

VICTOR HUGO AND SURREALISM:
PHANTOM DRAWINGS, AUTOMATISM, AND THE OCCULT

by

JILL ALLISON MILLER

Under the Direction of Professor Evan Firestone

ABSTRACT

During Victor Hugo's exile on the Channel island of Jersey, between 1853-1855 he and his family conducted almost two hundred séances in which they allegedly received messages and drawings from famous deceased personalities. Besides being a writer and poet, Hugo was also a prolific artist who experimented with automatist and experimental techniques to create thousands of images. Many Surrealist figures, including André Breton, Robert Desnos, André Masson, and Max Ernst, admired aspects of Hugo's art and writing. Comparing Hugo's experimental art, séance writings, and attitudes towards psychic material to the art and ideas of Breton and his circle opens up substantial new insights on Victor Hugo as a precursor to Surrealism and on the movement's connection to the nineteenth century.

INDEX WORDS: Victor Hugo, André Breton, André Masson, Robert Desnos, Valentine Hugo, Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, automatic writing, automatic drawing, spiritualism.

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To Robert Allen Miller (1950-2006)

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INTRODUCTION

In the years 1853-1855, during Victor Hugo's exile on the Channel island of Jersey, the French writer and his family conducted almost two hundred séances in which they allegedly received profound messages from famous deceased people, animals, and intangible spirits, including the Ocean and Death itself. Some of these "spirits" reputedly produced macabre and symbolic drawings using a pencil attached to the leg of a small table, creating cosmic diagrams and bizarre images. In addition to facilitating the séance drawings, Hugo, a celebrated writer and poet, also was a prolific artist. He used various media and experimental techniques to create thousands of images of abstract figures, obscure nature, and unearthly architecture.

Hugo's experimental art, mediumistic automatist writing and drawing, and attempts to channel the "other side" appear to have been an early influence on Surrealism. Although his drawings appeared in Théophile Gautier's albums and various publications between 1838-51, the novelist's art first became widely known to the public in a posthumous exhibition in 1888 at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris. His friend, fellow writer, and literary executor Paul Meurice organized this exhibition, which generated an interest in Hugo's art.¹ The show's popularity inspired Meurice's more ambitious project: founding the Maison de Victor Hugo at the writer's former home in the Places des Vosges in Paris, which opened in 1902 and held exhibitions of Hugo's drawings in 1919-20, 1930, and 1935. Another Hugo museum with a collection of his drawings, the Musée Littéraire Victor Hugo, opened in Luxembourg in 1935.

¹ Pierre Georgel, "Les avatars du 'peintre malgré lui'," in *La Gloire de Victor Hugo*, ed. Pierre Georgel, Jean-Paul Boulanger, and Geneviève Renisio (Paris: Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1985), 488-489.

Hugo's interest in dreams, the infinite, and the occult connects him to similar subjects explored in Surrealist art. William Gaunt recognized the Romantic origins of Surrealism in the shared investigation into the imagination and the supernatural, as exemplified in Hugo's mention of "the *surnaturel* not as something different from reality but as the reality normally hidden from view."² In fact, the techniques and subjects in Hugo's work have been compared to those in later Symbolist and Surrealist art, including Odilon Redon's nightmarish visions, Robert Desnos' drawings from the "season of sleeps," Max Ernst's *frottages*, and Oscar Dominguez's decalcomania. André Masson's automatic drawings and sand pictures from the 1920s are reminiscent of Hugo's manipulated ink splashes, gouache impressions, and other experimental techniques.

The Surrealists displayed their interest in Hugo as a precursor as early as the first Surrealist Manifesto in 1924. "Hugo is Surrealist when he isn't stupid," wrote Breton, referring to Hugo's automatism, but also to his attraction to religion and spiritualism. Nineteenth-century French psychology and its research into hypnosis, madness, delusions, and hysteria had a significant impact on Surrealism. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1900, provided the Surrealists with the concept of psychoanalysis and the interpretation of dream imagery. Freud theorized the unconscious mind and suggested the idea of "the Other" as a narcissistic projection of the self. Automatic writing and drawing became methods of self-discovery as artists sought to uncover prophetic truths within the self and interpret dreams as a window into an absolute reality.

Many sources, including Breton himself in the 1924 manifesto, include Hugo as a forerunner of Surrealism. Stefanie Heraeus, for example, cites Hugo's experimental art and his

² William Gaunt, *The Surrealists* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972), 7.

creation of “dream moods” as particularly inspiring to Breton’s circle,³ and Yvonne Duplessis mentions Hugo’s occult interests with those of the Surrealists.⁴ In exhibition catalogues of Hugo’s art, Pierre Georgel describes how the foundation of Hugo museums generated Surrealist interest,⁵ while Florian Rodari directly compares the poet’s drawings to Max Ernst’s work.⁶ However, these sources connect Hugo to Surrealism only fleetingly. The intent of this thesis is to examine in greater depth the influence of his experiments with automatist techniques and spiritualism on Surrealism. Hugo’s art explores the realm between dream and reality, populated by invisible forces and monstrous creatures that in the final analysis are projections of himself, an outcome the Surrealists would later pursue.

This thesis places Hugo’s visual work in three categories: 1) his carefully controlled, consciously-created drawings; 2) his experimental, automatist work which entailed manipulation of chance elements, and 3) his so-called automatic (or semi-automatic) spirit drawings. The first group are recognizable by the presence of detailed anatomical, landscape, or architectural imagery; many of these drawings record what he saw during his travels abroad or create picturesque landscapes incorporating his name or initials. His abstract experiments typically contain random spills of ink or pigment on paper, which he then sometimes folded, embellished with lace patterns, or added to with the forms of animals, faces, or structures. The third category of séance drawings are pencil sketches drawn from a “spirit” personality’s point of view. Sometimes they illustrate messages derived from table-tapping, and other times they are a visual response to questions from the participants. Some of the drawings may be more “automatic”

³ Stefanie Heraeus, “Artists and the dream in nineteenth-century Paris: Towards a prehistory of surrealism,” trans. Deborah Laurie Cohen, in *Dreams and History: The interpretation of dreams from ancient Greece to modern psychoanalysis*, ed. Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 146-47.

⁴ Yvonne Duplessis, *L’aspect expérimentale du surréalisme* (Agnieres: JMG editions, 1998), 36-38, in her section on “Les précurseurs.”

⁵ Georgel, “Les avatars du ‘peintre malgré lui’,” 489.

⁶ Florian Rodari, “Victor Hugo, a Precursor *a posteriori*,” in *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd., 1998), 26.

than others; studying them closely reveals that Hugo later reworked a number of them. The séance pictures appear semi-automatic judging by the loose pencil motions of erratic circles that then converge into mysterious, distorted images of figures or animals in ambiguous fantasy spaces. Then again, the amount of detail and control displayed in specific images—such as a precisely labelled portrait of the Lion of Androcles, or a Bacchanalian landscape with added wash shading—are far removed from anything that can be considered automatist.

Chance applications of media played a significant role in both Hugo's art and Surrealism. Hugo found fantastical or grotesque subjects within ink and wash stains, thus developing an early method of channelling the imagination, or as the Surrealists would say, the unconscious or dreams. Hugo's experiments were important predecessors of experimental techniques developed by Ernst and Dominguez, such as *frottage* and decalcomania, that both involved manipulating randomly created forms. Hugo's work can be considered automatic to the extent that he created images in a state of fluid, undirected thought, without premeditated subjects or rational structure. Seeking hidden figures and meanings within these images, though, reveals the imposition of conscious desire to find hidden symbols and messages in everyday life. Similarly, Ernst turned *frottage* patterns into zoomorphic vegetation or petrified forests. Masson's free-hand movements held some degree of chance, but his automatic drawings became reflections of personal experiences and memories that emerged through his associative interpretations of lines and shapes. Psychoanalysis advocates the benefits of free association in uninhibited expression, but to some extent, experimental or "automatic" art reflects the artist's ego in varying degrees.

Hugo's séance transcripts may be considered an early form of automatic writing, though Breton criticized such spiritual practices in *The Automatic Message*.⁷ In a mediumistic state,

⁷ André Breton, *The Automatic Message*, trans. Antony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 1997), 19-20. Originally published in *Minotaure*, 1933.

Hugo composed messages in his distinctive poetic style concerning death, immortality, and an elaborate universe of reincarnated souls. Purportedly releasing rational control of his verse allowed him to channel personalities from the “other side,” or his unconscious mind, thereby “automatically” producing cosmic prophecies and symbols. Isolation, exile, and a romantic temperament probably encouraged Hugo’s delusional accounts of related supernatural visions and encounters. Yet some early twentieth-century psychoanalytic applications of automatic writing were used to express fantasy (both constructive and destructive), reveal psychic material, and elaborate upon imaginative content, purposes which also correspond with Hugo’s séances.⁸

For the Surrealists, who wanted to unify the rational and irrational mind, automatic writing was an intuitive method of self-discovery that channelled dream content and reached hidden internal truths. While Freud and the Surrealists believed that unmediated expression could give insight into the unconscious, a source of personal imagery and creativity, their notion has been challenged. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claim that the unconscious is a meaningless “desiring-machine” that is “no more structural than personal, it does not symbolize any more than it imagines or represents.” The unconscious, they explain, “does not speak, it engineers.”⁹ In this thesis, though, terms such as “automatism” and the “unconscious” will be used as they were understood by the Surrealists, with the caveat that they are hardly unambiguous.

⁸ Anita M. Mühl, *Automatic Writing* (Dresden and Leipzig: T. Steinkopff, 1930), 38-39.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 53, 180, 296.

CHAPTER 1

PROTO-SURREALIST ART IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The dreamer's hand vibrates, trembles...
On the page, when these characters come out—
Words, figures, terms of doubtful origin,
Visage of the invisible, shown by the unknown;
Made by whom? shaped by whom? sprung from the shadows.

-Victor Hugo, *Les Contemplations*, 1856.¹⁰

Nearly as talented a draftsman as he was a writer, Victor Hugo's visual work of the mid-1850s through the 1860s reveals a persistent concentration on experimentation in addition to highly detailed drawings. Romantic imagery such as ruined gothic castles, violent seascapes, lighthouses, sea creatures, and grotesque faces appears in Hugo's art during his years in exile (1852-1870) on the Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey (Fig. 1). In addition, however, startlingly original and abstract compositions express otherworldly ideas inspired by his surroundings and presumably his unconscious mind (Fig. 2).

The ethereal and visionary qualities of Hugo's art and séance experiences were perhaps inspired by the distinctive scenery of Guernsey and Jersey, a location conducive to his temperament. The hallucinatory environment of the fierce sea, gloomy sky, and rugged landscape led Hugo to neglect external reality to capture "the ebb and flow of an imaginary

¹⁰ Victor Hugo, "I.viii. Continuation," in *Selected Poems of Victor Hugo*, trans. E. H. and A. M. Blackmore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 177.

world in which shapes could form and dissolve in an instant.”¹¹ This description by Pierre Georgel refers to Hugo’s fascination with the islands’ atmosphere, but his words could imply Hugo’s awareness of the unconscious, a concept of the psyche only theorized at a later date. In an 1856 letter to poet Franz Stevens, Hugo wrote, “I inhabit this immense dream of the ocean and slowly I become a sleepwalker of the sea,” indicating the hypnotic power of the ocean to efface the boundary between Hugo’s perceptions of dream and reality.¹²

Hugo’s encounters with a dreamlike world and “sleepwalking” state relate to the spirit world with which he claimed to communicate during séances at Marine-Terrace on the island of Jersey. According to the séance transcripts, some of the “spirits” faded almost as soon as the séance participants made contact, while others lingered to deliver elaborate messages and drawings; their earthly endurance seemed dependent on Hugo’s perceived connection to the deceased individual or mythical entity. Thus, the séances provided one means for Hugo’s automatist writing and drawing by channeling his imagination through other personalities.

French novelist Delphine de Girardin introduced the Hugo family to the turning tables in 1853. The séance phenomenon began as an American parlor pastime in New York during the late 1840s, and soon spread to England, Germany, and France.¹³ Nineteenth-century American and European upper classes and Romantics reacted to pervading attitudes of materialism and science with an interest in the afterlife and the “other side,” and instantly were receptive to the

¹¹ Pierre Georgel, *Drawings by Victor Hugo* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1974), Chapter III, n.p. Georgel explains the impact of Hugo’s travel drawings on his experimental work after 1860. The travel drawings were created during trips to the continent each summer from 1861-1870, where Hugo observed “picturesque curiosities” such as architectural details, strange rock formations, and rare animals. Upon returning to Guernsey, Hugo’s intricate drawings of these subjects inspired him to give “new vigour to his imaginary drawings” and blotting experiments.

¹² Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 330.

¹³ Ronald Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers: The Victorians and the Occult* (Sparkford: J. H. Haynes & Co. Ltd., 2004), 29. In Rochester, New York, sisters Margaret and Katie Fox claimed to receive messages from a “murdered pedlar” beginning in 1848. In table turning, the table is moved by “spirit” hands; in table tapping, “spirits” convey messages by rapping on the table.

séance movement that developed into Spiritualism. Some Parisian salons became dedicated to spirit contact through mediums, who transmitted the “spirit” messages through the rapping of a table leg on the floor. The letters of these messages were determined by the number of taps, which is how Hugo claimed to receive and write his “spirit” messages.¹⁴

Along with such séance phenomena as rapping noises, levitating objects, and phantom hands, automatic writing and drawing—already familiar to some writers and artists—also became a method of conveying the presence of a spirit world.¹⁵ As early as 1818, English painter and alleged psychic John Varley encouraged early Romantic artist and poet William Blake to draw “visionary heads” or “spiritual portraits” of historical and biblical figures who appeared to him. Though Blake explained that these spirits existed primarily in his imagination, the same faculty rendered them quite real to him:

A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour, or a nothing: they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments... than his perishing and mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all. The painter of this work asserts that all his imaginations appear to him infinitely more perfect and more minutely organized than anything seen by his mortal eye. Spirits are organized men.¹⁶

Blake’s description of his interior world of portrait sitters somewhat parallels Hugo’s universe of souls that he extricated in text and images during the Jersey séances. Blake’s strangest visionary head portrays the human-insect hybrid *Ghost of a Flea* (Fig. 3), who told Blake that “all fleas

¹⁴ Jean De Mutigny, *Victor Hugo et le Spiritisme* (Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1981), 20-21. Victor Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity: The Forgotten Masterpiece of Victor Hugo*, trans. John Chambers (Boca Raton: New Paradigm Books, 1998), 24-25.

¹⁵ Pearsall, 102.

¹⁶ Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), 66; 270-272. Blake believed that anyone could see a ghost, but to see a “vision” required a refined eye and imagination. Wilson mentions that in certain people “the imagination may be so stimulated by something actually seen that the percipient temporarily loses the power of discriminating between what he sees and what he imagines,” but Blake was usually aware of the difference between his spiritual vision and actual sight.

were inhabited by the souls of such men as were by nature blood-thirsty to excess, and were therefore providentially confined to the size and form of insects.”¹⁷

Perhaps Blake, whose work became more widely known after his death in 1827, influenced Hugo’s interest in souls and séances. Like Blake, Hugo’s imagination summoned specific historical personalities and created a universe of punished souls confined to animals, plants, and stones, but Hugo interpreted the spirits’ words and ideas rather than visualizing their physical features.¹⁸ In Hugo’s séances, the invisible “spirits” guided by Hugo’s hand produced drawings using a pencil attached to the leg of a small table (“held” by the séance participants atop a larger table), creating designs that foreshadowed André Masson’s experimental, automatic line drawings.

On the other hand, Hugo’s intentional drawings (i.e. consciously-created) and abstract experiments with various media on paper display elements of automatism and chance that later appealed to the Surrealists. The experimental techniques include ink blots (*taches*), wash, folding paper (*pliages*), lace impressions, and cut-out silhouettes.¹⁹ Hugo claimed sometimes to embellish his drawings with household items such as blackberry juice, caramelized onion, burnt paper, soot, toothpaste, coffee grounds, though many of the pages created with these unusual materials have not survived.²⁰

While Hugo’s drawings often contain precise lines and specific subjects, his use of ink and wash media often assisted his tendencies towards abstract, intangible, internal visions. To create the *taches*, for example, Hugo placed ink-blots or stains on paper and then spread the

¹⁷ Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, Vol. I. (New York: Phaeton Press, 1969), 304. Gilchrist quotes John Varley’s *A Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy* (1828).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁹ Marie-Laure Prévost, “The Techniques of a Poet-Draftsman,” in *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd., 1998), 31.

²⁰ Robb, 391.

liquid around the page to develop an image. *Les Orientales*,²¹ a brown wash, colored ink, charcoal, gum, and lace impression drawing from 1855-56, features a foreboding tower with a dark, gaping entrance that looms above a precarious flight of steps. Hugo used the patterns of lace, which he coated with ink and pressed on the page, to embellish the sky, stairs, and “V.H.” initials stenciled across the bottom, while the rest of the scene he rendered in indistinct forms and murky shadows.

Judging from Hugo’s detailed drawings of the Channel Islands, the forms within his experimental works were partly derived from his surroundings of crumbling stone buildings and rocky cliffs, although his vast architectural vistas existed only in his mind.²² Hugo may have considered a deliberate composition, but the placement of certain trancelike elements, such as rhythmic patterns within the abstract, crenellated walls and misty atmospheric forms found in chance ink flows and blots, hint at an automatist approach. He seems to have formed the architecture around the lace-impression initial “V”, which hovers above stairs that lead nowhere, suggesting that he was determined not to represent an existing place.

In other drawings, Hugo explores the imagery of the ocean itself. *Octopus with the Initials V.H.* from 1866 and *Abstract Composition (Monstrous Animal)*, ca. 1856 (Fig. 4) are both ink and wash compositions altered from automatic elements to express Hugo’s concept of the ocean as a powerful and dangerous place. *Octopus*, perhaps formed from a single ink *tache*, depicts the villain of Hugo’s novel *Toilers of the Sea* (1866) submerged in water with a phosphorescent glow. Its interlacing tentacles form the initials “V.H.” at the top of the page. Hugo incorporated the blotchy pattern of the wash into an undersea vision, with the lighter tones

²¹ The title refers to Hugo’s interest in Oriental subjects; he published a book of poems with the same title in 1829, did a series of Oriental drawings in 1837, and continued to explore Orientalism in later poetry. (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 13351, Folio 8.)

²² Hugo’s architectural drawings also suggest his admiration for Piranesi’s etchings of impossible architecture.

seeming to radiate from the octopus. *Abstract Composition*, in which Hugo also manipulated light and dark tones into an animal figure, appears to be the more automatist of the two. Hugo seems to have formed the body of a sea monster beginning with abstract shapes, meandering lines, and spontaneous brush strokes before rendering the creature's head.

Hugo created his *pliages* using a process similar to the *taches*, but with paper folded symmetrically one or more times—the same process as the images used in modern Rorschach tests. In one example, *Ink Tache slightly reworked on folded paper*, ca. 1856-57 (Fig. 5), Hugo used a pen to create caricatures within the brown ink and wash along the vertical axis of the page. These details suggest how a chance arrangement of media can evoke automatic associations with the human face, leading to individual caricatures, or perhaps imaginative spirit faces. Eighteenth-century British painter Alexander Cozens used the blotting technique for the less fantastic purpose of creating landscapes from ink stains. Later, Surrealists such as Max Ernst and Oscar Dominguez instigated “decalcomania” in 1937 as a means of evoking unconscious imagery through random patterns of paint on folded paper.²³

Besides Hugo's experimental works, some of his earlier line drawings and caricatures foreshadow the “spirit”-generated drawings of 1855-56. Around 1832, Hugo drew a cartoon of a grotesque male character, “Pista,” with an elongated head on a pair of legs (Fig. 6). “Pista” encounters other sketchily drawn figures, men and women formed from a few lines that suggest their appearance and environment.²⁴ Hugo also drew caricatures of political figures that attempted to recreate the person's likeness and personality using quick, sketchy lines, and he

²³ Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism & the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1992), 121.

²⁴ Ségolène Le Men, “Victor Hugo et la caricature: la ‘fantasmagorie farce’ d'un écrivain-dessinateur,” *L'Oeil de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Éditions des Cendres, 2004), 86.

invented hybrid creatures in a similar style.²⁵ His inventiveness in both the human and animal representations is evident. These hastily drawn images, often bizarre in subject, anticipate the contour-line faces and figures in Hugo's séance drawings.²⁶

He may have also esteemed the fantasy worlds of French caricaturist J. J. Grandville, who illustrated *Un Autre Monde* (1844) with a bizarre menagerie of characters, anthropomorphic plants, celestial landscapes, and intriguing transformations. One famous example is *Les metamorphoses du sommeil*, in which inanimate objects morph into an apparitional woman. Other Grandville images, such as an interplanetary bridge (Fig. 7) from *Un Autre Monde* and *Le but de ce steeple-chase* (Fig. 8) from *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux* (1842) may have had a role in Hugo's imaginings of otherworldly realms and creatures in the séance messages.²⁷ The latter Grandville drawing depicts tentacled monsters, not unlike Hugo's octopus, menacing an array of multiple-headed flowers that resemble the plants in one of Hugo's séance drawings (Fig. 9), although Hugo has topped his heart-shaped buds with human skulls to signify evil spirits.

Hugo was not the only nineteenth-century artist to experiment with automatist abstraction. In the 1870s, Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau began painting colorful, abstract compositions in oil on canvas, some of which he framed for his home. Some of these paintings

²⁵ Le Men, 92.

²⁶ Georgel, 1974, Chapter IV, n.p. Also Robb, 390-391, and Christopher W. Thompson, *Victor Hugo and the Graphic Arts (1820-1833)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1970), 64-125, relate Hugo's pictorial sources. His linear quality, emphasis on light and shadow, and dramatic subjects reveal his admiration for etchings by Old Masters such as Dürer, Rembrandt, Callot, Piranesi, and Goya. Furthermore, Hugo's friends in Paris, including Baudelaire, kept him updated regarding contemporary artists such as Doré, Méryon, Bracquemond, and Daumier. Inspired by their cityscapes, literary illustrations, and satirical figures, and by his travels around Europe every summer after 1861, Hugo continued to draw caricatures and imaginative architectural scenes.

²⁷ The illustrations from *Un Autre Monde* are available in J. J. Grandville, *Bizarrerries and Fantasies of Grandville* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974). *Le but de ce steeple-chase* is reproduced in *Grandville: Caricatures et Illustrations* (Nancy, France: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1975), Cat. No. 215.

were intended as studies for larger ones, but others were purely abstract (Fig. 10).²⁸ By the next decade he was creating *pliage* images with watercolor, leaving the design to chance (Fig. 11). Primarily, Moreau produced interesting color and texture combinations connected by brush strokes of various shapes and thicknesses. Though Moreau's watercolor experiments have been compared to Hugo's ink creations, the painter lacked Hugo's visionary intent to extract imaginary figures and locations from the pigment patterns.²⁹

Still another artist associated with Symbolism, Odilon Redon, created lithographs of bizarre creatures in the 1880s (Fig. 12), one of which art historian Dario Gamboni compares to Hugo's drawing of an elongated spirit figure on a rooftop (Fig. 13).³⁰ Artists like Redon may have become familiar with Hugo's art from publications. For example, Théophile Gautier printed albums of Hugo's drawings in 1838 and declared Hugo as much of an artist as he was a poet. These images were reprinted in newspapers or engraved for aesthetic and literary journals until his exile in 1851.³¹ Like many of Hugo's drawings, Redon's dark, fantastical visions often focus on a single object or motif with dreamlike effects, compositions that in turn could have inspired the Surrealists. Masson especially is known to have admired Redon's techniques of texture and coloring, even though the Symbolist artist's concept of the unconscious was more closely associated with spiritualism than Surrealism.³²

²⁸ Geneviève Lacambre, *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1999), 175-177.

²⁹ Raphael Rosenberg, "Hasard et abstraction. Les palettes d'aquarelle de Gustave Moreau," in *Gustave Moreau: Mythes & Chimères: Aquarelles et dessins secrets du musée Gustave-Moreau* (Paris: Musée de la Vie Romantique, 2003), 102.

³⁰ Dario Gamboni, "Images potentielles et 'soupçons d'aspect': la contribution d'Odilon Redon à l'histoire de l'ambiguïté visuelle," in Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano, *Odilon Redon: La Natura dell'Invisibile* (Milan: Skira Editore, 1996), 104-105.

³¹ Pierre Georgel, *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd., 1998), 14.

³² Richard Hobbs, *Odilon Redon* (London: Studio Vista, 1977), 149.

Redon's imaginative and fatalistic subjects explored territory that can be compared to earlier work by Hugo.³³ Thirty years after Hugo's mixed media composition *Justitia* (1857)³⁴ (Fig. 14), Redon created the strikingly similar lithograph, *The Dream is Consummated in Death*, 1887 (Fig. 15). In both images, apparitional heads emerge from darkness, with the central motif—the severed head in Hugo's and the skull in Redon's—suspended in midair. Redon replaced Hugo's ominous guillotine with ghostly limbs and the bloodstain spelling "JUSTITIA" in the pavement with a reflective, watery surface and a half-submerged head. Redon's lithograph illustrates lines from Edmond Picard's drama *Le Juré*: "The sinister command of the spectre is fulfilled. The dream has ended in death."³⁵ Both artists' eerie compositions display their fascination with capital punishment and the afterlife to make a statement about the justice system.

Another Hugo motif that emerged in Redon's work is disembodied teeth, which ambiguously appear in one of Hugo's experimental works from about 1856 (Fig. 16).³⁶ Redon employs the spectral teeth in his 1883 illustration of Edgar Allan Poe's story "Berenice" (Fig. 17) in which the main character cannot erase the vision of the ailing Berenice's ghastly teeth from his mind. However, Hugo's teeth look more inhuman and sinister than Redon's.³⁷ The connections between Hugo and Redon's graphic art suggest how the Surrealists may have seen some of Hugo's supernatural ideas filtered through Redon's mind.

³³ Claude Roger Marx, *Exhibition of Paintings, Pastels, Drawings, Water Colours, Lithographs by Odilon Redon*, (New York: De Hauke & Co., Inc., 1928), n.p. Redon's prints have also been compared to those of Dürer, Callot, and Goya.

³⁴ Georgel, 1974, Cat. No. 54, n.p. Claudie Judrin, "Hugo et Rodin: deux dessinateurs," *D'Ombre et de Marbre: Hugo Face à Rodin* (Paris: Maison de Victor Hugo, 2003), 71, also compares Hugo's *Justitia* to Auguste Rodin's mixed-media portrait drawings. Hugo's art influenced Rodin in the 1880s; both used *taches* and *bricolage* and portrayed mythical, literary, and architectural themes.

³⁵ Hobbs, 63. *Le Juré* tells the story of a juror who is cursed with madness and eventually commits suicide because he sentenced a prisoner to death.

³⁶ Georgel, 1974, Cat. No. 47, n.p.

³⁷ Alec Wildenstein, *Odilon Redon: Catalogue Raisonné de l'oeuvre peint et dessiné* (Paris: Wildenstein Institute, 1992-1998), Vol. II: Cat. No. 1089, "Les Dents de Bérénice," 174.

In 1865 Hugo wrote, “Great artists have an element of chance in their talent, and there is also talent in their chance.”³⁸ The Surrealists would have agreed. Though Breton and his circle rejected religiosity and spiritualism, the Surrealists adopted various methods of automatism as a means of self-discovery, pursuing the unconscious mind’s inherent creativity and repressed access to all human experience.³⁹ Like Hugo, they associated chance-created imagery with internal visions, and more complex automatic writing and drawing with hidden meanings and archetypes. Hugo’s experimental art was admired by and influential for a number of Surrealists, but so were his spirit drawings. To comprehend Hugo’s mindset during the mid-1850s and the extent of his impact on Surrealism, a closer look at the Jersey séances is necessary.

³⁸ Robb, 392.

³⁹ Choucha, 51-52.

CHAPTER 2

THE TURNING TABLES OF JERSEY

Hugo's intricate drawings that began as chance formations of liquid media are now generally accepted as precursors to Surrealist techniques. However, in creating the séance images he claimed to channel messages and pictures from the "other side." The spiritualists recognized two methods of automatic writing: direct, in which an invisible spirit wrote on a slate or page, or through a medium, who sank into a trance to channel the spirit messages to his or her own hand.⁴⁰ Instances of direct spirit painting and drawing were not unheard of, but the use of the planchette with a pencil on one leg created a balance between spirit contact and the medium's control.

The séances conducted during the Hugo family's exile on Jersey took place almost daily in their home, Marine-Terrace, from late 1853 through 1855. Hugo, his wife Adèle, and his sons Charles and Victor-François were usually in attendance. Some of Hugo's friends, including journalist and medium Delphine de Girardin, writer Théophile Guérin, and journalist Auguste Vacquerie, were present at certain séances.

Auguste Vacquerie was the brother of Charles Vacquerie, who married Hugo's favorite daughter, Léopoldine, in 1842. Less than a year after their wedding, Charles and Léopoldine, who was three months pregnant, drowned in a boating accident. Hugo never fully recovered

⁴⁰ Ronald Pearsall, *The Table-Rappers: The Victorians and the Occult* (Sparkford: J. H. Haynes & Co. Ltd., 2004), 102.

from this tragedy, the most devastating event of his life. Léopoldine's constant presence in his memory manifested itself in her appearance as the first spirit to contact the séance group. Furthermore, "spirit contact" with Léopoldine coincided with the first time Hugo agreed to join the ongoing séances conducted by his family and guests on September 11, 1853. The message of this brief conversation with his lost daughter was the necessity of suffering for "the other world."⁴¹ Hugo immediately became an enthusiastic participant in the séance tables.

In the following years, Charles Hugo usually acted as the medium because he was believed to be the most talented psychic of the group, but the séance messages were undeniably Hugo's.⁴² That Hugo experienced genuine spirit contact is highly dubious for numerous reasons, not least of all the possibility of such transactions. Then there is the practicality of transmitting complex messages through table-tapping, and his questionable mental health (he may have had a condition called fantastical paraphrenia, which causes grandiose fantasies, hallucinations, and paranoia).⁴³ The messages were conducted through a small, round table with a single triple-clawed leg placed on top of a larger square table. After the "spirit" messages were transmitted, Hugo transcribed most of them to paper, though sometimes Charles wrote the messages in his father's absence from some séances.

The séance productions originated in Hugo's imagination, affected by his situations of tragic loss and exile in a bleak and haunting environment.⁴⁴ In addition to connecting him with his deceased daughter Léopoldine, the tables gave him access to other human and animal personalities of historical or religious significance. Several of these specters produced "spirit"

⁴¹ Victor Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity: The Forgotten Masterpiece of Victor Hugo*, trans. John Chambers (Boca Raton: New Paradigm Books, 1998), 27.

⁴² Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 333.

⁴³ Jean De Mutigny, *Victor Hugo et le Spiritisme* (Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1981), 81-82.

⁴⁴ Gustave Simon, ed., *Chez Victor Hugo: Les tables tournantes de Jersey, Procès-verbaux des séances* (Paris: Louis Conard, 1923), 9-15. Simon agrees that Hugo was the main authority at the séance tables (replaced by his son Charles in Hugo's absence).

drawings, and he was able to contact disembodied entities such as Death, the Shadow of the Sepulcher, Drama, Tragedy, Poetry, the Idea, the Wind of the Sea, and the Ocean—ideas associated with the Romantic interest in mysterious and tumultuous natural forces. The messages related an entire clandestine universe in which the souls of humans, animals, plants, and rocks exist within different spheres of divine punishment. Each soul hopes to move upward into the next sphere, or fears descending into the lower one—essentially a “ladder of being” that extends from God to the abyss.⁴⁵

The content and language of the séance messages resulting in mediumistic automatic writing and image-making can be understood as the channeling of the poet’s creative mind. The most powerful of the spirits he created was the Shadow of the Sepulcher, which emerged at the next séance held after contacting Léopoldine. This spirit presented itself as the angel of death, wishing “to chat with life” and instruct the living to believe in the unknown. “Use your body to search out your soul,” ordered the Shadow. “You hold the key to a door that has been closed.”⁴⁶ Seeking the fulfillment beyond this metaphorical door, Hugo’s experience with the “other side” connected him to an unknown world rather than a paranormal one. The Shadow of the Sepulcher told Hugo that those in the physical world are “only wearing glasses,” suggesting that the concept of optical vision becomes irrelevant in the afterlife.⁴⁷ The Surrealists maintained a parallel belief in the full realization of one’s personality by rediscovering lost or hidden creative abilities through automatism.⁴⁸ Breton believed in the resolution of dream and reality into “a

⁴⁵ Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity*, 61-62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁸ Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism & the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1992), 53.

kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.”⁴⁹ Once the rational mind unified with the unconscious, one’s personality was complete.

Surrounded by the ocean, perhaps Hugo came to recognize aspects of himself in this constant reminder of nature’s forceful, unfathomable energies. Numerous drawings of the ocean emphasize the destructive power of storms, and Hugo illustrated his novel *Toilers of the Sea* with images of crashing waves and sea creatures, including the octopus bearing his initials. In April 1854, the spirit of the Ocean itself spoke through the poet at the séance tables. Hugo asked the Ocean to compose music, which the spirit attempted, but the notes were nonsensical when transcribed. When Hugo asked the Ocean how to fix the music, the spirit lashed out furiously at the séance group, criticizing the inadequacy of human musicians and instruments, demanding that all the sounds of nature be combined into its thundering noise and played on a piano with “only two keys, a white and a black, day and night, the day full of birds, the night full of souls.”⁵⁰ The Ocean’s grandiose fluidity of speech corresponds to Hugo’s literary style; he apparently was using no less than the ocean to express his creative alter ego or, as some would maintain, his unconscious. He seems to have been frustrated with humanity’s failure to recognize the profound intensity of his thought, and, judging by the Ocean’s occasional faltering speech and subsequent anger, with his own inability to express himself completely in a confined environment.

Among the Surrealists, the ocean became a symbol of the unconscious mind and its limitless, hidden depths. Michael Carrouges, writing about the Surrealists, uses the ocean as a metaphor for the mind, which ebbs and flows as intuition and imagination direct words and ideas into one’s consciousness:

⁴⁹ Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 14.

⁵⁰ Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity*, 136.

[T]he poets of the past and even of the present waited in their sheltered countryside for the tide to flow toward them up the deltas and estuaries of the imagination, at irregular intervals, while the surrealists went down to the water's edge and immersed themselves directly in the ocean of automatism where they could listen to that vast unending sound, the permanent oracle of the waves.⁵¹

Hugo seemed to become impatient waiting for the tide of ideas, so he turned to automatic writing to release alternative personalities and commune with universal ideas by means of entities such as the sea.

In September 1854, Hugo channeled the personality of Death itself, through which he explained the double life of the creative genius: the artist who labors to create during the day, and the phantom self who explores dreams and the afterworld during sleep. Hugo realized that geniuses convey the living, terrestrial world through their conscious work, but “into the phantom work they pour that other, celestial world.”⁵² Hugo’s manifestation of Death enticed him to merge with the shadows and storms of nature and be resurrected by night to create his ideal phantom work. However, such fleeting experiences were frustrating: “How quickly they pass, these phantom-ideas! They enter the brain, glitter, terrify and disappear; the eye of the specter-writer catches sight of them hovering there by the light of the phosphorescent whirlwinds of the black spaces of immensity.”⁵³ The ephemeral nature of these phantom ideas perhaps explains the aggravation Hugo expressed through “the Ocean.” Automatic writing by means of séance spirits sometimes allowed him to grasp them and create his work, while connecting to the hidden psychic mechanisms that the Surrealists sought to bring to light.

Death requested of Hugo to “make your phantom work come alive; make it complete; compose it with every philter of mystery” until the earth and the wind marvel at its tumult and greatness, and to publish his posthumous works at intervals in order to release into the world

⁵¹ Michel Carrouges, *André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism*, trans. Maura Prendergast (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1974), 119.

⁵² Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity*, 169.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

“unknown things which will have had time to ripen in the grave.” Death explained that though Christ was resurrected only once, Hugo should tell the next generation at his deathbed, “you will awaken me in 1920, you will awaken me in 1940,” and so on until the year 2000.⁵⁴ Hugo, preoccupied with death after the loss of his daughter, was seeking immortality through his work. He did not exactly follow Death’s instructions—though the séance transcripts were published in 1923, and the Surrealist movement, which resurrected Hugo’s notion of automatic drawing, began to form around 1920.

Experiencing disillusionment and following his doctor’s advice, Hugo and his companions ceased conducting séances in 1855, but spiritualist overtones remained present in his work.⁵⁵ His art became more automatic and experimental, and he added the 600-verse poem dictated by the “Shadow of the Sepulcher” in 1854 to *Les Contemplations* (*Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre*, which addressed séance spirits and their messages).⁵⁶ Though Hugo seemed to believe he was transcribing authoritative spirit messages, the writing style is unmistakably his own. He described the séance process as one in which “tappings and stanzas emerge from the obscurity... [N]ever did I mix in with my lines a single line emanating from this mystery, nor with my ideas a single one of those ideas. I always religiously left them to the Unknown, which was their unique author... The work of the human brain must remain apart from, and never borrow from, these phenomena.”⁵⁷ If these were Hugo’s beliefs, his strict separation of consciously created verses and those emanating from another source underscores a major point of difference with the Surrealists. In *The Automatic Message*, Breton asserted that “in contrast with the spiritualist’s

⁵⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁵ Robb, 339. The “spirit” visitors were giving Hugo insomnia, and his family and friends were weary of the morbid atmosphere and disappointed that none of the phantom predictions had come true.

⁵⁶ Discussed in Luc Sante, “The Octopus Bearing the Initials V.H,” in *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd., 1998), 12.

⁵⁷ Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity*, 129.

aim of dissociating the medium's psychological personality, the Surrealists' aim is nothing less than to unify that personality" and incorporate the marvelous aspects of the unconscious into their own work.⁵⁸

Whether Hugo genuinely believed in the séance spirits or not remains unclear. Luc Sante suggests that Hugo was only half convinced in the truth of the phenomena, and was "sufficiently self-aware to have known that... the occult folderol was only cosmetic. He had discovered a means of overriding conscious control of his verse."⁵⁹ The products of Hugo's séances appear to be a mediumistic form of automatic writing and drawing, that is, projections of himself onto personalities from the "other side."

Nancy Locke, in *Manet and the Family Romance*, notes that before Freud nineteenth-century psychology linked dreams to the unconscious as early as the 1860s, attempting to reconcile spiritualism and science. For example, Alfred Maury's *Le Sommeil et les rêves: études psychologiques sur ces phénomènes* (1861) theorizes that "unconscious activity" produces dreams and characters that reflect one's waking life and whose "reality seems exterior to the dreamer."⁶⁰ Hugo's séances may be a pre-Freudian example of ideal ego formation in an alternate personality, one in which he recognized himself in something he had not been and could not be, like Death or the Ocean. He projected himself onto these "spirits" in a state of need and desire, though Hugo remained fixated on himself, experiencing a generative force of ideas from the "other side."⁶¹

The principle of automatic writing was essential to Surrealism; Breton's declaration that dreamlike automatism was the source of poetic inspiration resulted in the movement's

⁵⁸ Breton, *The Automatic Message* (1933), trans. Antony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 1977), 25.

⁵⁹ Sante, 11, 26.

⁶⁰ Nancy Locke, *Manet and the Family Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 23-24.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 164. Locke applies these Freudian ideas of narcissism and the Other to Manet's portraits of Berthe Morisot.

foundation. In 1919, he began to observe his hypnagogic hallucinations while falling asleep, and to seek similar words and phrases from his unconscious mind during waking hours.⁶² Like Hugo with the séance messages, Breton believed he could receive cosmic revelations and discover marvelous realities. For Breton, these hallucinations at the edge of dreaming represented a duality of consciousness and the irrational side of the mind that could be explored through automatic writing.

Surrealist automatism is generally described as writing without conscious control or preconceived ideas to express the hidden thoughts and desires in the writer's unconscious mind. In the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), Breton defines the movement as "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."⁶³ Automatic, or Surrealist, writing is the first of the manifesto's "Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art." Breton instructs:

Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard.⁶⁴

Though automatism has its roots in spiritualism, Breton proposed that artists and writers attempt to harness their unconscious energies without relying on supernatural beliefs and rituals. For example, he claimed that his collaborative novel with Philippe Soupault, *Les champs magnétiques* (1919), was created through automatic writing that employed the free association of words that surfaced from the unconscious.

⁶² Carrouges, 7-8.

⁶³ Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), 26.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 29-30.

Unlike nineteenth-century spiritualists, who claimed that their automatic messages channeled souls of the deceased, the Surrealists saw “spirit” messages as productions of the medium’s unconscious through dissociation of the personality. The Surrealists believed they could achieve self-knowledge and unify the personality through automatic writing by continuing to access purity of thought and hidden truths in the unknown, but they sought this entity within the self rather than in the invisible world of spirits. They considered people in general to be strangers to themselves and ignorant of the creative depths of the human spirit, which unconsciously directed their actions and personality, and by using automatic writing one could release repressed creative energy.⁶⁵

Philosopher Maurice Blanchot wrote that the collective experience of Surrealism lay in Breton’s ability to make Surrealism “each one’s Other...making the Surrealist affirmation, in other words, a presence or a work of friendship.”⁶⁶ In the nineteenth century, Hugo created a vast array of spirit personalities, or “Others,” to reflect himself and his surroundings; Breton refined this concept into a movement that replaced the belief in mediums and ghosts with the belief in one’s unconscious, encouraging the union of the present and the lost abilities. As Katharine Conley explains, “Automatic writing and the unconscious are alternately metaphorized as night, death, an exotic voyage by water or by train, and also as Woman.”⁶⁷ These identities recall Hugo’s connection to “spirit” personalities such as the Shadow of the Sepulcher, Death, the Ocean, and the mysterious “Lady in White” who haunted the island of Jersey. When Breton wrote, “Hugo is Surrealist when he isn’t stupid” in the *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, he probably

⁶⁵ Sarane Alexandrian, *Le surréalisme et le rêve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 97-98. Also discussed in Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 8-9.

⁶⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (1983), trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 408.

⁶⁷ Conley, *Automatic Woman*, 15.

had the turning tables and Hugo's religious inclinations in mind. As Mark Polizzotti remarks, the Surrealists' most striking poetic images were not produced during a conscious creative process but from a "more universal mental substrata—were not, in other words, dictated by the voice of reason, but whispered by what Victor Hugo had called the 'mouth of shadows.'"⁶⁸

Fascinated with but disdainful of the occult, the Surrealists intended to detach their method of automatic writing from spiritualist mediums' ghostly messages. According to Breton, "samples of medium-based automatic writing... have proved far less interesting than drawings purporting to have the same origin" as a result of the "pathetic spiritualist literature with which they have usually been contaminated from the outset." Though the surviving séance messages were not widely known until Gustave Simon published them in *Les tables tournantes de Jersey* in 1923,⁶⁹ Breton indicated his prior awareness of the séances in a 1922 interview with André Parinaud. He stated that the Surrealists' attitude toward spiritualism was "midway between the attitudes held respectively, circa 1855, by Victor Hugo... and Robert Browning, as expressed in his poem "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium'" and marked by an interest in "what remained of mediumistic communication once we had freed it from the insane metaphysical implications it otherwise entailed."⁷⁰ Breton laments that the Hugo family succumbed to this trend, which they "thoughtlessly supported... with their story of the 'table turnings of Guernsey [sic]" and he criticizes Hugo's grandiloquence and naïveté.⁷¹ The Surrealists' spiritual beliefs in general seemed to drift between skepticism and elements of the supernatural; Breton was an atheist, but admitted a superior source of reality and man's fall from former glory. Inspired by Hugo's *La*

⁶⁸ Mark Polizzotti, ed., *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, (New York: Paragon House, 1969), 103.

⁶⁹ Gustave Simon, ed., *Chez Victor Hugo: Les tables tournantes de Jersey, Procès-verbaux des séances* (Paris: Louis Conard, 1923).

⁷⁰ André Breton, radio interview with André Parinaud, 1922, in *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, ed. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Paragon House, 1969), 64.

⁷¹ André Breton, *The Automatic Message* (1933), trans. Antony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 1997), 24-25.

Fin de Satan and the occult, he developed a view of a vengeful God symbolizing Fate and an interest in regaining the lost powers of humanity.⁷²

Influenced by the nineteenth-century spiritualists' use of trancelike séance communication and the Symbolists' interest in dreams and madness, the Surrealists examined the workings of the human mind and the creative energy that could result from states of hypnosis. In the autumn of 1922, they conducted a series of trances, the "season of sleeps": literary and verbal automatic experiments to release the hidden prophecies and knowledge within the unconscious and dreams without interference from the rational mind. Many of these experiments took the form of séances, but their purpose was to explore the unconscious mind rather than communicate with the dead. Breton, his wife Simone, Robert Desnos, Francis Picabia, Max Ernst, and René Crevel (who learned séance procedures from a medium), were some of the participants.⁷³ The messages resulting from hypnotic states suggest an internal dialogue between the sleeper and himself, "hermetically sealed" from others with personal symbols.⁷⁴

Desnos, the most celebrated of the Surrealist "mediums," allegedly fell into a trance at will and spoke eloquently of incredible prophecies and revolutions, essentially speaking his dreams in a waking state.⁷⁵ He also composed poems and drawings under hypnosis. Breton included Desnos and the period of sleeps in *Nadja*, remarking that Desnos

'dozes' but he writes, he talks... Those who have not seen his pencil set on paper—without the slightest hesitation and with an astonishing speed—those amazing poetic equations, and have not ascertained, as I have, that they could not have been prepared a long time before...cannot conceive of everything involved in their creation at the time, of the absolutely oracular value they assumed.⁷⁶

⁷² Carrouges, 30.

⁷³ Katharine Conley, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 16-18. Also discussed in M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 63-66.

⁷⁴ Michael Richardson, ed., *The Dedalus Book of Surrealism 2* (Cambs, United Kingdom: Dedalus Ltd., 1994), 278-279.

⁷⁵ Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 83-84.

⁷⁶ Breton, *Nadja*, 31-32.

Breton considered Desnos the Surrealist who best manifested the movement's ideals. In *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Breton maintains that "Robert Desnos speaks Surrealist at will" because he could reach his unconscious through automatic writing, drawing, and speaking.

Desnos was known to have greatly admired Hugo, for which Breton sometimes ridiculed him.⁷⁷ In a recent catalogue of Hugo's art, *L'Homme Océan*, Marie-Laure Prevost juxtaposes his experimental art with later artists' work, including a comparison of a Hugo *pliage* (Fig. 18) with Desnos' *l'Amour des homonymes* (Fig. 19) from 1922. Hugo's murky *pliage* contains his own initials; Desnos' colorful album page with a similar ink design contains his name and those of fifteen Surrealist associates, including Breton, Ernst, Crevel, Picabia, and Duchamp.⁷⁸ Desnos' use of *pliage* techniques and his combination of image and text suggests his interest in Hugo's experiments. Furthermore, there also is a similarity between Hugo's séance drawings and the drawings Desnos made under hypnosis.

Despite their spiritual associations, Hugo's séances and related drawings are experiments with automatism; Hugo captured proto-surreal essences by allowing "spirits" to guide his hand. Prevost claims that "The period of spiritualism in Jersey effectively evokes the 'season of sleeps,' the automatic writing of the Surrealists."⁷⁹ In addition to general similarities between the Jersey séances and the "season of sleeps," examples of Desnos' mediumistic art from this period (Figs. 20 and 21), though done without a table, display an equally cryptic and

⁷⁷ Conley, *Robert Desnos*, 60, 212. Desnos mentions "Hugo's legacy as 'liberty'" in his poem "The Legacy" (1943).

⁷⁸ Marie-Laure Prevost, *Victor Hugo: l'homme océan* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2002), 346. Hugo's *tache pliage* (1850s) is located in a private collection; Desnos' album is located in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Manuscripts, N.A.F. 25096, f. 35. Prevost also compares Hugo's drawing "Torquemada" (1853-54) to a film still from Luis Bunel and Salvador Dali's *L'Âge d'or* (1930); both have similar compositions of skeletons or other horrors embedded in rock.

⁷⁹ Marie-Laure Prevost, *Du chaos dans le pinceau: Victor Hugo, Dessins* (Paris: Maison de Victor Hugo, 2000), 188. "La période spirite à Jersey, en effet évoque l'époque des sommeils,' l'écriture automatique des surrealistes." Translation mine.

diagrammatic style.⁸⁰ His use of symbolic objects, segmented faces, simplified plant, animal, and star forms, horizon lines, and inclusion of text all point to his appreciation of Hugo's séance productions.

Desnos' work was characterized by a constant theme of death, which may have led him to Hugo's eloquent messages from "Death" and séances in general.⁸¹ The Surrealist trances can be considered a form of death—of the conscious self, while communing with the unconscious mind. In 1924 Desnos published an article entitled "Le Génie sans miroir" that explored the "power of madmen to access other worlds through a sense of vision focused on 'infinity'"—though the drawings he analyzed by "madmen" were his own. Conley's description of the article seems also to fit Hugo's séance activity, especially if De Mutigny's theory of the poet's deteriorating mental health was true.⁸² Breton ended the period of sleeps due to the participants' increasing fear of the psychological and physical dangers of excessive automatic experimentation—especially because Desnos attacked Eluard with a knife while under hypnosis, and increasingly was having trouble waking from his trances.⁸³

Like the ancient Greeks, who believed that Muses bestowed poetic inspiration, Hugo readily seemed able to access his Muse. He could write beautiful verses at will, and composed many at the séance tables through his spirit personalities. Breton, too, in his novel *Nadja* (1928) conjured phantoms surrounding and within the self. The story describes Breton's encounters in Paris with a young woman called Nadja who Breton sees as "a free genius, something like one of those spirits of the air which certain magical practices momentarily permit us to entertain but

⁸⁰ Mentioned in Marie-Laure Prevost, "Donne-moi un crayon," in *L'Oeil de Victor Hugo*, 164-65.

⁸¹ Prévost, Marie-Laure, "Donne-moi un crayon," in Musée D'Orsay, *L'Oeil de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Éditions des Cendres, 2004), 165. Prévost further suggests Desnos' awareness of Hugo's séances by comparing Desnos' automatic drawings to Hugo's "spirit" drawings.

⁸² Conley, *Robert Desnos*, 19. The article appeared in *Les Feuilles Libres* under Paul Eluard's name in February 1924.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 23.

which we can never overcome.”⁸⁴ Breton understood “the capacity of certain creative women to gain access to worlds that are closed to him.”⁸⁵ For the Surrealists the creative unconscious was feminine, and contact with this inner Muse or Other could release the poetry within themselves. As Breton encounters Nadja through Paris, she is so elusive and her mind such a miasma, that her presence seems to imitate spirit contact. Nadja is ultimately lost to an asylum; her character easily could be seen to parallel Hugo’s relationships with mournful female ghosts on Jersey or spirits such as that of Léopoldine.

Breton opens *Nadja* with the passage, “Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt.’ ...Such a word means much more than it says, makes me, still alive, play a ghostly part, evidently referring to what I must have ceased to be in order to be *who* I am.”⁸⁶ Next, Breton expresses his concern that he may be a ghost doomed to eternally retrace his own steps trying to rediscover what he has forgotten from his lifetime. He sees himself as something of a living phantom while sensing the power of his unconscious to haunt his everyday life. Breton’s portrayal of both himself and Nadja as apparitional creatures between the worlds of reason and madness reveals the lingering influence of spiritualism, in which the Surrealists refused to believe but remained interested.

Breton asserted in 1934 that the Surrealists “provoked new states of consciousness” and took “a decisive step towards the unification of the personality, which it found threatened by an ever more profound dissociation as a result of their attempts to obtain self-knowledge through automatic techniques similar to those of spiritualist mediums.”⁸⁷ In both Hugo’s séances and Surrealist trances and automatic writing, the artist acts as the medium; his or her creative force

⁸⁴ André Breton, *Nadja* (1920), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), 111.

⁸⁵ Conley, *Automatic Woman*, 116.

⁸⁶ Breton, *Nadja*, 11.

⁸⁷ André Breton, *What is Surrealism?* (1934), ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Monad Press, 1978), 138.

drives the prophetic messages. Hugo's séances stand out from most other examples of "spirit contact" because of the prolific, poetic messages and illustrious personalities he claimed to channel from the "other side." Using poetry, prose, and visual art, Hugo released the revelations of which the creative mind is capable. Breton, Desnos, and many other Surrealists who participated in the "season of sleeps" replicated Hugo's efforts from the vantage point of Freudian psychology and its understanding of the unconscious.

CHAPTER 3

THE SPIRIT DRAWINGS AND ANDRÉ MASSON

Victor Hugo's "spirit" drawings represent an enigmatic phenomenon in the poet's visual oeuvre: performing experiments in automatism to seek the obscure, chaotic side of the human soul and to understand the infinite. The convulsive, linear style of these pencil sketches recalls Hugo's consciously-created line drawings of human, animal, and ghostly caricatures, in which he seemed to draw jagged lines or create stains on a page, then added the grotesque features that emerged in his imagination. Perhaps the experience of exile on Jersey revealed Hugo to himself; Jacqueline Lafargue considers 1852-55 the years of his "most sublime inspiration," when he was introspectively creating experimental abstract art with various media.⁸⁸ In contrast, the séance drawings reveal more macabre and mysterious content based on the table's participants, the spirits they claimed to contact, and Hugo's descent into his own mind—a process that presumably leads to exchanging controlled artistic ability for spontaneous, dreamlike imagery.⁸⁹

One of the most prolific spirit personalities was the Lion of Androcles, who dictated poems and challenged Hugo to poetry duels. The lion had reached the next rung on the "ladder of being" in Hugo's séance universe by refusing to devour the condemned Androcles, who once removed a thorn from the lion's paw. On April 13, 1854, the lion prophesized to the Hugo family, Vacquerie, and Guérin that a comet was coming: "The star with a tail creeps through the

⁸⁸ Jacqueline Lafargue, *Victor Hugo: dessins et lavis* (Paris: Éditions Hervas, 1983), 13.

⁸⁹ Luc Sante, "The Octopus Bearing the Initials V.H.," in *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd., 1998), 26.

celestial grave. The comet is the serpent that appears in those times when humanity is about to reopen the tombs of the dead. Viper on the earth, boa in the sky.”⁹⁰ When Hugo requested exact details about comets and their paths; the lion replied, “Give me a pencil.”

The séance group located a smaller table, placed it on top of the larger one, and attached a pencil to one of its three legs. Observing the original drawings reveals that the table legs were about three inches apart, judging by the indentations on the heavy paper (measuring about 11” x 16”) that was placed underneath; the indentations also reveal the predominantly circular or haphazard motion used to create the images, probably the easiest patterns for moving the table. Some of the pencil lines were drawn with significantly more pressure than others, in the case of heavy outlines or words, which appear in Latin and French and sometimes obscure the pictures.

The first recorded spirit drawing from April 1854 (Fig. 22) reveals a diagram of comets: a rough circle, labeled “pater” with radiating lines represents this form as the star of origin. Four longer, winding lines connect to smaller circles, representing the comet heads. Wavy lines along the paths from the star create the comets’ tails. Under one comet, the table wrote “semen astrorum,” or “seed of the stars.” Marie-Laure Prévost observes that the comet drawing may illustrate Hugo’s family organization, with himself, “pater,” as the source and the comets as his family (perhaps his surviving children and his wife). Prévost also suggests that the tentacle-like forms in this “spirit” sketch foreshadow Hugo’s later drawing *Octopus with the Initials V.H.* of 1866.⁹¹

Next, Hugo asked the lion to draw a self portrait. The table produced a medallion-like image of a regal crowned, winged lion standing on a platform that reads CI GIT HOMO

⁹⁰ Victor Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity: The Forgotten Masterpiece of Victor Hugo*, trans. John Chambers (Boca Raton: New Paradigm Books, 1998), 139.

⁹¹ Marie-Laure Prévost, “Donne-moi un crayon,” in *L’Oeil de Victor Hugo*, Musée D’Orsay (Paris: Éditions des Cendres, 2004), 157.

SALVVS, all inscribed in a circle, closely resembling the symbolic lion of St. Mark.⁹² Next Adèle Hugo asked the spirit to draw her thoughts; the resulting image was a square grave topped with a cross (or an altar in an apse) connected to a rough series of concentric circles (or an eye) with the torso and head of a woman in the center, her face scribbled out. Adèle took this as a portrait of her daughter Léopoldine, of whom she had been thinking.

One of the most intriguing séance drawings from 1854-55 is labeled “SPIRITVS MALVS” (evil spirits) in large letters (Fig. 9).⁹³ The drawing depicts a grotesque landscape beneath a ghoulish sun; the scene is framed by two barren trees anthropomorphized by skulls emerging from the branches. The skulls embedded in the grassy ground between the trees may be the “seeds” from which grow the four strange skeletal plants. Some yield only skulls; others, the skull, spine, and ribcage, and one has sprouted up to its leg bones. A winged, horned demon with a phallic protrusion from its head crouches in the center of the scene and oversees the plants, which perhaps contain punished souls reincarnated as plants, far down the ladder of being. A close examination of this drawing reveals eraser marks on the demon’s wings, indicating that Hugo later changed or added to the drawing. Although some of the séance pictures are cruder than others, the level of detail in certain images suggests that Hugo embellished them afterwards—as did many Surrealist artists, including Masson, with their automatist drawings.

The drawings became more complex and mystifying in following séances. One image (Fig. 23) shows a skeleton in a tomb reaching for a bird—probably a dove or owl—whose wing

⁹² Hugo’s earlier sketchbooks reveal that he had practiced drawing lions, including the lion statue at Waterloo, various lion heads and faces, and a lion resting its head on its paws. These images are located at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, n.a.f. 13452.

⁹³ Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Album spirite, n.a.f. 13353, fol. 4. The French script upside-down along the bottom appears to read, “La bouche qui s’ouvre trop fait fermer les yeux,” perhaps a reference to the spirit personality Hugo called the “Shadow of the Sepulcher” (“la bouche d’ombre”).

is attached to a bat outside the tomb, which in turn is connected to a star. Free-flowing curved lines form the trees and earth surrounding the composition. At the right, a winged angel inserts an enormous key into the tomb, perhaps to release the soul inside that seems to strive for the heavens.⁹⁴ Another complicated picture (Fig. 24) depicts a triple-faced, long-limbed man astride a turkey drawing five stick figures with a quill on a piece of paper placed on his forehead (reminiscent of prophetic mediums' writing techniques). A torn heart obscures his face and two teardrop-shaped forms with evil faces hang from his ears. The details in this drawing, especially the two profiles that form the man's ears, provide another example of post-séance altering of the images.⁹⁵

The first page in séance sketchbook N.A.F. 13353 resembles a bacchanalian scene in pencil and black wash (Fig. 25). It seems to portray three satyr-like figures sexually interacting with a rocky landscape, a two-headed skull tree below which sit two other strange characters, and on the far right a winged, crouching leonine female creature drawn in jagged lines, perhaps a sphinx. The words "et un pinceau" are written on the back of the page, which may indicate that the controlling "spirit" requested a brush as well as a pencil,⁹⁶ or that Hugo later refined this drawing as well.

André Masson wrote the introduction for the "Dessins de Victor Hugo" exhibition at the Musée Villequier in 1971; he argued that although Breton mentioned Hugo in his writings and was aware of his proto-surreal art in the 1920s, he did not give Hugo enough credit as a Surrealist precursor.⁹⁷ Masson also indicated his familiarity with Hugo's lace impressions,

⁹⁴ Ibid., fol. 11.

⁹⁵ Ibid., fol. 17. According to Geneviève Picon and Réjane Bargiel, eds., *Victor Hugo: Dessins*, cat. no. 96 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1985), 233, the writing reads "j'ai peint l'homme omnia sunt in hoc monstro/je ne peux pas/prodige/deux superhommes" (or "Deus superhomines").

⁹⁶ Ibid., fol. 1. Discussed in Picon and Bargiel, cat. no. 87, 232.

⁹⁷ Masson, André, "Le Peintre Victor Hugo," in Pierre Georgel, *Dessins de Victor Hugo* (Villequier: Musée Victor Hugo à Villequier, 1971), 14. Translation mine. According to William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, *André*

experimental drawings, illustrations for *Travailleurs de la Mer* (including the octopus with the author's initials) in the Villequier text.⁹⁸ "Automatic writing and drawing were for the Surrealists the key that permitted the opening of the invisible world and the secret currents that traverse our spirit," wrote Masson. For this reason, Hugo's *Tête de Diable*, 1860-70 (Fig. 26) was included in the "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936 as a precursor of Surrealism.

Masson began to practice automatic drawing in the winter of 1923-24, before he met Breton.⁹⁹ According to František Šmejkal, Masson "seized graphic automatism as naturally as Robert Desnos assimilated verbal automatism," and both created their work in a type of creative frenzy.¹⁰⁰ Masson explained that his automatic drawing process required liberation of the mind from all associations, entering a trance-like state, abandoning oneself to "interior tumult," and rapid speed.¹⁰¹ In his specific method of drawing, "the first graphic apparitions on the paper are pure gesture, rhythm, incantation, and as a result pure doodles," in which he then sought human or animal forms.¹⁰² Automatism allowed him to become a medium for his unconscious mind. Images of male and female anatomy, animals (especially fish), mythology, and the ocean were seen in Freudian terms. He was also interested in themes of birth, death, sexuality, and war. Many of his drawings resemble battle scenes, Daedalian castles, or chimerical forms dissected

Masson (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), Masson said that "Hugo was, like David's *Marat*, wonderful and intriguing, but without the incandescent power that fired his imagination in the Rubens, the Delacroix, and Chateaubriand."

⁹⁸ André Masson, "286. A Roger Caillois" (1942), in *Les Années Surréalistes: Correspondance 1916-1942* (Paris: La Manufacture, 1990), 490.

⁹⁹ André Masson, *André Masson, Line Unleashed: A retrospective exhibition of drawings at the Hayward Gallery, London* (London: The South Bank Centre, 1987), 21. Masson's work also was inspired by (and diverged from) Cubism.

¹⁰⁰ František Šmejkal, *Le Dessin Surréaliste* (Paris: Éditions Cercle d'Art, 1974), 24. "Masson s'empara de l'automatisme graphique aussi naturellement que Robert Desnos assimila l'automatisme verbal." Translation mine.

¹⁰¹ Masson, *André Masson, Line Unleashed*, 33.

¹⁰² André Masson, *Le Rebelle du Surréalisme: Écrits*, ed. Françoise Will-Levaillant (Paris: Hermann, 1976), 21. Translated by David Lomas in "'Modest recording instruments': Science, Surrealism and Visuality," *Art History*, vol. 27, iss. 4 (Sept. 2004): 627-650), 644.

into pieces. Similar themes of violence and confrontation in nature and humanity appear in all forms of Hugo's work. Both artists employed a linear style using free-hand movements, and were often fixated on water and architecture.

Drawings by Hugo and Masson were presumed to express the artists' unconscious, but to remain under a structure imposed by the conscious mind. In Masson's *The Portico*, 1925 (Fig. 27), for example, flowing, biomorphic lines metamorphose into human figures or parts of them that are imposed upon angular architecture.¹⁰³ Hugo's séance drawings and later work, such as *Il était là caressant sa chimère*, 1864-65 (Fig. 28) also display humanoid entities formed by semi-automatic lines: a winged, misshapen creature and the "chimère" he caresses. Examples of Masson's work, such as a figural, aquatic drawing from 1924-25 (Fig. 29), have an unmistakable resemblance to *Il était là caressant sa chimère*. Masson's more fluid style successfully projects the freedom of mind and release of repressed tension that automatic drawing supposedly provides.

However, William Rubin argues that a pure state of automatism is impossible to achieve. In his view, many of Masson's drawings represent the artist's outlet for his thoughts and memories of the horrors he witnessed in the French infantry during World War I. His experience left him with post-traumatic stress disorder that caused depression and violent tendencies.¹⁰⁴ While Masson's automatism could be used to create pleasurable line drawings such as *The Portico*, other works suggest themes of mutilation and massacre of humans, animals, and mythical creatures (Fig. 30). In addition to expressions of battlefield trauma, such subjects may

¹⁰³ Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism & the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1992), 54.

¹⁰⁴ Rubin and Lanchner, 21-22, 31. Also discussed in William Jeffett, *André Masson: The 1930s* (St. Petersburg: The Salvador Dali Museum, 1999), 38-39. Masson was severely wounded in 1917, and discharged from the army and the mental ward (where he was placed after an escape attempt from the army hospital) over a year later.

have been an attempt to reconcile the shattered aspects of his personality through Surrealist techniques.

Compared to Hugo's spirit drawings, Masson's work seems less mediumistic and more therapeutic, intended for exploring the darker aspects of the self. Perhaps Masson recognized himself in Hugo's bizarre universe of spirits, punishment, and rebirth; Masson also created mysterious and prophetic worlds like Hugo's spirit universe, though his images express the inherent violence in humanity and nature by means of restless, nightmarish compositions. Masson's work contains far more sexual imagery, from nude figures to penetrative struggles, although there are sexual elements in Hugo's spirit drawings (such as the nude "bacchanalian" figures and the phallic forms in the "Spiritus Malus" picture). In the drawings attributed to "spirits," Hugo may have felt more freedom to express sexual desire.

During the 1850s, violence and a fascination with death appeared in Hugo's drawings, evidenced in skulls, decapitations, ghosts, demons, battles, and shipwrecks. While Masson focuses on brutal acts in progress, Hugo's macabre scenes imply violence or depict its aftermath. These images range from a confrontation between a monstrous figure and a succubus (Fig. 31) to a scene titled "Torquemada," which contains skeletal figures embedded in rock within a vast, ambiguous space (Fig. 32). Prévost speculates that this image was the basis for a scene in Salvador Dalí's and Louis Buñuel's controversial film *L'Âge d'Or* in 1930 (Fig. 33).¹⁰⁵ Masson's use of imaginary, Daedalian architecture in drawings such as *City of the Skull*, 1939 (Fig. 34) may reveal the influence of Hugo's fantastical vistas and travel drawings of cities, castles, and towers (Fig. 35), some of which simultaneously display construction and decay. Hugo's architectural images often emphasize shadowy, surreal aspects of material and space, land and water, creating dreamlike and often ominous environments.

¹⁰⁵ Marie-Laure Prévost, *Victor Hugo: l'homme océan* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2002), 347.

In the Musée Villequier catalogue, Masson refers to Hugo's discourse with the sea in his intentional drawings which "[push] the combat between light and shadow to its extremities" in terrifying, sublime visions.¹⁰⁶ The destructive power of the ocean and the concept of man against the elements appealed to the Romantics and to Masson. Pierre Georgel views Hugo's obsession with the sea as expressions of primordial archetypes, danger, obscurity, and immensity, a fantastic bestiary of sea monsters that "reawaken the primitive age of powerlessness and enslavement to nature, abolished by the march of progress."¹⁰⁷ Few of Hugo's drawings express these concepts as well as his illustrations for his novel *Toilers of the Sea* (1866).

In 1944, Masson illustrated Hugo's novel with striking images such as Gilliatt battling the octopus (Fig. 36), a strangely sexual composition reminiscent of Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man," fuses the story's climax with Masson's 1936 figure of Acéphale (Fig. 37). The headless, nude male holds a flaming heart in one hand and a "dagger-shaped flower" in the other; his skull covers his genitals and his visible, serpentine entrails symbolize a labyrinth. This drawing was the cover for the first issue of the political review *Acéphale*, Masson's collaborative project with Georges Bataille.¹⁰⁸ Bataille wrote in the initial essay that Acéphale is "not me, he's more me than me, his belly is the labyrinth in which I find myself, being him—that is, a monster."¹⁰⁹ In mirroring Acéphale and Gilliatt in these drawings, Masson implied that Gilliatt must battle the repressed aspects of his unconscious mind.

¹⁰⁶ Masson, 1971, 16-17. Translation mine.

¹⁰⁷ Pierre Georgel, *Cet immense rêve de l'océan: sujets marins par Victor Hugo* (Paris: Maison de Victor Hugo, 2006), 56-58.

¹⁰⁸ Rubin and Lanchner, 141-42, quoting Masson.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 142. Original essay in Georges Bataille, "La Conjuración Sacra," in *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie, 1936-1939* (Paris: Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1995), n.p.

Marine imagery is a frequent theme in Masson's automatic work. His *Animal pris au piège* (*Animal caught in a trap*) (Fig. 38) from 1928-29 contains the biomorphic forms of spindly plants and a predatory fish in undefined space embellished with blotted ink. His combination of automatism and *pliage* recalls Hugo's *Paysage au Pont*, ca. 1855-56 (Fig. 39), an image that especially demonstrates how Hugo, after applying ink and folding the paper, allowed chance forms to create otherworldly compositions. Masson wrote: "No European painter before Victor Hugo applied the wash to the point of making it a *subject*. And that, for him, became painting."¹¹⁰

The abstract forms in *Paysage au Pont* hint at landscape elements, reflections in water, and a standing figure, but ultimately Hugo's experimental images are about exploring mindscapes using automatist forms subsequently elaborated with a paintbrush. This process that permitted the hand to create abstract forms through semi-controlled movements and the imagination to structure lines into comprehensible but enigmatic pictures, foreshadowed and reinforced the technique of the *séance* drawings. In a similar manner, Masson created complex works such as *Battle of Fishes*, 1926 (Fig. 40), which was begun by pouring glue and sand on canvas. He then embellished this foundation with depictions of bleeding, ferocious sea creatures amid jagged subterranean scenery, releasing rage about combat and violence.¹¹¹

Although Masson was interested in the *séance* worlds Hugo created, he did not require alter egos to express himself in his work. He presented his brutal compositions as extensions of himself, giving rise to those repressed parts of the human psyche that hold a strangely universal appeal. In contrast, Hugo denied that he consciously created the "spirit" drawings, messages, prose, and poems during the *séances*. Perhaps anticipating how both spiritualists and skeptics

¹¹⁰ Masson, 1971, 13. Translation mine.

¹¹¹ Rubin and Lanchner, 25.

would receive his accounts of the séances, his personal disavowal of the material ensuing from them was calculated to generate curiosity about their origins. Nevertheless, Hugo's mediumistic activities provided a precedent for the Surrealists' "season of sleeps" in the early 1920s, although they insistently proclaimed the individual psyche was the foundation of automatic writing and drawing.

CHAPTER 4

HUGO AND SURREALISM IN THE 1930S

In the 1930s, new figures emerged within the Surrealist movement, including Valentine Hugo, Oscar Dominguez, and Leonora Carrington. Meanwhile, new automatist techniques such as Dominguez's decalcomania were developed following Ernst's discoveries of *frottage* and *grattage* in the mid-1920s. Several Surrealists, including Ernst and Carrington, delved into alchemy at this time—as did Victor Hugo a century earlier in his novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Following the mid-nineteenth century occult revival, alchemical texts and information on famous French practitioners, particularly Nicolas Flamel, became available for the curious to study and decipher. Alchemy offered the Surrealists another alternative to rationalism, providing a source of personal symbols and clandestine knowledge.¹¹²

The artist Valentine Hugo (née Gross) provides an important Surrealist link to Victor Hugo. She married the writer's great-grandson, designer Jean Hugo, in 1919 and became active in Surrealist circles in 1928-36. Very devoted to Breton, Valentine Hugo had a turbulent affair with him in 1931-32; through her, Breton gained access to Victor Hugo's *taches* and developed a further interest in his work.¹¹³ In 1936 she loaned Hugo's abstract wash drawing *Tête de Diable*

¹¹² M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 23. The Surrealists even toured medieval, alchemically significant locations in Paris such as Notre-Dame cathedral, inspired by Fulcanelli's *Le Mystère des cathedrales*, 1926.

¹¹³ Jean-Pierre Cauvin, "Valentine, André, Paul et les autres, or, the Surrealization of Valentine Hugo," in *Surrealism and Women*, eds. Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 182-84. Valentine separated from Jean Hugo in 1929. Also discussed in Pierre Georgel, "Les avatars du 'peintre malgré lui'," (1985), 489.

to the momentous “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Hugo’s brief biography in the exhibition catalogue mentions his “landscape and architectural sketches; archaeological interest combined with romantic; mystic symbolism,” and calls him “the Piranesi of the Gothic,”¹¹⁴ but *Tête de Diable* also demonstrates the chance flows of ink that appealed to the Surrealists.

Valentine Hugo exhibited some of her work at the MOMA exhibition,¹¹⁵ although she is best known for her graphic design, exquisite corpse drawings with Breton and others, and oneiric illustrations of Surrealist texts. Her 1933 cover design for *Contes Bizarres* (Fig. 41)—a book written by Achim d’Arnim and introduced by Breton—exemplifies the flowing lines, dizzying movement, and sharp contrasts of light and color that characterize her style. Jean-Pierre Cauvin writes that “it is Valentine, the spouse of a direct descendant of Victor Hugo, who evinces the greater kinship with the imaginative powers and Romantic sensibility of the seer-poet... For hers is the creativity and temper of a visionary Romantic... turned surrealist.”¹¹⁶

In an essay written the same year as the “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition, Breton compared Oscar Dominguez’s automatist decalcomania images to Hugo’s abstract work, stating that “the wash-drawings by Victor Hugo seem to provide evidence of systematic explorations in the direction which concerns us here.” Using Dominguez’s *Decalcomania* of 1936 (Fig. 42) as an example, Breton notes how Hugo’s automatist experiments emulated “an extraordinary power of suggestion” that inspired the Surrealists to explore the same procedures and search for hidden meaning in similar creations.¹¹⁷ Breton relates the random patterns created

¹¹⁴ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 256.

¹¹⁵ Valentine Hugo’s biography in the catalogue mentions her marriage to Hugo’s great-grandson. She contributed three dreamlike paintings: *Dream of January 17, 1934*; *Gules with four mouths or, two, one and one*, and *The Surrealist poets, Paul Eluard, André Breton, Tristan Tzara, René Crevel, Benjamin Péret, and René Char*.

¹¹⁶ Cauvin, 190.

¹¹⁷ André Breton, “Oscar Dominguez: Concerning Decalcomania without Preconceived Object (Decalcomania of Desire),” 1936, in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 129.

by Dominguez's technique, which involved the transfer of gouache stains from one page to another, to the fantastical, expressive landscapes Hugo also found in ink patterns.

Max Ernst adopted decalcomania using oil on canvas in the 1940s, combining this technique with a magic realist style to create hallucinatory, biomorphic forms.¹¹⁸ For example, in *Fascinant Cyprès* from 1940 (Fig. 43), Ernst manipulated the forms of reddish-brown paint against a blue background to resemble a towering rock formation, a petrified tree, and fossilized birds' beaks and claws. In his book on Ernst, Patrick Waldberg directly compares him to Hugo, describing how decalcomania offered Ernst endless possibilities as he covered canvases with dramatic landscapes that display "the desolate splendour of a world struck by some cosmic disaster, but one in which the forces of life are gathering again and toiling towards a new birth."¹¹⁹ José Pierre also describes how decalcomania was "rediscovered" by Dominguez and Ernst after Hugo and others used the method first to find similarly alienating and chimerical realms within random ink patterns.¹²⁰

Ernst also is known for his earlier *frottage* images, which he began around 1925 (Fig. 44). These pictures, formed by pencil on pigment rubbed on paper placed over textured surfaces, recall Hugo's lace impressions. Utilizing this technique, Ernst perceived grotesque plants, animals, structures, and forests in the patterns. Ernst also developed *grattage*, a method in which canvas is covered with layers of paint, placed on textured surfaces, and then scraped to remove layers of paint. Ernst considered *frottage* the visual equivalent of automatic writing as described by Breton in the *Surrealist Manifesto*, because the artist witnesses and assists the birth and development of each design, without preconceived ideas. However, Ernst considered Breton's

¹¹⁸ Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism & the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1992), 121.

¹¹⁹ Patrick Waldberg, *Max Ernst* (Paris: Société des Éditions Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1958), 320, 325. Translated by Kenneth Lyons.

¹²⁰ José Pierre, *L'Aventure Surréaliste Autour d'André Breton* (Paris: E.P.I. Filipacchi/Artcurial, 1986), 107.

and Masson's automatism too unrestrained, preferring to maintain more control over his work and ideas.¹²¹

For his part, Breton admired Ernst's Freudian approach to dream content, writing in *Surrealism and Painting* that

Max Ernst has now begun to examine the substance of objects, with complete freedom to determine new shadows, attitudes and shapes for them. Under his brush there come to birth heliotrope women, higher orders of animals attached to the earth by roots, huge forests towards which a fierce desire impels us, young people who no longer dream of anything but treading their mothers underfoot.¹²²

Ernst's art also contains recurring examples of personal symbolism. Notoriously obsessed with birds, birds appear in many of Ernst's drawings, revealing their forms in the manipulated patterns created by decalcomania and *frottage*. Ernst even created an alter ego as a superior bird named Loplop in the 1920s. He described Loplop as his devoted "private phantom... sometimes winged, invariably male."¹²³ The anthropomorphic Loplop stars in Ernst's paintings and collage novels, but sometimes he is reduced to symbolic attributes such as a disembodied bird's head or a pair of hands, particularly in images where Loplop "introduces" other figures, objects, or Ernst's work itself, as if channeling them. In *Loplop Introduces a Young Girl* of 1930 (Fig. 45), the creature presents not only the girl's profile, but also Ernst's innovative use of texture, collage, and found objects. A year later, in *Loplop Présente* (Fig. 46), Ernst drew only the outlines of Loplop's head and hand (or wing) as the bird offers an easel covered with Ernst's semi-automatist drawings and paintings.

As a member of Breton's Surrealist circle, Ernst probably was aware of Hugo's séances as well as his artistic techniques. Ernst's development of Loplop and use of symbols can be

¹²¹ Robert Rainwater, ed., *Max Ernst: Beyond Surrealism: A Retrospective of the Artist's Books and Prints* (New York: New York Public Library and Oxford University Press, 1986), 14. Also discussed in Werner Spies, *Max Ernst, Loplop: The Artist in the Third Person*, (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1983), 72.

¹²² Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," 1928, in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, 30.

¹²³ Spies, 9.

associated with Hugo's creation of various "spirit" personalities through which he could introduce art and writing that was his, yet not his. It is not difficult to relate Loplop and the Lion of Androcles as psychologically "channeled" entities. Utilizing experimental techniques and washes, Hugo frequently portrayed birds, including owls, abstract eagles (Fig. 47), and the Gallic cockerel (Fig. 48). Also, some of Hugo's architectural visions and ominous castles rise from textured landscapes (Fig. 49) that resemble Ernst's petrified forests. Both men created art that was heavily invested in visual media, the creative process, and personal symbols.

Florian Rodari directly compares Ernst to Hugo in the sense that both artists had an extraordinary visionary power and imagination to create microcosms within abstract patterns and details. Rodari observes that Ernst's creations "often oscillate between two planes, the real and imaginary, unsure of the threshold separating them, engendering in the viewer a sense of *déjà vu*, of a country that is known but cannot be reached."¹²⁴ His description also could apply to Hugo's Romantic visions of land, sea, and architecture that relocate familiar places into unknown worlds.

While Hugo's "spirit" drawings can provide revelations of his internal universe, Ernst's esoteric symbolism conceals and encodes his meaning, which sometimes relates to the alchemical principles that fascinated the Surrealists. Hugo's references to alchemy in his writing and séances certainly would have attracted them. In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the corrupt priest Claude Frollo, his walls covered in hermetic phrases, attempts alchemical experiments in his tower cell and refers to legendary alchemists such as Nicolas Flamel (1370-1417).¹²⁵ Alchemy also surfaces in séance messages in July 1854. Using the phantom identity of Flamel, with

¹²⁴ Florian Rodari, "Victor Hugo, a Precursor *a posteriori*," in *Shadows of a Hand: The Drawings of Victor Hugo* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Ltd., 1998), 26.

¹²⁵ In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Book VII, Chapter IV, "Fate." According to Yvonne Duplessis, *L'aspect expérimentale du surréalisme* (Agnieres: JMG editions, 1998), 36, Hugo conducted specific occult and alchemical research on the fifteenth century for *Notre Dame de Paris*.

whom John Chambers speculates Hugo created an “esoteric correspondence,” Hugo drew a series of diagrams accompanied by Latin phrases about the planet Mercury and its inhabitants. One of the “Flamel” drawings (Fig. 50) depicts a creature with a rhombus-shaped sorcerer’s head (wearing a pointed cap) on what is probably a lion’s body. Hugo asked “Flamel” its meaning, then wrote a list of Latin words on the creature; some describe it as “half-matter” and “half-spirit,” but the words *petasus insani* refer to Mercury, the unique alchemical metal. Then “Flamel” went on to draw a diagram of the hydra-like beings that inhabit the planet.¹²⁶

Breton referred to alchemy in his writings, including the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), which recounts the great influence of Flamel’s hermeticism, offering the modern artists hope towards discovering the Philosopher’s Stone, “that which was to enable man’s imagination to take a stunning revenge on all things, which brings us once again, after centuries of the mind’s domestication and insane resignation, to the attempt to liberate once and for all the imagination by the ‘long, immense, reasoned derangement of the senses.’”¹²⁷ The Surrealists were drawn to alchemy because they associated it with transmutation (for them, of thought, dreams, and reality), the discovery of lost knowledge, and the restoration of man’s creative psychic powers.

Alchemical concepts sometimes arose under hypnosis during the aforementioned “season of sleeps” in the early 1920s, particularly in Crevel’s stories and Desnos’ drawings. In 1923 Ernst drew a double portrait of fellow “season of sleeps” participant Max Morise (Fig. 51), representing two faces or a dual personality with fused profiles like the mythological Janus. Morise expels birds, branches, and animal parts from his body and open mouths. The double faces, fused as if in an alchemist’s furnace, symbolize the astrological sign of Gemini, an

¹²⁶ Victor Hugo, in *Conversations with Eternity: The Forgotten Masterpiece of Victor Hugo*, trans. and commentary by John Chambers (Boca Raton: New Paradigm Books, 1998), 151. “*Petasus insani*” could translate to “insane traveler,” a reference to the speed which Mercury travels around the sun.

¹²⁷ Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 174-74.

allusion to another esoteric science.¹²⁸ Like Desnos' drawings, the diagrammatic quality, use of symbols connected by lines, and central third eye in Ernst's image are reminiscent of Hugo's spirit drawings. Similar motifs appear in Hugo's picture of the skeleton in the tomb and of a godlike figure with an eye in his torso (Fig. 52). The "third eye" represents inner sight and clairvoyance, and also corresponds with cosmic diagrams of the sun and moon—alternate symbols of male and female in alchemical diagrams.¹²⁹ In Hugo's drawing, a strange celestial form with closed eyes ascends behind the imposing spirit. Both Hugo and Ernst seem to have emphasized hidden knowledge and wisdom through personal symbols of secret phenomena.

M. E. Warlick's extensive study of Ernst and alchemy contends that automatist methods such as *frottage* involve another type of transmutation: "The frottage process was inherently alchemical, because it transformed base matter—floorboards, leaves, or twine—into works of revelation."¹³⁰ According to Warlick, the collage method also can be related to alchemy in its transformation of ordinary materials into artistic gold. A collage such as *Loplop Introduces a Young Girl* can be seen as specifically alchemical, combining elemental objects and male and female symbols in one "vessel" of composition.¹³¹ In medieval alchemy, diagrams of the androgyne symbolized the primal matter of the Sun ("King") and Moon ("Queen"), presented as a half-male, half-female figure or as lovers to indicate the harmonious chemical "marriage" of sulphur and mercury.¹³²

Warlick has convincingly demonstrated that Ernst's collage novel, *Une Semaine de bonté* (1934), is structured on the alchemical process. *Une Semaine de bonté* contains seven chapters,

¹²⁸ Warlick, 72. In Ernst's painting *Rendezvous of Friends*, 1922, Morise appears holding a sphere or celestial globe.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 191. The eye motif recurs in Ernst's *Histoire naturelle* in cosmic forms of "ringed suns" and "the deep black hole in the depths of the sea." Phallic and vaginal forms also emerged in alchemical works.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹³¹ Ibid., 122-3, 127.

¹³² Fred Gettings, *Secret Symbolism in Occult Art* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1987), 154.

each assigned a different weekday, protagonist, and element relating to alchemical ingredients and processes: mud (earth), water, fire, blood (air), and the quintessence (the last three chapters).¹³³ Each chapter explores the relationship between the elements, but the novel's lack of logical sequence encodes it, not unlike an alchemical manuscript which only those worthy of its secrets can unlock. The color sequence of black to white to red in the first three chapters parallels the stages of alchemical operations: putrefaction, ablution, and conjunction—the chemical wedding that produces the Philosopher's Stone.¹³⁴ The protagonist, or *exemple*, in each chapter is also symbolic; for instance, the first chapter (Sunday) features the Lion of Belfort. Lions traditionally represent primal matter, and in some images the male lion's head is fused with a female body to create the androgyne. Recurring images of lions in Hugo's séance drawings suggests his knowledge of alchemical symbols, especially in the "Flamel" image of a magus' head on a lion's body.

In 1931, Ernst created the collage series *A l'intérieur de la vue* for Valentine Hugo. Some of these collages, featuring solar and lunar fusion in concentric circular diagrams, refer to her *Objet surréaliste à fonctionnement symbolique* of the same year (Fig. 53). This work consists of a "red hand and a white hand on a carpet of fire," that had appeared to Breton in a dream. Her alchemical composition represents the fusion of "masculine red sulphur" and "feminine white mercury,"¹³⁵ indicating her awareness of hermetic concepts. Both hands are placed on a gaming table, and the white hand holds a pair of dice, adding connotations of chance and fate to her object's interpretation.

¹³³ Warlick, 121. Seven relates to "the seven ancient planets and to their oversight of the seven metals, progressing from lead to gold."

¹³⁴ Warlick, "Max Ernst's Alchemical Novel: 'Une Semaine de bonté'," in *Art Journal*, Vol. 46 (Spring 1987), 63. She also discusses the collage novel in *Max Ernst and Alchemy*, 121-127.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2001, 117.

Another artist associated with Surrealism, Leonora Carrington (b. 1917), preferred a magic realist style for her depictions of mysterious portraits and alchemical symbolism. Choucha suggests that women Surrealists turned to the occult and mythology seeking more powerful female roles and goddesses to emulate;¹³⁶ women also were more traditionally spiritualist mediums, and considered to have greater powers of extrasensory perception and access to the unconscious—like Breton’s clairvoyant Nadja. Breton called Carrington, who became Ernst’s muse in 1937, one of “the boldest and most lucid” modern minds,¹³⁷ even though her autobiography, *Down Below*, rewrites *Nadja* from a visionary woman’s point of view, and criticizes Breton for losing Nadja to an asylum. Like Breton, she uses labyrinthine mirroring of worlds to ask herself who she is.¹³⁸ Late in her life, Carrington expressed her perception of being a kind of seed that will split into other beings unlike her, “but once the split is complete the absolute Other will take over in this field of doubting multitude I call myself.”¹³⁹

Using alchemical symbolism to “reconstruct the shattered fragments of her psyche,”¹⁴⁰ Carrington assumed different personalities and identities in her paintings, which often contain bizarre creatures, esoteric diagrams, astrological references, and vessel-shaped symbols. In *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)* from 1936-37 (Fig. 54), she sought to channel the magical aspects of painting by representing herself as an androgynous, entranced figure situated between a chimerical hyena and two horses—a vortex of figures around a “psychic center.”¹⁴¹ Just as Hugo aligned himself with animals such as the Lion of Androcles, and Ernst with birds,

¹³⁶ Choucha, 96.

¹³⁷ Penelope Rosemont, ed., “Leonora Carrington,” in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 102.

¹³⁸ Renée Riese Hubert, “Beyond Initiation: Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst,” in *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Partnership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994) 117-18.

¹³⁹ Leonora Carrington, “What is a Woman?” (1970), in *Surrealist Women*, ed. Rosemont, 373.

¹⁴⁰ Choucha, 119.

¹⁴¹ Susan L. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Burlington, Vermont: Lund Humphries, 2004), 30. Carrington expressed that everybody has an “inner bestiary,” and was drawn to hyenas for their curiosity and wildness. The arcane subtitle refers to the modern horse’s prehistoric ancestor.

Carrington identified with horses, which reminded her of Celtic mythology, the Greek winged horse Pegasus, and liberation.¹⁴² While the painting may be interpreted as the transition to adulthood, or an alchemical journey to create a new self,¹⁴³ its inclusion of symbolic animals reveals Carrington's "powers as a *femme sorcière*, challenging the traditional role of Muse prescribed by the Surrealists"¹⁴⁴ and reclaiming mediumistic feminine abilities. As she is transformed into an adult with both human and animal characteristics, the horse flees into the forest, the domain of the shaman, on a "psychic and magical journey."¹⁴⁵

Carrington's shamanistic portrait of Ernst (Fig. 55) portrays him as a birdlike, cloaked figure carrying an "alchemical vessel" containing a horse.¹⁴⁶ In the background of the fantasy landscape there is a large, frozen horse in the background representing herself; perhaps she intends to further reverse gender roles by presenting Ernst as her "Muse."¹⁴⁷ Like Valentine Hugo, she fuses symbolic red and white, and gives Ernst a mermaid's tail in order to transact the merger of male and female elements that was central to both alchemy and Surrealism.¹⁴⁸ Susan L. Aberth interprets the painting as a companion to her self-portrait, and the figure's amalgamation of marine, animal, and human characteristics as a reference to Ernst's hybrid creatures. Carrington's short story, "Fly, Pigeon," may provide another source of imagery; the description of the main character, Célestin, who is turning into a bird, parallels Ernst's appearance in her portrait of him.¹⁴⁹ Her combination of her esoteric style with Ernst's

¹⁴² Hubert, 120. Carrington's mother was Irish, so she learned Celtic myths at an early age.

¹⁴³ Choucha, 116-117.

¹⁴⁴ Aberth, 35.

¹⁴⁵ Choucha, 116-117.

¹⁴⁶ Warlick, 162. The representation of Ernst recalls a shaman figure or the Tarot card of the Hermit carrying a lantern. Also discussed in Hubert, 122.

¹⁴⁷ Aberth, 42.

¹⁴⁸ Ernst's portrait of Carrington titled *Leonora in the Morning Light*, n.d., depicts her body entwined with animals and plants, giving her mythical identities.

¹⁴⁹ Aberth, 42.

symbolism represents another method of transmuting male and female creative material into an alchemical emblem.

Ernst's and Carrington's fusion of alchemy and art led to Ernst's highly complex painting *The Robing of the Bride* in 1940 (Fig. 56). The work contains decalcomania, which alludes to primal matter, but the painting abounds with specific alchemical symbolism. Ernst depicts a human female with a red male owl's head bearing a third eye, a woman with a birdlike head turned from the viewer, another bird-human androgyne, and a demonic green hermaphrodite. This painting embodies the fulfillment of a medieval alchemical journey that artists such as Hugo pursued through Romanticism, attempting to discover its secrets through both investigative and spiritual methods. Drawing imagery from alchemy and his imagination to portray the "chemical wedding" of sulphur (red) and mercury (white), Ernst finally represented the unions of body, spirit, and knowledge which will produce the Philosopher's Stone and attain the final stages of esoteric Surrealism.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 164-166, and Choucha, 120-125. Choucha interprets the figure on the left as Ernst or Loplop, and refers to Leonardo da Vinci's, Hugo's, and Cozens' previous use of decalcomania.

CONCLUSION

Interest in Hugo's life and works intensified after his death; articles and catalogues on his art have been published every few years since the early 1900s. Along with the posthumous exhibition of Hugo's art at Galerie Georges Petit in 1888, the great sculptor Auguste Rodin was in the process of designing *The Monument to Victor Hugo*, destined for the Pantheon to honor the poet whose incendiary writing against tyranny carried the French Revolution into the nineteenth century. A marble version of the monument, which depicts Hugo heroically nude on the rocks of Guernsey, deep in thought with one arm outstretched towards the ocean or the infinite, was installed in the Palais-Royal from 1909-1933 (Fig. 57).¹⁵¹ Interestingly, Rodin commemorates Hugo's time in exile, during which the French people considered him "a remote, abstracted presence, a formerly real-world writer who had been transmuted into a timeless, transcendent literary 'voice.'"¹⁵² Familiar with Hugo's poetry and wash drawings, Rodin sculpts the writer as a quasi-divine spirit of creativity's turbulent nature using his distinctive, agitated style.¹⁵³ Anticipating Surrealism, the monument and its subject represent an ongoing dialogue between the visual and literary arts, or between the creator and his psyche.

¹⁵¹ Ruth Butler, "Rodin's Victor Hugo Monument," in *Rodin's Monument to Victor Hugo* (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, with the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Foundation, 1998), 15, 19. Intended for the Pantheon, "No commission ever meant more to Rodin" than this one from the fine arts administrators of the Third Republic. Usually only mythical, Olympian figures were portrayed nude, thus Rodin's statue suggests that Hugo defies time and mortality. The bronze sculpture with muses was not cast until 1996; the bronze and marble (moved due to weather damage) statues are now located at the Musée Rodin.

¹⁵² Jane Mayo Roos, "Steichen's Choice," in *Rodin's Monument to Victor Hugo*, 89. Edward Steichen photographed the shadowy figure of Rodin in front of his Hugo monument and *The Thinker* in 1902.

¹⁵³ Albert E. Elsen, *Rodin's Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 168. Claudie Judrin, "Hugo et Rodin: deux dessinateurs," 64-71; see Ch. 1, note 30.

When the Maison de Victor Hugo opened in 1902 (the centenary of Hugo's birth), the public experienced "a stupefying revelation" of Hugo's artistic skill, in the words of poet Edmond Rostand.¹⁵⁴ By 1919-20, Surrealist artists and writers began to fuse Romantic and Symbolist themes with modern psychology and post-war disillusionment, and recognized in Hugo's architectural and chance-created drawings "the poetic virtue of these strange works and the aesthetic revolution they implied."¹⁵⁵ Hugo's fantastical art allowed him to extend his vivid literary imagination into the visual realm. Expressing desolate feelings, macabre sensations, and esoteric curiosity, his work renders him a predecessor of both Surrealist and magic realist artists caught in the rising interest in Hugo's work.

Studying Hugo's art and séances has enhanced existing concepts of his role in the movement's nineteenth-century roots, which Breton mentioned in the first *Surrealist Manifesto*. He wrote "Hugo is Surrealist when he isn't stupid," meaning perhaps that once the religious and supernatural aspects are stripped away from Hugo's work, it presents a framework for automatist experimentation. The 1936 "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" exhibition, which revealed Surrealism's nineteenth-century foundations, included an example of Hugo's experimental art, a wash drawing created by the manipulation of random ink flows. The Surrealists recognized the desired "omnipotence of [the] dream" in such work, in which fantastical subjects emerged from Hugo's imagination.¹⁵⁶

On a deeper level, the dream visions, chimerical creatures, and esoteric references in Hugo's work parallel Surrealist motifs and symbols. Fascination with alchemy is another example of the Surrealists' applying arcane practices to their quest for absolute reality. Their

¹⁵⁴ In *Les Nouvelles Illustrées* (1903), quoted in Pierre Georgel, "Les avatars du 'peintre malgré lui' (1985), 489.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. In *Drawings by Victor Hugo* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1974), references, n.p., Georgel lists many of the Hugo exhibitions since 1862.

¹⁵⁶ André Breton, defining the movement in *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1924.

explorations in paint and collage represent symbolic journeys to transmute base material and opposing concepts, such as male and female, into a superior art that embodies the ideal, unified state of being. The evolution of séances from a spiritual pastime to a method of self-exploration under hypnosis also links Hugo with Surrealism. Automatic writing and drawing evolved from mediumistic to psychoanalytic purposes as artists sought to escape the rational, known world to access creative truths. They used séance techniques to convey messages not from the “other side,” but from the unconscious, which they considered the source of hidden genius.

The messages and drawings created by Hugo’s prolific séance “spirits” suggest imaginative processes released from rational self-censorship. These phantom encounters opened new creative pathways and connected Hugo’s psyche with the marvelous and unknown. Surrealists searched for similar messages and prophecies in dreams, trying to rediscover the former glory from which humanity fell. Another thematic connection that could be explored between Hugo and Surrealism is the motifs drawn from mythology. Although the Surrealists’ interest in myth was primarily inspired by Freud, mythic undercurrents and themes arise in Hugo’s work. Many of the Jersey séance “spirits” relate to ancient counterparts; Hugo’s visions of the Ocean, Poetry, Tragedy, and Death coincide with pagan gods, muses, and the underworld.

Thus Hugo’s grand delusions and ghostly fascinations foreshadowed the psychoanalytic ambitions of Surrealism and the modern age, as the quest for self-enlightenment evolved from mediumistic pastimes to individual psychic explorations. Although Hugo denied his authorship of the séance poems and unique visions of the afterlife, the “spirits” language is undeniably his own. In contrast, twentieth-century Surrealists considered automatic messages fascinating self-revelations. Similarly, the esoteric elements that artists carried through the Romantic era and beyond influenced the Surrealists to encode their work with personalized alchemical references

and symbols. One wonders what perplexing secrets remain concealed in Hugo's epic poems and Ernst's collage novels; as "Death" told Hugo, "Be the Oedipus of your own life and the Sphinx of your own grave."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Victor Hugo, *Conversations with Eternity: The Forgotten Masterpiece of Victor Hugo*, trans. John Chambers (Boca Raton: New Paradigm Books, 1998), 172.

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APPENDIX A: IMAGES



Figure 1. Victor Hugo, *Les Orientales*, 1855-56, ink and gouache on paper, 18 x 11 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 2. Hugo, *Octopus with the Initials V.H.*, 1866, ink and wash on paper, 36 x 25 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

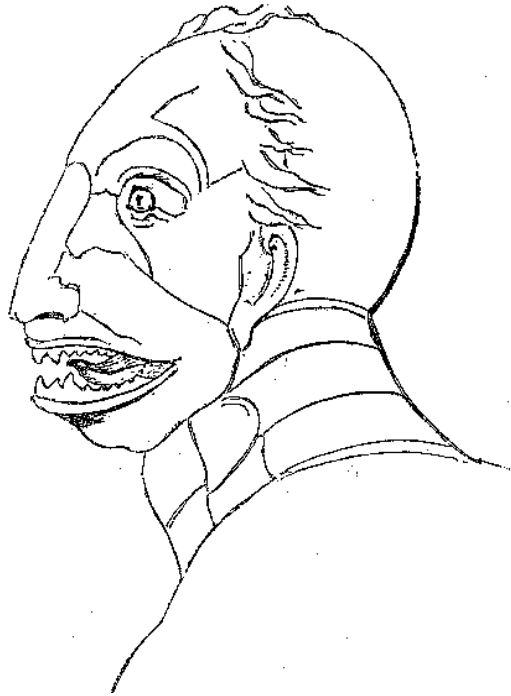


Figure 3. William Blake, *Ghost of a Flea*, ca. 1819, pencil on paper.



Figure 4. Hugo, *Abstract Composition (Monstrous Animal)*, ca. 1856, pen, wash, and gouache on paper, 11.6 x 19.7 cm, private collection.



Figure 5. Hugo, *Ink Tache slightly reworked on folded paper*, ca. 1856-57, pen, ink, and wash on paper, 20 x 14 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 6. Hugo, *Pista* cartoons, 1832, ink and wash on paper, 9.5 x 12 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

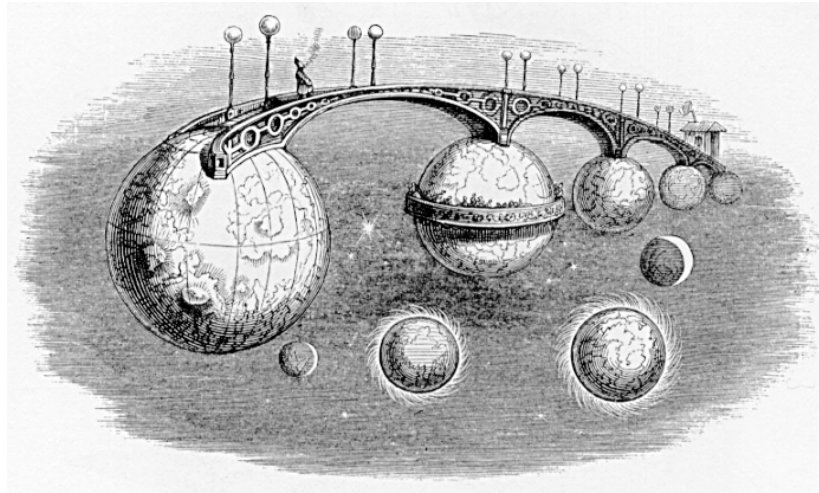


Figure 7. J. J. Grandville, Interplanetary bridge from *Un Autre Monde*, 1844.

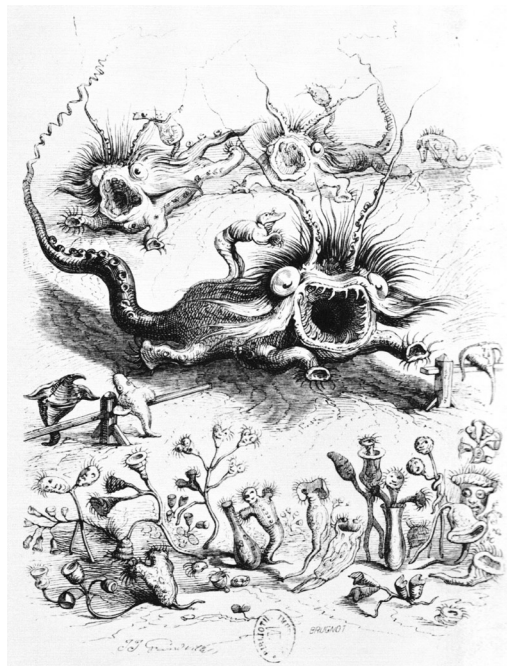


Figure 8. J. J. Grandville, *Le but de ce steeple-chase* from H. de Balzac et. Al., *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux*, 1842.

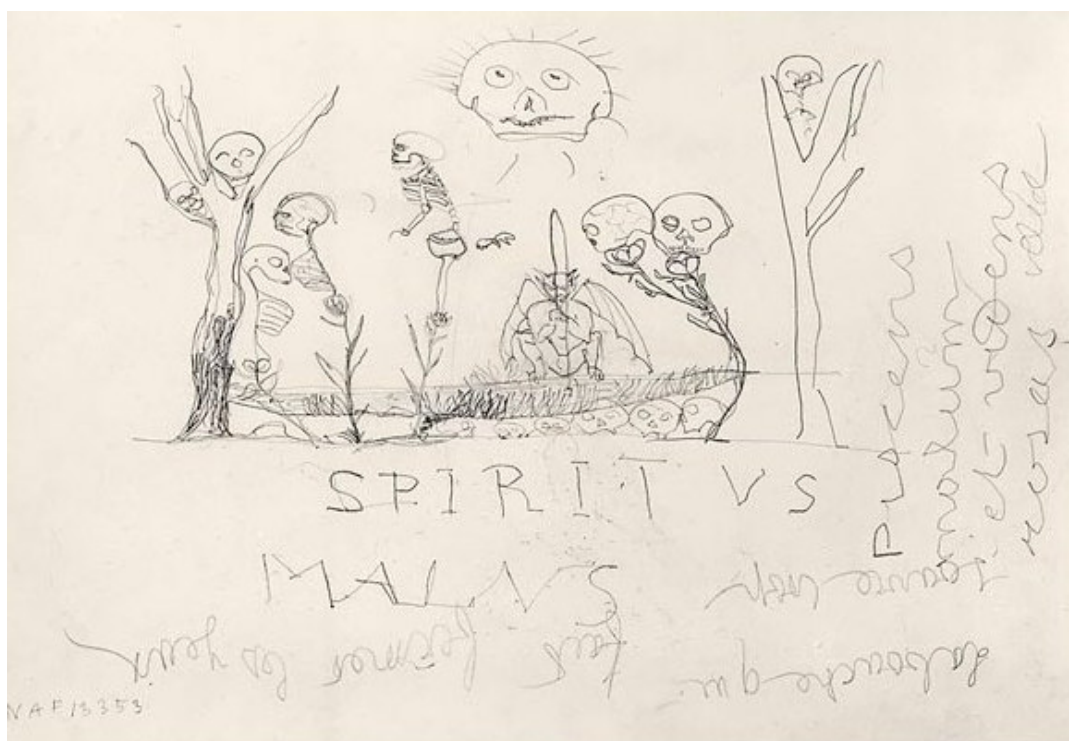


Figure 9. Hugo, "Spirit" drawing with *Spiritus Malus*, 1854-55, pencil, 29 x 42 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 10. Gustave Moreau, *abstract composition*, oil on canvas, approx. 3' x 3', Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau.

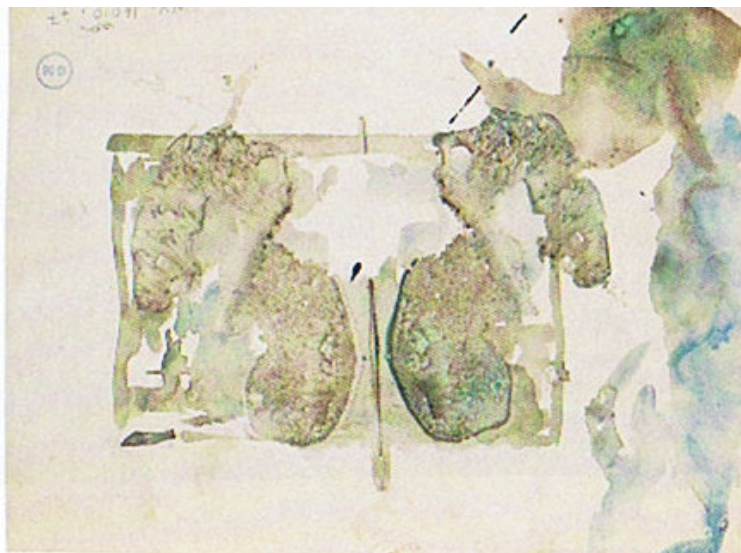


Figure 11. Moreau, *Femme-chat (pliage)*, watercolor, 16 x 20.7 cm, Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau.

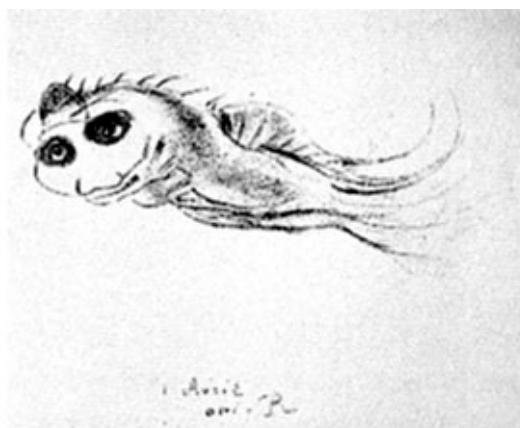


Figure 12. Odilon Redon, *Menu pour le diner des lithographes français du 1er avril 1887*, lithograph, 5 x 11.8 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 13. Hugo, *Un spectre debout sur une cheminée voisine risquait lui-même un oeil et regardait la belle*, 1856-1857, ink on paper, 15 x 87 cm, Milan, collection of Arturo Schwarz.



Figure 14. Hugo, *Justitia*, 1857, mixed media on paper, 52 x 35 cm, Guernesey, Hauteville House.

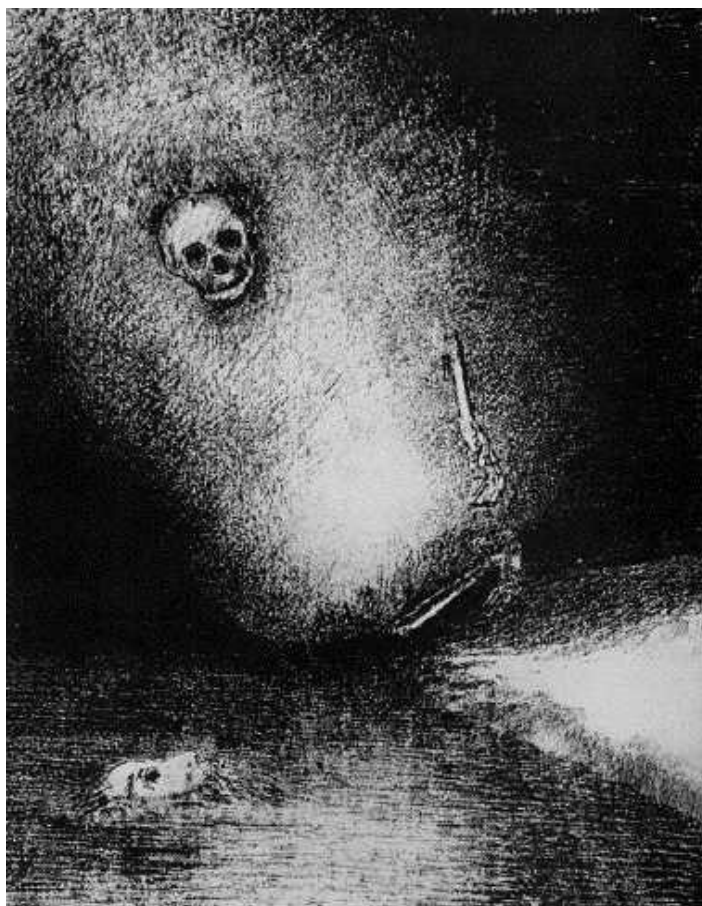


Figure 15. Odilon Redon, *The Dream is Consummated in Death*, 1887, lithograph, 23.8 x 18.7 cm, London, British Museum.



Figure 16. Hugo, *Unidentified Subject*, ca. 1856, wash and gouache on paper, 24 x 17 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 17. Odilon Redon, *Les Dents de Bérénice*, 1883, lithograph.



Figure 18. Hugo, *tache pliage*, 1856-57, wash and ink on paper, 20 x 16 cm, private collection.



Figure 19. Robert Desnos, *l'Amour des homonyms*, 1922, ink on paper, 27 x 21 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

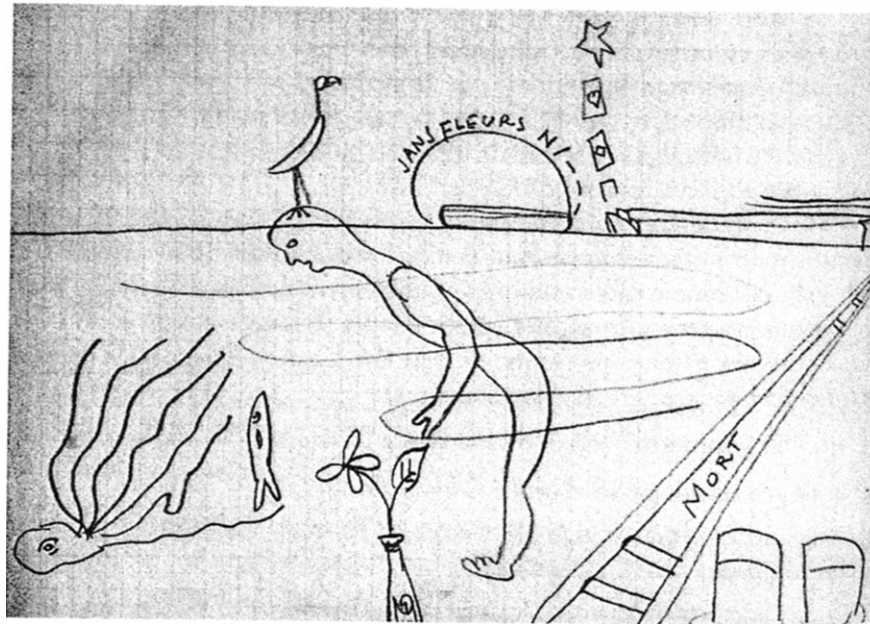


Figure 20. Desnos, *Untitled*, 1 November 1922, drawing, collection of Jacques Fraenkel.

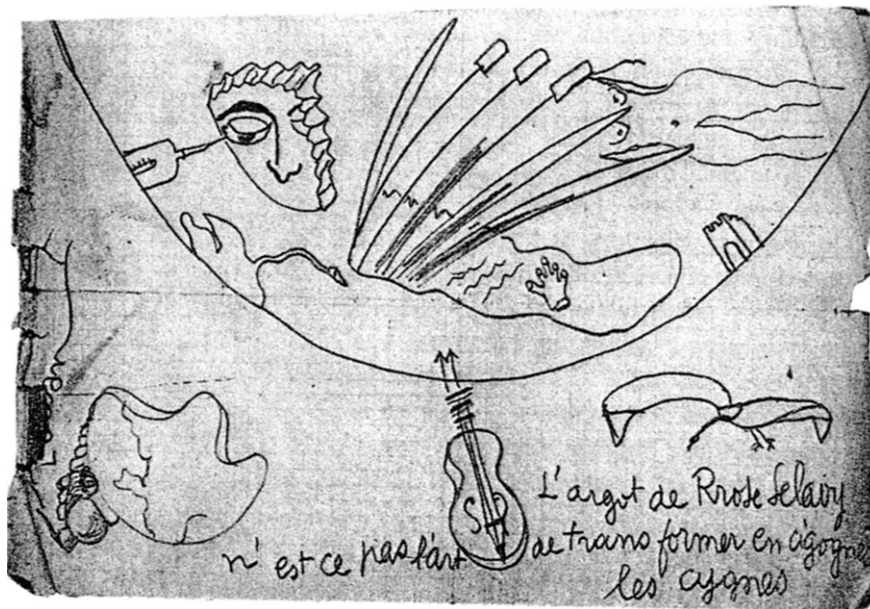


Figure 21. Desnos, *Untitled*, Autumn 1922, drawing, Paris, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet.

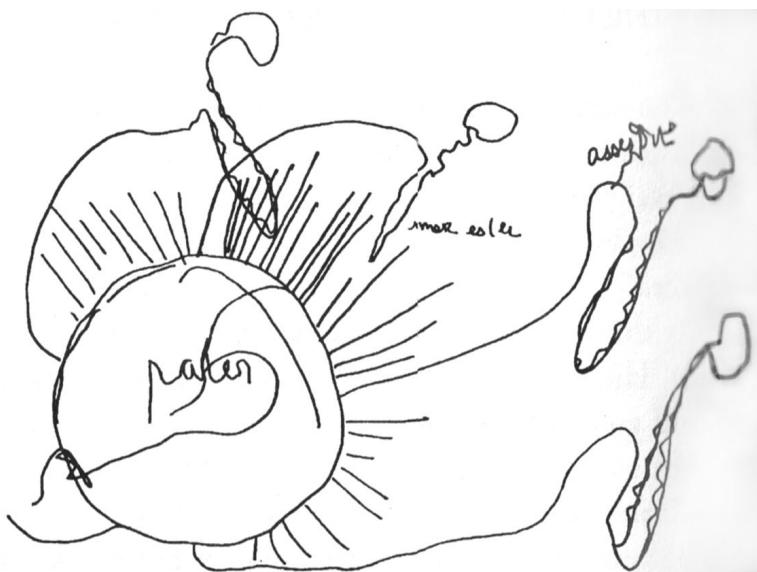


Figure 22. Victor Hugo, “Spirit” Drawing with Comets, April 1854, pencil, 29 x 42 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 23. Hugo, “Spirit” drawing with skeleton in tomb, April 1854, pencil, 29 x 42 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

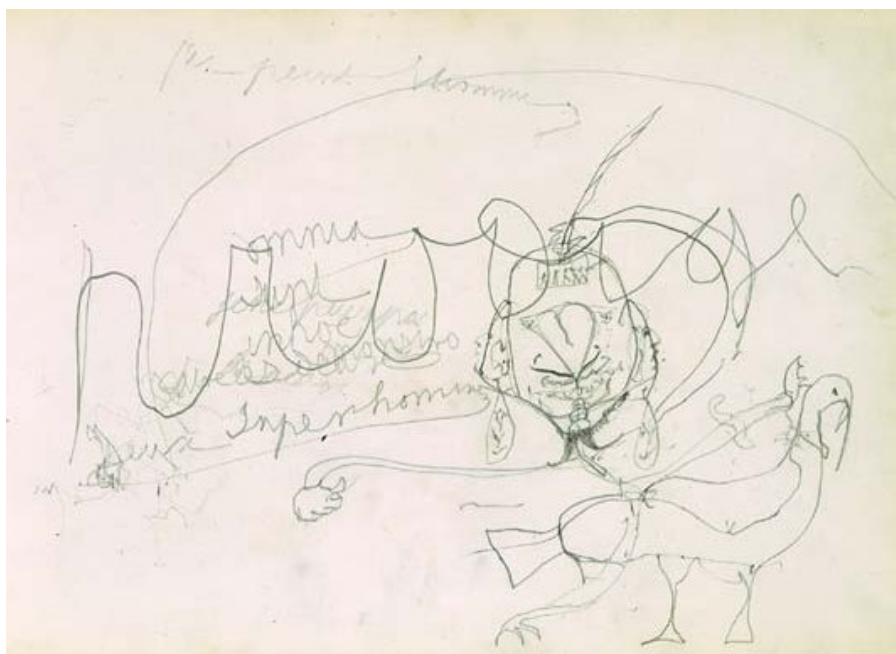


Figure 24. Hugo, "Spirit" Drawing with Figure, ca. 1856, pencil, 29 x 42 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 25. Hugo, "Spirit" Drawing with Grotesque Figures and Landscape, 1854, pencil, 29 x 42 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 26. Hugo, *Tête de Diable*, 1860-70, ink on paper, 24 x 15 cm, collection of Bernard Picasso.



Figure 27. André Masson, *The Portico*, 1925, ink on paper, 35.5 x 29.9 cm, Ertegun Collection.



Figure 28. Hugo, *Il était là caressant sa chimère*, 1864-65, ink on paper, 23 x 18 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 29. André Masson, *Automatic Drawing*, 1924-25, pen, 24 x 32 cm, Collection of Maurice Jardot.

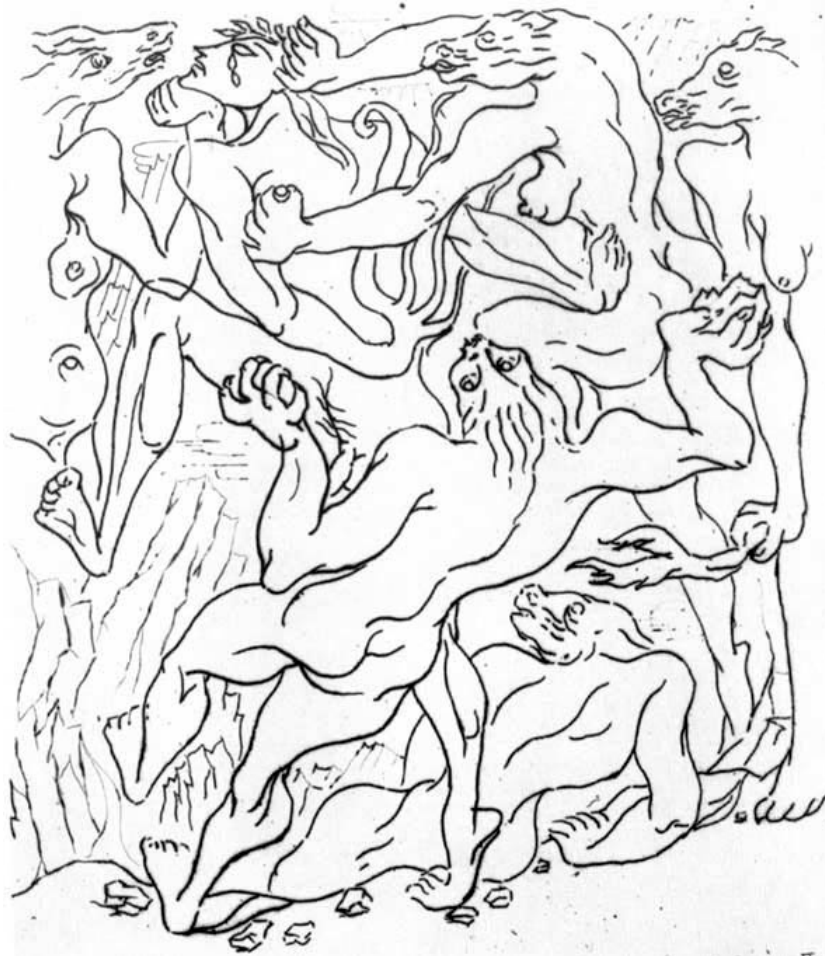


Figure 30. Masson, *Sacrifices: Orphée*, 1933, etching, 46 x 35 cm, Paris.



Figure 31. Hugo, *Miss visitée par son succube*, 1856, 15 x 9.3 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



Figure 32. Hugo, *Torquemada*, ca. 1853-54, mixed media on paper, 28.8 x 45.8 cm, Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo.



Figure 33. Salvador Dali and Louis Buñuel, film still from *L'Âge d'Or*, 1930.

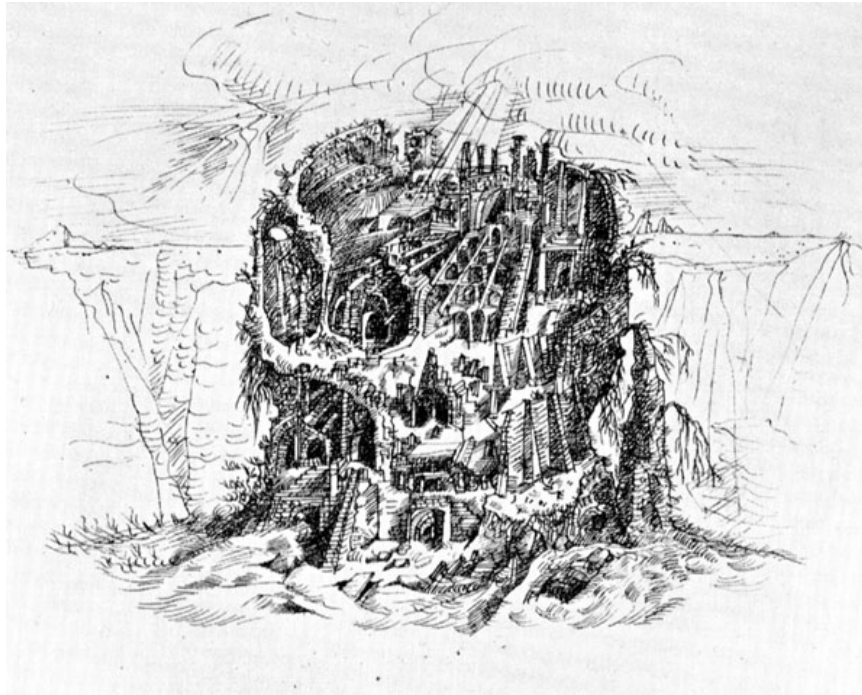


Figure 34. Masson, *City of the Skull*, 1939, ink, 24 3/4" x 18 7/8," Paris.

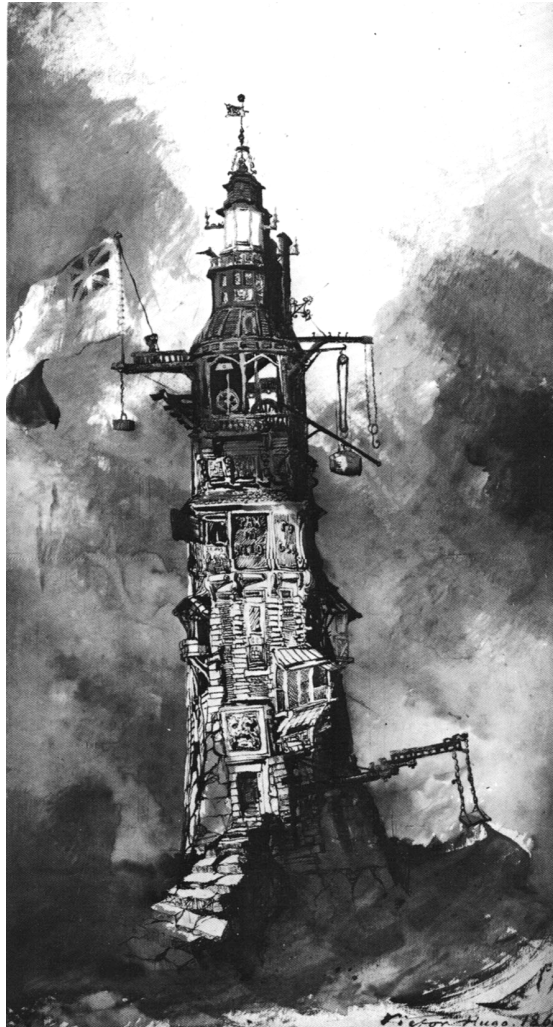


Figure 35. Hugo, *Le Phare d'Eddystone*, 1866, ink on paper, Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo.

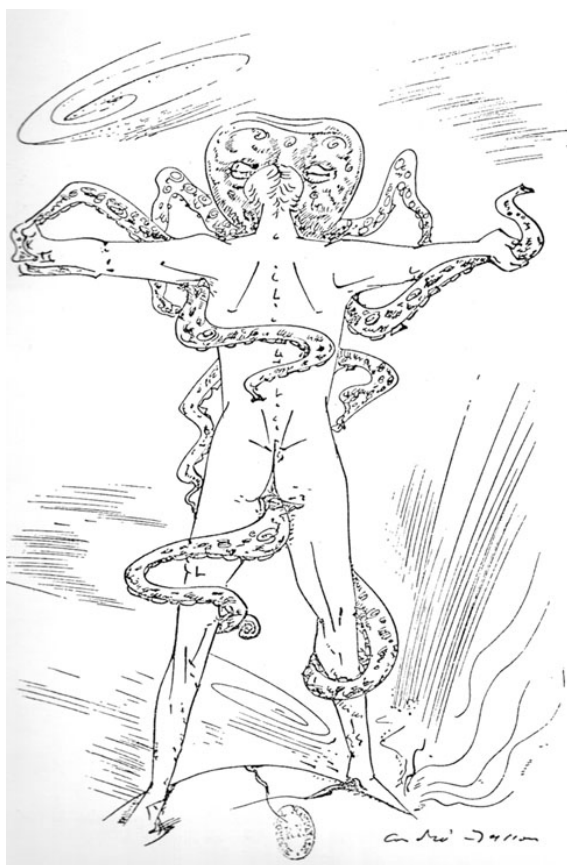


Figure 36. Masson, Untitled drawing illustrating "The Octopus" from *Toilers of the Sea*, 1944, Collection of Roger Caillois.



Figure 37. Masson, Cover for *Acéphale*, 1936.

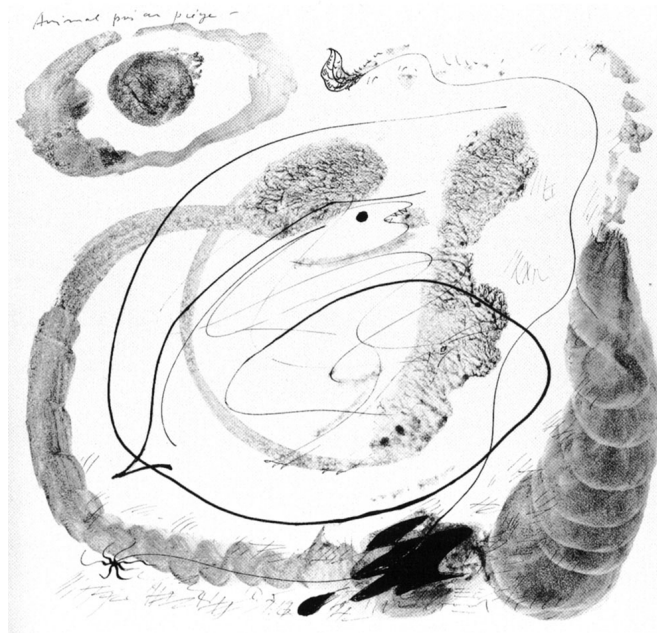


Figure 38. Masson, *Animal pris au piège*, 1928-29, pen and ink wash, 32.9 x 32.6 cm, private collection.



Figure 39. Hugo, *Paysage au Pont*, ca. 1850s, ink on paper, 10.2 x 13.5 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon.



Figure 40. Masson, *Battle of Fishes*, 1926, mixed media on canvas, 14 ¼" x 28 ¾", New York, Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 41. Valentine Hugo, Cover of *Contes Bizarres*, 1933, private collection.



Figure 42. Oscar Dominguez, *Decalcomania*, 1936, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 43. Max Ernst, *Fascinant Cyprès*, 1940, oil on canvas, 34 x 28 cm, Sprengel Collection, Hanover.

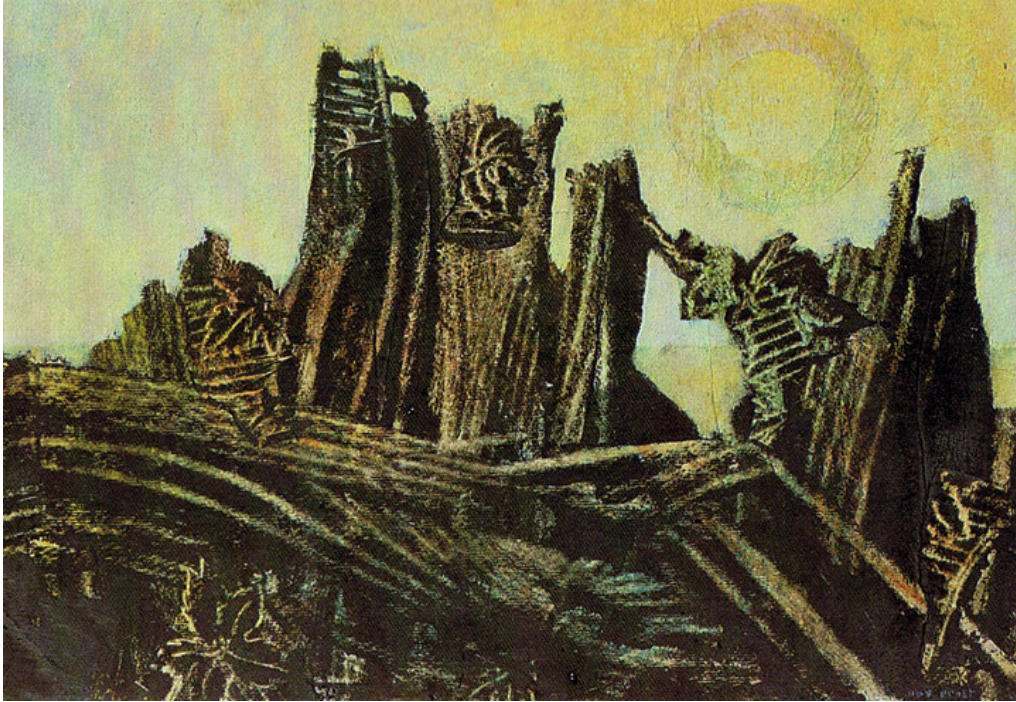


Figure 44. Ernst, *La Forêt Pétrifiée*, 1927, oil on panel, 28 x 38 cm, private collection.



Figure 45. Ernst, *Loplop Introduces a Young Girl*, 1930, mixed media on wood, 195 x 89 cm, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou.

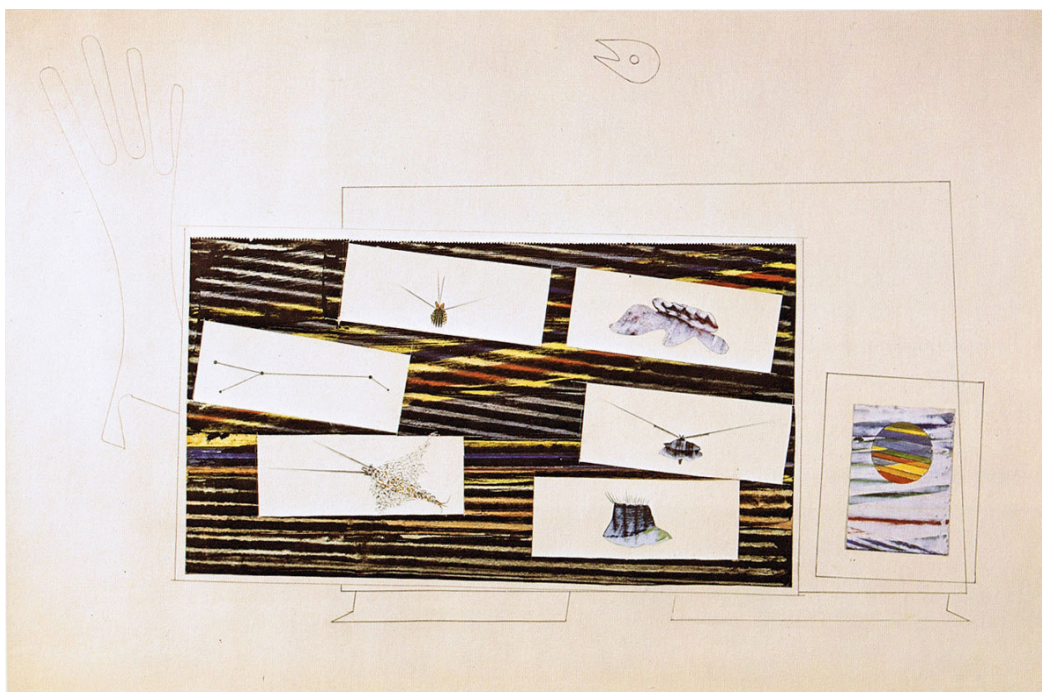


Figure 46. Ernst, *Loplop Présente*, 1931, mixed media, 41.3 x 64.5 cm, New York, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome L Stern.



Figure 47. Hugo, *Aigle*, ca. 1855, watercolor, ink, lace impression, and pencil on paper, 28.5 x 21.5 cm, Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo.



Figure 48. Hugo, *Gallia*, n.d., ink on paper, 61 x 47 cm, Paris, Maison de Victor Hugo.

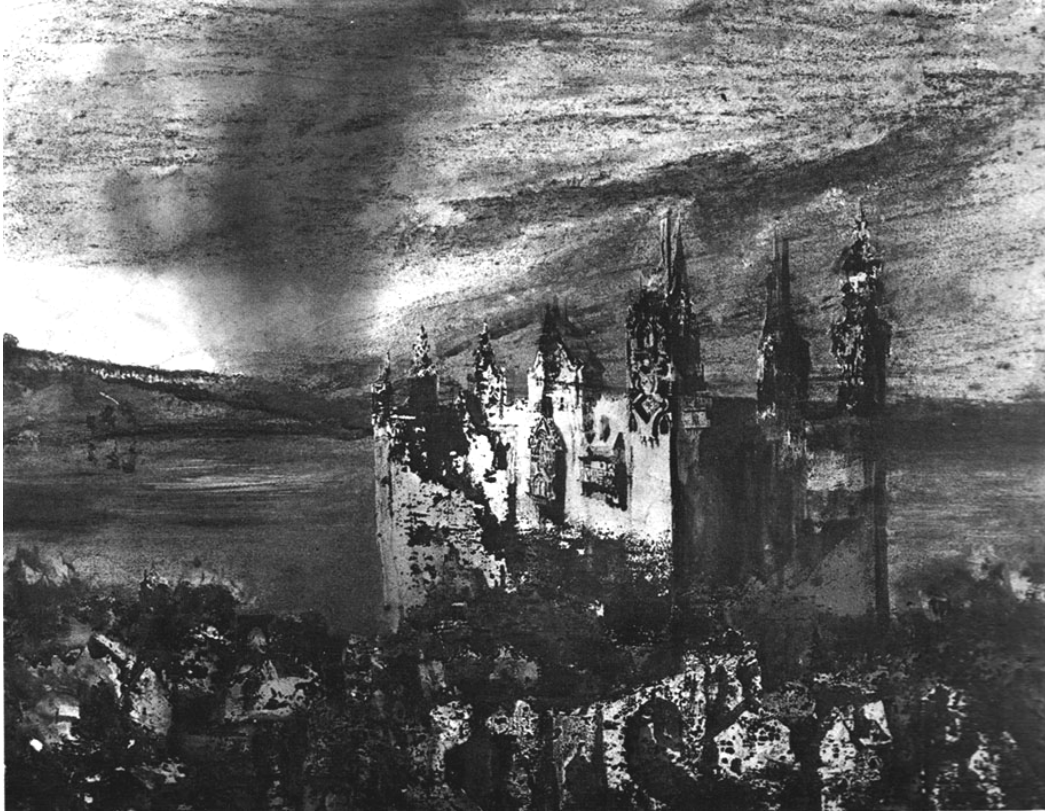


Figure 49. Hugo, *Château dans une ville en ruine*, ca. 1850, ink and gouache on paper, 45 x 60 cm, private collection.



Figure 50. Hugo, "Spirit" drawing of alchemical creature, July 1854, pencil, 34 x 50 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

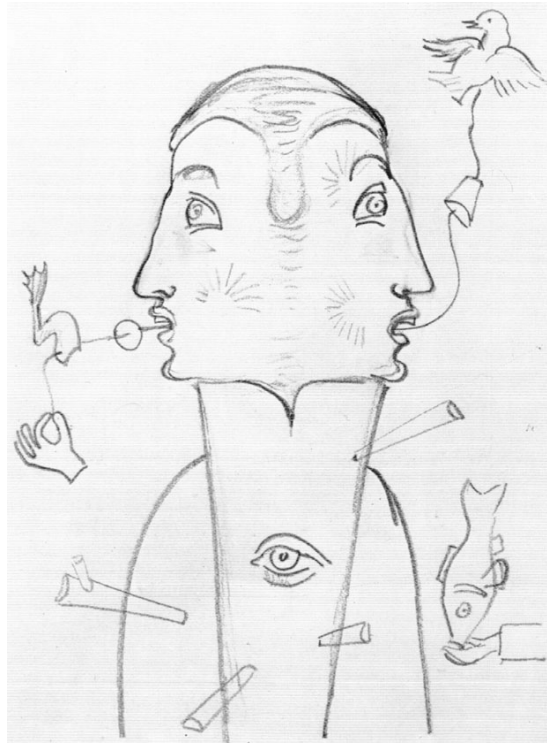


Figure 51. Ernst, *Portrait of Max Morise*, 1923, pencil, 23 x 14 cm, Sprengel Collection, Hanover.



Figure 52. Hugo, "Spirit" drawing with figures, 1854-55, pencil, 29 x 42 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

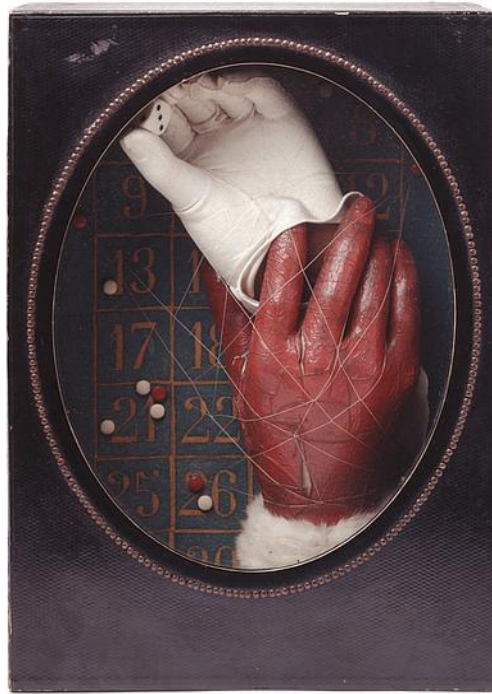


Figure 53. Valentine Hugo, *Objet surréaliste à fonctionnement symbolique*, 1931, mixed media, Paris, Centre Pompidou.



Figure 54. Leonora Carrington, *Self-Portrait*, 1936-37, oil on canvas, 25 ½" x 32", private collection.

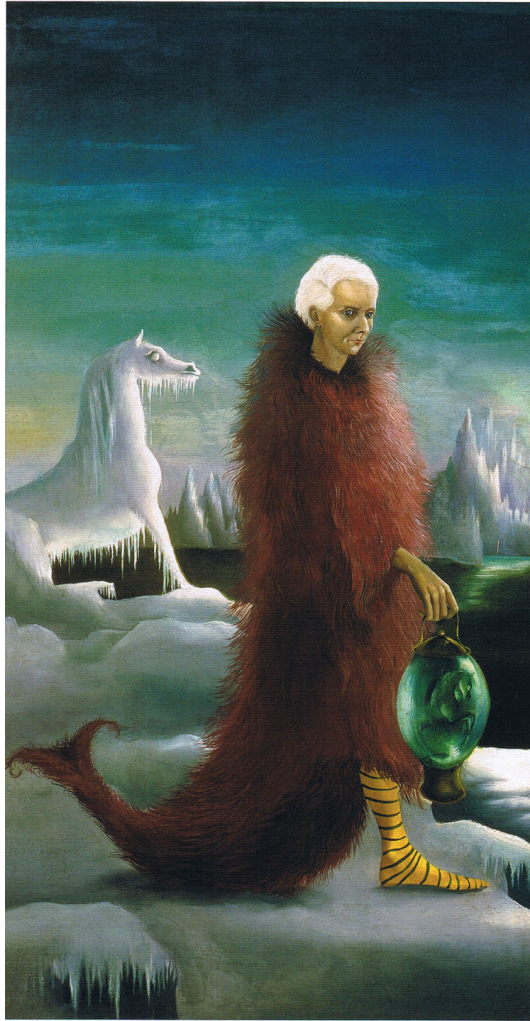


Figure 55. Carrington, *Portrait of Max Ernst*, 1939, oil on canvas, 50.2 x 26 cm, private collection.



Figure 56. Ernst, *The Robing of the Bride*, 1940, oil on canvas, 130 x 96 cm, Venice, Peggy Guggenheim Collection.



Figure 57. Auguste Rodin, *Monument to Victor Hugo* in the Palais-Royal, ca. 1901, marble, Paris, Musée Rodin. Photograph: Adolphe Braun, 1909, carbon print.