

The Ghostwriter's Preface

I claim the title, *ghostwriter*, with great humility and esteem for Bishop Myriel, Victor Hugo's catalyst character in *Les Miserables*. Basing this novel on an already well-known and beloved fictional protagonist posed a challenge, to say the least. My original design for this work consisted of each chapter containing three segments: *fiction* (filling out the character of Bishop Charles Francois Myriel); followed by a *nonfiction* essay (reflecting on my own personal experience of dealing with life-situations similar to those in the bishop's life); and closing each chapter with a *poem* relevant to the chapter's theme.

Nearing completion of the first draft, I secured the input from a select group of early readers. One of them, Honey O'Leary, suggested that I simply focus on Bishop Myriel's story and figure out some other vehicle for my personal musings and poems. Honey's suggestion struck a chord of "rightness" within me. My only concern was doubt that I would have enough material in the bishop's part to produce more than a short booklet. To find the answer, I stripped the manuscript of all personal musings. To my surprise, I still had a respectable page count for a stand-alone book. I also discovered in this process that I had written an uncluttered novel.

The book you now hold in your hand is . . . a novel . . . my fictionalized story of the fictional character Bishop Myriel, his life and times. I apologize to the great Victor Hugo, who might read this in "author heaven" and not be pleased. I'll have to face that when Hugo and I meet some day on that common ground (or cloud).

Why This Story?

In the dramatic stage adaptation of *Les Miserables*, with music by Claude-Michel Schönberg, French lyrics by Jean-Marc Natel and in English by Herbert Kretzmer, Bishop Myriel appears early in Act I for barely a few minutes. During that brief encounter with mendicant Jean Valjean, the bishop bestows upon the wild-looking parolee the inherited Myriel family treasures (silver dinnerware and candlesticks). Before they part ways on stage, the bishop spontaneously "commissions" Valjean with a new calling in life:

"Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!"

With that surprising and confusing revelation, the bishop withdraws from the stage not to be seen again until Valjean's deathbed scene when he appears to the dying man as in a vision.

How different the scene in Hugo's original!

The *first lines* of that sprawling epic present Bishop Myriel front and center as a major player in the story:

In 1815, M. Charles Francois Myriel was Bishop of D____. He was a man of seventy-five and had occupied the bishopric of D____ since 1806.

Fantine, Book the First, Chapter I, Myriel

In the commission scene, the bishop's final words to Valjean are:

“Remember this my brother, you will use this precious silver to become an honest man. By the witness of the martyrs, by the Passion and the Blood, God has raised you out of darkness; I have saved your soul for God.”

Soon after being released, however, Valjean robs Petit Gervais, a lone child on a deserted road. Suddenly, he recalls the bishop’s mandate (in this abbreviated form):

“ . . . you have promised me to become an honest man. I am purchasing your soul; I withdraw it from the spirit of perversity and give it to God Almighty. ”

Myriel and Valjean never meet again, at least not until Jean Valjean lies on his deathbed. Hugo describes that scene as follows:

The portress had come up and was looking through the half-open door. The physician motioned her away, but he could not prevent that good, zealous woman from crying to the dying man before she went”

“Do you want a priest?”

“I have one,” answered Jean Valjean.

And, with his finger, he seemed to designate a point above his head, where, you would have said, he saw someone.

It is probable that the Bishop was indeed a witness of his death-agony.

Over the century-and-a half of the original novel’s existence, a number of abridged versions of the 1,200-plus pages have appeared. Some publishers made an editorial decision to abridge the text. In doing so, they generally omit the statement that Bishop Myriel was in the process of writing a book on the topic of Christian duty. I am grateful for Charles E. Wilbour’s unabridged English translation (1862, the very year of the novel’s first publication. Wilbour includes Hugo’s detailed, Scripture-based outline of the bishop’s opus-to-be. Random House’s Modern Library Edition of Wilbour’s translation (2000) filled that important gap.

We are told by Victor Hugo himself that the work remained unfinished. The bishop’s detailed outline captured my imagination and launched me on a twenty-year inner quest that has resulted, finally, in this historical novel. Probing *Les Miserables*’ expansive spirit became my passion. I can only hope that I serve the good bishop well by attempting to channel his spirit. And so, I dare to offer what I call a *first draft manuscript* of Bishop Myriel’s book. In doing so, I have done my best to preserve *Duty*’s outline as created by the original author.

First, I offer a set of reflections on themes given birth in Myriel’s rich and fertile prayer life. Then, I offer my rendering of the book the bishop outlined but never completed.

Part the First: The Duties of All addresses key virtues applicable to all people of good will.

Part the Second: Duties According to One’s Life offers insight into common obligations applicable to roles being lived by specific segments of Christian and secular society.

Throughout, I use a common typeface to convey the Bishop’s interior thoughts—his ponderings—and French Script MT to indicate what he committed to paper. Where applicable and to maintain a connection with the original story, I employ citations at the head of most chapters from Hugo’s original text or relevant citations from the New Testament.

I invite and welcome your feedback.