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Critics celebrate the pictorial nature of Victor Hugo's poetry and prose. His imagery often seems lush and vibrant, and yet it encompasses all of nature, the beautiful and what society calls ugly. In fact, Hugo was a visual artist, pummeling sepia ink onto folios, shaping ruined castles from dark cliffs and somber, ink-clotted skies. If his art had a certain consistency, his poetry reveals a surprising variety. The reader peruses the selections published in *The Penguin Book of French Poetry* like a visitor to an art gallery. Many of the poems have a religious overtone, be they romantic reconciliations with grief, a lapsed, intimate happiness subsumed in the soothing indifference of nature, or narrative poems such as *Boaz Sleeping*, which vivifies an old man's biblical story. Such poems glow with figurative language; Boaz's poem closes with an image of seeds scattered from a sickle into "the field of stars." Others, however, assume tones and imagery akin to social realism, such as *Memory of the Night of the Fourth*. Here Hugo boldly sets the tone with violent imagery more suited to the yellowed pages of a city newspaper: "The child had received two bullets in the head." A mother's grief finds no solace in silvery rivers or the eternal thrum of nature; her son, a tiny victim of a political upheaval, sets the pomposity and casual cruelty of Napoleon in stark relief. Though hardly gilded, this poem has the grim, expressionistic realism of a Käthe Kollwitz lithograph from later years.

And yet of all the poems, one has horizons beyond an art gallery. *Open Windows* rings and whistles and clacks and clangs—a rare poem composed neither of concrete imagery nor figurative language. Hugo crafts an aural poem, seemingly prescient to the Dada sound poets of the early twentieth-century, such as Hugo Ball, who created nonsense poems just so the musicality of language could be liberated from the confining burden of meaning. With characteristic boldness, Hugo opens the poem by stating its singular powerful effect: "I hear

voices.” Syncopated sounds pulse through the poem, though he uses no onomonopaeia. In its original French, the unusual poem has a traditional Alexandrine sixteen-line form, with rhyming couplets giving rhythm and only two enjambments, a typical “flow” device of breathless Romantic poets. The translator makes some curious choices by removing the line breaks and any attempt at mimicking the rhyming couplets. This gives the poem the effect of a prose poem, something that Hugo never could have imagined, because only later poets began to work in this form. Perhaps the unique nature of this poem—the brevity and specificity of the sounds—forced the translator to abandon its old form. Yet all of the other poems also have lost their rhyming couplets and line breaks; the curious decision seems global, and those not fluent in French lose the craft of the original work.

In a poem full of simple sentences and fragments, the only concrete image arises in the second sentence. Without an aural quality or a verb, the evanescent, unformed image seems even more passive: “Lights through my eyelid.” All other imagery—be it a robin or a fly or hammers on a forge—arises purely by sound or the metonymic suggestion of sound, by how the sentence is placed in the poem. Normally, “A fly comes in” would constitute an image, but in this aural din the reader anticipates the fly’s arrival only by its buzz. Hugo, the drowsy narrator, has relinquished the self-glorified reins of the poet altogether, to let the reader create a mental image, a mental sound from personal referents.

Though Hugo boldly states the poem’s aural intent with an active first person sentence, how does he sustain interest in a languid poem enlivened only by sound, which opens with the dullest of images, a person about to wake up from bed? Even novice novelists avoid opening their chapters with such a scene of a waking sleeper; it is simply too fitting to be memorable.

Hugo navigates this vignette lyrically by pairing sounds of contrasting resonance against each other. For instance, sentences direct the reader back and forth like a swinging bell: “A bell is in full swing at the Saint-Pierre church. Bathers’ cries. Closer! further! no, this way! no, that way!” Here Hugo telegraphs his poetic technique by pairing binaries, *closer* and *further*, and he repeats this later in the poem, “Good morning. Goodbye.” He enriches the prosaic voices by nesting them in other sounds of contrasting associational, emotional resonance. Church bells beckon religion and society; the cries of bathers conjure fun and play in lapping waves. “A trowel scrapes a roof. Horses pass in the lane,” directs the reader to implied images heavenward and down to hooves clopping on the ground, while the following sound of the scythe creates a classic binary between laborers of the city and the farm. These pairings assure that this odd poem will read less haphazardly, and the reader may not miss concrete images, figurative language, an active narrator or a distinct storytelling voice and worldview. In fact, this poem may long linger with the reader because of what it does not have, the windows it opens to other forms of experience. One hears a world beating on captive eardrums, perceived between languid eyelids. Yet even here, Hugo closes the poem with his most poetic binary yet, pairing the annoyingly intimate with a vastness appropriate for his first use of figurative language: “A fly comes in. Boundless breath of the sea.” Here, sound alone unites minute experience, and its attendant allusion to pestilence and decay, with the incomprehensible eternity of the ocean.