I was writing one of those irksome study abroad applications, explaining why I wanted to study in Paris. It was entirely quotidian: I mentioned my love of French literature and my desire to study it in situ. And though I specifically mentioned Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* and the way that reading it before the actual Notre-Dame de Paris would bring the story to life, little did I know how close the bond between fiction and world would become. The two, *Notre-Dame* and *Notre-Dame*, are entangled but separate: The cathedral, in all its glory, grasps the meaning of Hugo’s story in a way that an attentive reading cannot. Complicating matters is Hugo’s claim in the novel that books have replaced architecture as the record of humanity: now stone and paper reflect onto one another, and the actuality of the edifice, whose dilapidation and destruction Hugo feared, is held up by the Romantic manifesto. Hugo’s title is often translated into English as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. However, this places an incorrect emphasis on the person. It is not the hunchback Quasimodo who is the main character of the story. Though the novel focuses largely on the gypsy Esmeralda and the three men in her life—Quasimodo, Claude Frollo, and Phoebus de Châteaupers—it is the cathedral itself which plays the central role, towering over the events of the story. In Hugo’s time, this magnificent architectural gem...
had fallen into major disrepair, and the novel was a rallying cry to save the cathedral—not simply in the name of its beauty and magnificence, but in the name of a wider humanity.

For Hugo, architecture was the book of the history of humanity before humanity learned to write books: “Until Gutenberg, architecture was the principal, universal art of writing,” he claimed. But among all these grandiose shouts of love, Hugo does not actually provide any evidence. A sentimentalist rather than a logician, he waxes poetic about rose windows and delicate columns. My collegiate skepticism made that a little too difficult to accept without proof. I had to go see the cathedral for myself to know what he meant.

I’d seen Notre-Dame before, on my first trip to Paris, when I was still starry-eyed and naïve from reading too many French novels. But this time, I had the leisure to study and examine instead of simply catching my breath in awe. I elbowed my way through crowds of tourists with the novel in hand, reading Hugo’s description and comparing it to the stone reality.

The three portals, carved into ogival arches, the embroidered, lacy cordon with its twenty-eight royal niches, the immense rose window, flanked by two lateral windows like a priest flanked by a deacon and sub-deacon, the high and frail gallery of clover-leaf arcades, which supports a heavy platform on its fine little columns, and, lastly, two massive dark towers with their slate awning, all harmonious parts of a magnificent whole, superimposed in five gigantic stories…a symphony in stone, the colossal work of a man and of a people, a complete and complex ensemble like the Iliads and Romanceros of which it is a sister…a sort of human creation, powerful and fecund like divine creation, of which it seems to have appropriated the dual characteristic: variety, eternity.

Powerful as this description is, Hugo makes a claim that is perhaps a little too extravagant for credibility. In comparing the cathedral to literary creations like Homeric epics, what does it really mean for the cathedral to be a text or book? What sense is there in encompassing ‘humanity’ itself? It was by examining the cathedral minutely, Hugo’s book often in hand, that I found the answer and became convinced of Hugo’s claim.
The cathedral’s façade is perhaps the aspect that contains the most writing, plays the biggest role, and is thus the one I spent the most time studying. The three doors into the cathedral are crowned with tympanums depicting Biblical scenes, while the archways themselves play host to thousands of figures and carvings, apostles, saints, angels, kings, devils, demons, and humans. The tympanum above the middle portal portrays to the ominous scene of the Last Judgment, while the other two depict the stories of the Virgin and Saint Anne, her mother. In a way, these scenes make Notre-Dame the book of humanity, for it bears a record, written in stone, of that which is inscribed in the Book—the Bible. The depiction is impressive:
In the Final Judgment, Michael weighs the souls of the dead, as the good traipse off to Heaven happily while the damned shuffle off in chains to hell. Below the scales, a demon arises out of hellfire, attempting to tip them, while the two other tympanums present triumphant images of the Virgin Mary. Standing before these powerful scenes, I realize that these depictions no doubt served as a sort of Spark Notes for the illiterate churchgoers of the Middle Ages; those who could not afford or read books could simply read the writing off the stones and see the doctrine of their religion inscribed there. Already the cathedral had proven itself to be a grand piece of writing.

Inside the cathedral, too, there are ways in which this structure becomes a record of history: The stained-glass windows depict major scenes from the history of Paris as well as from the Bible. The cathedral itself is so tall that in the evenings, the darkness of the ceiling feels like a starless night sky. It is majestic and breathtaking, once again a reminder that even in the Middle Ages, mankind had the pride to build to the skies: Having failed with the tower of Babel, we created cathedrals instead.

However, it is the learning experience provided by the façade that played the biggest role in convincing me of Hugo’s claim, an experience borne from the book and the cathedral working in tandem, both serving as textbooks and yet so much more than that. In Hugo’s novel, the façade itself plays a large role, as the demonic priest Claude Frollo searches for the secrets of alchemy in its figures—and those aspects of the edifice he gazes upon actually exist. As a writer, Hugo had no obligation to be that accurate and the artistic license to invent whatever he chose, but instead, he chose accuracy. For example, Frollo spends much of his time “examining first the foolish virgins with their overturned lamps, then the wise virgins with their lamps upright.” The French language being such that the word folle can mean both foolish and crazy, I spent much of my time futilely looking for crazy virgins on the façade and wondering how in the world I was supposed to tell if they were virgins.

Unsurprisingly, my resort was Wikipedia, that disen-
chanting savior of the species *Homo Studentia*. With a few keystrokes, I landed upon the parable of the 10 virgins, as well as the confirmation that they are, indeed, upon the façade. In the parable, Jesus tells a story about a party of virgins attending a wedding; they are given the task of carrying a lamp and awaiting the bridegroom (symbolically, Jesus). Five virgins bring sufficient oil for their lamps, and five do not. The parable itself is not particularly relevant to the novel; it’s also not one of the wider-known of all parables, as far as I can tell. Hence, the cathedral has acted as a textbook for me, preserving a text I did not know and teaching me about it, allowing me once again to deepen my knowledge. And now, when I come back to the cathedral, I find the virgins on the sides of the middle portal, indeed standing there with their lamps, bringing the story to life.

That is also not the only instance of a perfect integration of the façade into the story. Many times I can stand before Notre-Dame de Paris with its book, reading a few tantalizing lines and finding them written in the stone, attempting to find their meaning just as Claude Frollo did. Frollo spent countless hours gazing upon those stones, sometimes “calculating the angle of the gaze of that raven on the left side, which is certainly looking at some mysterious point where the secret of the philosopher’s stone is hidden, if it’s not in the cellars of Nicholas Flamel.” That particular crow is to the left of the middle portal, and indeed it gazes wisely, as if it knows some secret. The “seven nude figures at the feet of Notre Dame” are also indeed “on the side of the Hotel Dieu,” that is, on the left portal, the one closest to the hospital called the Hotel Dieu—though it is doubtful that one of those figures represents Mercurius as is claimed. The figures in Hugo’s story are actually there with their secrets, just as alluring and mysterious as they are in the story; not only has Hugo forever preserved them in his text, he has also given them a meaning of their own, independent of the creator’s original intent and thus of the limitations of that intent.

Yet Hugo laments that “this will kill that”—literally, that the book will kill the cathedral. He spends a long chapter expanding Claude Frollo’s fear that the writing of paper will destroy the writing of stone. But, as my experiences in Paris have
demonstrated, this claim is a paradox, for the book of paper is that which preserves the book of stone and allows it to retain its meaning as well as its glory. Having found the aspects of the façade that Hugo integrated into the story, I found just one method Hugo used to preserve the book of stone in the book of paper. But there are others. The novel is called Notre-Dame de Paris just as the cathedral is called Notre-Dame de Paris, equivocating the book of stone and the book of paper; the two grand artistic creations are literally one through their names, and architecture is certainly not dead. Even the writing of the book itself is complicit in Hugo’s goal of preserving architecture, for his metaphors are architectural, his references for describing literature equally so. The poetic figure of the novel Pierre Gringoire, for example, “builds the fantastic edifice of hypotheses, that grand card castle of philosophers.” In this particular case, poetic invention created by the poetic figure is described as an architectural structure. Conversely, later on in the story, a staircase is described as being “as stiff as a classic alexandrine” (a form of verse used in seventeen century French theatre). Throughout the story, poetry is defined through architecture and architecture through poetry, binding them inextricably. Furthermore, the cathedral is inescapable as a presence in the story. Aside from the importance of its façade and the figures on it, there is also the fact that the cathedral is either the setting or the spectator for almost every single event in the story—a fact that became clear as I spent my year abroad walking down Paris’s winding streets. Notre-Dame de Paris is located on what is called the Ile de la Cité—that small island in the middle of the Seine, once the Roman colony Lutetia, from which Paris was born. Almost all of the events of the story take place on this island itself, linking the book and the edifice to the very existence of Paris. The story begins in the Palace of Justice, right across from Notre-Dame and a structure I pass on my way from the Latin Quarter to the metro hub of Châtelet. Following the characters as they make their way through small streets, it becomes clear that they don’t leave the island—Esmeralda and her lover have a rendez-vous on Saint Michel bridge, the one in front of which I get out of the metro on my trips to the bookstore; the
siege of the cathedral and the attempted execution happen right before the edifice. Several other events happen on the place de Grève—today the square in front of the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall), which I pass by on my way to work and which is clearly visible from the cathedral’s towers. It is here that Esmeralda dances, and here that she dies. It is as if the edifice drew an invisible circle around itself, gathering the events of the story inside, making itself unforgettable.

But Notre-Dame de Paris is also a literary manifesto, a Romantic manifesto, and Notre Dame de Paris serves as yet another example of Hugo’s Romantic claims. The book-cathedral expounds Victor Hugo’s literary ideas, while the stone edifice proves them, and the inextricable link between the two at once valorizes Romanticism and preserves architecture.

Hugo makes his Romantic claims from a theatrical point of view—Romanticism in France, after all, was a movement in whose beginnings theatre played an integral part. Romantic theatre was a refutation of classical French theatre, just as
Romanticism was a refutation of Classicism: Hugo’s novel is a stage, as he proves again and again, which allows him to translate the rejection of a classical theatrical credo in favor of a Romantic one into novel form. The French Romantics were great admirers of Shakespeare, and French Romanticism was greatly inspired by him, including the idea so famously expounded by the Bard that “all the world’s a stage.” Romantic novels are often stages whose authors present themselves as directors and playwrights; in the very beginning of Notre-Dame de Paris the “spectacle” of the conflict of the People and the Clergy in reality is said to mimic the same spectacle on the stage. Thus, reading the novel as a sort of play, it is possible to read its ending as Hugo’s refutation of the rules of classical French theatre. These rules were mostly set in stone during the 17th century, the golden age of classical theatre; the numerous rules placed an emphasis on what the French call *vraisemblance*, the idea that a literary work, while not real, must resemble reality. The Romantics redefined this idea of what it means for a literary work to resemble truth by rejecting many of the rules of classical theatre. In his novel, Hugo erased the particular distinction classical theatre made between tragedy and comedy, a strict line sometimes blurred by tragi-comedies, which in themselves also followed a distinct pattern. In classical theatre, comedies usually ended in a marriage (which symbolized unity and harmony) and tragedies end in a death (which symbolized the impossibility of a reconciliation between the character and his world). This was a clear division that Hugo upends, defining a comic ending as tragic, while allowing the novel’s tragic ending to carry a sort of sublimity. When one of the characters weds at the end of Hugo’s novel, the narrator tells us that he “ended tragically—he got married,” making the happy marriage a tragic outcome. However, the “Marriage of Quasimodo,” as the final chapter is entitled, is in itself a death: Quasimodo’s skeleton is found intertwined with that of Esmeralda, the two eternally united in death in a way that is reminiscent of the union of Heathcliff and Catherine from Wuthering Heights, among others. Death and harmony are inseparable: “when they wanted...
to detach him from the skeleton he held embraced, he fell into dust.” There is a certain poetry to this death that is in itself a marriage, the appropriation of the comic trope of a marriage into the tragedy of death.

This union is also significant because of another aspect of Hugo’s artistic credo. In the preface to his play *Cromwell* (a preface that’s become more famous than the play itself), Hugo outlines the idea that Romantic theatre reaches a sort of perfection through the union of the grotesque and the sublime, and the union between Esmeralda and Quasimodo at the end of the story is precisely this union. Esmeralda is described many times as both divine and sublime, while Quasimodo is undoubtedly a grotesque figure with a grimace for a face. Their marriage at the climax of the story is a symbolic defense of a Romantic belief.

The cathedral itself complements the plot as a manifestation of this credo, for it symbolizes the union of sublime and grotesque both on the page and in reality. Hugo calls it a “majestic and sublime edifice,” yet also notes its grotesque nature, commenting on the similarity between the deformed Quasimodo and the disconcerting gargoyles scattered around the cathedral’s surfaces. And standing before the cathedral, this union becomes even more evident. On postcards and in photos, the cathedral is
beautiful, a harmonious symphony of stone, but in reality, it is indeed nothing but majestic and sublime. Yet it has its grotesque side, too, as one discovers by climbing the towers and coming face to face with those chimeras and wandering through dark corners.

It is not only the cathedral, but also Paris that elucidates Hugo’s meaning. The Paris of Hugo’s novel is not the Paris Hugo knew; the setting of his story is a sort of magical, historical Never Never Land, a romantic vision of the Middle Ages popular among Romantic writers. Hugo’s own Paris was much like Paris today, a modern city, clinging to the remnants of its medieval history. Thus, the sort of historical nostalgia that Romantic writers, including Hugo, imbued their novels with as they valorized the past can still be felt today. As I discovered when I arrived, the Paris I read about isn’t the Paris of today. The
16th-century map of Paris I buy from a charming bouquiniste bears little resemblance to my modern map, many of its structures long destroyed. The Bastille is gone. The Hôtel de Ville has been transformed from the Gothic structure it once was into a Disney-esque castle. The original Palace of Justice burned down long ago, and the one that took its place is a non-descript stone building. These edifices, absent in our day, were already gone in Hugo’s, the only remnants of them remaining in Paris’s historical museum, the Musée Carnavalet. Today’s Paris is old and new, haphazard, just as Hugo describes it:

The Paris of today has no general appearance. It’s a collection of samples from many centuries, and the most beautiful are gone. The capital is
gaining nothing but houses, and what houses! At the rate at which things are going, there’ll be new ones every fifty years. Thus, the historical significance of its architecture is being erased every day. The monuments become rarer and rarer, and it seems that each day they are being engulfed bit by bit, drowned in the houses. Our fathers had a Paris of stone; our children will have a Paris of plaster.

The Haussmannian buildings that cover most of Paris hide the few ancient remnants, and even the view from the towers of Notre Dame is not what it once was. Hugo provides an entire chapter describing the view from those towers, noting church after church, the gates that once circled the city, and the old bridges and winding streets. But today, as I climb that winding staircase, all I see are apartment buildings, a couple of Gothic churches peeking out between them, and the Eiffel tower in the distance, its legs firmly planted as it reaches its slender neck towards the clouds. Perhaps, though, this change has a positive aspect: the Middle Ages are so romantic because there’s so little left of them. The Paris of centuries ago is a distant ideal for a romantic imagination, and as another Romantic writer, Gerard de Nerval, pointed out, if one wants to preserve an ideal, one needs to stay away from it. One would hardly actually want to live in the 15th century, even if it does make a good setting for a story.

Today’s Paris has its own charms. Even if the Metro breaks down constantly and the streets are crowded with tourists, every street has a unique gem, an author’s favorite café, a place of residence. But, though I could sip coffee eternally at Fitzgerald’s favored Café de Flore, I much prefer to stand before the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris with Notre-Dame de Paris and live its literary paradox.

WORKS CITED