the silver, Myriel informs Valjean that he has purchased his soul for God. Myriel, who will serve as a lifetime mentor, initiates a path of spiritual transformation for Valjean.

Valjean initially stumbles on his path by stealing a coin from a child, Petit-Gervais. This is Valjean’s second infraction of the law—a crime specified in Article 383 of the French Penal Code. Valjean keeps his promise to use the bishop’s silver to become an honest man, albeit by assuming a new identity of Monsieur Madeleine to avoid an arrest for stealing the coin. Through the bishop’s gift and Valjean’s ingenious invention, he gains significant wealth and eventually becomes mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer. In this village, Valjean invests in philanthropic causes, such as establishing primary schools, a refuge home for the poor, and a pharmacy. He also makes a solemn promise to Fantine, a former factory employee, to care for her daughter Cosette. While Valjean progressively undergoes his spiritual transformation at Montreuil-sur-Mer, one of his former prison guards, Javert, becomes the village’s police inspector. Javert suspects that

Madeleine is the former convict Valjean, the accused thief of the coin, so he revitalizes his investigation of the petty crime. Eventually, the identity of Madeleine is revealed through Valjean's confession. Before fleeing to Paris to escape a second imprisonment, Valjean rescues Cosette from the Thénardier family, her depraved temporary guardians. Pursued by Javert and his patrol through Paris, Valjean, while hoisting Cosette, covertly scales a high wall and evades capture. Nine years after his release from the galley, Valjean and Cosette both unintentionally penetrate the boundary of the convent *le Petit-Picpus*.

This chapter examines rebirths of both characters during their five-year refuge in the social space of the convent. In general, rebirth takes place when a previous life, the course of existence of an individual, ceases to exist, and a brand-new life for the individual begins. For Valjean, even though he starts his journey on the path of spiritual transformation while mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer, as discussed later in the chapter, pride emerges in him. The convent halts his descent into pride; in the social space of the convent, Valjean dies to self and experiences a spiritual rebirth into a humble, selfless man. For Cosette, her past life is erased in the social space of the convent; in its place, a life full of opportunities, previously inaccessible, commences for her. Neither character decides to remain in this social space, by taking religious vows or continuing employment there. Yet, their transitory time lived in its secluded walls transforms them. In the present and following chapter, I will explore how the convent's positive, sanctifying effect over the *religieuses* is sufficiently expansive to allow others who are not nuns themselves to benefit from its attributes.

### ***Le Petit-Picpus*: The Importance of the Hugolian Digression**

Before examining the rebirths of Valjean and Cosette, it is essential to consider the relevance of Hugo's digression on convents. Abruptly introduced into the text, the digression at first glance seems to detract from the narrative. Like Flaubert, cited in the chapter's epigraph, some readers may question, possibly even disregard, books six and seven of the second volume of *Les Misérables*.<sup>17</sup> In fifty protracted pages of narrative, the author seems to abandon his two characters in the convent *le Petit-Picpus*<sup>18</sup>—a social space unfamiliar to them, and in Valjean's case, forbidden—in order to digress on observations made by the omniscient narrator. Is this simply a literary device used by the author to sustain suspense concerning their eventual fate? Prior to their entrance into the cloister, during the pursuit in Paris, the narrative pace rapidly escalates. Once inside the convent, the pace declines to a meditative pause.

While sustained suspense can develop a closer connection between the reader and the characters, one effect of Hugo's use of this narrative technique is to focus the reader's attention on the social space where their rebirth occurs. At the outset, the digression reveals the physical boundaries, the confining aspects of the cloister. The omniscient narrator leads "les yeux profanes" beyond the convent's parlor into the typically inaccessible space of the cloister's interior, promising to reveal "des choses que les conteurs n'ont jamais vues" (2: 226). Considering the urgency for both characters to remain hidden for an extended period in a self-sustaining environment—Valjean from Javert and Cosette from the Thénardier family—the reader may ponder their serendipity. At first glance, the social space of the convent meets their immediate needs. Additionally, the omniscient narrator probes the symbolic boundaries, examining the meanings which the members of the community ascribe to the convent's perimeter. In the social space of *le Petit-Picpus*, the convent's monastic rules are exceedingly

austere. For example, the nuns take no baths, never brush their teeth, scourge themselves every Friday, and wear hair-cloth shirts that occasionally produce fevers and nervous spasms (2: 228-230). Hugo's digression emphasizes the singularity of this social space.

Another feasible purpose for Hugo's use of digression as a narrative device may be to express ideological concerns regarding the relevance of the convent. The passage on the convent raises profound concerns held by Hugo, his literary colleagues, and potentially his readers concerning the resurging political and social influence of the Church's monastic ideology. In an energetic tone, the omniscient narrator 'rallies the troops.' Together, readers and narrator alike are urged to consider a maxim: "Combattons. Combattons, mais distinguons. Le propre de la vérité, c'est de n'être jamais excessive" (2: 267). In the digression on the convent, Hugo incites readers to engage and to "look beyond the story being told on the diegetic level so as to apprehend the novel's greater truths and larger ideology" (Roche, "Inscribing" 23). Through this digression, the reader can discover that the social space of the convent is full of contradictions: darkness versus light, fear versus calm, silence versus children's laughter, death versus life, innocence versus abnegation—a true paradox for the reader to contemplate.

### **A Space for Rebirth: Jean Valjean**

During his five-year asylum at the convent, Valjean changes from a person in whom excessive pride was gradually emerging to one who entirely devotes his life towards the interests of others. His profound rebirth at the convent progresses essentially in four phases: bewilderment, resurrection, reflection, and humility. Prior to entering the convent, pride was leading Valjean to a potential spiritual downfall. His transitory time lived within the social space of the convent redirects his path:

Il est certain qu'un des côtés de la vertu aboutit à l'orgueil. Il y a là un pont bâti par le diable. Jean Valjean était peut-être à son insu assez près de ce pont-là, lorsque la providence le jeta dans le couvent du Petit-Picpus ; tant qu'il ne s'était comparé qu'à l'évêque, il s'était trouvé indigne et il avait été humble ; mais depuis quelque temps il commençait à se comparer aux hommes, et l'orgueil naissait. Qui sait ? il aurait peut-être fini par revenir tout doucement à la haine.

Le couvent l'arrêta sur cette pente. (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 2: 337)

The social space of the convent contributes to completing the work that Bishop Myriel began.

In a bizarre twist of fate, Valjean inadvertently penetrates a social space forbidden to him. Further, he enters a social space that at first glance appears strangely similar to the one which he previously attempted to escape four times. The omniscient narrator describes various general aspects of convents. For example, while considering the deserted cloister cells at the medieval Villers Abbey, an abandoned monastery located near Brussels that Hugo himself visited, the omniscient narrator reveals:

[C]achots de pierre, moitié sous terre, moitié sous l'eau. [...] Dans l'un des cachots, il y a un tronçon de carcan scellé au mur ; dans un autre, on voit une espèce de boîte carrée faite de quatre lames de granit, trop courte pour qu'on s'y couche, trop basse pour qu'on s'y dresse. On mettait là-dedans un être avec un couvercle de pierre par-dessus. (2:264)

His description eerily resembles the depiction of the prison dungeon where Valjean was previously chained and incarcerated for nineteen years.

Landing in the cold, somber garden of *le Petit-Picpus*, Valjean does not realize that he has entered a cloister's supposedly impenetrable enclosure. In this manner, his rebirth begins in a state of bewilderment. A leitmotif of Hugolian contrasts, a disparity between glimmers of light

and protruding shadows, persists in the description of *le Petit-Picpus* : “Pourtant il y avait quelque chose au-delà de cette ombre, il y avait une lumière ; il y avait une vie dans cette mort” (2: 226). In spite of the calm that now surrounds him, fear and reverence overwhelm Valjean. Further contributing to his bafflement, he unknowingly witnesses an act of reparation, a ritual consisting of prayers offered for the expiation of mankind’s sins, performed by a *sœur choriste*:

[I]l crut voir à terre, sur le pavé, quelque chose qui paraissait couvert d’un linceul et qui ressemblait à une forme humaine. Cela était étendu à plat ventre, la face contre la pierre, les bras en croix, dans l’immobilité de la mort. On eût dit, à une sorte de serpent qui traînait sur le pavé, que cette forme sinistre avait la corde au cou . . .

Il était effrayant de supposer que cela était peut-être mort, et plus effrayant encore de songer que cela était peut-être vivant. (2: 202)

Valjean, a character normally depicted in the text as supernaturally heroic, is appalled. He flees the scene in terror, not daring to look behind him.

Yet, the reader may question who exactly expresses the extreme anxiety and bewilderment in the narrative:

Où était-il ? qui n’aurait jamais pu s’imaginer quelque chose de pareil à cette espèce de sépulcre au milieu de Paris ! qu’était-ce que cette étrange maison ? Édifice plein de mystère nocturne [...] leur offrant brusquement cette vision épouvantable, promettant d’ouvrir la porte radieuse du ciel et ouvrant la porte horrible du tombeau ! (2: 202)

In this passage, Hugo employs the narrative device of free indirect discourse in which the speaker is not explicitly identified. The reader is given a rare glimpse into the innermost thoughts of Valjean. Is this a representation of an outcast’s voice? Considering his brutal years in prison, where he witnessed numerous horrors in silence and resignation, it is intriguing that Valjean’s

initial impression of the convent could produce such a physiological and psychological reaction. In the manner that Barrie observes, these types of responses “are often engendered by sacred settings, consistent with their symbolic agendas. Any space that heightens or deprives the senses can produce feelings of discomfort or ease, anxiety, or peace” (84-85). In Valjean’s case, it would seem that his initial impression of the convent indicates an exaggerated mixture of angst and perplexity.

One could also reason that the passage offers critical assessments from the omniscient narrator regarding the contradictions within the convent’s social space. As Gerald Prince explains regarding narratorial indeterminacy: “the narrative voice and the voice of one character or another coalesce to present situations and events, speeches or thoughts, emotions or perceptions” (85), thus making it problematic to determine the voice’s source. Nonetheless, I concur with Bromberg who submits that Hugo’s intended audience is the *lecteur pensif*, a reader who “knows how to read texts with multiple, and even contradictory, layers of meaning” (231). Brombert further remarks: “Hugo refers to great texts, especially in difficult historical times, as having hidden levels of significance: texts with a ‘double *fond*,’ a ‘triple *fond*’—perhaps even more” (231). Both Brombert and Roche suggest that Hugo’s narrative technique of omniscient perspective instills his characters with mystery and even sanctity (Brombert 124, Roche, “Inscribing” 28). This style encourages an active interpretation by the reader and as Brombert notes: “Hugo the author believed in the inviolability of his own characters; he comments, observes, and judges—but he remains outside them” (125). As a result, the *lecteur pensif* is encouraged to actively engage with the text in order to decode, reconstruct, and formulate interpretations of the novel’s narrative elements (Roche, “Inscribing” 28). Aided by the obscurity

of the voice's source, an image of an enigmatic and mysterious cloister emerges for the reader, thus incrementing the state of bewilderment expressed by Valjean.

However, once Valjean discovers the convent's identity, he immediately ponders how to remain there since "habiter un lieu impossible, c'[est] le salut" (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 2: 280). Since Valjean and Cosette have improperly entered the convent by scaling its walls, he must devise a means for them to secretly exit and reenter the convent in a legitimate manner before their presence is detected. Fortunately, the first person he encounters in the convent is a familiar face, the gardener Fauchelevent, who agrees to assist. Two years prior, as Mayor Madeleine, Valjean saved Fauchelevent's life by rescuing him from underneath a collapsed wagon. Later, Valjean obtained employment for the crippled man at the convent. Their departure plan for Cosette is straightforward: hide her in a basket that Fauchelevent will carry outside the convent's walls. However, Valjean's departure is much more complicated because of his size. In the process of achieving his secret exit from *le Petit-Picpus* and his proper reentry, Valjean advances on his path towards rebirth.

Valjean's second phase of rebirth, a metaphorical resurrection, is not possible without the aid of another individual in the religious community: mère Innocente. From 1819 to 1825, mademoiselle de Blemeur, known by her religious name as mère Innocente, serves as the mother superior of *le Petit-Picpus*. The convent offers her the unique opportunity to preside over the religious community and to act as the spokesperson with ecclesiastical and political authorities. The omniscient narrator describes her as erudite, skillful, fluent in several languages, and "plutôt bénédictin que bénédictine," (2: 247) suggesting characteristics that would be labeled as masculine at that epoch. As the head of the religious community, she faces the dilemma of honoring the burial request of a recently deceased nun. The State no longer permits corpses to be



interred within convent grounds, but rather decrees that they be buried at the public cemetery. Nonetheless, the prioress firmly believes that some acts can be forbidden by man, yet ordered by God (2: 295). She chooses to perform an act of conscience that directly conflicts with a State ordinance, to answer to a higher law (Gasbarrone 21). For mère Innocente, the convent represents a place of sanctuary. Thus, she requests Fauchelevent to clandestinely place the nun's body in the convent's crypt, with the assistance of five *sœurs choristes*. Considering this audacious act, Porter notes: "Consciously, Hugo's nuns are separatists: they cooperate to defy the patriarchy dominant in the external world" (85). From the State's perspective, mère Innocente is guilty of transgression; from the religious community's viewpoint, she is innocent, as her name proclaims. When Fauchelevent questions the wisdom of breaking a State ordinance, Mère Innocente maintains in defiance:

—D'un côté saint Bernard ; de l'autre l'agent de la salubrité ! D'un côté saint Benoît ; de l'autre l'inspecteur de la voirie ! L'état, la voirie, les pompes funèbres, les règlements, l'administration, est-ce que nous connaissons cela ? Aucuns passants seraient indignés de voir comme on nous traite. Nous n'avons même pas le droit de donner notre poussière à Jésus-Christ ! Votre salubrité est une invention révolutionnaire. Dieu subordonné au commissaire de police ; tel est le siècle. (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 2: 296)

From her viewpoint, the monastic rules of the cloister and her vow of obedience supersede the Napoleonic Code: "In the service of a higher law, falsehood may well be justified. Her insistence on the sacred rights of those who die in the convent also reinforces the author's reflections in [his digression] 'Parenthèse'" (Grossman 136). Eventually, Fauchelevent acquiesces, consciously joining the *sœurs choristes* as offenders of the crime specified in Article 358 of the French Penal Code, which carries a penalty of six days to two months of imprisonment.<sup>19</sup>

Because of Fauchelevent's assistance with the nun's secret interment, the prioress agrees to admit Valjean as an additional gardener and Cosette as a *pensionnaire*—two individuals mentioned by Fauchelevent as extended family, yet unknown to her—after the fictitious burial of the nun at the public cemetery. In her decisions and actions, mère Innocente directly influences the rebirth of both Valjean and Cosette. Unbeknownst to her, she also becomes an indirect accomplice to Valjean's secret exit from the convent.

When Fauchelevent describes to Valjean the dilemma of an empty State-provided coffin—empty since the nun has been interred in the convent's crypt—Valjean proposes an outrageous idea: he will use the coffin as a secret exit. Instead of filling the coffin with dirt to deceive the State authorities, Fauchelevent secures Valjean in it. The fictitious burial of the nun commences. All stages of Valjean's escape plan succeed without difficulty until arrival at the public cemetery. An unanticipated gravedigger momentarily covers the coffin with a layer of dirt, resulting in an unexpected lapse of time where Valjean is physically buried. Eventually, Fauchelevent convinces the gravedigger to leave; nevertheless, he believes that Valjean is already dead. Yet, a miracle occurs: “Voir une mort est effrayant, voir une résurrection l'est presque autant” (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 2: 322). Valjean endures a burial and metaphorically experiences a resurrection, which subsequently provides him a second entrance into the cloister. As symbolized in the ritual of a nun's perpetual profession, the convent represents for him a place of rebirth. Further, as Roche remarks: “Jean Valjean's rebirth, as the novel's central arc, expresses the fullest range of the possibilities of moral progress—self-sacrifice, the eschewal of self-interest, selflessness in the name of a higher good” (“Beauty” 32). In his metaphorical resurrection, Valjean dies to self, moving away from self-centeredness and towards consideration of the needs of others.

Soon after his metaphorical resurrection, mère Innocente admits Valjean and Cosette to the convent. In this social space, Valjean begins his third phase of rebirth: reflection. Prior to his life at the convent—whether laboring in the galley or managing his factory, whether feeding his sister’s seven children or investing in philanthropic causes—Valjean enjoyed little opportunity for reflection. Yet, within the four walls of the cloister, a social space “dedicated to contemplation and wisdom” (Lefebvre 137), he spends considerable time in meditation. In this protected fortress, “une île entourée de gouffres” (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 2: 335), life renews for Valjean. As he works in the garden, he puzzles over the similarities between the social space of the prison and that of the convent: interminable and arduous daily routines, sleep deprivation, austere accommodations, restrictive diet, suppressed birth names and imposed silence (2: 337-38). However, Valjean also ponders the extreme comparison between the prisoners and the *religieuses*: guilt versus innocence, denied offenses versus confessed transgressions, shackles of chains versus shackles of faith, and rage against the universe versus benediction (2: 338-341). Comparing the convent to the galley, he muses : “Là les ténèbres ; ici l’ombre ; mais une ombre pleine de clartés, et des clartés pleines de rayonnements” (2: 340). Valjean observes that both the prisoners and the nuns perform the same work of expiation; yet, with the *religieuses*, it is not personal expiation but rather an offering of atonement for others.

In the progression of the narrative, the omniscient narrator interrupts Valjean’s meditation: “Ici toute théorie personnelle est réservée, nous ne sommes que narrateur ; c’est au point de vue de Jean Valjean que nous nous plaçons, et nous traduisons ses impressions” (2: 342). Why does the narrator desire to distinguish the point of view? Furthermore, why does the narrator seemingly withhold any theory or further observations? It is possible that Hugo, once again, desires for the *lecteur pensif* to formulate his/her own impressions of the contradictions of

the convent. From Valjean's perspective, the social space of the convent is a place of expiation, not of punishment (2: 342). He recalls in shame his past actions of clinching his fist against God (2: 342). During his refuge in the convent, he witnesses the ceaseless dedication, gratitude, humility, and self-denial demonstrated by the nuns. Initially horrified by *la réparation*, a ritual consisting of prayers offered by a *sœur choriste* for the expiation of mankind's sins, he now occasionally observes this ritual, albeit alone in the garden outside the chapel. As a man, he would never be allowed to take perpetual vows in the convent as specified by the monastic rules; yet, the distinct consistency of the nuns and his observations of their various rituals greatly influences his transformation.

Awakened and renewed, Valjean concludes his rebirth in a state of humility. He is immensely humbled by "ce mystère de sublimité" (2: 343). He acknowledges that in the two critical junctures of his life, when society cruelly rejects him, two houses of God accept him. In the social space of the convent—a space that confounds Valjean—his pride vanishes. In his rebirth, facilitated in this space and influenced by the *religieuses*, he experiences expiation from pride and ultimately tranquility. His own perpetual profession ensues within *le Petit-Picpus*. The convent halts his descent into pride and alternatively leads him to an ascent of humility and selflessness. Through this rebirth, Valjean shifts his focus exclusively to Cosette's welfare, eagerly sharing his newfound joy and tranquility with her. The convent provides a place for that new life to flourish.

### **A Space for Rebirth: Cosette**

During her five-year asylum at *le Petit-Picpus*, Cosette also undergoes a rebirth, shedding the misfortunes of her early childhood and beginning a new life. During her time at the convent,

Cosette changes from an apprehensive, hopeless girl whose potential is severely restricted, most likely eliminated, to a pre-adolescent whose circumstances are considerably favorable. Her rebirth at the convent, from abused child to privileged girl, consists of two elements: first, a shift from anxiety to security and second, a renewal from a life full of impediments to a life promising opportunity.

Cosette's life begins in a state of uncertainty. As an infant, she is quickly abandoned by her biological father, Félix Tholomyès, a bourgeois law student from Toulouse and lover of her mother Fantine. Since the French Civil Code "protected a man, married or single, from any requirement to support an illegitimate child, or even from being identified as the father" (Accampo 102), Cosette's welfare relies solely upon her mother. Fantine searches for employment and for a full-time caretaker for her child. She surmises that the Thénardier family will be reliable. Remote boarding of the children of French working-class women was common at that time; "[they] often put their babies out to nurse in the country, a situation from which a tragically high number of them did not return" (Freedman and Hellerstein 131). Fantine entrusts Cosette, aged two, to the family's care. Initially, Fantine works at Valjean's factory in Montreuil-sur-Mer, sending the majority of her wages to the Thénardier family. Fantine pays generously, but the Thénardiens misappropriate the funds, completely neglecting Cosette's basic needs. After the factory supervisor learns of her illegitimate child, Fantine loses her job. Like numerous other destitute women at that time, she turns to prostitution in order to survive. Ultimately, on her deathbed, as witnessed by two nurturing *sœurs infirmières*, Fantine entrusts the guardianship of Cosette to Mayor Madeleine, otherwise known as Jean Valjean.

At the Thénardiens, Cosette suffers physical deprivations such as hunger, lack of adequate clothing, and sleep deprivation. She becomes their servant, living in continuous fear due to their

physical and mental abuse. Injustice makes her bitter, and misery produces an ugly countenance (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 1: 214). After her mother's death, Valjean, her newly designated guardian, retrieves her from the Thénardier family, paying them generously before fleeing with Cosette to Paris. Until her encounter with Valjean, Cosette has experienced during infancy only a brief moment of affection with her mother. During Valjean's strenuous and dangerous flight from Javert, Cosette unhesitatingly accompanies him, trusting him completely.

Once within the protected space of the convent, Cosette discovers security, in large part due to a consistent, supportive, and sympathetic environment. Hence, her rebirth begins: her outlook shifts from anxiety to certainty, bolstered by adequate nourishment, clothing, and shelter, and demonstrated with her discovery of laughter. Newfound family and friends contribute significantly to her rebirth. While living with the Thénardier family, Cosette is called by many sympathetic and derogatory *prénoms*—*l'Alouette* by the villagers, *Chien-faute-de-nom* by Madame Thénardier—yet she can never claim a surname. Cosette's legal first name is Euphrasie; however, Fantine preferred to call her Cosette. Fantine, an orphan as well, knew neither of her parents; in fact, her first name was given by a bystander when she was a homeless child roaming the streets. At *le Petit-Picpus*, Cosette becomes part of a singular family unit: a child of a devoted guardian and of multiple mothers. Behind this rampart, Cosette receives the family name of Fauchelevent through a notarial act executed by Valjean. This legal distinction results from a written declaration of paternity and ancestry concocted by Valjean, subsequently unquestioned and authorized by mère Innocent and the State. Under Title X of the French Civil Code, Valjean becomes legally responsible for the care, representation, and administrator of the personal effects of Cosette as a minor. As Roche remarks: "For Cosette, [her] sufficiency is born of the secure

life Jean Valjean has built for her in lifting her from the child servant of the Thénardiens to Mademoiselle Euphrasie Fauchelevent” (“Beauty” 27).

Her rebirth at the convent also consists of a renewal from a life full of impediments to a life promising opportunity. Even though minimal, Cosette has access to fundamental schooling previously unavailable to her. Cosette begins her education at the convent’s *pensionnat*, which includes training in household management, a traditional role prescribed to women at that time:

On lui avait appris la religion, et même, et surtout la dévotion ; puis « l’histoire, » c’est-à-dire la chose qu’on appelle ainsi au couvent, la géographie, la grammaire, les participes, les rois de France, un peu de musique, à faire un nez, etc., mais du reste elle ignorait tout, ce qui est un charme et un péril. (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 4: 85)

Along with her classmates at the *pensionnat*, she also learns domestic skills and Church doctrines. On certain feast days, the students amuse themselves by dressing like the nuns and performing various rituals. Nonetheless, they abide by the strict rules of the convent including silence. Punishment for breaking silence consists of “croix de langue” (2: 240) in which the student must make a cross with her tongue on the dirty floor.

In the sacred space of the convent, an illegitimate child, born of a prostitute, acquires a surname and a social status not previously available to her. Due to her guardian Valjean’s immense wealth accumulated while operating his factory in Montreuil-sur-Mer, her future prospects for marriage and an elevated social status increase. This newly acquired social distinction will bolster a dramatically different outcome for her. Moreover, contrary to the *religieuses* who suppress their birth names, Cosette gains one, possibly a foreshadowing of her imminent departure from the convent.

## Consequences of Rebirth

After five years at the convent, Valjean begins to question the source of his happiness and his motives for remaining there. He struggles between his desire to prevent any separation from Cosette, which could be accomplished by her taking a perpetual vow, in contrast with his concern for her future resentment towards him, which could arise if she desires to explore opportunities outside of the convent's walls. Valjean contemplates Cosette's prospects, considering his abundant financial resources, and concludes that "il n'avait pas le droit de condamner Cosette au cloître par la raison qu'il avait été condamné au bagne" (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 4: 77). Ultimately, Valjean decides that they should leave; *le Petit-Picpus* has served its purpose for them as a place of refuge, albeit a temporary one. Unlike the nuns residing there, neither Valjean nor Cosette have taken perpetual vows. As an indemnity for Cosette's education, Valjean contributes 5,000 francs to the religious community (4: 77).

In this manner, considering aspects such as social position, finances, amenities, and personal happiness, a life demonstrating selflessness emerges, directly resulting from his rebirth at the convent. Like the *religieuses* he observed, he accepts self-sacrifice, suffering, and humility for the sake of others. Inspired, Valjean achieves a deeper level of understanding and awareness as Gasbarrone surmises:

*Les Misérables* is primarily the tale of his spiritual journey from the depths of alienation and despair to his achievement of the highest form of transcendence. When the novel opens he is a hardened ex-convict who has rejected God. By the novel's end, having passed through successive stages of awareness and self-awareness, he achieves the promise that the Bishop had held out to him with the gift of the candlesticks. (18)



Despite his dread of eventual separation, Cosette's needs supersede his own. Although the convent represents a place of rebirth for Valjean, unlike the nuns, it is not his permanent home.

Soon after their departure, the omniscient narrator describes Cosette as developing into an extremely attractive girl. Through her reflection in the mirror, Cosette discovers her beauty and decides that she is "une machine de guerre" (4: 90). The act of gazing in the mirror— forbidden at the convent—enables a new idea of herself founded in her beauty. As Briana Lewis notes:

[Cosette] perceives that power comes with her beauty; she invokes precisely the feminine ideal that most often objectifies female characters, paradoxically transforming it, through the subjectivity created by her gaze in the mirror, into agency. ("Femme" 60)

From that moment of awareness, Cosette intentionally modifies her outward appearance, according to the prevailing fashion and financed by Valjean's generous pocketbook, in order to effectively "wage war on the battlefield of the Luxembourg Gardens" (60).

During her promenades with Valjean in the Luxembourg, she gains the attention of Marius, her future husband. It is intriguing that the character Cosette, for the remainder of the narration in *Les Misérables*, continues to exude an image of purity—a distinct representation of Marian piety—outside of the physical barrier of the convent's walls. Moreover, her character offers a double discourse, as Nicole Savy aptly notes : "Cosette est un personnage féminin qui représente les femmes misérables, et la Femme idéale" (126). As expressed through the awakened impressions of her smitten admirer, Cosette is wrapped in a metaphorical halo: "L'auréole venait droit à lui. [...] Belle d'une beauté tout ensemble féminine et angélique, d'une beauté complète" (3: 166-67). A future "angel in the house," Cosette represents to Marius the

idealization of womanhood, a young lady with a pure soul who exercises power in secret and subtle ways (Freedman and Hellerstein 134).

Her admirer Marius also manifests an image of purity. Teasingly called “monsieur l’abbé” by his friends, he embraces a type of monastic existence, choosing to live in poverty rather than receive assistance from his *grand bourgeois* grandfather Gillenormand. Unlike many of the male characters in the novel, “un œil qui eût regardé au dedans de Marius eût été ébloui de la pureté de cette âme” (3: 146). Marius constantly draws attention from other admirers; yet, unlike his friends, he purposefully avoids contact with all women. Nonetheless, everything changes when his eyes meet Cosette’s gaze. Unlike Fantine’s liaison with Tholomyès, “Cosette’s relationship with Marius distinguishes itself at the outset by the purity of intent of the young man” (Lewis, “Douceur” 19).<sup>20</sup>

Marius eventually discovers the address of Cosette’s home on Rue Plumet, where they secretly meet in the garden:

[I]l y eut là, toutes les nuits, dans ce pauvre jardin sauvage, sous cette broussaille chaque jour plus odorante et plus épaisse, deux êtres composés de toutes les chastetés et de toutes les innocences, débordant de toutes les félicités du ciel, plus voisins des archanges que des hommes, purs, honnêtes, enivrés, rayonnants, qui resplendissaient l’un pour l’autre dans les ténèbres. Il semblait à Cosette que Marius avait une couronne et à Marius que Cosette avait un nimbe. (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 4: 228)

Alluding to the Biblical garden of Eden, the omniscient narrator paints an image of a secret place, a space where a chaste and innocent relationship flourishes, one that exists outside of the fortress of the convent.

Their rendezvous shifts from the vast public space of the Luxembourg Gardens to the private space of the garden of Rue Plumet, “a utopic and idyllic space that reflects, nurtures, and protects their love in its various stages of blooming” (Roche, “Beauty” 27). Abandoned for more than half a century, the garden is covered with a lush canopy of intertwined shrubbery, bramble, and trees, “impénétrable comme une forêt [...] sombre comme une cathédrale” (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 4: 81). In spite of his expertise with pruning, Valjean decides to leave the garden uncultivated in order to not attract attention. This colossal, disheveled forest, enclosed by towering stone walls with iron grated gates, offers solitude, refuge, and concealment. To a certain extent, Cosette merely maneuvers from one seemingly similar space to another; yet, the spaces differ considerably. Unlike the social space of the convent, the space of the garden of Rue Plumet contains liberty and voluptuousness, with a covering that spreads wildly, abundantly, and freely. As the omniscient narrator notes, the grating of this space compares with that of the space of the convent:

En quittant le couvent, Cosette ne pouvait rien trouver de plus doux et de plus dangereux que la maison de la rue Plumet. C’était la continuation de la solitude avec le commencement de la liberté ; un jardin fermé, mais une nature âcre, riche, voluptueuse et odorante ; les mêmes songes que dans le couvent, mais de jeunes hommes entrevus ; une grille, mais sur la rue. (4: 86)

This seemingly impenetrable space, intended by Valjean to hide and protect Cosette, is skillfully invaded by Marius.

During her time at *le Petit-Picpus*, unlike the numerous meditations and deliberations pondered by Valjean, the narration reveals little to the reader regarding Cosette’s impressions. What memories did she contemplate from her traumatic past? What aspirations and secrets did

she share with others? What *were* her thoughts on life at the convent? The convent's strict rules for silence seem to suppress her voice. Cosette—one of the most recognized characters in literature—remains relatively silent throughout the novel, even after her departure from the convent. Once her claimed weapon of beauty effectively strikes a target, Cosette seldom expresses any future ambition other than to be pleasing to others. Denying any individuality, she murmurs coquettishly in her husband's ear: "Je m'appelle Marius. Je suis madame Toi" (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 5: 240). Even after her elevation in society to baroness and even after Valjean's unfathomable gift of 600,000 francs for her dowry, she remains passive. As Lewis writes:

Cosette, having constructed her own self in the image of the usually passive feminine ideal, becomes less inclined to action as the plot progresses around her; the paradox of this ideal as a war machine does not hold. ("Femme" 61)

In her passivity, it is primarily the actions of others that sustain Cosette's rebirth. As a heroine of the novel, she remains perplexingly inaccessible and thus relatively unknown to the reader. This near nonexistence seems to even be questioned by Cosette herself when she challenges Valjean and Marius: "Eh bien, est-ce que je suis quelqu'un ?" (Hugo, *Les Misérables* 5: 273) Yet, from the perspective of various characters in the novel and from the viewpoint of the omniscient narrator, she represents the ideal woman, "bref, une princesse blonde en tout point conforme au fade féminin de son siècle" (Savy 129). However, from the viewpoint of numerous literary critics, such as Lewis, Cosette "may be a model of a feminine ideal that is by definition a passive, objectified non-subject" ("Femme" 57). Discerning Cosette's character as particularly mediocre, Savy criticizes that she is "une héroïne aussi dénuée d'unité interne, d'individualité et finalement d'intérêt propre" (126). One wonders what role her minimal education at the

convent—an education that furnished a negligible arsenal of weapons against ignorance—played in the development of her character.

## Conclusion

In a broader context, the omniscient narrator informs the reader that *le Petit-Picpus* also undergoes a significant transformation. During the Restoration, the religious community there begins to dramatically decline, attributed primarily to the burden of its monastic rules and the lack of new recruits. Eleven years after the departure of Valjean and Cosette, the *pensionnat* disappears. Contrary to the reality of membership expansion in feminine religious orders, commencing under the Restoration and continuing for most of the nineteenth century, Hugo elects to diminish his fictional convent. Its demise, possibly used as a narrative device, initiates further narrative regarding the relevancy of monasticism. At that time, religion was also undergoing a significant transformation. The omniscient narrator contends that in order to demolish counterfeits and reconstruct an ideal religion—to purify faith and obliterate superstition—it is essential to delve deeper into the question of monasticism’s remaining relevance. The omniscient narrator does not refute religion’s significance. Indeed, as Roche justly notes, from the book’s beginning, the narrator asserts that the novel’s chief protagonist is not man, but the Infinite or God:

Hugo is unequivocal in both his intent to establish man’s deep relationship to a metaphysical realm governed by a higher order and to draw attention to the dire consequences in the political realm of positivism, science, and anticlericalism taken too far. (“Beauty” 21)

Rather, the omniscient narrator appeals for a careful examination of the current monastic resurgence, concluding: “Au point de vue de l’histoire, de la raison et de la vérité, le monachisme est condamné” (2: 262). According to the narrator of *Les Misérables*, monasticism is an anachronism. In this perspective, cloisters that served a purpose during the Medieval period are considered in contemporary society as parasites, as human inventions that are injurious to society’s progress.

Nevertheless, the narrator ends this extended denunciation of convents by commending the sublimity of prayer and ceaseless devotion observed by the nuns. Choosing to not emphasize the convent as a space for opportunity, Hugo focuses rather on the convent as a space for sanctuary and for rebirth. As Porter notes: “Hugo dramatized [the convent] as one of many conduits for divine grace, but trivialized the willed achievements of the community” (86). Like Hugo, who remained voluntarily on the island of Guernsey during the Second Empire, the choice of self-exile by a nun—motivated either politically or spiritually—is an individual choice (Brombert 131). Hugo publicly maintained, as an elected deputy in the National Assembly and as a writer, that secular education should be made available exclusively under State regulation, and not administered by the clerical party. Moreover, as recorded in *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo : Actes et paroles, avant l’exil, 1841-1851*, Hugo affirmed the value of genuine religious teaching; yet, he stressed that its place was within the Church and not in the classroom: “ne pas mêler le prêtre au professeur” (318). In other words, he supported a separation of Church and State. Thus, the role of the convent, in Hugo’s view, was diminished, no longer serving as the place of the *pensionnat*.

### Chapter 3

#### A Space to Revive Creativity in George Sand's *Histoire de ma vie*

J'ai lu, d'une traite, les dix  
volumes de l'*Histoire de ma  
vie*, dont je connaissais les  
deux tiers environ, mais par  
fragments. Ce qui m'a surtout  
frappé, c'est la vie de  
couvent.

— Gustave Flaubert,  
Correspondance

In October 1854, the first installment (*en feuilleton*) of George Sand's autobiographical work, *Histoire de ma vie*, appeared in the daily newspaper *La Presse*.<sup>21</sup> Following the success of over forty published novels and plays—introducing heroines such as Indiana and Lélia, which critics alleged to have a distinct resemblance in character and circumstances to the author—Sand offered the eager public an account of her own story. Like Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, Sand's autobiography experienced immediate acclaim after publication. Modern literary critics such as Germaine Brée consider Sand as “perhaps the greatest autobiographer in an era much given to autobiography” (438).<sup>22</sup> Yet, Sand's work also faced diverse criticism. Much to the dismay of some readers, her autobiography did not disclose scandalous revelations regarding her numerous romantic relationships for which she was famous. Yet, this was never her intent, as explained in a letter to Charles Poncy:

—[J]e ne veux accuser et contrister personne. Cela me serait odieux et me ferait plus de mal qu'à mes victimes. Je crois donc que je ferais un livre utile, sans danger et sans scandale, sans vanité comme sans bassesse, et j'y travaille avec plaisir. (qtd. in Lubin, *Introduction* xvii)

Considering Sand's avowed intention, Thelma Jurgrau writes that "revealing her secrets to the gossipmongers or confessing her sins to her peers" was not a motive for writing *Histoire de ma vie* (199). Rather, Sand wished to recount her life experiences as an artist and as an intellectual, situated in a historical context. In *Histoire*, Sand expresses hope that her personal impressions will serve as a stimulus, an encouragement, and even a guide for others (1: 9).

Sand devotes a significant portion in her autobiographical work—nearly two hundred pages—to her experience at the *Couvent des Dames anglaises*. Resulting from a combination of the prevailing social standard for many girls, her particular family situation, and her individual circumstances, Sand enters the convent at the age of thirteen. She spends two and a third years behind the cloister grille,<sup>23</sup> a social space where she unexpectedly experiences a rejuvenation of creativity. In this chapter, I will first analyze her commencement there as an "enfant terrible" (Sand 6: 116) whose mischievous escapades with her classmates rekindles her imagination, and subsequently, her passion for writing. Next, considering her dramatic reversal to an ardent and nervous piety during her second year, I will examine her creative thinking inspired by sacred voices. Lastly, I will explore her theatrical debut that takes place behind the cloister grille. Sandian devotees across the centuries, including Gustave Flaubert and Georges Lubin, claim that her recollections of the time spent there comprise some of the most intriguing prose in *Histoire*. This chapter explores how the convent represents a space for reviving creativity in the formative years of Sand's adolescence.

### ***Histoire de ma vie: The Influence of Ancestry***

In order to better comprehend the renewal of Sand's creativity at the convent, it is essential to first examine her family situation, in particular her father's sudden death, that



influences her entry into the convent. From the first publication of *Histoire*, various critics chide the excessive place given to her father's story rather than to her own. Considering that the first third of the autobiography is dedicated to genealogy and a revised reproduction of her father's letters to his mother and wife, nineteenth-century critic Armand de Pontmartin asserted: "On a pu dire qu'un titre meilleur eût été *Histoire de ma vie avant ma naissance*" (Lubin, *Introduction* xxi). Janet Beizer suggests that most readers either persevere or altogether bypass this protracted introduction "in order to move on to more gripping, more passionate, more dynamic, more affect-laden pages" (64). Yet, Sand asserts that in order to produce a relevant autobiography of the first forty years of her life, it is essential to understand the multiple facets of her ancestral past:

Toutes les existences sont solidaires les unes des autres, et tout être humain qui présenterait la sienne isolément, sans la rattacher à celle de ses semblables, n'offrirait qu'une énigme à débrouiller. [...] Cette individualité n'a par elle seule ni signification ni importance aucune. Elle ne prend un sens quelconque qu'en devenant une parcelle de la vie générale, en se fondant avec l'individualité de chacun de mes semblables, et c'est par là qu'elle devient de l'histoire. (2: 240-41)

Considering the family as an anchor, as a center of experience between generations, Michelle Perrot concurs with Sand's assertion: "Comprendre l'histoire, c'est comprendre la succession des événements [...] Se comprendre soi-même, c'est se situer dans le temps des générations" (276). Ancestry plays a prominent role in Sand's story.

In Sand's ancestral account, she relates how her father, Maurice François Dupin, an officer in Napoléon's army, meets Sophie Victoire Delaborde. Sophie becomes Maurice's mistress, and a month before their child's birth, they marry in secret. In the year of Napoléon's

coronation (1804), Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin, best known by her pseudonym George Sand, is born. As Sand details in her personal narrative, a mixture of royal and plebeian blood runs in her veins: a disparate combination of an aristocratic paternal lineage and a plebeian maternal bloodline. When Maurice's mother, Marie-Aurore Dupin (Madame Dupin), learns of his marriage, she tries to have it annulled, subsequently initiating a lifelong adversarial relationship with her daughter-in-law Sophie. However, Sand suggests that Madame Dupin's disapproval results from more than social class differences:

Sans doute ma grand'mère eût préféré pour mon père une compagne de son rang ; mais elle l'a dit et écrit elle-même, elle ne se fut pas sérieusement affligée pour ce qu'on appelait dans son temps et dans son monde une mésalliance. Elle ne faisait pas de la naissance plus de cas qu'il ne faut, et, quant à la fortune, elle savait s'en passer. [...] Mais elle ne put qu'à grand peine accepter une belle-fille dont la jeunesse avait été livrée par la force des choses à des hasards effrayants. (3: 29)

In other words, as Elizabeth Harlan suggests, Madame Dupin fears the consequences of a marriage with a woman "who exchanged sexual favors for financial support" (28).

When Sand is four, Maurice dies in a riding accident, so Sophie and she move to Nohant to live under the care of Madame Dupin. Sophie and Madame Dupin attempt to live in the same household, but their significant difference in temperaments, social class, and ideologies result in continuous tumult. As described in her autobiography, Sand suffers greatly from their constant quarrels, often trapped between the two women. In her analysis, Brée suggests a narrative pattern in *Histoire*, a continuously shifting "happy triangle," that not only shapes the autobiography, but also recurs repeatedly in Sand's literature (442, 446).<sup>24</sup> As a child, Sand seeks security within this grandmother-mother-child triangle. When life within the space of this triangle becomes

unbearable, she escapes to another dimension, located between the outdoor world and her vivid imagination, in order to create an idealized humanity outside of the turmoil of her reality.

Inspired by recurrent dreams, Sand, around the age of eleven, creates a deity named Corambé who becomes not only her moral compass but also an autonomous “inner voice” that inspires her first stories. Of this inner dialogue with Corambé, Isabelle Naginski writes: “The hearing of voices and the feeling of spiritual elevation are Sand’s two preferred metaphors for expressing artistic creation” (238). Sand’s mythical creature Corambé functions, according to Beizer, as “muse, companion, co-author, subject, character, and title of a cycle of fictions” (81).

Ultimately, money and the promise of education serve as a leverage to determine who will raise Sand. Sophie relinquishes custody of her daughter to Madame Dupin, in exchange for a yearly pension of 1,000 francs, and returns to Paris without Sand. At this pivotal moment, Sand remarks in *Histoire* that “Corambé [est] muet” (6: 98). Accordingly, as Beizer observes: “When Corambé takes flight, inspiration dies” (89). Amidst this increasing turmoil, Sand neglects her studies with her private tutor François Deschartres and rebels against separation from her mother. Moreover, she contests Madame Dupin’s desire for her advancement in society. As Sand indicates in *Histoire*, the debutante process, presentations of young women of marriageable age to high society, does not appeal to her:

—Cela se réduit, pensai-je, à devenir une belle demoiselle bien pimpante, bien guindée, bien érudite, tapant sur un piano devant des personnes qui approuvent sans écouter ou sans comprendre, ne se souciant de personne, aimant à briller, aspirant à un riche mariage, vendant sa liberté et sa personnalité pour une voiture, un écusson, des chiffons et quelques écus. Cela ne me va point et ne m’ira jamais. (6: 100)

Madame Dupin, considerably influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy on women's education,<sup>25</sup> resolves to send Sand to the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* in Paris. Currently in vogue, the convent includes a *pensionnat* where established aristocratic families and the newly endowed bourgeoisie send their daughters for an education (Lubin, "Éducation" 455). Madame Dupin believes that her granddaughter will receive disciplined training in this environment and will learn the etiquette necessary to secure a profitable marriage and prominent social position. To Sand's astonishment, her mother Sophie agrees and moreover encourages the plan.

Consequently, Sand, at the age of thirteen, spends two and a third years behind the cloister grille, a social space where she unexpectedly experiences a rejuvenation of creativity. Contemplating the convent episode of Sand's autobiography—a sort of *bildungsroman*—Brée observes that "Sand traces the emergence of Aurore as an individual from her confused state of dependency upon the initial, though atypical, parental couple: mother, grandmother" (444). In the social space of the convent, Sand eventually discovers tranquility, and will claim that her experience there is one of the happiest moments of her life.

### **A Space for Reviving Creativity: Imagination**

Unlike the fictional convent that Hugo creates in *Les Misérables*, the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* existed in Paris for more than two centuries. In his monograph compiled from monastery archives, Father Cédoz details the convent's history from its formation in 1634 until 1884. Founded by an order of English Augustinians, the convent, situated on the *rue des Fossés-Saint-Victor*,<sup>26</sup> offered a *pensionnat* to English-speaking students (Cédoz 35). The monastery archives record the names of girls from affluent English and French families, with the number of

students increasing significantly between the First Empire and the Restoration (346). One person registered in 1818 is Aurore Dupin (466).<sup>27</sup>

When Sand arrives at the convent as a new student, it is the hour of recreation. The mother superior sends her to the convent's garden to join the other *pensionnaires*. Sand writes that upon her first entry in the garden, a vast expanse within the social space of the convent, she immediately examines and pokes about every corner of the garden "comme un oiseau qui cherche où il mettra son nid" (6: 109). In the convent's garden, she seeks a nest, a place of refuge in her new home at the convent. In *La Poétique de l'espace*, Bachelard writes that in the home, a dreamer of refuge dreams of a place, of a nest, where he/she would like to hide like an animal in its hole (45). He suggests that a dreamer of refuges fantasizes a nest for protection:

"Physiquement, l'être qui reçoit le sentiment du refuge se resserre sur soi-même, se retire, se blottit, se cache, se musse" (93). Immediately within the convent's walls, Sand breaks away from the constraining grandmother-mother-child triangle and finds her own place of refuge:

Là-dessus je me réjouis d'être au couvent ; j'éprouvais un impérieux besoin de me reposer de tous ces déchirements intérieurs ; j'étais lasse d'être comme une pomme de discorde entre deux êtres que je chérissais. J'aurais presque voulu qu'on m'oubliât.

C'est ainsi que j'acceptai le couvent, et je l'acceptai si bien que j'arrivai à m'y trouver plus heureuse que je ne l'avais été de ma vie. [...] [J]e passai là trois ans [ou trois calendriers civils] sans regretter le passé, sans aspirer à l'avenir, et me rendant compte de mon bonheur dans le présent ; situation que comprendront tous ceux qui ont souffert et qui savent que la seule félicité humaine pour eux c'est l'absence de maux excessifs. (6: 112-13)

In *Thinking through the Mothers: Reimagining Women's Biographies*, Beizer analyzes ornithological metaphors dispersed throughout Sand's autobiography, in particular one that Sand uses to describe her traumatic departure from her mother's nest (59).<sup>28</sup> In her analysis, Beizer writes that Sand relates in *Histoire* a remark that Sand attributes to Madame Dupin:

—Ta mère [...] est si inculte qu'elle aime ses petits à la manière des oiseaux, avec de grands soins et de grandes ardeurs pour la première enfance ; mais quand ils ont des ailes, quand il s'agit de raisonner et d'utiliser la tendresse instinctive, elle vole sur un autre arbre et les chasse à coups de bec. (7: 254-55)

Pecked out of the nest, Sand quickly searches for a secure place, locating one first in the convent garden. As time passes, she locates other nooks of comfort and safety within the convent.

Sand expresses that, isolated from her biological family in the convent, she does not regret her "captivity" (6: 114) within this "prison" (6: 115). Indeed, she refuses multiple invitations to leave the convent for approved outings. Rather, she chooses to remain locked behind the cloister grille, prevented from interactions with the outside world, yet encouraged to form relationships with those living inside this protected fortress. Kselman suggests that Sand develops in her autobiography a paradoxical view of the social space of the convent: a space that offers a supportive community, yet a space with "a prison-like atmosphere within which she was nonetheless free to explore spiritual possibilities" (*Conscience and Conversion* 197). Communal life at the convent enables her to escape from family conflict and to develop new relationships that will help revitalize her imagination.

In her account of her adolescent years at the convent, Sand acknowledges the significant influence of place on thoughts and recollections. With meticulous detail, she recalls different physical aspects of the convent. As Perrot writes: "Aux lieux, Sand attache une extrême

importance dans ses romans [...] L'histoire, privée et publique, qui se répondent et se recouvrent, dans ce jeu perpétuel de renvois qui tisse la remémoration, s'inscrit dans l'espace" (278-79). In her autobiography, Sand describes the incongruous collection of new and dilapidated structures within the convent: student dormitories, nuns' cells, kitchens, cellars, a church, an apothecary, and classrooms. In *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers observes that Sand characterizes the convent "very much like a Gothic castle: the sprawling old buildings, complicated passageways, mysterious garrets and subcellars, and high walls" (131). A momentous place in her life story, the convent consists of a maze of dark corridors, some with galleries that lead nowhere. Yet, on its boundaries, charming homes for retired women cluster side by side<sup>29</sup> and lush vegetable gardens feed the nearly one hundred thirty persons living there.

For education, the convent divided the girls into two levels—the lower class for girls ages six to thirteen and the upper class for girls fourteen and above. While Sand is in the lower class, she receives an education similar to that of Hugo's character Cosette: languages, history, geography, drawing, and music. Often avoiding her studies, Sand promptly joins a group labeled as *diabes* (devils), classmates known to stealthily evade classroom instruction and to actively resist the monastic rules established for *pensionnaires*. Eagerly, Sand explores with her newfound friends outside of the safety of her nest; "far from being repressed by confinement, she discovers the delights of indoor adventure" (Moers 131). During their nocturnal prowls, the *diabes* enter forbidden gardens, scramble along rooftops, scale ledges, and crawl through windows to escape detection. Yet, their most intriguing nightly escapade, inspired by Gothic novels, Irish legends, and imprisoned nun narratives, involves *chercher la victime*. In these daring exploits, the *diabes* diligently search for a legendary captive who is imagined to be imprisoned in some secret chamber hidden underneath the convent:

Ce grand secret, c'était la légende traditionnelle du couvent, une rêverie qui se transmettait d'âge en âge et de *diable en diable* depuis deux siècles peut-être ; [...] Il s'agissait de délivrer la victime. Il y avait quelque part une prisonnière, on disait même plusieurs prisonnières, enfermées dans un réduit impénétrable, soit cellule cachée et murée dans l'épaisseur des murailles, soit cachot situé sous les voûtes des immenses souterrains qui s'étendaient sous le monastère. (Sand 6: 143-44)

The *diaboles* probe the strictly forbidden buildings, that remain in decrepit and hazardous condition, in order to access the convent's seemingly endless subterranean passageways. Of these searches, Kselman asserts: "As Sand realized, in their play the girls were acting out a prominent theme in the fashionable gothic literature, which featured heroes and heroines imprisoned in the dark recesses of monasteries" (*Conscience and Conversion* 198). Sand writes in *Histoire* that her prior reading at Nohant of Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel, *Les Visions du Château des Pyrénées*, further stimulates her imagination in these nocturnal adventures (6: 145). Moreover, the chance of being caught enhances their excitement and resourcefulness.<sup>30</sup>

In *La Poétique de l'espace*, Bachelard explores the poetic depth of the space of the home, a space that constitutes a body of images providing proofs or illusions of stability (34). In his view, a home is imagined as a vertical being, its verticality ensured by the polarity of the cellar and the attic: "Les marques de cette polarité sont si profondes qu'elles ouvrent, en quelque manière, deux axes très différents pour une phénoménologie de l'imagination" (35). Considering the cellar, "on lui trouvera sans doute des utilités. [...] Mais elle est d'abord l'être *obscur* de la maison, l'être qui participe aux puissances souterraines. En y rêvant, on s'accorde à l'irrationalité des profondeurs" (35). Sand describes in *Histoire* how their nightly expeditions in the underground passages ignite their "folles imaginations" (6: 145). Inspired, Sand rediscovers



creative writing. In her “journal satirique” (6: 161), she narrates the underground adventures and classroom pranks of the *diabes*, portions of which she sends in letters to her grandmother. Her urge to create reawakens, unfolding in works of poetry and short stories that she shares with her classmates. For her own personal reading, she resumes her “eternal poëme” (6: 234) of Corambé. Nonetheless, Sand writes, “le roman était en action, et le sujet, c’était la victime du souterrain, sujet bien plus émouvant que toutes les fictions possibles” (6: 235). Imagining, a fundamental element of creative writing, flows freely for her in this space.

Referring to these imaginative activities from her adolescence, Sand attempts in *Histoire* to establish a connection with the reader: “mon but, en retraçant mes souvenirs, est d’intéresser mon lecteur au souvenir de sa propre vie” (6: 230). Sand wishes to evoke the reader’s memory. Further, Mary Garnett writes: “*Histoire de ma vie*, unlike many autobiographies, is a reader-centered text in which Sand creates an intimate bond with her reader that, in her depictions of childhood, draws the reader back to reflect on his or her own experiences” (115). Upon reflection of these experiences, Sand emphasizes that the reader can retake possession of his/her “veritable richesse” (6: 231) formed in the innocence of youth.

### **A Space for Reviving Creativity: Sacred Voices**

Sand remarks in her autobiography that, although she had been delighted with communal life, a private *chez soi* is necessary for those who love “à rêver et à contempler” (6: 240). She claims that the happiest moment at the convent occurs when she moves out of the dormitory and acquires an individual cell as an upper-class student. Located in the attic of a dilapidated building, her miniscule room is like an oven in the summer and literally an ice box in the winter, with icicles forming from its disjointed ceiling. Like most convents, heat is not available in the

dormitories or individual cells. Sand acknowledges that this extreme frigidness causes dreadful colds and sharp pains in her limbs, an affliction that persists in later years. In spite of its decrepit condition, her cell in the attic becomes a beloved personal refuge—a place for contemplation and dreaming: “quel monde de rêveries semblait lié pour [elle] à cette petite niche poudreuse et misérable” (6: 243). In *La Poétique de l’espace*, Bachelard describes the attic as “un gîte de reverie,” the place where one develops the habit of daydreaming (33). One always climbs to reach the attic: “Il a le signe de l’ascension vers la plus tranquille solitude” (41). In a Bachelardian reading, a place of solitude in the attic offers “les cadres d’une rêverie interminable, d’une rêverie que la poésie pourrait seule, par une œuvre, achever, accomplir” (33). Unlike the cellar, the *être obscur* of the home, the roof, through its means of shelter and protection, immediately expresses its *raison d’être* (35). Considering Bachelard’s concept of the home’s verticality, the dreamer dreams rationally under the roof in the attic; unlike the subterranean passageways, fears are easily rationalized here (36). Thoroughly content in her new dwelling at the convent, Sand transforms from a young girl regularly engaged in diversions in the underground passages with her fellow *diaboles* to one dedicated to daydreaming and contemplation in her cell in the attic.

One sacred voice that offers Sand inspiration during her spiritual transformation belongs to Sister Marie Alicia Spiring. As a postulant, Marie Alicia served as headmistress of the *pensionnat*; six years prior to Sand’s arrival, she took her perpetual vows and received the black veil (Cédoz 350). For Marie Alicia, the convent represents both a space for sanctuary and a space for opportunity. She undertakes the role of secretary for the religious community, in charge of all of the mother superior’s office work. Both her peers and the students esteem Marie Alicia. Sand

praises her as being the wisest, most intelligent, and kindest nun in the religious congregation, “la perle du couvent” (6: 201).<sup>31</sup>

As Arnold notes, many religious congregations with *pensionnats* encouraged the nuns to become a “bonne mère” for their students (177). At the *Couvent des Dames anglaises*, an *adoption maternelle spéciale* occurs when a *religieuse* (*petite mère*) elects to “adopt” a *pensionnaire* (*fille*) (Sand 6: 203). A *pensionnaire* initiates the adoption request and, if the nun consents, obtains authorization from the student’s parents and the mother superior. This relationship permits the *fille* access to previously restricted areas, such as the cell of her *petite mère*, in order to meet regularly at a designated time. In her autobiography, Sand explains her request for Marie Alicia to become her *petite mère*, a feat that her classmates deemed unthinkable and impossible due to their different temperaments:

J’avais besoin de chérir quelqu’un et de le placer dans ma pensée habituelle au-dessus de tous les autres êtres, de rêver en lui la perfection, le calme, la force, la justice ; de vénérer enfin un objet supérieur à moi, et de rendre dans mon cœur un culte assidu à quelque chose comme Dieu ou comme Corambé. Ce quelque chose prenait les traits graves et sereins de Marie Alicia. C’était mon idéal, mon saint amour, c’était la mère de mon choix. (6: 207)

Replacing Corambé, Marie Alicia becomes Sand’s muse, a sacred source of inspiration. Marie Alicia plays a significant role in Sand’s adolescent development; moreover, she aids Sand during a moment of desperation as discussed later in this chapter. Considering the derivation of inspirational figures in Sand’s life, Beizer elaborates: “[Marie Alicia] takes a place in the succession of good mother figures that stretches from Sophie to God to Corambé” (80). Naomi Schor writes that in the social space of the convent, “Sand finds what she had so sorely lacked in

her childhood, *an ideal or idealizable mother, a fit mother for her idealism*” (emphasis by author 178).<sup>32</sup> When referring to Marie Alicia in her autobiography, Sand often intersperses her text with lively dialogue, a narrative technique that effectively engages the reader. Through this technique, Sand reveals to the reader a more intimate and realistic glimpse of Marie Alicia’s benevolent and enlightened disposition. Through her text, Sand endows her muse a distinct voice outside of the walls of the convent, beyond its strict rules for silence.

Sand claims that, unexpectedly, at the age of fifteen, she experiences an epiphany while alone in the convent’s church. With visual, auditory and olfactory detail, she recounts in *Histoire* the manner in which “la poésie du saint lieu s’empare de [s]on imagination” (6: 255). Like Corambé, another sacred voice speaks to her:

Tout à coup je ne sais quel ébranlement se produisit dans tout mon être, un vertige passe devant mes yeux comme une lueur blanche dont je me sens enveloppée. Je crois entendre une voix murmurer à mon oreille : *Tolle, lege*. Je me retourne, croyant que c’est Marie Alicia qui me parle. J’étais seule. (6: 255)

This mystical experience of a sacred voice that commands her *Tolle, lege*, or as translated by Naginski, the Augustinian message of “*Take this book and read it*” (164), leads her to abandon her affiliation with the *diabes*. Rather, she undergoes a radical spiritual transformation. Moved by this sacred voice, Sand begins to read hagiographical literature available at the convent such as *La Vie de saint Augustin* and *La Vie des saints*. As was the case in most *pensionnats*, access to books, beyond classroom manuals, was limited to devotional literature. However, this limitation did not prevent creative thinking, as Christina de Bellaigue observes: “Under the cover of her devotional reading, Sand was making interpretative choices and developing her own ideas” (219).

Convinced of a spiritual call to remain permanently at the convent, Sand veers towards an ascetic lifestyle with overzealous fervor. Eventually, her ardent passion for a mystic life that she adopts, in which she neglects food and sleep, results in serious health issues. Voices of reason—in particular, those of her confessor l'abbé de Prémord and Marie Alicia—stress concern for her well-being. In her autobiography, Sand continuously expresses gratitude that no one attempts to proselytize her during her spiritual journey; in fact, Marie Alicia and her confessor convince Sand to not take premature vows. However, the effect of the mysterious voice lingers with Sand for an extended period; according to Jurgrau, Sand's spiritual conversion is “a dominant factor in her mood for the next twelve years, until she publishes her first novel” (200). With the continuous merging of the concepts of “religion” and “novel” in *Histoire*, Naginski suggests that “[t]he *Tolle, lege* episode can be interpreted as a prefiguration of Sand's future vocation as a writer. [...] The image of the ‘limitless path’ opening up before her can be seen as a metaphor for her own future itinerary as a novelist writing for her life” (165). Instead of taking the path of a *religieuse*, Sand continues her journey along the *chemin* of a creative writer, exerting her influence through literature.

### **A Space for Reviving Creativity: Debuts and Denouements**

Upon advice from her confessor, Sand abandons her ascetic lifestyle and returns to a life of gaiety with her classmates. However, their form of diversion no longer consists of *chercher la victime* but rather of theatre performance. In *Histoire*, Sand describes her artistic progression from leading a small troupe that performs her “petites comédies” (7: 67) in the back of the classroom to eventually directing a four-hour theatrical production for the entire religious community. Nicknamed “*l'auteur*” and “*boute-en-train*,” Sand makes her theatrical debut in the

convent. She assumes responsibility for multiple roles such as playwright, casting director, stage manager, costume designer, and actress. With the limited resources available within the convent, her theatrical production requires much ingenuity and imagination in preparation of the stage sets and costumes.<sup>33</sup>

As was the case in many *pensionnats*, a library did not exist at the convent. During the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, girls' reading was highly restricted, regardless of political ideology. The importance attached to a Catholic conception of female innocence led to restrictions on books available to female readers within *pensionnats* (Bellaigue 204). Advice literature produced by Catholic pedagogues recommended the avoidance of "*mauvaises lectures*" (dangerous books) for female readers (207). Influential figures contended that girls must be protected from their own supposed natures of susceptibility, promiscuity, and rebellion through containing their intellectual curiosity with a limited selection for reading (206). As Lubin notes, censorship forbid various types of literature at the *pensionnat*: "Molière, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Diderot, Voltaire restent à la porte" ("Éducation" 456). Ironically, Sand loosely bases her first theatre production on Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673). From her prior reading of Molière at Nohant, she creates a script based on memory, improvising the dialogue and omitting the "love scenes" (Sand 7: 69). According to Sand, her theatrical debut receives overwhelming praise and "mit la communauté de si belle humeur que [elle] pensai[t] voir crouler la salle" (7 : 71-72). She attributes the success to multiple factors: a dedicated theatre troupe, parental support, encouragement from the nuns, and an eager audience. Sand notes that this creative diversion inspires the entire religious community: "La camaraderie, le besoin de s'aimer les unes les autres pour se divertir en commun, engendrèrent la bienveillance, la condescendance, une indulgence

mutuelle, l'absence de toute rivalité" (7: 73). Consequently, the mother superior allows Sand and her troupe to continue in their theatrical diversions with weekly Sunday performances.

In spite of Sand's apparent state of absolute tranquility, Madame Dupin, who worries about her granddaughter's intention to eventually take the veil, decides to remove her from the convent. This sudden denouement completely confounds Sand:

Cette nouvelle tomba sur moi comme un coup de foudre, au milieu du plus parfait bonheur que j'eusse goûté de ma vie. Le couvent était devenu mon paradis sur la terre. Je n'y étais ni pensionnaire ni religieuse, mais quelque chose d'intermédiaire, avec la liberté absolue dans un intérieur que je chérissais et que je ne quittais pas sans regret, même pour une journée. Personne n'était donc aussi heureux que moi. (7: 82)

Sand writes that she had found a perfect happiness in the social space of the convent, a space that she loved and held dear. In *La Poétique de l'espace*, Bachelard introduces a concept of "topophilia," the experience of happiness in a space. According to Bachelard, *l'espace heureux* represents the inhabited space that one loves (17). In the social space of the convent, Sand's home for more than two years, she experiences bliss and intimacy. Sand reflects on the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* in her autobiography:

Je l'ai dit, mais je le dirai encore une fois, au moment d'enterrer ce rêve de vie claustrale dans mes lointains mais toujours tendres souvenirs : l'existence en commun avec des êtres doucement aimables et doucement aimés est l'idéal du bonheur. L'affection vit de préférences ; mais dans ce genre de société fraternelle, où une croyance quelconque sert de lien, les préférences sont si pures et si saines, qu'elles augmentent les sources du cœur au lieu de les épuiser. (7: 110)

In this refuge, a protected social space consisting of more than a physical boundary, Sand finds community and inspiration, aspects that facilitate a rejuvenation of creativity. However, Sand's time spent behind the cloister grille end abruptly due to her grandmother's decision. In her autobiography, Sand notes that she most likely would have adhered to her spiritual pursuit in Catholicism if she had remained at the convent (7: 84). Instead, after returning to Nohant, she probes further into various philosophical and religious questions, a comprehensive effort that continues throughout her lifetime and significantly influences the narrative in some of her novels.

### **Representations of the Convent in Sand's Novels**

After her departure from the convent, during an extended period of “une profonde mélancolie,” or as Sand characterizes “le mal du couvent” (7: 109), she sincerely contemplates returning. Ultimately, partially due to her self-education gained through extensive reading from her grandmother's library, Sand decides not to take a perpetual vow. However, five years after her departure, she suffers from an oppressive marriage and postpartum depression, a “tristesse sans but et sans nom” (Sand 8: 100). At the age of 20, after the birth of her first child, Sand seeks refuge at the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* where she receives special permission to bring her son Maurice. The *religieuses*, in particular Marie Alicia, comfort Sand with maternal care and dote on her son during their short stay. Once again, Sand considers a future life in the cloister and wrestles with her decision. On the one hand, Sand perceives that she enjoys “douceurs de la liberté” (8: 102) outside of the convent. She searches for a confirmation of the existence of constraint within the convent, “le côté sombre et asservi de la vie monastique” (8: 102). Instead, she finds protection, “tant d'aise et de liberté, au contraire, dans cette captivité qui vous préserve,



dans cette discipline qui assure vos heures de recueillement” (8: 103). On the other hand, Sand tries to recapture fond memories from her adolescence; yet, the social space in the convent has changed. As an example, some of her former classmates who are still there have grown; she no longer recognizes them. Acknowledging the inevitability of change, Marie Alicia encourages her to not live on “vains rêves” (8: 103) but rather on the joy of motherhood. Eventually, Sand and Maurice return to Nohant.

After the July Revolution, Sand visits the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* for the last time. Sand remarks that “[t]out le monde y était préoccupé des effets de la révolution de juillet, de l’absence d’élèves, de la perturbation générale dont on subissait les conséquences matérielles” (8 : 244). After her visit, Sand declares her rupture from the convent. Nonetheless, her memories of the social space of the convent as well as her impressions on monastic life exert significant influence in her future novels, four of which I will briefly discuss.

Her first published novel *Rose et Blanche* (1831), written in collaboration with Jules Sandeau, addresses prevailing social, economic, and political structures in the first half of the nineteenth century that limited opportunities for women. The novel recounts the story of two young women who seek asylum at a Parisian convent due to extreme oppression experienced outside its walls (Jumel 40). Without marriage prospects, sustainable professions, or sufficient financial funds, Rose and Blanche view the convent as a refuge rather than a spiritual sanctuary, as Caroline Jumel elaborates:

La société n’a rien à leur offrir, sinon des souffrances, ainsi que des humiliations physiques et morales. Le couvent vers lequel les deux protagonistes sont dirigées—car il faut avant tout souligner que la société les pousse à entrer au couvent—est représenté au premier abord comme un asile ; [...] La vision du couvent selon Rose est celle de

l'austérité et de l'ennui. Mais elle est consciente du fait que sa situation sociale ne lui offre pas vraiment d'autre choix. (42-43)

In this novel, the Sandian reader will likely recognize Sand's convent confessor in the character abbé de P. . . and Marie Alicia in the character Sister Adèle, both exemplary members of the fictional religious community (Kselman *Conscience and Conversion* 209). Likewise, the paradoxical view of the social space of the convent that Sand develops in her autobiography appears in the novel, as Caroline Jumel surmises: "En effet, le couvent sert à la fois de refuge contre l'oppression mais aussi de structure carcérale. Le couvent est donc représenté comme un refuge problématique" (38).

*Valentine* (1832), the second published novel under her *nom de plume*, examines class and gender issues during the Restoration, in particular educational practices at that time. Contemplating the education that Sand received at the convent, Georges Lubin writes: "On a peine à considérer cela [son éducation] comme une véritable éducation digne de ce nom. La place des sciences est à peu près nulle, celle de la philosophie inexistant" ("Éducation" 456). Lubin notes that Sand indirectly addresses the realities of its deficiency through her protagonists: "les [héroïnes] paraissent être passées par le couvent des Anglaises" (459). As an example, *Valentine* expresses extreme displeasure with her education:

—[D]ans le temps où nous vivons, il faut une spécialité. [...] L'éducation que nous recevons est misérable ; on nous donne les éléments de tout, et l'on ne nous permet pas de rien approfondir. On veut que nous soyons instruites ; mais, du jour où nous deviendrions savantes, nous serions ridicules. (*Valentine* 26)

After leaving the convent, Sand decides to recommence her studies with her private tutor François Deschartres. This time she endeavors in earnest to strengthen and broaden her

knowledge by taking full advantage of Deschartres's expertise and of the immense library at Nohant. Sand begins a lifelong dedication to study in the previously neglected fields of science, philosophy, literature, poetry, and politics. As Lubin notes, Sand recognizes that "l'éducation était le Sésame qui ouvrirait les portes fermées" ("Éducation" 465). Self-sufficiency is enabled for Sand through her new educational efforts, as demonstrated in her unique accomplishment as a financially independent female writer.

In 1839, a revised edition of the novel *Lélia* (1833) was published, a novel-poem that Sand describes in *Histoire* as a spontaneous inspiration from the "l'école de Corambé" (9: 79). Like the final version of *Les Misérables*, *Lélia II* greatly expands the role of the convent (Porter 78). In the novel, Sand probes the feminine *mal de siècle*; in particular, she examines the feminine condition in the institution of marriage, an institution that *Lélia* ultimately rejects. Instead, *Lélia* enters a Camaldolese convent where she eventually becomes the abbess (Kselman *Conscience and Conversion* 226). Schor writes: "In the second, more overtly feminist *Lélia* of 1839, *Lélia* withdraws altogether from society into the cultural space Catholic societies specifically allocate female dropouts from the exchange system [of marriage] and/or the erotic marketplace, the convent" (88). With the assistance of the character Cardinal Annibal, *Lélia* attempts to reform the Catholic Church from within (Kselman *Conscience and Conversion* 226).

As Thérèse Laroche notes, in *Lélia* Sand appropriates and revises the traditional conventions of sainthood, using hagiographical allusions as a vehicle for representing the heroine's malaise (14). Rather than the intimacy achieved by a saint through an ascetic lifestyle of monastic discipline and prayer, *Lélia* finds only "the same desolation she found in intimate human relationships, a challenge to the basic premise of *vita sancta* according to which it is only in mysticism that the saint will find the intimacy falsely promised by the world" (Laroche 17).

For Lélia, both the ascetic lifestyle and the enjoyment in worldly pleasures fall short. Ultimately, her reform efforts fail, and Lélia is exiled from the convent (Kselman *Conscience and Conversion* 226).

*Spiridion* (1839), published six months prior to *Lélia II*, takes place during the late eighteenth century in a remote Italian monastery, a “privileged space for meditation” (Naginski 141). In the novel, with prose composed merely of monologues and dialogues, a dying monk named Alexis mentors a novice named Angel (Kselman *Conscience and Conversion* 225). Thematic and mystical aspects of the *Tolle, lege* episode described in *Histoire* occur for Alexis while alone in the church: “a hushed atmosphere, a portrait, a strange apparition or vision” (Naginski 165). Inspired, Alexis counsels Angel in utopian ideology such as “the perfectibility of humankind, the idea of continuous progress, the insistence on a eudemonistic vision for the future [and] belief in a new religion of Humanity” (142). In Sand’s fictional monastic space, she replaces Alexis’s attachment to Catholicism with a conviction of a new faith, a form of Christian socialism. Naginski notes that in both *Spiridion* and *Lélia II*, Sand utilizes poetic correspondence, “in which the figural and architectural [space of the convent] echo one another”; “in the descriptions of Lélia’s cell and Alexis’s tower, an identification is made between the characters’ mental states and the architectural world surrounding them” (153-54). Yet, unlike the uncertainty in *Lélia*, *Spiridion* closes with hope for a new religion (160).

## Conclusion

In spite of her memories of absolute tranquility in the social space of the convent that are vividly portrayed in *Histoire*, Sand chooses to not accentuate this instance of topophilia in her four novels. Rather, she critiques the minimal education and the lack of opportunities available

for women at that epoch. In her pursuit of a new religion, she advocates freedom of choice, as expressed in *Histoire*:

Mais il faut que cette religion s'établisse par la foi et non par la contrainte, par le libre examen et non par la raison d'État. Aucun homme n'a le droit de l'imposer à son semblable avant qu'il l'ait comprise et acceptée librement (3: 140).

In her private and public correspondence, like Hugo, she advocates a form of separation of Church and State. Within this separation, she stresses the duty of the State to provide free and secular education to everyone, as a basic human right (Lubin "Éducation" 467). The role of the convent, in Sand's view, was diminished, no longer serving as the place of the *pensionnat*.

Five years after the first installment of *Histoire* appeared in *La Presse*, the physical space of the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* began to drastically change. During the projects of urban renewal under the Second Empire, the State expropriated the land of the convent in 1859, offering an indemnity of 700,000 francs (Cédoz 397). Forced to leave Paris, the religious community purchased property in Neuilly where in 1860 they began construction of a new convent, including a *pensionnat*, "une parfait appropriation aux besoins d'une maison d'éducation" (348, 394). Later in 1862, the religious community added a primary school for the *enfants pauvres* of Neuilly (444). However, by the end of the century, similar to the situation of other convents in France, student numbers began to dwindle. Nancy Rogers notes that "the community remained in France until 1911, when the nuns left as a result of the secularization of French society" (11). At least until 1988, the religious community continued to exist, albeit relocated to a new physical location in London (11).

## Conclusion

La société se doute à peine de  
ce creusement qui lui laisse  
sa surface et lui change les  
entrailles. [...] Que sort-il de  
toutes ces fouilles  
profondes ? L'avenir.  
— Victor Hugo  
(*Les Misérables* 3: 180)

In the texts analyzed in this thesis, two highly prominent authors of the nineteenth century chose to not depict the social space of the convent as a place of sinister confinement. Rather, they represent the convent as an edifying, sacred place of refuge. For Hugo's character Jean Valjean, the convent offers a hiding place for a man escaping inevitable punishment established through the French Penal Code. For Hugo's character Cosette, the convent provides a haven to an abused, illegitimate child, born of a prostitute and forgotten by society. In this sacred space, two unique, transitory residents, who are significantly influenced by the ceaseless dedication and self-denial demonstrated by the nuns, experience a metaphorical rebirth with transformative consequences. For George Sand, the convent offers a solace and respite during two troublesome periods of her life: first as an adolescent girl trapped in an adverse triangular relationship with her mother and grandmother and later as a young mother trapped in a repressive marriage. In this protective space, slowly ascending from its maze of dark, subterranean passages to its tranquil attic, Sand experiences a rejuvenation of creativity as a writer.

Despite the positive space that the convent represents in both writers' works, both Hugo and Sand opined that the future role of the convent should be diminished, no longer serving as the place for girls to receive a secondary education. Until the Third Republic, religious communities with *pensionnats* enjoyed considerable dominance in the area of girls' schooling.

Yet, even for social spaces seemingly isolated and impenetrable, there exists the capacity for change. By the 1860s, public debate on the control and content of girls' education began to surge. Influential writers, such as Hugo and Sand, engaged in public discourse that expressed unequivocal support for free, secular education as a fundamental right of all children, made available exclusively under State regulation. In this political and social climate, anti-clericals wished to weaken the considerable influence which the religious communities exercised over education.

Critical legislation was passed during the Third Republic that influenced the gradual reduction of the role of the convent in girls' schooling. The Camille Sée law of 1880 established a State system of secondary education for girls that awarded a *diplôme d'études secondaires* upon completion. Yet, this diploma, as Rebecca Rogers observes, "opened no doors except those of the conjugal home" (Rogers, *Salon* 207). Moreover, the *collèges* and *lycées* were neither obligatory nor free, and both establishments continued to keep religion in the curriculum as an elective (205-07). Nonetheless, the State's establishment of a public system of secondary schools for girls prompted the creation in 1881 of the *École normale supérieure de Sèvres* to train future teachers (207). The Ferry laws of 1881-83 made primary education free, obligatory, and secular, replacing religious instruction with civics (Curtis 107). Further, the Goblet law of 1886 replaced religious personnel in state schools with lay personnel; this law affected more than 15,000 *religieuses* (Gibson 128). During the same time period of these legislative measures, the establishment of new religious orders largely ceased. However, overall numbers remained fairly steady until the end of the century (105). Likewise, the proportion of French students in Catholic schools, at its peak in 1876, slowly but steadily declined from 1881 to 1901 (Grew and Harrigan 101). Nonetheless, whether considered as a favorable agent or not, one could argue that the

social space of the convent with its *pensionnat* and community of teaching *religieuses* accentuated the relevance of girls' secondary education, a consideration long neglected by the State.

Beginning in the twentieth-century, the social space of the convent in France evolved. Although the convent continued to serve as a sacred space for religious community, it declined as a space for opportunity in the domains of education and health care. The coming of the French welfare state, with its assumption of the responsibility for these domains, was a key factor in explaining this downturn. Further, the Law of Associations (1901) and the Law of 1904, that excluded *religieuses* from teaching, laicized a preexisting educational system. As Grew and Harrigan note, "between 1901 and 1906, teachers in religious orders all but disappeared" (107). Partially influenced by these legislative measures, nuns migrated from France to establish schools and hospitals in congregations in other parts of the world. Rebecca Rogers writes that 1900 was the high point of this movement, when "approximately 20,000 women in 55 French religious congregations had established themselves in 80 non-European countries" ("Le Catholicism" 92). Thus, the convent continued to serve as an alternative space to discover and fulfill a sense of purpose outside of the traditional feminine roles of marriage and biological motherhood.



## Notes

1. Claude Langlois, French historian and sociologist, has conducted extensive research on nineteenth-century female religious congregations. A year after his doctoral thesis defense in 1983, the Éditions du Cerf published Langlois's 776-page thèse d'état entitled *Le Catholicisme au féminin : Les Congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Rogers, "Le Catholicisme" 83). His thesis focused new attention on *religieuses* whose lives and careers had been relatively neglected in the field of women's history, despite their active participation in the fields of education and health care (83). As differentiated in his thesis, a distinction between cloistered orders and their nuns and active congregations and their sisters existed in the nineteenth century. In my thesis, I use the terms 'order' and 'congregation' interchangeably and the term *religieuse* to include both cloistered nuns and active sisters.

2. Using Langlois's reconstituted figures, Ralph Gibson reports in *A Social History of French Catholicism: 1789-1914* the following number of *religieuses* in France:

1815	15,000
1830	30,000
1848	66,000
1861	104,000
1878	135,000 (105).

3. The *Revue des Romans* (1839), a catalogue of 1100 "productions remarquables des plus célèbres romanciers" (vii) compiled by Eusèbe de Saint-Fargeau, cites numerous examples from works published in the beginning of the nineteenth century. For example, in *Le Damsel et la bergerette* (1808) by Cuvelier de Trie, a young man disguises himself as a nun in order to rescue his lover unwillingly held in a convent (161). In Salverte's novel *Nèila* (1812), Hildéric rescues his paramour Nèila from a convent cell (260-61). Likewise, in *La Mère intrigante* (1811) by Maria Edgeworth, a young woman escapes imprisonment by descending the convent's walls—with the help from a ladder held by her lover (208-09). As a final example, in *Cécile* (1827) by Victor Jouy, the heroine is rescued by her lover Anatole de Césane (368).

4. Newspaper reports for the case of Barbara Ubryk appeared internationally, from Europe to North America to Australia. Verhoeven notes that in France, "the first lengthy report was published in *Le Temps* and *La Liberté* on July 27, 1869, and the following day in *Le Siècle*, *Le Journal des Débats*, *Le Moniteur Universel*, and *L'Opinion National*" ("Sad Tale" 116).

5. In *George Sand*, Elizabeth Harlan notes that “during the course of Sand's career, she produced more than ninety novels, dozens of novellas, scores of plays, thousands of pages of autobiography, tomes of commentary and criticism, hundreds of articles, numerous travel journals, and a correspondence comprising some twenty thousand extant letters” (xi). Similarly, Victor Hugo is revered worldwide for his numerous works of poetry, fiction and drama, and scores of drawings and written correspondence. Ozouf justly remarks that “nulle royauté littéraire n’égala jamais la sienne. [...] C’est le chêne immense dont les robustes frondaisons couvrent depuis soixante ans de leur ombre les floraisons sans cesse renaissantes de la pensée française” (45).

6. The mother-house of the order *Bon-Pasteur* was established in 1829 at Angers, the “congregational capital of western France” (Taron 125-27). By the end of the nineteenth century, the 220 monasteries of *Bon-Pasteur*, with 39 in France, housed 47,835 *pensionnaires* (134).

7. Initially, in Hugo’s first version titled *Les Misères*, the convent les Dames de Saint-Michel, an authentic space in Paris designated for the rehabilitation of *filles débauchées* (‘wayward girls’), served as Valjean’s refuge (Huard 367). However, this convent would eventually not serve Hugo’s purpose, and as Georges Huard appropriately suggests: “ce refuge pour filles débauchées, repenties ou non, et traitées avec une sévérité extrême, n’était nullement désigné pour qu’il lui confiât l’éducation de Cosette, future baronne Pontmercy” (371).

8. Thérèse received special permission from the Church to enter the convent at the age of fifteen. Typically, Church law forbade entrance before sixteen and novices under twenty-one needed parental consent to take their vows (Rogers, “Retrograde” 152).

9. In her early 20s, Thérèse was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Towards the end of her life, the elder nuns encouraged her to document her memories of the Carmelite convent and her personal *petite doctrine*. Marie-Françoise-Thérèse Martin died at the age of 24 (Hellerstein et al. 107). She is known today as Saint Thérèse de Lisieux and became one of the most popular saints in the twentieth century (Kselman, “Langlois’s Vision” 74). She was canonized in 1925 and named a doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II in 1997. Her autobiographical memoir, *Histoire d’une âme*, sold over two million copies by 1925 and today is translated in over 50 languages (74).

10. For an extended discussion of the solemn vows taken, see Odile Arnold, chapters 3 and 7, and Elizabeth Rapley, chapter 8.

11. It is interesting to note that according to Grew and Harrigan's quantitative analysis, on the eve of the Ferry Laws (1881), 98 percent of France's departments had reached the goal of full enrollment of the primary school-age population (59).

12. However, Curtis observes that by the 1860s and 70s, many teaching congregations expanded their curriculum, either of their own accord, or in response to community pressure: "A teaching manual for women religious published in 1858 recommended they include geography, history, physics, natural history, literature, bookkeeping and drawing as additional subjects" (85).

13. Similar to obtaining the *brevet*, some *religieuses* temporarily left the cloister in order to receive certified training in nursing. For example, some of the cloistered nuns from the Hôtel-Dieu received training from the Salpêtrière, one of the four secular teaching hospitals.

14. According to historian Guy Rosa, the oldest piece of evidence for the book's conception, written on the back of a form addressed to "*Pair de France*," consists of four lines: "Histoire d'un saint / Histoire d'un homme / Histoire d'une femme / Histoire d'une poupée" (31). Thus, the first version's genesis would have occurred at least several weeks after Hugo's nomination to the Chamber of Peers in April 1845. In that year, Hugo began a first version of a novel titled *Les Misères*, nearly completing it in 1847 with only the fifth volume remaining (Huard 371). However, completion was interrupted considerably due to unforeseen events resulting from the Revolution of 1848 and the coup d'état in 1851. During his subsequent exile, in the spring of 1860, after a delay of twelve years, Hugo returned to his novel, which he ultimately titled *Les Misérables*.

15. Details of Hugo's negotiations with potential publishers were frequently reported in the French press and subsequently discussed in the literary community. Refusing the substantial offer of 150,000 francs from the French publisher Hetzel, Hugo managed to secure from the Belgian publisher Lacroix and Verboeckhoven an unprecedented royalty of 300,000 francs for an eight-year license and translation rights—equivalent at that time to the annual salaries of 120 civil servants (Robb 376).

16. According to the journals of Hugo's wife Adèle written during the family's exile, even their son Charles, a progressive Republican, strongly opposed the choice of a Catholic priest as the protagonist's spiritual mentor. Yet Bishop Myriel plays a considerable role. With the first book of volume one titled "Un Juste," the novel commences with a lengthy introduction of Myriel, an exemplary priest affectionately called "monseigneur Bienvenu" by his parishioners (1: 17). Lisa Gasbarrone observes: "The notion that an admirable and elevated character like Myriel

represents the ‘true priest’ suggests that, in Hugo’s eyes, Catholicism was far from incompatible with the Ideal, as his son maintained. [...] There are other religious figures—the aptly named Sister Simplicie and Mother Innocente—who, like Myriel, demonstrate a pure commitment to a higher law that Hugo associates with the practice of a devout, deeply held Christian faith” (4-5). These exemplary characters “stand outside the normal conventions of law and order. [...] All are bonded through self-sacrifice in a community unlimited by age, gender, or social class” (Grossman 117). In Graham Robb’s assessment, Myriel “antagonizes the Church (both in the novel and in reality) by following Christ’s teaching to the letter” (378). In the novel, the anomaly of Myriel simultaneously reveals the deficiency and potentiality of the Church.

17. Book six, titled “Le Petit-Picpus,” meticulously details *les règlements de vie* at *le Petit-Picpus*, similar to those described in chapter one of this thesis. Book seven, aptly titled “Parenthèse,” questions the relevance of monastic communities.

18. Hugo invented the social space of *le Petit-Picpus* as an amalgamation of real and fictional spaces influenced by his extensive research on Parisian convents, by interviews of acquaintances affiliated with convent *pensionnats*, and by the recollections of two of his mistresses, Juliette Drouet and Léonie Biard. It is also possible that the Feuillantines convent from his youth influenced his creation. After Hugo’s parents separated, his mother returned with her sons to Paris where she rented a house that had once been part of the convent (Robb 24). As a child, Hugo spent many hours exploring its “five acres of wilderness enclosed by high stone walls” (24). The social space of the convent ultimately represented in *Les Misérables* evolved significantly during the writing process, resulting in a 300 percent increase in textual content from its original description (Rosa 35). Initially, in *Les Misères*, the convent les Dames de Saint-Michel served as Valjean’s refuge (Huard 367). Hugo abandoned it, substituting another convent known by Biard, based largely upon recollections from her aunt who was educated there between 1819 and 1823—a period close to that of the fictional characters Valjean and Cosette (357). Ultimately, in his final version, Hugo created an imaginary site named le Petit-Picpus-Saint-Antoine, thus avoiding any outcry from existing religious communities (Huard 346, 372).

19. Effectively, mère Innocente, the five *sœurs choristes* and Fauchelevent join the status of Valjean as a lawbreaker, notwithstanding undetected. For mère Innocente it is a matter of obedience to a higher law. For Fauchelevent, it is a matter of indebtedness to Valjean.

20. Briana Lewis and Nicole Savy argue that the tragic death in 1843 of Hugo's daughter Léopoldine, who drowned in a boating accident, along with her husband and his uncle, influenced themes and characterization in *Les Misérables*. In particular, Lewis notes that "Cosette is easily recognizable as Léopoldine's clearest avatar in the novel, particularly in the tenderness of the father-daughter relationship she shares with Jean Valjean and in his response to her marriage" ("Douceur" 12). Considering the clandestine meetings of Marius and Cosette, Lewis adds: "The stories of the two daughters' romances and the fathers' disapproval of them are strikingly similar: both daughters conduct a relationship in secret which, when discovered by the fathers, devastates them and moves them to rage and the temptation of unheroic behavior" (18). However, in the fictional narrative, the father ultimately blesses the marriage and provides a generous dowry (18). In a fictional world where amends can be made, "Hugo allows Cosette to live on in wedded bliss where Léopoldine did not" (20).

21. Previously, in October 1847, Sand had contacted the publisher Hetzel to inquire if they wished to publish her autobiography, having already completed the first volume (Lubin, *Introduction* xvi). Shortly thereafter, on December 21, 1847, Sand executed a five-year licensing agreement with Charles Alexandre Delatouche, a wealthy businessman (xvi). Contrary to reports published in the daily press, Hetzel was not the purchaser but rather an intermediary (xvii). According to correspondence with Hetzel, Sand continued research and writing of the remaining four volumes of her autobiography (xviii). Yet, similar to the final version of *Les Misérables*, completion was interrupted for a long period, in her case seven years, considerably due to events resulting from the Revolution of 1848 and the coup d'état of 1851.

22. In *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, Carla Hesse writes that "in 1820, when Aurore Dupin [George Sand] was sixteen years old, only about four percent of published writers were women, although this represented a doubling of the percentage of female authors since 1789" (qtd. in Garnett 108). Amplifying Sand's achievement is the fact that "in 1831, as a young woman of twenty-seven, married and the mother of two small children, Sand ventured forth from her province in central France, established herself as a writer at the epicenter of French culture, and earned her own living" (Harlan xiv). Similar to Hugo's royalty for *Les Misérables*, Sand licensed the rights to the manuscript of her autobiography for a period of five years for the immense sum of 130,000 francs, an amount later published in *La Presse* in all uppercase letters (Lubin, *Introduction* xix-xx).

23. Sand enters the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* on January 12, 1818 and leaves the convent on April 12, 1820 (Lubin, *Introduction* xxxix). Even though Sand refers to the time lived within the social space of the convent as three (presumably calendar) years, the time lapsed is actually two and a third years.

24. In *Indiana*, a triangle consists of wife (Indiana)-lover (Raymon)-friend (Ralph) in which Ralph reveals to Indiana “the moral turpitude of the loved younger man, as [Sand’s] grandmother revealed to Aurore her mother’s unworthiness” (Brée 446). In *Lélia* the same triangular configuration appears, “linking the passionate Sténio, Lélia and the wise older friend, Trenmor” (447).

25. Rousseau’s vision of domesticated womanhood remained relevant throughout the nineteenth century. His philosophy argued that “all the education of women should bear a relation to men—to please, to be useful to them—to possess their love and esteem, to educate them in childhood, to nurse them when grown up” (Rogers, *Salon* 20). In a like manner as a young girl, Madame Dupin had been sent to Saint-Cyr, a boarding school established by Madame de Maintenon in 1684 for orphaned aristocratic girls.

26. This street no longer exists. In the early nineteenth century, it was located near *rue Monge* in the Latin Quarter.

27. Other members of Sand’s family are also recorded in the archives. During the Revolution of 1789, the convent, like most religious centers in Paris, was diverted into a prison (Cédoz 273). A remarkable coincidence, both Madame Dupin and Sophie were imprisoned there at the same time. Madame Dupin, who was incarcerated for concealing documents and valuables behind a false wall in her apartment, was confined from November 1793 to August 1794 (283). Likewise, Sophie was arrested for singing a seditious song against the Republic and was held during the Reign of Terror (283-84). While at the convent, their paths never crossed.

28. In her analysis, Beizer further notes: “When we follow the path of birds throughout Sand’s autobiography, however, it becomes clear that she is not in fact departing from the history of her heritage and birth by telling stories about birds, but rather tracing a storyline that is metaphorically and metonymically continuous with her matrilineage” (73). Jurgrau concurs that this metaphor runs through Sand’s autobiography: “As she attempts to re-create the myth of her character, tales and images of birds are threaded through the work, legitimated by the fact that her grandfather [Antoine Delaborde] on her mother’s side was a bird handler in Paris” (204).

29. Widows with unsustainable financial means would often seek refuge in a convent. For example, as a young widow without significant financial support, Madame Dupin took shelter at the convent of the Dames du Calvaire for several years before her second marriage (Harlan 16).

30. A common punishment required the offender to wear their nightcap all the next day, even at church. When nuns saw these students, they would make the sign of the cross and cry: “Shame! Shame!” (Sand 6: 137)

31. Marie Alicia was less than thirty when Sand met her (Sand 6: 201). According to the monastery archives, she was a nun who was “très estimée;” she lived 43 years in the cloister of the *Couvent des Dames anglaises* (Cédoz 354).

32. In *George Sand and Idealism*, Schor clarifies that her reference to Sandian idealism “comes to function within the history of aesthetics as the opposite of realism, [...] idealism as it signifies chiefly in nineteenth-century French aesthetic discourse” (11-12). In other words, Sandian idealism refers to “[Sand’s] participation in elaborating what Joseph Frank has described as the second of the ‘two romanticisms’ available to European authors who came of age in the 1830s—that is, native French social romanticism” (165).

33. Sand writes that her theatrical debut launches a tradition at the convent: each year the students perform a play in honor of the mother superior’s birthday (7: 70). Subsequently, a theatre is built and various stage equipment, such as stage lights and a thunder machine, are purchased (7: 70). According to Sand, the merriment disappears in later productions: “Mais les représentations n’étaient pas gaies; c’étaient toujours les petits drames larmoyants de madame de Genlis” (7 : 70).

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