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Balzac's Creative Melancholia: Writing the Unconscious Loss

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WRITING THE UNCONSCIOUS LOSS

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Abstract

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Although “depression” and “melancholia” are often interchangeably used, I intend to differentiate them in order to highlight the creative potential of melancholia. My dissertation is indeed devoted to understanding melancholia and its tie to creativity through an examination of Honoré de Balzac’s works. I argue that Balzac (who suffered from bouts of depression) “reworks” depression into what he calls “melancholia” in *La Peau de Chagrin* (1830-1831), *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1834) and *Séraphîta* (1833-1835). While melancholia shares many characteristics of depression, what distinguishes it from depression is its potential for creativity and survival. In depression, as illustrated in Balzac’s *La Peau de Chagrin* (1830-1831), the subject is devalued by identifying with the disappointing lost loved object, an identification that can lead to suicide. As I show, melancholia transcends the suffering of depression through idealization. In Balzac’s melancholia, an extreme idealization of the object functions indeed as a coping mechanism insofar as this unconscious fantasy fills the hole left by the absence of the object. This idealization, which keeps alive both the lost object and the melancholic subject, is however fueled by ambivalence and rage. While my methodology is informed by psychoanalytic understandings of “melancholia,” I hope to show the invaluable insights that literature contributes to the psychoanalytic understanding of depression and melancholia. Literature will reveal what psychoanalysis cannot.

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Dedications

To my mother, Kyungmee (김경미)

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INTRODUCTION

Though depression and “melancholia” are terms often interchangeably used, I intend in this dissertation to differentiate them in order to highlight the creative potential of melancholia. My dissertation is indeed devoted to understanding melancholia and its tie to creativity through an examination of Honoré de Balzac’s works. Balzac, I will argue, not only proposes an in-depth analysis of depression, and even of suicidal depression, but also reworks depression into what he calls “melancholia.” While melancholia shares many characteristics of depression, what distinguishes it from depression is its potential for survival.

As many critics have noted, Balzac was himself prone to depression. In *Dans Balzac* (1986), Pierre Citron offers us an overview of Balzac’s childhood that shows how the father of *La Comédie humaine* was predisposed to depression. Being “le fils détesté,”¹ Balzac was neglected since birth, sent away to boarding school at age eight, and treated with indifference by his mother. In *Prométhée, ou La Vie de Balzac* ([1974] 1993), André Maurois notes Balzac’s biting resentment towards his mother’s early abandonment by citing from *Le Lys dans la Vallée* (1835) from *Études de Mœurs* the following lamentation: “Quelle disgrâce physique ou morale me valait la froideur de ma mère? Étais-je donc l’enfant du devoir, celui dont la naissance est fortuite? ... Mis en nourrice à la compagne, oublié par ma famille pendant trois ans, quand je revins à la maison paternelle, j’y comptais pour si peu de chose que j’y subissais la compassion des gens...” (13-14). Balzac describes the suicidal depression that the lack of maternal love can cause through the words of the main character Felix: “Je me jetai à ses pieds [...] Ma mère me

¹ Pierre Citron, *Dans Balzac* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 22.

répondit que je jouais la comédie. Je me plaignis de son abandon, elle m'appela fils dénaturé. J'eus un tel serrement de cœur qu'à Blois je courus sur le pont pour me jeter dans la Loire. Mon suicide fut empêché par la hauteur du parapet."² His mother's lack of love, her favoritism for his brother and his estrangement from his beloved sister drove the young Balzac (who was recorded to have said on several occasions: "Je n'ai jamais eu de mère" (Maurois [1974] 1993, 17)) to immerse himself in the task of reading and writing literature.

While Balzac's bouts of depression have been documented and traced to a maternal indifference, I do not intend to propose a psychobiography³ of Balzac. What will interest me instead is what can be learned from the complex analysis of depression that he proposes in his writing, and from the move out of depression into melancholia that his writing both describes and performs.

One of the greatest and most prolific writers of the 19th century, Balzac wrote over the span of some 17 years over a hundred works, which consisted of 91 completed novels and 64 unfinished titles, most of which were integrated in *La Comédie humaine*, a monumental work that would be left unfinished. My dissertation will focus on three texts from this monumental oeuvre: *La Peau de Chagrin* (1830-1831); *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1834); and, *Séraphîta* (1833-1835). The texts that I will analyze are not only chronologically connected but were all written within a period of five years. I should also note that the trajectory of my dissertation, which starts with a consideration of suicidal depression in *La Peau de Chagrin* and ends with an analysis of mysticism as an extreme development of melancholia in *Séraphîta*, parallels the

² Honoré de Balzac, *Le Lys dans la vallée* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. IX. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1978), 981.

³ For a psychobiography of Balzac, see E. C.M. Frijling-Schreuder, "Honoré De Balzac—A Disturbed Boy Who Did Not Get Treatment" in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 45: 426-430.

trajectory that Balzac himself set up in *La Comédie humaine*: he indeed places *La Peau de Chagrin* at the beginning and *Séraphîta* at the end of its *Etudes philosophiques*.

My methodology is informed by psychoanalytic understandings of “melancholia” such as the one that Sigmund Freud proposes in his seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). In this essay, Freud distinguishes melancholia from mourning by categorizing it as a pathological reaction to the loss of a loved object. In melancholia, this loss is deemed “unconscious,”⁴ and as such, *unnamable*, inexplicable and impossible to locate and/ or put into words. Viewed typically as a healthy response to the loss of a loved object, mourning, on the other hand, deals with loss via a process of libidinal detachment from the lost loved object. In mourning, the ego of the mourner becomes “*free and uninhibited*”⁵ from the lost loved object by adhering to “the call of reality” that tells him to move on, “count one’s losses” and re-cathect to another love object.⁶ In melancholia, the subject is unable to separate from the lost loved object and is never freed from it. The melancholic ego is shackled to and fixated on the loss, which he cannot accept, so much so that it identifies with the lost object. The depressed subject refuses to mourn by reinvesting in another object. Instead of mourning, it creates a different relation to the lost loved object.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981): 245.

⁵ “[...] When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.” (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 245).

⁶ “Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day.” (Ibid., 244).

Because of some “slight or disappointment”⁷ caused by the loved person (object), the melancholic’s ego cuts its tie to the object, completely decathects (disinvests its libido) from the object and draws back the libido into itself.⁸ As the melancholic subject cuts its relation to the object, s/he incorporates it. This “cannibalistic” “devouring”⁹ of the lost loved object starts a process of identification.¹⁰ The ego identifies with the abandoned object. As Freud puts it: “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.”¹¹ The ego that has identified with the lost loved object then becomes the target of the superego that begins to castigate it severely:

The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning—an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any

⁷ “An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered.” (Ibid., 248-249).

⁸ “But the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object.” (Ibid., 249).

⁹ “The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it.” (Ibid., 249-250).

¹⁰ As Freud indicates in his text, the nature of the melancholic identification is “narcissistic:” “The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up. This substitution of identification for object-love is an important mechanism in the narcissistic affections.” (Ibid., 249).

¹¹ Ibid.

achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished.¹²

The criticisms addressed by the superego to the ego are in fact the criticisms that could be addressed to the disappointing loved object with which the ego has identified: “So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego.”¹³

Reading Freud’s text on melancholia gave rise to a number of questions which drove my investigation and which I try to address throughout this dissertation. First, if melancholia is a reaction to the loss of a loved object, what exactly is meant by this “loss”? This question was prompted by two remarks of Freud:

Where the exciting causes are different one can recognize that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted). In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which had given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn

¹² Ibid., 246.

¹³ Ibid., 248.

from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.¹⁴

In the quote above, Freud mentions enigmatically that: 1) loss is unconscious; 2) in melancholia, one does not know what is lost. “Unconscious loss” intimates not knowing what one has lost through the loss of a person (through death or disappointment). Second, if melancholia is a refusal to mourn the loss of the loved object, what does it try to preserve, the object or the relationship to this object? And how do we understand the very notion of “object” since the loss of the “object” cannot be simply equated with the loss of the “person”? What parts or components of the lost object does melancholia internalize? Third, what is meant by the expression “shadow of the object”? :

Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification.¹⁵

Finally, if the ambivalent love-hate relationship towards this object is a key component of melancholia, how exactly does this ambivalence manifest itself?

¹⁴ Ibid., 245.

¹⁵ Ibid., 249.

It is these questions that drove in large part my analysis of “melancholia” in Balzac. While Freud’s analysis has been crucial in prompting these questions, it also seemed to me that the mechanisms he outlines in this text on “melancholia” could not account for what Balzac called “melancholia” in his own literary work. Freud and Balzac, it seemed to me, did not mean the same thing by “melancholia.” This discrepancy between the psychoanalytic and literary understanding of the term “melancholia” is the question, which inspired this dissertation. Through his use of the term “melancholia,” Balzac, I will argue, indeed identified a specific process that is different from depression and asked its readers to take it into account. An important part of my work is, therefore, to show that what Freud calls “melancholia” in fact refers to what I will call “depression” as distinct from what Balzac calls “melancholia.”

While my methodology is informed by psychoanalytic understandings of “melancholia,” I do not intend to simply “apply” psychoanalysis to literature. In the understanding of melancholia, literature has its own crucial role to play. And it is this role that I would like to highlight. Literature will reveal what psychoanalysis cannot. As I hope to show, psychoanalysis may indeed have much to learn from Balzac’s texts — to the extent that they compel psychoanalysis to consider that a difference does exist between depression and melancholia. In so doing, literature contributes invaluable insights to the psychoanalytic understanding of both depression and melancholia.

While melancholia shares many characteristics of depression, what distinguishes it from depression, I will argue, is its potential for survival and creativity. In depression, the subject is devalued by identifying with the disappointing lost loved object, which can lead to self-annihilation. As I will show, melancholia helps the lost subject find a way to transcend the suffering of depression through idealization. In Balzac’s melancholia, an extreme idealization of

the object functions indeed as a coping mechanism insofar as this unconscious fantasy fills the hole left by the absence of the object. Balzac creates a fantasy, which functions as a buffer against the pain of depression, in order to keep strangely “real” and alive the dead maternal object, always kept at a distance. This idealization keeps alive both the lost object and the melancholic subject. This fantasy is both a coping mechanism and the denial of the absence of the maternal object and the lack that the lost loved object presents.

My dissertation will begin with a consideration of depression. While, as critics have noted, Balzac explored suicidal depression in *Les Proscrits* (1831), and at the beginning of *Le Lys dans la Vallée* (1835), I will focus on *La Peau de Chagrin* (1830-1831), a text published in the same year as *Les Proscrits*, which stages a character, Raphaël, who under the impact of disappointed love, falls in a depression that leads him to contemplate suicide. It is indeed with *La Peau de Chagrin* that Balzac shows himself to be, as Paul Denis puts it, a “clinician of depression.”

En bon clinicien de la dépression Balzac décrit la dépersonnalisation qui l’accompagne dès que l’investissement de l’objet se défait, il évoque la « mourant » plongé « dans une extase douloureuse », « en proie à cette puissance malfaisante », à « l’action dissolvante ». Il décrit les effets dépersonnalisant du reflux de la libido désinsérée de l’objet sur laquelle elle était investie : Raphaël « sentait son organisme arriver insensiblement aux phénomènes de la fluidité.¹⁶

¹⁶ Paul Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif envisagé à partir de *La Peau de chagrin* de Balzac” in *Le Courrier balzacien* 82, no. 1 (Paris: Société des amis d’Honoré de Balzac, 2001): 4.

Paul Denis, a psychoanalyst who has authored several books on psychoanalytic theory, such as: *Emprise et satisfaction, les deux formants de la pulsion* (1997); *Sigmund Freud 1905-1920* (2000); *Eloge de la bêtise* (2001); *Les phobies* (2006); *De l'exaltation* (2013); and, *Le narcissisme* (2015), and devoted two articles to Balzac, proposes an insightful analysis of the depressive mechanisms at work in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*. While I will explain the intricacies of his reading, my interpretation will expand on some key points in the picture of suicidal depression that Balzac proposes. It will especially insist on the status that Balzac gives in this text to the dead mother as the root cause of Raphaël's suicidal depression. In the novel, Raphaël experiences the literal loss, the death, of his mother at a young age. I will read this literal death as being in fact a metaphorical representation of what André Green has identified in his chapter, "La Mère Morte," in *Narcissisme de vie narcissisme de mort* (1983) as the dead mother complex. Green's "dead mother complex" consists of a depressed mother who is not literally dead but who is emotionally absent or incapable of loving her young child. As such the maternal depression is transmitted into the child: "The essential characteristic of this depression is that it takes place in the presence of the object, which is itself absorbed by a bereavement:" "Le trait essentiel de cette dépression est qu'elle a lieu en présence de l'objet, lui-même absorbé par un deuil" (Green 1983, 256).

Of relevance to my analysis will also be Abraham and Maria Torok's article entitled "Mourning *or* Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation" (1972), published as a chapter in their book, *The Shell and the kernel*, Volume I (1994). In it, the process of incorporation is linked to a fantasy that arises from an inability to mourn:

Incorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such. In these special cases the impossibility of introjection is so profound that even our refusal to mourn is prohibited from being given a language. [...] The words cannot be uttered, the scenes cannot be recalled, the tears cannot be shed – everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved. Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes, and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography. [...] A whole world of unconscious fantasy is created, one that leads its own separate and concealed existence.¹⁷

Their introduction and analysis of psychical crypts, which carry the “secret” of the lost loved object, is central to my argument in Chapter I. According to Abraham and Torok, mourning and introjection are interestingly aligned with each other in that just as an infant who is given milk and fed with words by his mother is both nourished and able to communicate, a person who is successfully mourning is able to know, name and later release (de-cathect) from their loss via words. But in cases where the mother is dead or absent, this infant is not given the words that it needs. The infant experiences muteness or a void, an unnamable/ unconscious loss that cannot be formulated. “The abrupt loss of a narcissistically indispensable object of love has occurred, yet the loss is of a type that prohibits its being communicated. If it were not so, incorporation would

¹⁷ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation* (1972) in *The Shell and the Kernel*, V. I., Ed. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 130.

have no reason for being.”¹⁸ This unconscious and unnamable loss leads to the constitution of a psychic crypt: “The words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed – everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved.”¹⁹ The loss and the memories, feelings and affects associated to the loss are put away in a psychical crypt, “buried alive” as it were. It is such a maternal crypt that Balzac indicates, I will argue, by enigmatically situating Raphaël’s mother’s tomb on an island in the middle of a river. Through the figure of this maternal tomb as an isolated resting place on an island, the text points to the status of the dead mother as an internal, psychic crypt. It is the effect of this maternal crypt on the subject that I will trace in my analysis of the text, which dissects the darker aspects that characterize its depressive machinery, such as stagnancy, idleness, rage, ambivalence, destruction, and suicidal tendencies. Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin*, however, explores more than the complexities of the workings of depression.

While my interpretation, following the path opened by Denis, explores the depressive mechanisms at work in this text, it also identifies the crucial move from depression to melancholia that this text performs, a move that Denis does not explore, which is the melancholic move towards idealization. As a process of idealization, melancholia allows the subject to survive, to avoid the worst outcome of depression: suicide. Melancholia, however, is not simply an eradication of the depression from which it stems: melancholia suspends depression’s worst outcome through idealization and the play of ambivalence (love/hate relationship) towards the lost loved object. By creating an ideal and maintaining it, melancholia redirects the depressive energy.

¹⁸ Abraham & Torok, *Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation*, 129.

¹⁹ Ibid., 130.

Chapter II will study the rage and destruction that is aimed at the idealized maternal object in *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1834) in *Histoire des Treize* of *Études de Mœurs*. In order to do so, I will focus on the figure of decapitation on this text. Critics have noted the prevalence of decapitated heads in Balzac's œuvre. Roland Chollet in "Trophées de têtes chez Balzac" notes Balzac's scattering of the image of cut out feminine heads in his texts and elaborates on the author's fixation on decapitation. In *La Duchesse de Langeais*, we are not, however, dealing with a literal decapitation but with the looming threat of decapitation, which Nathalie Buchet Rogers in "De 93 À L'Histoire Des Treize: La Terreur de (Marie-) Antoinette de Langeais" (2001) relates to the historical and real decapitation of the Queen Marie-Antoinette.

My interpretation will read the looming threat of decapitation in the text as a figure for the way melancholia redirects the rage of depression, i.e. the rage that depression can direct against the subject itself and lead to suicide. Instead of attacking the subject, rage is directed outward, toward the sublime object. The figure of decapitation as manifestation of the rage against the idealized melancholic object will be central in understanding the role of ambivalence in melancholia. I will indeed propose to read the cut of decapitation that marks the sublime figure as both the unconscious rage against the maternal object and a denial of its lack and incompleteness. Decapitation in fact figures the psychic mechanism that generated melancholic idealization. The text shows that the sublime object of melancholia is generated by an invisible psychic beheading, a brutal mutilation, and a violent cut of the maternal object, which is, however denied.

Chapter III will focus on *Séraphîta* (1835) from *Études Philosophiques*. As a self-proclaimed mystical text, *Séraphîta* may appear to be at odds with the rest of Balzac's oeuvre.

Nevertheless, Balzac insists on the importance of *Séraphîta* in his Introduction to *La Comédie humaine*:

En me voyant amasser tant de faits et les peindre comme ils sont, avec la passion pour élément, quelques personnes ont imaginé, bien à tort, que j'appartenais à l'école sensualiste et matérialiste, deux faces du même fait, le panthéisme. Mais peut-être pouvait-on, devait-on s'y tromper. Je ne partage pas la croyance à un progrès indéfini, quant aux Sociétés ; je crois aux progrès de l'homme sur lui-même. Ceux qui veulent apercevoir chez moi l'intention de considérer l'homme comme une créature finie se trompent donc étrangement. *Séraphîta*, la doctrine en action du Bouddha chrétien, me semble une réponse suffisante à cette accusation assez légèrement avancée d'ailleurs. [...] Le magnétisme animal, aux miracles duquel je me suis familiarisé depuis 1820 ; les belles recherches de Gall, le continuateur de Lavater ; tous ceux qui, depuis cinquante ans, ont travaillé la pensée comme les opticiens ont travaillé la lumière, deux choses quasi semblables, concluent et pour les mystiques, ces disciples de l'apôtre saint Jean, et pour tous les grands penseurs qui ont établi le monde spirituel, cette sphère où se révèlent les rapports entre l'homme et Dieu.²⁰

Charles Grivel also insists that *Séraphîta* is not a “marginal” text while noting that it “remains an open work:”

²⁰ Balzac, *Avant-Propos de « La Comédie Humaine »* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. I. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1976), 16-17.

Le roman, souvent symbolique de tout *Le Livre mystique*, n'a cessé de susciter des interrogations et des commentaires sans avoir rencontré, semble-t-il, des interprétations décisives. *Séraphîta* reste une œuvre ouverte. Se proposait-elle d'aller plus loin qu'une initiation à Swedenborg, le père conceptuel de son « héros », et qu'un exposé fictionnalisé de sa doctrine ? Les liens avec d'autres textes de *La Comédie humaine*, et avec l'écrit balzacien tout entier, n'ont cessé d'être questionnés, établis ou déniés, au point que l'œuvre sert un peu de clivage dans la famille balzacienne, entre une lecture selon le « système » et une approche plus attentive aux pesanteurs du réel et aux contingences du métier. Ni traité, ni évangile, *Séraphîta* se présente comme un roman du surnaturel (autre voie du fantastique ou du philosophique) et l'on y repère aisément ce que Balzac y entretient de résistance du réel à la fable qu'on lui impose, précisément pour laisser son espace au roman, voire au romanesque, avec effets de neige.²¹

While many analyses of the texts have explored the version of mysticism that this text articulates, I intend to show that, with mysticism, Balzac deploys the ultimate consequences of melancholic idealization. According to Denis, mysticism is an inversion of and even an alternative to depression. In my study of the text, I will focus on the latter: mysticism is an alternative to depression insofar as it represents the culminating point of the idealization mechanism that characterizes melancholia.

²¹ Charles Grivel, « IV. LECTURES ET COMMENTAIRES » of « *Notice pour Séraphîta* », in *Balzac : La Comédie humaine : Edition critique en ligne*, Groupe International de Recherches Balzaciennes, Groupe ARTFL, Université de Chicago, Maison de Balzac [accessed on March 7, 2019: www.v1.paris.fr/commun/v2asp/musees/balzac/furne/notices/seraphita.htm].

In *Séraphîta* (1835), Balzac apparently proposes a positive and even ecstatic, blissful version of the melancholic idealization. I will argue that Balzac uses the mystical discourse to highlight the abyssal void that the melancholic idealization tries to fill, an abyssal void, which annihilates the melancholic subject at the end of the novel. Although the sublime annihilation is described as a sort of infinite ecstasy and jouissance, I will look at how Balzac the writer, however, takes his distance from the apparent bliss of such annihilation. In both *Les Proscrits* and *Séraphîta*, the figure of the writer is able to recognize the appeal of mysticism yet withstand the seductive nature of its self-obliterating destruction. Even more, Balzac the writer distances himself from this kind of “bliss” by writing, which I regard as the very thing that fills in the threatening emptiness of melancholia.

While my dissertation proposes that this melancholic process allows one to survive, it does not, however, propose melancholia as a therapeutic “solution” but as a creative mechanism. If melancholia suspends the suicide of depression, it is not an easy way out of it. It does not eradicate the mechanisms of depression but gives them a twist so as to suspend their destructive outcome. In this, it is “life-saving” since it gives space and time to create. With that said, if the melancholic process is a coping mechanism that allows one to write, the persisting and on-going work of idealization is a taxing process. This exhaustion is most palpable in the character of Albert Savarus, one of the many doubles in which Balzac represents himself as writer, who literally exhausts himself in writing. As for Balzac himself, his manic creativity and working habits have become a literary legend in its own right. A thirteen to sixteen-hour workday and endless cups of coffee seemed to have shortened his life. Harry Bruce in *Page Fright: Tools, Tricks, and Fetishes of Famous Writers* (2009) writes:

Balzac went to bed at eight p.m., and his valet awakened him at midnight. He donned a white cashmere robe, like those worn by Dominican monks, and secured it around his waist with a gold chain, from which dangled tiny scissors and pliers, also gold. He stepped into white Turkish trousers, pulled on red leather slippers embroidered with more gold, sat down at a small table, grabbed a quill pen, and, by the light of four candles, began to work. Pritchett wrote: “To say that he worked is inadequate; he seemed to have a ceaseless engine in his brain.... He wrote hour after hour and when he flagged and his head seemed to burst, he went to the coffee-pot and brewed the strongest black coffee he could find, made from the beans of Bourbon, Martinique and Mocha. He was resorting to a slow course of coffee poisoning and it has been estimated that in his life he drank 50,000 cups of it. When dawn came he stopped writing and, imitating Napoleon, lay for an hour in a hot bath. At nine messengers brought him proofs from the printers and he began the enormous task of altering almost everything he had written and in that handwriting that drove printers mad.” (Bruce 2009, 25-26)

Coffee, the very thing, which energized and inspired him to write, also *slowly poisoned* him. Dressed completely in white and in monk’s attire, Balzac carried the same kind of reverence and devotion for his work as a religious to God. Balzac the writer exhausted himself in the process of writing the monumental work that is *La Comédie humaine*, which he did not complete. In a melancholic gesture of sorts, *La Comédie Humaine* seems to revolve around a lack – an opened wound that no writing could ever fill.

CHAPTER I

FROM DEPRESSION TO MELANCHOLIA: BALZAC'S *LA PEAU DE CHAGRIN*

In an article entitled “Le mal-être dépressif envisagé à partir de *La Peau de chagrin* de Balzac,” French psychoanalyst Paul Denis praises Balzac for being a remarkable “clinician of depression”²² in *La Peau de chagrin*, a text that finished writing between the years 1830 and 1831 and included in his *Études philosophiques*. This novel, which, as Denis points out, was the last book that Freud read before his death, constitutes an invaluable exploration of the psychological workings of depression. Denis indeed reads Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin* as the “illustration” of object loss and of the organization of a “depressive movement,” of “depression in the psychiatric sense of the word” characterized by phenomena of “*rétrécissement*” (shrinkage) and “*appauvrissement*” (impoverishment).²³

Before turning to the interpretation of Balzac’s text, I will first explain Denis’s theorization of depression. As we shall see, Denis’s overall approach to the study of depression painstakingly refrains from giving an overly simplified definition of it. What he calls *le mal-être dépressif*²⁴ is a “way of being” (*façon d’être*), a condition rather than a symptom or mental illness. Furthermore, Denis understands depression as a method of survival rather than simply a symptomatic response to an illness. In this chapter, I will not only follow Denis’s reading but also expand on it, by addressing aspects of the Balzacian text that he leaves aside. I will

²² Paul Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif envisagé à partir de *La Peau de chagrin* de Balzac” in *Le Courrier balzacien* (Paris: Société des amis d’Honoré de Balzac, 2001): 3. All translations mine.

²³ Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif,” 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

especially try to trace a move that I believe to be crucial, from depression to melancholia. If Balzac's text does propose, as Denis argues, an invaluable exploration of depression, it also, I will argue, shows how "melancholia" can emerge from the workings of depression.

DEPRESSION: A STUBBORN HOLD ON LOVE & THE DEFLECTION OF LOSS

In his analysis, Denis follows Freud who, in his seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), distinguishes melancholia from mourning by categorizing it as a pathological reaction to the loss of a loved object. In depression and melancholia, this loved object fails via some unforgivable disappointment. Because of this disappointment, the relationship between the subject and the object of love is suddenly found irreparably ruptured. As Freud noted, the ego cuts its relation to the object. While following Freud, Denis makes an important distinction between the loved object and the love relationship or relation to love, which the subject retains because he cannot let go of it. For the subject, what is threatened to be irretrievably lost is not just a loved object, but also the relation to love itself. What must be preserved for the survival of the ego is the subject's relation to love. In a sense, the object becomes a fairly replaceable item while the relationship to love is deemed to be one of a kind. Since the subject invests this relation to love with unconscious meanings, its loss could be interpreted as intensely significant and deeply personal.

Instead of mourning the loss of the relationship, i.e., accepting it and investing in new objects and new relationships, the subject refuses to mourn and rejects the loss of the object. For Denis, the most defining characteristic of depression is indeed the subject's incapacity to let go of or detach from a particular object of love (that is, from a certain representation that the subject

has of love), and reinvest love in different and new objects. According to Freud, in melancholia, the ego is never freed or uninhibited enough to re-cathect and love again. As Denis reiterates in this article, “l’amour pour l’objet . . . ne peut être abandonné.”²⁵ This “love” for the object cannot be abandoned since the ego of the subject is organized by it. The object itself is irreplaceable for it is deeply lodged within the psyche of the subject; in fact, it is woven into the very fabric of the ego where it becomes the entity that allows the subject to function. Additionally, the relation to love, which is in fact “the loss of the object,” cannot be discarded – for to lose this love would, according to Denis, “deprive the psyche of the organizing element of its functioning.” [“La « perte d’objet », perte interne qui touche « le moi lui-même » comme l’indique Freud, et non simple rupture d’une relation de personne, est au cœur de ce phénomène qui prive le psychisme d’un élément organisateur de son fonctionnement, d’un « objet » psychique dont la disparition entraîne une désunion de l’enchaînement des événements psychiques.”]²⁶ It would expose it to the terrible threat of disorganization and collapse. As he puts it, “l’objet perdu doit être conservé sous peine de désorganisation, c’est à sa conservation que va s’attacher le moi du sujet.”²⁷

Although the actual external object of love may be forever lost in reality, the internal object of love, i.e., the subject’s relationship to love, is, nevertheless, conserved by fantasy. As Freud stated in “Mourning and Melancholia,” the lost loved object is continually loved and thus preserved through a process of narcissistic identification and incorporation. As the melancholic subject cuts its relation to the object, s/he incorporates it and, in some instances, becomes it. This

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ Ibid., 10.

process of incorporation, which translates into a “melancholic confusion,”²⁸ i.e. melancholia’s process of depersonalization,²⁹ adds another layer of complexity in melancholia – the ease with which the subject is able to interchange himself/ herself with the object of loss. This identification leads us to question the object of the melancholic subject, or what Denis calls the internal object: “la personne perdue ou plutôt l’objet interne constitué au cours des relations avec elle.”³⁰ The internal object is an assemblage of all the relations that the subject has had with the object that stands in for love. The internal object is then the symbol of *the subject’s relation to the object and via it to love*.

It is this internal object that finds itself fixed or “erected” within the ego: “Perdu, l’objet sera remplacé par son ombre érigée en “objet dépressif” chargé de maintenir la cohésion de l’organisation psychique menacée.”³¹ According to Denis, the internal object is a “shadow” and not the object itself. The notion of shadow comes from Freud who claimed in “Mourning and Melancholia” that “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.”³² Freud does not offer any explanation of this “shadow.” Denis gives a more precise significance to the word in its relation to melancholia. The shadow of the object that falls on the subject, or the “ego,” as Freud put it, is not the shadow that the object casts, but the shadow that the object has become once it has revealed its disappointing emptiness. It is this shadow which is “erected” as what Denis calls the “depressive object.” In some cases, Denis seems to regard this internal object or “*objet dépressif*” as the symbolic representation of the overarching loss (of the relation to love) that has occurred.

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid., 10.

³² Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 249.

For instance, he states that: “Dans la dépression, le sujet surinvestit l’ombre de l’objet, [...] le déprimé constate la vacuité de l’ombre.”³³ Thus the lost loved object is nothing more than the mask or shell of the depressed individual’s relation to love. The lost object of love that is resurrected within the psyche serves as a ghostly representation of the love relationship that has been lost.

In Denis’s interpretation of depression, the depressed subject never mourns the lost loved object. Rather it longs for the lost affective love relations that give meaning and purpose to the existence of the depressed individual. It is the relation to love that the depressed subject refuses to give up. The subject therefore internalizes the relation to the loved object and to love itself. This love relationship becomes the fulcrum of the depressed ego’s psychic organization. However much the psyche of a depressed individual may be “menaced” by disarray and agony, the internal object (the relationship to love) is protected, maintained and conserved within the depressed ego. This is what the psyche exhaustively maintains in order to organize itself. I would suggest here that the depressed person never stops loving “love” itself. For those prone to depression, it is the relation to love that is the single, most important glue for holding together a functioning organization of the psyche.

Denis makes an important and crucial point: depression is “une façon d’être, une façon pour le psychisme de survivre à sa propre désorganisation [...] la désorganisation du psychisme est pour celui-ci le danger absolu.”³⁴ By maintaining a relation to the internal object, the psyche protects itself from the disorganization that the complete loss of the relation to love would inflict. Initially organized around the loved object, the psyche now needs to reorganize itself around the

³³ Paul Denis, “Sérâphîta, le mysticisme et la dissolution du tiers” in *Revue française de psychanalyse* 69, no. 3 (2005): 829.

³⁴ Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif,” 3.

shadow or the depressive internal object. This internal object (or shadow) becomes the internal substitute for the lost external object and the main organizing element of the psyche that is fighting against loss.

In depression, “la perte de l’objet est à la fois reconnue et niée”³⁵ (“the loss of the object is both recognized and rejected at the same time”). The internal object functions therefore as a fetish, which denies the loss of the object. This fetish is the depressed person’s evidence that nothing has been lost. It is an “*étrange monument intérieur.*” This “strange,” “interior” monument of sorts is also an altar dedicated to dead love. The depressive internal object becomes an idol, a cult of the loss, that is also an inaccessible relation to love. The terrible threat of disorganization, which the blow of significant loss of love produces, is now put on hold and deceptively silenced by the frozen promise of perfect love reverberating in the shadow (i.e. the love relationship that is the internal object).

If depression is a mode of survival, it comes at a cost. First, Denis insists that depression is “*une maladie de l’investissement*” or “*surinvestissement.*”³⁶ Depression invests and even overinvests in the internal object. Although this internal object provides an organization for the psyche, it, being a depressive object, cannot provide any drive satisfaction. Depression overinvests in an inaccessible object that cannot give anything – that cannot love. This overinvestment in the internal object also means that there can be no investment in new objects. Desire becomes the worst danger for the depressed subject because it aggressively obstructs and seeks to destroy the only organizing object. Denis states that *désirer*, the act of *desiring*, threatens to make disappear the sole organizing object of the psyche: “Désirer devient le pire

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

³⁶ Ibid., 10.

danger, celui qui menace de disparition le seul objet organisateur vis à vis duquel aucune satisfaction pulsionnelle ne peut être obtenue.”³⁷ It threatens the existence of the chosen internal object and thus the entire psychical organization of the melancholic ego.

Second, the internalization of the object modifies the ego. As Freud noted, the incorporation of the lost loved object starts a process of identification. The ego identifies with the abandoned object. As he puts it: “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.”³⁸ The ego that has identified with the lost loved object becomes the target of the superego that begins to castigate it severely. The internal object, this shadow of the object, is not only erected within the ego but also “as” the ego. Freud’s argues that it is the impoverishment of the ego rather than that of the world that occurs in melancholia: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself”.³⁹ Denis interprets this impoverishment of the ego as “the internal loss that touches the ego”⁴⁰ [“perte interne qui touché « le moi lui-même » comme l’indique Freud”]. This last point, which is nowhere explicitly stated by Freud in his essay on mourning and melancholia, will serve as a helpful observation in our analysis of suicidal depression.

LE LIT DÉPRESSIF: FIXATIONS ON THE LOST MATERNAL OBJECT

³⁷ Ibid., 11.

³⁸ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 249.

³⁹ Ibid., 246.

⁴⁰ Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif,” 3.

Denis's reading of *La peau de chagrin* focuses mainly on the relationship between Raphaël de Valentin and the woman with whom he falls in love: Fœdora. Though it is Fœdora's loss that triggers Raphaël's clinical (suicidal) depression, it should be noted that Raphaël was a highly melancholic character even before his initial meeting and eventual falling in love with Fœdora. In fact, he describes his entire childhood as full of dread and melancholy brought on by excessive loneliness and agonizing longing for love, affection and warmth from his parents, especially his mother.

Denis tries to shed light on Raphaël's predisposition to depression, on what he calls "*le lit de sa dépressivité*," an expression coined by Jean Bergeret.⁴¹ According to Denis, the "bed" of Raphaël's depression lies in his fixation on a lost primitive object of love, which is his mother who died when he was only 10 years old:⁴²

L'objet maternel doublement interdit - par la prohibition œdipienne d'abord et par la mort ensuite - n'a pu donner lieu à un travail de deuil, et la fixation à cet objet primitivement perdu fait le lit de sa dépressivité - pour reprendre ici le terme de Jean Bergeret -, et le prédispose à s'attacher à une femme qui a la réputation d'être inaccessible, et qui se refuse. Fœdora est le second objet dont il est impossible de faire le deuil, car il a été impossible d'en faire la conquête.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴² "J'étais fils unique et j'avais perdu ma mère depuis dix ans." (Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. X., Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1979), 125).

⁴³ Denis, "Le mal-être dépressif," 11.

Besides the literal separation caused by his mother's sudden death, Raphaël experiences another kind of separation from her through the "Oedipal prohibition," enforced by his father, of the maternal object, that starts in his infancy and continues on until his mother's untimely death. These two types of estrangements define the maternal object as the object, which cannot give the love that is necessary and desired.

According to Denis, Raphaël failed to mourn the loss of his dead mother, his first ideal object of love. A prototypical melancholic subject, he cannot mourn her because he cannot give up his first object of love. Denis implicitly suggests that Raphaël's desire to keep for himself the island where his mother is buried is the sign of his on-going attachment to her even after her death: "Il n'a rien conservé du patrimoine paternel, sauf l'île de la Loire qui abrite le tombeau de sa mère et qu'il finira par aliéner."⁴⁴ Denis is right that the only sign of Raphaël's attachment for his mother is the possession of her tomb. But I would like to expand on the presentation of the maternal object as both dead and a crypt, which offers a slightly more morbid and objectified representation of the mother.

I will first point out that Raphaël never speaks about his relationship to his mother with much warmth, comfort, fondness or joy. There is absolutely no mention of his mother as a nurturing and loving figure. In fact, we know very little about her other than her Irish roots indicated by her name ("Barbe-Marie O'Flaharty"), the possible cause of her death by consumption,⁴⁵ and the fact that she had "des biens considérables."⁴⁶ These few factual details

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11. As we shall later see, the island does not belong to the "patrimoine paternel" as Denis claims, but to the "patrimoine maternel."

⁴⁵ "Ma mère n'est-elle pas morte de la poitrine?" (Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, 209).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 126.

convey the sense that Raphaël in fact hardly knows his mother or remembers her at all. The same emotional distance from the maternal figure can be heard in Raphaël's reaction when he learns that he has inherited the fortune that his maternal uncle, Major (Martin) O'Flaharty,⁴⁷ made through the East India Company and left to his niece, the late Miss O'Flaharty, Raphaël's mother:

- Un instant, répliqua Cardot assourdi par un chœur de mauvaises plaisanteries, je viens ici pour affaire sérieuse. J'apporte six millions à l'un de vous. (Silence profond.) Monsieur, dit-il en s'adressant à Raphaël, qui, dans ce moment, s'occupait sans cérémonie à s'essuyer les yeux avec un coin de sa serviette, madame votre mère n'était-elle pas une demoiselle O'Flaharty ?
- Oui, répondit Raphaël assez machinalement, *Barbe-Marie*.⁴⁸

Raphaël's mechanical ("machinalement") utterance of his mother's first name, "Barbe-Marie," evokes a certain trancelike yet fixed disassociation and detachment from her. His tempered and precise murmur of her name only intensifies the distance between them and swells his mother's image with *foreignness*. She seems *foreign* to him in the sense that he is *far* from her as an actual (real) person, a subject, who can be seen in the fullness of her complexities and thus loved. Her

⁴⁷ Balzac seems to have derived the name of Major Martin O'Flaharty from a comedic play by Richard Cumberland, "The West Indian" (1771). The play's hero is a Major O'Flaherty, a generous libertine and an Irishman who had made his fortune from sugar and rum in the tropics. According to the *Pléiade*, the name of O'Flaharty may have been "borrowed by Balzac" from Lady Morgan's book, "Les O'Brien et les O'Flaharty ou l'Irlande en 1793," published in 1828. ("Histoire du texte, documents, variantes, notes, indications bibliographiques" in *La Comédie Humaine*, T.X., Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1979), 1313).

⁴⁸ Balzac, *La Peau*, 208.

Irish maiden name (O'Flaharty) stresses the emotional foreignness of a mother who is not acknowledged as a full subject, but reduced to the mere status of an object.

The island-crypt where Raphaël's mother is buried becomes the physical representation of the maternal figure as being not only an object but also a dead object. This morbid representation of the mother as a thing (island-crypt) indeed objectifies her. The mother who barely appears in the novel becomes identified with this object, this thing that commemorates an absence. Unearthed from the haze of the melancholic sentimentality in the novel, she appears as an isolated tomb or place of secret memorandum, enclosed in the peaceful waters of the Loire and surrounded in the idyllic forestry and countryside of France. His objectification of her as a watery island-tomb provides a striking image of what exactly Raphaël's mother actually is (means) to the melancholic infant-subject. The mother as a literal "corpse" buried in a crypt represents a mother from whom love can never be obtained. It is this dead maternal object that Raphaël retains and buries inside of him, in his psyche, and continues to love. This dead maternal object does not only represent a mother whose love was lost because she died. As can be seen from Raphaël's lack of any memory of a loving/nurturing mother, the dead maternal object represents the emotional maternal deadness, i.e. her inability to ever give love. In this sense, the mother's death can be seen as only the mere physical manifestation of what she already was for Raphaël while alive – the Freudian gaping hole of melancholy that is the absence of love.

We need then to reevaluate Raphaël's apparent indifference to his mother's death. Like the classic melancholic person who relentlessly refuses to mourn, Raphaël cannot express *real* grief and/or sadness over the loss of his mother. His indifference in fact means that his love for her (as the never-present mother and/or unloving corpse that she has always been and finally

becomes when she dies) is buried within his psyche, that is, unavailable to consciousness. The deadness of the object in turn imposes upon his ego its own deadened (*indifferent*) state of being. Raphaël's melancholic ego thus identifies with the deadness of his mother – her lack and absence of love that has become his whole existence. Shackled to such a *dead* maternal object as this – one who is unable to respond to his need for love, Raphaël may as well be a walking corpse himself, not yet dead but always killing himself with the suffocating loss of her love.

Raphaël's relationship to this dead maternal object informs, as we shall see, his choice of love objects. A character “born to love” (“*né pour aimer*”⁴⁹), he chooses impossible objects of love that do not or cannot love back. Because his conception of love is connected to a dead mother who cannot provide the love that he seeks, he is condemned to be attracted exclusively to women who are metaphorically “dead,” corpse-like, that is, women who cannot, like his mother, love him.

There is, however, another characteristic of Raphaël's mother that Denis does not at all consider but that, as we shall see, informs his future choice of love objects: her monetary fortune and the role that this materialistic power plays in Raphaël's family history. Right after mentioning her death, Balzac launches indeed into a complicated presentation of Raphaël's family history that deserves close attention:

J'étais fils unique et j'avais perdu ma mère depuis dix ans. Autrefois, peu flatté d'avoir le droit de labourer la terre l'épée au côté, mon père, chef d'une maison historique à peu près oubliée en Auvergne, vint à Paris pour y tenter le diable. Doué de cette finesse qui rend les hommes du midi de la France si supérieurs quand elle se trouve accompagnée

⁴⁹ Ibid., 130.

d'énergie, il était parvenu sans grand appui à prendre position au cœur même du pouvoir. La révolution renversa bientôt sa fortune; mais il avait su épouser l'héritière d'une grande maison, et s'était vu sous l'empire au moment de restituer à notre famille son ancienne splendeur.⁵⁰

As one of Raphaël's friends will later stress, Raphaël's father is not only the "chef d'une maison historique," but also a noble descendant of Roman Emperor Valens.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid., 125.

⁵¹ The name of *de Valentin* seems to be derived from the family name, Valens, which is directly linked to the 66th Roman Emperor, Flavius Julius Valens Augustus, who, according to historians, was popularly nicknamed the "Last True Roman." From 364 to 378, Valens ruled over the eastern half of the Roman Empire, or, as the text calls it, "*l'Empire d'Orient*," a region, which consisted of today's Greece, Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, and Persia, splitting the power with his older brother, Emperor Valentinian I, who successfully ruled over the western half. In *Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century A.D.* (2002), Noel Lenski writes on the signification of the name of Valens: "*Valens* is apparently a translation of a typically Illyrian name, Licca, meaning something like 'strongman.' This made it a favorite choice for the sons of soldiers like Valens's father" (Lenski 2002, 51). Contrary to the valiant meaning attached to his name and the legacy of his older brother and father, Valens is described as weak, inexperienced in battle, fearful, passive, uneducated in the realm of "liberal disciplines," and, as Balzac has described him in his text, a true royal or "legitimate inheritor" of the Eastern Roman Empire: "Although every bit a Pannonian, Valens was in many respects not like his father or brother. He was not a great soldier; he did not grow up in the camp; he was not well built. Ammianus tells us he was pot-bellied, bowlegged, and had a bad eye. There is very little evidence that he was even born in Cibalae. Yet he remained a quintessential Pannonian, even if of a different ilk. In the same way that Gratian and Valentinian were men of the camp, Valens was a man of the country. While his father and brother were campaigning, Valens apparently stayed on the family estate, which accounts for what Ammianus calls his "rustic nature" (an attribute that the historian uses to characterize all Pannonians). Any military service Valens saw before 363 was without distinction. Zosimus tells us that empire came as a great shock to him, because he had led an inactive life before he shouldered its burdens; Ammianus confirms this, saying that Valens was 'schooled in neither military nor liberal disciplines.'" (Lenski 2002, 51-51) For more information on the life of Valens and a useful history on the Eastern Roman Empire, see A.H.M. Jones's *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey* (1964).

Raphaël de Valentin, s'il vous plaît ! Nous *portons un aigle d'or en champ de sable couronné d'argent becqué et onglé de gueules*, avec une belle devise : NON CECIDIT ANIMUS ! Nous ne sommes pas un enfant trouvé, mais le descendant de l'empereur *Valens*, souche des *Valentinois*, fondateur des villes de Valence en Espagne et en France, héritier légitime de l'empire d'Orient. Si nous laissons trôner Mahmoud à Constantinople, c'est par pure bonne volonté, et faute d'argent et de soldats. Émile décrivit en l'air, avec sa fourchette, une couronne au-dessus de la tête de Raphaël.⁵²

Although he comes from a glorious and even imperial lineage, Raphaël's father is poor, unable to derive enough wealth from his lands to subsist. Instead of "labourer" his own lands (i.e., of falling from his noble rank by working like a mere peasant), he prefers to go to Paris in order to gain the wealth necessary to sustain his noble rank. Although he makes his way into the "cœur même du pouvoir" (i.e. close to the king), he loses his fortune during the Revolution and so decides to marry the "inheritor of a great fortune:" "il avait su épouser l'héritière d'une grande maison."⁵³ The wording of the sentence implies that the father *knew to marry* Raphaël's mother for her money. His decision to marry a rich woman shows the importance of wealth in maintaining the social power and status that should be attached to a noble name.

As Nicole Mozet notes, Raphaël's father resembles Balzac's own father, as he presented him in the preface of the *Lys dans la vallée*:

⁵² Balzac, *La Peau*, 99.

⁵³ Ibid., 125.

Les ressemblances entre Raphaël et Balzac ne sont plus à démontrer, mais il faut souligner que *La Peau de chagrin* est le seul roman de *La Comédie humaine* où le romancier ait mis en scène son propre père, mort en 1829, d'une façon aussi directe et aussi explicite. Le rapprochement s'impose en effet entre la biographie du vieillard et celle que Balzac lui-même fait de son père dans la préface du *Lys dans la vallée*, dans laquelle on a la surprise de trouver les mêmes considérations, en grande partie légendaires, sur la noblesse auvergnate et la carrière brisée par la Révolution, car Bernard-François Balssa, né dans une famille paysanne, faisait encore partie, sous l'Empire, des notables de Tours.⁵⁴

Like Raphaël's father who went to Paris towards the "heart of the power," Balzac's own father had managed to secure for himself a place within *le Conseil Privé du Roi*.⁵⁵ However, Balzac's father, Bernard-François Balzac, was not a noble. He came instead from a family of peasants. Furthermore, as André Maurois notes, the "true name" of Balzac's father was not originally "Balzac" but "Balssa."

Son nom véritable, *Balssa*, lui venait d'une famille paysanne du hameau de la Nougayrié, dans le Tarn. Le radical *bals*, en langue d'oc, signifie : *roc escarpé*. Il y a, en Auvergne, des Balsac, des Balssa, des Balsan. Bernard-François, volontiers glorieux, se targuait

⁵⁴ Nicole Mozet, "Une Poétique de la Transgression" in *Balzac et la peau de chagrin*, Ed. Claude Duchet (Paris: Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1979), 18-19.

⁵⁵ Marcel Bouteron, "Le fonctionnement du conseil du roi Louis XVI expliqué par l'un de ses secrétaires, Bernard-François Balzac" in *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine* 12, no. 29-30 (1937): 325-337.

d'être de la race conquise, celle des Gaulois autochtones qui avaient résisté aux invasions et d'où sont sortis les Balzac d'Entragues, famille très noble.⁵⁶

According to Jean-Louis Déga, the father changed the spelling of his original name from “Balssa” (or “Balsa”) to “Balzac” in order to acquire the social advantages linked to a name that looked French, and not Occitan. The slight change of the consonant letter “s” to the letter “z” would distance the Balzacs from their Occitan peasant roots while highlighting the name’s close proximity to a very noble family, “the Balzacs of Entragues.”⁵⁷ Balzac’s father preferred the spelling of the name with the “z” as this version implied historic nobility and thus better secured his ambitions to climb the social ladder. “A trente ans il a pris le nom de Balzac, sans doute pour favoriser la confusion avec une grande famille noble – il faisait état devant les siens de cette flatteuse parenté (*Corr., II, 710*).”⁵⁸ The son of Bernard-François Balssa pursued the *nobilization* of the peasant and Occitan name “Balssa” that his father had undertaken when he decided to sign

⁵⁶ Maurois, *Prométhée*, 8-9. In addition to this, Jean-Louis Déga proposes another etymological derivation of the name: “Le nom de famille Balsa ou Balssa ne dérive pas comme on l’a parfois écrit du nom de lieu Balsac existant en Auvergne et en Rouergue mais de l’adjectif “balsan” issu du bas latin “balteanus” qualifiant à l’origine un cheval ayant des taches blanches sur ses jambes.” (Déga, *La vie prodigieuse de Bernard-François Balssa* (Rodez, France: Éditions Subervie, 1998), 13).

⁵⁷ Déga, *La vie prodigieuse de Bernard-François Balssa*, 19.

⁵⁸ Citron, *Dans Balzac*, 20-21. According to Déga, the father first used the “de” in front of his name, spelled “Balzac,” in a baptismal contract for his daughter, Laurence: “Quoi qu’il en soit, l’acte de baptême est éloquent car c’est une des premières fois qu’il attribue la particule à Bernard-François: ‘Le treize de mai mil huit cent deux à été baptisée Laurent (sic) François de Balzac et de dame Anne-Charlotte-Laure Sallambier, demeurant rue Neuve, paroisse de Saint-Hilaire...’” (Déga, *La vie prodigieuse*, 324).

his own literary works with the name: Honoré *de* Balzac.⁵⁹ Shortly after the death of his own father, Balzac added for the first time the “de” to his signature in October of 1829 when he completed *El Verdugo*, also translated as “Le Bourreau” or “The Executioner.”⁶⁰ From this point on, all the literary works that compose *La Comédie Humaine* would be put under this “noble sounding” name. Given the Balzacs (father and son’s) investment in the nobilization of their name in order to secure for themselves societal (political) rank, status and power, the biographical resemblances between Honoré de Balzac’s and Raphaël’s father need to be reassessed. Raphaël’s father seems to function as an idealized father figure since he has the

⁵⁹ Throughout his life, Honoré de Balzac was mistakenly addressed as “de Balzac” rather than simply “Balzac.” According to Maurois, one notable instance that may have led to this swift adoption of the “de” in his name occurred during Balzac’s collège years when “he was awarded the decoration of the Lily, [which] was assigned to ‘Honoré de Balzac.’” On Page 29 of *Prométhée* ([1974] 1993), Maurois explains how the Monarch’s ascription of the “de” in the award that he gave was a tactical effort to gain the popularity and trust of the youth. Maurois provides another possible explanation for this addition of the “de” in Balzac’s name, which he relates to the continual colloquial usage of the name as such. Soon after the publication of his first book, the name of Honoré de Balzac permeated into the intellectual salons of Paris. De Balzac was retained as the legitimate name of the young Honoré and began to be used to refer to the greatest and most prolific writer of his time: “C’était une immense faveur que d’être reçu par la divine Juliette en son troisième étage. Il semblait que le prestigieux pouvoir d’une fée eût adouci la raideur de la montée. Les hommes de tous bords s’y réconciliaient. Chateaubriand y rencontrait Benjamin Constant et Lamartine. La duchesse impériale. Mme d’Abrantès y introduisait Balzac. « Regardez avec soin ce jeune homme à l’œil charbonné, à la chevelure de jais ; regardez son nez, sa bouche surtout, lorsqu’un souvenir malin vient en relever les coins ; voyez-vous une sorte de dédain, ou de malice, dominer dans son regard où cependant il y a de la bonté pour ses amis ? Ce jeune homme, c’est Monsieur de Balzac. Il n’a que trente ans, mais déjà bien des volumes sont sortis de sa plume. »” (Maurois, *Prométhée*, 120). Despite these assumptions and eventual adoption of the “de” by outside parties, Honoré *de* Balzac would not sign his name with the “de” even in his first novel, *Les Chouans*. It wouldn’t be until *El Verdugo*, a novella written in the same year as *Les Chouans*, when he fully adopts the “de.”

⁶⁰ Janet L. Beizer, “The Narrator as Story Seller Balzac’s *El Verdugo*” in *Honoré de Balzac* (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 45: “*El Verdugo*, Balzac’s first tale of parricide, was written in October of 1829, four months after the death of his father. It is the first text signed “*H. de Balzac*” by the writer, who here appropriates the particule which Bernard-François, his father, assigned himself. Here, then, Balzac accedes to the patronym. It is also among the very first of the texts that were to figure in the *Comédie humaine*.”

nobility that the Balzac family desired. If the Balssa family wanted a noble name in order to gain social power, Raphaël's father, for his part, understands that a noble name must be associated with the social power derived from wealth. He constantly tries to maintain the *ancienne splendeur* of a noble family at a point in history when names held lesser value than money.

In contrast to a paternal figure whose sole purpose is to keep the valor of nobility intact, Balzac creates a maternal figure that seems to be an enigmatic social hybrid. According to Pierre Barbéris, Raphaël's mother belongs to the merchant bourgeoisie, which specifically dealt with trade and commerce in the West Indies: "Il [Raphaël's father] avait épousé dans la classe marchande (le frère de Barbe Marie-Charlotte laisse une fortune gagnée aux Indes dans le commerce)." ⁶¹ Though it is undeniable that the mother's family is involved in commercial trade, as the reference to the *Compagnie des Indes* suggests, ⁶² the fact that she is presented as "the inheritor of a *grande maison*" ("l'héritière d'une grande maison" ⁶³) indicates her possible ties to

⁶¹ Pierre Barbéris, "L'autobiographie, pourquoi? comment?" in *Balzac et la peau de chagrin* (Paris : Société D'Édition D'Enseignement Supérieur, 1979), 39.

⁶² "The East India Company bought goods, including gold, in India and sold them in Europe. The cost of its goods in India, called in its jargon the 'investment,' was met by proceeds of European goods sold in India – not a substantial quantity – by silver coin and bullion shipped there, which the Company tried to hold down, and by monies borrowed locally. If goods sold well in Europe, the Company might find itself borrowing in India and piling up funds in England, above the dividend paid out of its profits. There was thus a transfer problem from normal operations because of unbalanced trade and shortage of specie [...] After 1800 when the Napoleonic Continental system, or blockade, made selling Indian goods to Europe difficult, and it had to carry the war to French colonies in the Indian subcontinent, the Company found itself borrowing in India for military operations." (Charles P. Kindleberger, *A Financial History of Western Europe* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 234-235.)

⁶³ Balzac, *La Peau*, 125.

a noble lineage.⁶⁴ As for her name, Barbe-Marie O’Flaharty, it is a strange concoction of English, French and Irish origins. O’Flaharty, an Anglicized derivation of the name of *Ó Flaithbheartaigh* (from Middle Irish) and its Irish Gaelic counterpart, *O’Flaherty*, is rooted in Irish royalty, i.e. the “Princes of Iar (or West) Connaught.”⁶⁵ The figure of the mother is thus characterized as an ambiguous hybrid of both noble and merchant traits with origins that are left opaque, mysterious and foreign.⁶⁶

Whether she is noble or not, the mother’s relation to fortune plays a crucial role in the family history. She indeed has what the father lacks, i.e., the wealth necessary to secure social status. Raphaël’s father uses her fortune to purchase several foreign estates (in Bavaria and Prussia) conquered and later given by Napoleon to his generals. The profits that he derives from these lands allow him to bring back the “splendor” that his noble family had during the monarchy but that he lost during the revolution: “[...] [il] s’était vu sous l’empire au moment de

⁶⁴ According to the *Dictionnaire Littré*, a *grande maison* connotes nobility: “Être de grande maison, être d’une famille noble.” (*Dictionnaire Littré: Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. “maison” [accessed on October 28, 2016: <http://www.littre.org/definition/maison.>]).

⁶⁵ One should also note that in another novel, *Béatrix* (1839), Balzac uses the Irish name of O’Brien, a name tied to the kings of Ireland, for the character of Fanny O’Brien, the wife of Baron de Guenic. The fact that Balzac uses these two Irish names, O’Brien and O’Flaherty, seem to confirm that he indeed borrowed them from Lady Morgan’s book: “Les O’Brien et les O’Flaherty ou l’Irlande en 1793.” (*Library Ireland: History, Genealogy, Culture*, s.v. “O’Flaherty – Princes of Iar (or West) Connaught” [accessed on January 2, 2017: <http://www.libraryireland.com/Pedigrees1/o-flaherty-heremon.php>]).

⁶⁶ Furthermore, Balzac seems to use characteristics of his own mother in the creation of Raphaël’s mother. As Barbéris points out, in the original edition of the text, Raphaël’s mother is born in Tours (“Barbe-Marie-Charlotte, née à Tours”), the birth place of both Balzac’s mother and Balzac himself, a notation that, as he indicates, was cut out in the later editions. (Barbéris, “L’autobiographie,” 38.) I will also point out that her name, Barbe-Marie-Charlotte, links her to Balzac’s maternal side of the family. The name combines an inversion of the forename of Balzac’s maternal grandmother, Marie-Barbe-Sophie Chauvet, and the middle name of Balzac’s mother, Anne-Charlotte-Laure Sallambier. This is the full name of Balzac’s grandmother, as it appears in *Dans Balzac* (Citron 1986, 17-18).

restituer à notre famille son ancienne splendeur.” As Barbéris points out, the fact that the father marries his wife for her money, which is presumably linked to trade, and that he uses her fortune to buy the lands taken by the Empire, indicates that he is a “peculiar” kind of noble – one who does not hesitate to compromise himself by dealing with the Napoleonic regime with which staunch members of the nobility refused to have anything to do: “Il s’agit donc là d’un noble très particulier: non pas d’un fidèle au Lys, d’un combattant de l’armée de Condé, d’un rêveur sur parchemins, mais d’un homme qui avait choisi (indépendamment, à notre niveau, de tout jugement de valeur) le mouvement, le progrès.”⁶⁷

With the fall of the Empire, the tribunals of Bavaria and Prussia contest the father’s legal possession of these lands and demand that he pays back all the “revenus” gained from them (including the profits from the *sales of wood* (“coupes de bois”) that he made between 1814 and 1817):

Ayant jadis acheté plusieurs terres données par l’empereur à ses généraux et situées en pays étranger il luttait depuis dix ans avec des liquidateurs et des diplomates, avec les tribunaux prussiens et bavares pour se maintenir dans la possession contestée de ces malheureuses dotations. Mon père me jeta dans le labyrinthe inextricable de ce vaste procès d’où dépendait notre avenir. Nous pouvions être condamnés à restituer les revenus par lui perçus, ainsi que le prix de certaines coupes de bois faites de 1814 à 1817.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Barbéris, “L’autobiographie,” 39.

⁶⁸ Balzac, *La Peau*, 150.

During the Bourbon Restoration, the ultra-royalist Jean-Baptiste de Villèle (a.k.a. Jean-Baptiste Guillaume Joseph Marie Anne Séraphin, Count of Villèle) “exhumes”⁶⁹ a Napoleonic decree, the imperial decree of forfeitures (“le décret impérial sur les déchéances”), which ruins Raphaël’s father since it requires that he forfeit the lands and pay back all the profits made from them. In order to save the honor of his noble name, he decides to repay all the money he owes. To do so, he spends not only all of his own fortune but also all of the fortune that Raphaël’s mother had gained back during the Restoration: “La restauration, qui rendit à ma mère des biens considérables, ruina mon père.”⁷⁰ Under the same regime (the Bourbon Restoration), the father consequently loses all his wealth (through the exhumation of the Napoleonic decree) while the mother regains hers, presumably through the Law of Indemnity of 1825,⁷¹ which was “designed to reimburse the most needy of those who lost their lands” during the French Revolution. This maternal wealth is thus shown as powerfully redeeming as it is ultimately what saves the honor of the paternal name.

In the end, Raphaël must give up his own portion of the maternal inheritance in order to pay off his father’s debts: “Aussi, quand monsieur de Villèle exhuma, tout exprès pour nous, un décret impérial sur les déchéances, et nous eut ruinés, signai-je la vente de mes propriétés, n’en gardant qu’une île sans valeur, située au milieu de la Loire, et où se trouvait le tombeau de ma mère.”⁷² The only thing remaining in his possession is the island in the Loire where his mother

⁶⁹ Ibid., 152.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 150.

⁷¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Émigré” under *Law of Indemnity of 1825* [accessed on February 2, 2017: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/emigre#ref257086>.].

⁷² Balzac, *La Peau*, 152.

is buried. Instead of a loving mother from whom he can expect to inherit the fortune that will give him social standing, he only has a cold corpse incapable of giving love, which is buried in a tomb on an island in the middle of the Loire, a piece of land which is “sans valeur,” i.e. from which he cannot derive any financial sustenance and hence social power.⁷³ His father’s financial crisis and the ultimate depletion of his mother’s fortune thus result in Raphaël’s financial ruin and social bastardization. Though not a bastard because of an illegitimate birth, Raphaël is, according to Barbéris, made a *social bastard* in the sense that his lack of money makes him lose all the societal power that his noble name should have.⁷⁴

⁷³ According to Roland Le Huenen, this reference to the island as being without any financial value masks the high emotional value that the son invests in the mother. To possess the island is an attempt to possess the mother i.e., the object of fantasy: “Se dépouillant de son héritage, Raphaël refuse toutefois de se défaire d’une “île sans valeur, située au milieu de la Loire, et où se trouvait le tombeau de [sa] mère” (p.134). Mais est-elle vraiment sans valeur marchande cette île qu’il finira par vendre, acculé à la misère et au désespoir, et dont il retirera quelques profits? Il serait plus vraisemblable de croire que posant le geste symbolique du rejet paternel, dont la générosité filiale n’est que l’occasion alléguée, le bâtard se prend à vivre l’intrigue de son roman familial et ressuscite dans son imaginaire la présence de la mère morte mais toujours convoitée, comme si la possession de l’île garantissait celle de l’objet du fantasme, possession d’autant plus assumée dans l’innocence et l’absence de remords que la mère n’est plus. Morte au monde, celle-ci, délestée, par le don, de sa soumission à la loi du père, continue de hanter de sa présence l’espace de la fiction fantasmatique.” (Huenen, “Le Personnage et Son Désir” in *Balzac et la peau de chagrin* (Paris: Société d’Édition d’Enseignement Supérieur, 1979), 102).

⁷⁴ “[...] Raphaël est un bâtard. On ne quitte pas le problème de l’identité. Seulement, Raphaël se fabrique (Balzac lui fabrique) une bâtardise doublement spéciale : d’abord, c’est une bâtardise sociale, ensuite c’est une bâtardise napoléonienne... Raphaël n’est nullement, à prendre ces choses à la rigueur, un bâtard “biologique” ou “moral”... Raphaël est un bâtard social, l’enfant d’une génération perdue, quelqu’un qui entre dans le monde avec des armes qui ne sont pas les bonnes. Non qu’il soit un opposant politique, un traumatisé des changements institutionnels : il n’est ni libéral, ni républicain, même si on peut le classer “à gauche”, compte tenu de sa réticence à s’engager aux côtés du pouvoir, et Raphaël est pauvre.” (Barbéris, “L’autobiographie,” 38). Alongside this social bastardization, Barbéris points out a second kind of bastardization – one that is caused by his father’s purchase of Napoleon’s foreign lands. Raphaël’s father compromises/bastardizes his noble standing in society by buying lands from Napoleon, with whom other members of the nobility refuse to engage.

Presented as the one who has the material wealth that guarantees social power, the maternal figure is thus central to Raphaël's family history. Although she possesses the very sign of social power, i.e., the wealth that the father needs but does not have, her entire fortune is in the end completely liquidated simply to save the honor of a noble name now deprived of any social power.

As for Raphaël, he loses his maternal inheritance. Instead of having a mother who is available to give him material wealth, i.e. the benefits of her fortune, as well as her immaterial (emotional) wealth (love), Raphaël is left with a mother who is dead on all accounts. Both in her brief life and in her actual physical death, she gives neither the emotional sustenance, needed for him to grow and recognize (seize) the love that he so desires, nor the financial sustenance, needed for him to have societal power. From this dead maternal object, he can neither expect love nor derive fortune.

The mother's total and utter lack offers the perfect foundation upon which a melancholic subject is bred. As we shall see, Raphaël indeed fails to mourn not only the loss of a maternal love, which he never had, but also the loss of the maternal fortune snatched from him by his father. He remains fixated on an internalized maternal object from which he still hopes to receive love and fortune although this object has proven to be dead, i.e. incapable of loving, and poor, i.e. incapable of giving the wealth that grants social power. The maintenance of an affective relation to this internalized maternal object informs, as we shall see, Raphaël's choice of loved object. He is only attracted to women who, like his mother, are not only unresponsive/ elusive, cold/dead inside and thus totally unavailable if not utterly unattainable, but also rich.

THE MOTHERLY ASPECT OF THE IDEAL

Having been financially ruined by the loss of his maternal inheritance, Raphaël tries to cope with this loss by creating a safe haven, a “womb-like” sphere of study. Calling his intellectual study “the best mother,” Raphaël devotes nearly three years to scholarly work within which he plans to write a famous play, a philosophical text on the theory of the will, and a royalist history of the Revolution:

Hélas! l'étude est si maternellement bonne, qu'il y a peut-être crime à lui demander des récompenses autres que les pures et douces joies dont elle nourrit ses enfants. Je me souviens d'avoir quelquefois trempé gaiement mon pain dans mon lait, assis auprès de ma fenêtre en y respirant l'air, en laissant planer mes yeux sur un paysage de toits bruns, grisâtres, rouges, en ardoises, en tuiles, couverts de mousses jaunes ou vertes. Si d'abord cette vue me parut monotone, j'y découvris bientôt de singulières beautés.⁷⁵

In the passage above, Raphaël withdraws within a secure and intimate place that strangely reads like an imaginary mother's womb. Study is made maternal: “Study is such a good mother” [*l'étude est si maternellement bonne*]. Within this insular space, “singular beauties” and the harmonic comingling of nature's brilliant creations captivate Raphaël; he is lured by study's calm capacity to nourish and rejuvenate while allowing him a life, which now echoes monastic devotions to this thing called Study, i.e. the good mother who has milk to give. As Pierre Danger

⁷⁵ Balzac, *La Peau*, 135.

in “La castration dans *La Peau de chagrin*” (1982) pointed out, the activity of studying represents a “regression” into the “cellule matricielle:”

Ce don de lui-même, que Raphaël fait en se consacrant à l’étude, représente une régression fœtale, un repliement dans la cellule matricielle, un renoncement à l’existence au nom des seules vraies valeurs, représentées par la mère. C’est le mythe, si fréquent chez Balzac, de la mansarde, de la cellule, lieu protecteur et propice à l’éclosion du génie. “Je me souviens d’avoir quelquefois gaîment trempé mon pain dans mon lait” : le lait exprime ici la sobre et digne simplicité de sa vie, mais il est évidemment évocateur d’une autre chose, plus profondément enfouie dans l’inconscient du narrateur. À l’ambiguïté sexuelle que nous avons pu constater dans les portraits de Fœdora ou d’Aquilina, s’oppose ici la profusion des indices de féminité accumulés dans la description du paysage qui entoure Raphaël. La matière dominante est l’eau, la forme dominante la courbe : il n’est question que de brouillard, de l’ondulation des toits, “océan de vagues immobiles”, de mousses, de “couleurs ravivées par la pluie”, et tout ce tableau s’incarne soudain dans la ravissante image, fugitivement entrevue, de “quelque jeune fille faisant sa toilette”, en laquelle se rejoignent le thème de l’eau et celui de la féminité. (Danger 241)

Raphaël calls his study, i.e. the modest room in which he is fed by intellectual pursuits, a “voluntary prison”⁷⁶ where he will create his books on history, philosophy and art. Although Raphaël enjoys the pleasure of studying, Balzac doesn’t fail to insist that this pleasure coincides

⁷⁶ “J’aimais ma prison, elle était volontaire.” (Balzac, *La Peau*, 136).

with the desire for material gain. Raphaël studies in order to regain the wealth and social status that he has lost.

But it is also through this very act of studying and the particular creativity that it invokes that he creates an ideal woman, who is in fact an idealized *maternal* object. The creation of this ideal woman underlines his refusal to mourn the loss of the maternal object of love. Raphaël never gives up his “mother” as the primary object of love. He remains psychically attached to the narcissistic object that is his mother, an object that is narcissistic in so far as it is expected to satisfy his “vanity,” i.e. his narcissism, by giving him that which his mother could not give him: love, wealth and social standing. While he studies in the hope of regaining through his studies the social status that he has lost, he indeed dreams of an ideal woman who is made of rare stones and gold. She is “decked out in diamonds,” “dazzling,” and desired by many:

[...] vêtue de dentelles, de diamants, donnant ses ordres à la ville, et si haut placée et si imposante que nul n’ose lui adresser des vœux. Au milieu de sa cour, elle me jette un regard à la dérobée, un regard qui dément ces artifices, un regard qui me sacrifie le monde et les hommes !⁷⁷

Raphaël’s ideal woman is rich: she lives surrounded by “cashmere,” “silk” and “diamonds.” Although Raphaël identifies himself at times as a hopeless romantic, he knows of no love that is not somehow tinted in gold and tainted with power. For him to love anyone, luxury and social status is necessary:

⁷⁷ Balzac, *La Peau*, 142-143.

Puis, je l'avoue à ma honte, je ne conçois pas l'amour dans la misère. Peut-être est-ce en moi une dépravation due à cette maladie humaine que nous nommons la civilisation ; mais une femme, fût-elle attrayante autant que la belle Hélène, la Galatée d'Homère, n'a plus aucun pouvoir sur mes sens pour peu qu'elle soit crottée.⁷⁸

His ideal woman must be rich and “haut placée.” In other words, she must also be aristocratic to gratify his “vanity.” “Une femme aristocratique et son sourire fin, la distinction de ses manières et son respect d'elle-même m'enchantent; quand elle met une barrière entre elle et le monde, elle flatte en moi toutes les vanités, qui sont la moitié de l'amour.”⁷⁹

Raphaël's ideal woman is a replica of the internalized maternal object, which has been narcissistically invested. Internalized, this maternal (narcissistic) object of 'ideal' love dictates Raphaël's choice of love object. It explains why Raphaël falls in love with “*la belle Fœdora*.” As soon as he hears the name of Fœdora and the description that his friend, Rastignac, gives of her as “the beautiful countess”, a “*femme à la mode*,” who is rich, beautiful and graceful, Raphaël is infatuated with the idea of Fœdora. Most interestingly, Rastignac emphasizes Fœdora's status as a rich woman “qui possède près de quatre-vingt mille livres de rentes” and who is eligible for marriage (*une femme à marier*):

Demain soir tu verras la belle comtesse Fœdora, la femme à la mode. – Je n'en ai jamais entendu parler. – Tu es un Cafre, dit Rastignac en riant. Ne pas connaître Fœdora ! Une femme à marier qui possède près de quatre-vingt mille livres de rentes, qui ne veut de

⁷⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 143.

personne ou dont personne ne veut ! Espèce de problème féminin, une Parisienne à moitié Russe, une Russe à moitié Parisienne ! Une femme chez laquelle s'éditent toutes les productions romantiques qui ne paraissent pas, la plus belle femme de Paris, la plus gracieuse !⁸⁰

As he obsesses over her name and her reputation, Fœdora becomes for Raphaël the “incarnation” of his “hopes” and of his “visions,” “the symbol of all my desires and the theme of his life:”

Fœdora. Mais ce nom, cette femme n'étaient-ils pas le symbole de tous mes désirs et le thème de ma vie ? Le nom réveillait les poésies artificielles du monde, faisait briller les fêtes du haut Paris et les clinquants de la vanité ; la femme m'apparaissait avec tous les problèmes de passion dont je m'étais affolé. Ce n'était peut-être ni la femme ni le nom, mais tous mes vices qui se dressaient debout dans mon âme pour me tenter de nouveau. La comtesse Fœdora, riche et sans amant, résistant à des séductions parisiennes, n'était-ce pas l'incarnation de mes espérances, de mes visions ? Je me créai une femme, je la dessinaï dans ma pensée, je la rêvai.⁸¹

Raphaël recognizes that the rich Fœdora, whose name “faisait briller les fêtes du haut Paris et les clinquants de la vanité,” interests him because she would satisfy his own vanity: she is the incarnation of his own “vices,” i.e., his narcissism.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 145-146.

⁸¹ Ibid., 146.

In the beginning stages of Raphaël's interest in Fœdora, he tirelessly tries to convince the countess to marry him in order to increase his fortune and become rich:

– Bah ! Fœdora ou la mort ! criai-je au détour d'un pont. Fœdora, c'est la fortune ! Le beau boudoir gothique et le salon à la Louis XIV passèrent devant mes yeux ; je revis la comtesse avec sa robe blanche, ses grandes manches gracieuses, et sa séduisante démarche, et son corsage tentateur. Quand j'arrivai dans ma mansarde nue, froide, aussi mal peignée que le sont les perruques d'un naturaliste, j'étais encore environné par les images du luxe de Fœdora. [...] Ce cœur de femme était un dernier billet de loterie chargé de ma fortune.⁸²

She is his lottery ticket, i.e. his access to the fortune that will give him his standing in society. Despite Fœdora's reputation as a woman who rejects love and refuses to share her wealth, Raphaël attempts to cover her moral defects ("Il me la peignit avare, vaine et défiante; mais avare avec faste, vaine avec simplicité, défiante avec bonhomie"⁸³) by creating an image of Fœdora that allows him to continue to love her. The real Fœdora is thus replaced with the ideal image of Fœdora that Raphaël creates. As Denis puts it, his mind is "occupied" by this constructed image: "il a bâti un 'objet' autour duquel tout son psychisme s'est organisé."⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid., 152.

⁸³ Ibid., 147.

⁸⁴ Denis, "Le mal-être dépressif," 3.

But Fœdora is incapable of giving him either love or fortune. If she is rich, she is also “avare,” “vaine.”⁸⁵ No more than Raphaël could receive wealth from his dead mother, can he receive any wealth from Fœdora. Moreover, Fœdora is also as emotionally dead as his mother was. She is emotionally cold as “marble:” “Elle était debout, et me jetait son sourire banal, le détestable sourire d’une statue de marbre, sec et poli, paraissant exprimer l’amour, mais froid.”⁸⁶ Cold as marble, she evokes the maternal corpse.

Instead of giving Raphaël her love and her fortune, i.e. the expression of true love, Fœdora worsens his financial ruin and abandons him as he spends the last remnant of his money trying to seduce her. Instead of gratifying his narcissism, his “vanity,” Fœdora, being herself a highly narcissistic and vain character, only takes care of her own “vanity.” Raphaël chooses to love a beautiful and rich woman (a narcissistic object) who, like his dead mother, is incapable of giving him the love and wealth that would gratify his narcissism, as she herself is narcissistic by nature.

Mocking the conventions of marriage and familial love, Fœdora indeed cruelly rejects Raphaël’s proposition of love. Spurned and disappointed, he decides to cut all external relation to her. Despite his conscious decision to cut Fœdora out of his life, he cannot however completely give “her” up because she has become the sole object around which his entire psyche is organized. According to Denis, Raphaël would be thrown into a spiral of disorganization should he truly lose *her*: “Renoncer à l’image qui le possède lui est impossible car cela le plonge dans une désorganisation vertigineuse, dans une dépersonnalisation dont Balzac nous montre l’alternance avec des moments d’excitation, d’exaltation, de soif d’objets nouveaux et de

⁸⁵ Balzac, *La Peau*, 147.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 159.

farouche détermination suicidaire.”⁸⁷ Despite the severing of his relationship with the real Fœdora, Raphaël continues therefore to live in relation to Fœdora by internalizing the relation that he had to her:

Je sens la folie rugir par moments dans mon cerveau. Mes idées sont comme des fantômes, elles dansent devant moi sans que je puisse les saisir. Je préfère la mort à cette vie. Aussi cherché-je avec conscience le meilleur moyen de terminer cette lutte. Il ne s’agit plus de la Fœdora vivante, de la Fœdora du faubourg Saint-Honoré, mais de ma Fœdora, de celle qui est là, dis-je en me frappant le front.⁸⁸

Ma Fœdora is the ideal image that has been internalized and incorporated into Raphaël’s ego. “My Fœdora” as ideal love is the depressive object, the shadow of “*la Fœdora vivante*,” the actual Fœdora. Raphaël is haunted by the shadow or “irreplaceable object.” that is now “his Fœdora.” This internal object is a mummy. In “L’embaumement nostalgique, entre deuil et dépression,” Denis defines the psychic disorganization of mourning and depression as a certain death or dying of “others” in the ego. If mourning commemorates the lost loved object, depression mummifies or embalms the lost (dead) objects of love. Denis points to Raphaël’s internalization of “his Fœdora” as an example of this process of embalming loss.

Fœdora, as the shadowy object that Raphaël has internalized, cloaks Raphaël under darkness. Her shadow isolates him and obscures reality insofar as it prevents him from investing in new objects: “l’ombre de la maîtresse inaccessible l’isole et obscurcit tout, chaque visage

⁸⁷ Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif,” 4.

⁸⁸ Balzac, *La Peau*, 191.

nouveau est recouvert de cette ombre.”⁸⁹ Through the sheer force of desire, an investment is continuously made in an ideal (shadow or phantom) that cannot exist in reality. Because Raphaël invests in this shadow, he cannot invest in any other object. His love for Fœdora prevents him from loving the emotionally sustaining maternal figure that is available to him: Pauline, the daughter of his landlady, Madame Gaudin. As much as Raphael yearns for love, he cannot indeed see nor identify love when it is in front of him. Pauline consistently displays her devotion and affection for him, yet he ignores and denies her love:

Quand je fus près de Pauline, elle me jeta un regard presque maternel, et s’écria, les mains tremblantes, en posant vivement la lampe : – Dieu ! comme vous êtes pâle ! Ah ! il est tout mouillé ! Ma mère va vous essuyer. Monsieur Raphaël, reprit-elle après une légère pause, vous êtes friand de lait : nous avons eu ce soir de la crème, tenez, voulez-vous y goûter ? Elle sauta comme un petit chat sur un bol de porcelaine plein de lait, et me le présenta si vivement, me le mit sous le nez d’une si gentille façon, que j’hésitai. – Vous me refuseriez ? dit-elle d’une voix altérée.⁹⁰

Pauline’s repeated offering of milk connotes maternal love as nourishment. Dripping with milk and cream (“Elle sauta comme un petit chat sur un bol de porcelaine plein de lait, et me le présenta si vivement, me le mit sous le nez d’une si gentille façon”⁹¹) and born out of the comfort of the small brown room of her mother’s modest home (“au milieu de cette salle brune

⁸⁹ Denis, “*Le mal-être dépressif*,” 4.

⁹⁰ Balzac, *La Peau*, 162.

⁹¹ Ibid., 162.

où la vie simplifiée semblait se réfugier dans les émotions du cœur”), she evokes everything maternal, warm, nourishing, loyal, unconditional, healing, virtuous, and pure about love. Unfortunately, her maternal care and warmth are not enough to make Raphaël love her. In his eyes, Pauline cannot ever be his ideal loved object because she is poor and insignificant in social status. Despite the fact that she can love and nurture him, she cannot fulfill his social “vanity,” i.e. his narcissism, and thus, she is rejected and shunned. Because she is poor, humble, soft and loving, he cannot love her: “Je n’aimais pas Pauline pauvre, Fœdora riche n’avait-elle pas le droit de repousser Raphaël?”⁹² Instead, he chooses Fœdora, “la femme sans cœur” (Balzac, *La Peau*, 120), who is rich and utterly incapable of loving, and continues to love the internalized shadow of this Fœdora even after he has cut all social relation to her.

Raphaël is indeed unable to get rid of this Fœdora within who is “killing” him:

– Cette femme [Fœdora] me tue, répondis-je. Je ne puis ni la mépriser ni l’oublier. – Il vaut mieux la tuer, tu n’y songeras peut-être plus, s’écria-t-il en riant. – J’y ai bien pensé, répondis-je. Mais si parfois je rafraîchis mon âme par l’idée d’un crime, viol ou assassinat, et les deux ensemble, je me trouve incapable de le commettre en réalité. La comtesse est un admirable monstre qui demanderait grâce, et n’est pas Othello qui veut !⁹³

In this short exchange between Raphaël and Rastignac, Raphaël refers to the shadow of Fœdora as “*cette femme*.” The phantom or shadow is personified as an actual woman. The ideal that is

⁹² Ibid., 175.

⁹³ Ibid., 191.

the internal object is also given power to influence reality and to control Raphaël's life and death. As we shall see, the killing that Raphaël experiences is not so much a murder as it is a suicide that is being delayed (*suicide retardé*⁹⁴).

SUICIDE OR THE SUBLIME POETRY OF DEPRESSION

Fœdora's refusal to love Raphaël drives him indeed to suicide. However, his friend, Rastignac, convinces him not to kill himself immediately but instead to engage in debauchery as a more "elegant" mode of suicide. Instead of hurling himself into the Seine and dying in an instant, Raphaël will kill himself through debauchery and the wearing of life that it entails: "J'ai voulu me tuer par la débauche."⁹⁵ But debauchery does not kill him. It depletes him of all his money. Having gambled away his last golden coin, Raphaël decides once again to kill himself by plunging into the Seine:

Mort, il valait cinquante francs, mais vivant il n'était qu'un homme de talent sans protecteurs, sans amis, sans paillasse, sans tambour, un véritable zéro social, inutile à l'état, qui n'en avait aucun souci. Une mort en plein jour lui parut ignoble, il résolut de mourir pendant la nuit, afin de livrer un cadavre indéchiffrable à cette société qui méconnaissait la grandeur de sa vie.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ "Vous vouliez mourir? hé ! bien, votre suicide n'est que retardé." (Balzac, *La Peau*, 88).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 257.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 66.

Without Fœdora or money, Raphaël's ego does not *feel* empty; it *is* empty. Fœdora's rejection of Raphaël's love is equated to the loss of money, health, security and happiness. What makes him completely impoverished is the shattering of all hope for a secure and satisfying relationship with Fœdora. His view of himself as "un véritable zéro social" nullifies his existence even before his actual death.

Raphael glorifies suicide as the sublime poetry of melancholy, "terrible and noble:" "Chaque suicide est un poème sublime de mélancolie. Où trouverez-vous, dans l'océan des littératures, un livre surnageant qui puisse lutter de génie avec ces lignes : *Hier, à quatre heures, une jeune femme s'est jetée dans la Seine du haut du Pont-des-Arts.*"⁹⁷ Through suicide, he seems to intend two things. On the one hand, he intends to leave his legacy or mark in society by suicide as a kind of art form, an artful death that he morbidly defines as "sublime poetry." Suicide will turn his life into an artwork. His name will end up on the paper and, for a day, he will be immortalized.

On the other hand, suicide for Raphaël is a cruel and traumatic revenge. Through suicide, he lives out the fantasy that he is exacting revenge on Fœdora. According to Freud, the ego that is suffering from depression identifies with the shadow of the object. Raphaël identifies with Fœdora when he plunges into debauchery. Fœdora, a woman who loves money, social status and vain pleasures, embodies the debauchery that Raphaël chooses in order to kill himself. By killing himself, Raphaël kills therefore the loved object with which he has identified. He murders the disappointing lost loved object that he has become. In this logic, suicide is the perfect revenge. It is so perfect that it may as well be art. As Raphaël explains, a man who is truly in love cannot kill himself out of respect for the beloved who resides in his heart: "Un homme sans passion et

⁹⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

sans argent reste maître de sa personne; mais un malheureux qui aime ne s'appartient plus et ne peut pas se tuer. L'amour nous donne une sorte de religion pour nous-mêmes, nous respectons en nous une autre vie ; il devient alors le plus horrible des malheurs, le malheur avec une espérance, une espérance qui vous fait accepter des tortures.”⁹⁸ The logic in this quote can be extended to explain suicide. One may argue that suicide is an expression of triumph over the lost loved object that resides in the ego: “I have overcome the disappointing lost beloved! I have overcome everything and everyone! I have even overcome my own body. The lost loved object inside of me is finally killed as it deserves to be.” By killing itself, the ego does not only murder the object, which it has internalized, it also kills itself insofar as it has identified with this object. It kills its identification with the lost loved object, which means that in suicide, the relation to love is killed as well.

Raphaël waits until nightfall to drown himself in the Seine. As he waits for dusk, he wanders through Paris until he finds himself in front of an old antique shop. As he is overwhelmed by his chaotic perception of the shop's collections of various objects, he discovers a talisman that seizes his scattered attention. The talisman is a “*peau de chagrin*” made from the skin of a wild and rare onager, a crossbreed of a horse and a donkey that comes from Africa and Asia. This skin has the magical power to grant the wishes of its possessor. With the talisman, Raphaël has therefore access to god-like (demonic) powers to manipulate the world and reality around him. But every wish that is granted shortens the life of its possessor. The talisman represents this shortening of life. The skin shrinks with every wish granted. The talisman

⁹⁸ Ibid., 164.

represents therefore two things: “Ceci est un talisman qui accomplit mes désirs, et représente ma vie.”⁹⁹

The skin is called a “*peau de chagrin*” that is, according to the Littré, a “cuir grenu fait d'ordinaire d'une peau de mulet ou d'âne.”¹⁰⁰ But the word “*chagrin*” also evokes the sadness that characterizes depression. According to Denis, the talisman is indeed a metaphor of “*l'objet dépressif*.” This *objet dépressif* is not just Fœdora but the “défiguration, par le surinvestissement et le repliement narcissique, des deux premiers objets” that is, the disfiguration of the dead mother and “Fœdora.”¹⁰¹ The depressive object is the imago (object-representation) of the love relationships to these two objects. In this process, the characteristics or aspects of external objects or lost persons are cut out and combined in the monstrous construct of one single chimeric object.

The talisman emits a strange but powerful and seductive luminosity. “Par un phénomène inexplicable au premier abord, cette peau projetait au sein de la profonde obscurité qui régnait dans le magasin des rayons si lumineux que vous eussiez dit d'une petite comète.”¹⁰² As Denis points out, light emanates from this dark leathered object, but it does not reflect anything. The talisman represents the depressive object insofar as this object cannot reflect back any image in which the subject could recognize itself:

⁹⁹ Ibid., 291.

¹⁰⁰ The *Dictionnaire Littré* offers two definitions for “*peau de chagrin*.” 1.) “Cuir grenu fait d'ordinaire d'une peau de mulet ou d'âne. Peau de chagrin. Étui de chagrin. Relier un livre en chagrin. *Fig. et familièrement*. Avoir une peau de chagrin, avoir la peau rude, rugueuse. 2.) Espèce de squalé dont la peau fort dure sert à faire une sorte de chagrin.” (*Dictionnaire Littré: Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. “*peau de chagrin*” [accessed on March 3, 2018: <https://www.littre.org/definition/chagrin.>]).

¹⁰¹ Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif,” 11.

¹⁰² Balzac, *La Peau*, 82.

La peau fascine par l'éclat qui semble émaner d'elle et constitue en fait un miroir qui ne peut réfléchir aucune image : placée en face d'un visage, elle ne lui renvoie rien. Si l'on admet la fonction de miroir psychique d'un objet d'amour qui renvoie à qui l'aime une image où celui-ci se reconnaît grandi, la peau alors fonctionne à rebours, défait l'image de qui veut s'y trouver.¹⁰³

The talisman also represents the “moral phenomenon” of depression and the shrinking or reduction of life that this phenomenon inflicts. The shrinking of the talisman shows that desire is “the worst danger” for the depressive psychic organization: “Désirer devient le pire danger, celui qui menace de disparition le seul objet organisateur vis à vis duquel aucune satisfaction pulsionnelle ne peut être obtenue.”¹⁰⁴ In depression, the psyche has reorganized itself around the internal depressive object that has nothing (no satisfaction) to give. Any desire represents therefore a danger for this organization. It threatens to shrink the depressive object, represented by the skin. For the depressed subject whose psychic life depends on the maintenance of the depressive object, any desire for another object is therefore viewed as deadly. Hence this subject decides not to desire, which results in a life that is totally impoverished. Denis mentions the fact that Raphaël organizes his practical life so that he never feels any desire for an object. He even wears glasses that distort people so he does not ever desire a woman. The main point here is that depression refuses to invest in any new object but remains fixated onto the sole possession of the

¹⁰³ Denis, “Le mal-être dépressif,” 11.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

depressive object. The psychical organization of a depressed mind is restricted and prohibited from desiring.

Denis notes that, with the talisman, the ego moves from being “l’idéal du Moi” (representations that connect the psychical function to the world of objects) to being a “Moi idéal.” “The “Moi idéal” “has no other aim than the total possession of a single object that would ensure its narcissistic completeness” (“un « Moi idéal » qui n’a d’autre visée que la possession totale d’un seul objet, laquelle serait censée assurer la complétude narcissique.”¹⁰⁵) The ego spends a lot of psychical work, maintaining and overinvesting in an internal object from which it cannot derive any satisfaction. It seems to me that, in so doing, the ego becomes completely possessed by the object. The ego survives by constantly keeping the single object around which it is organized. The ego is reduced to a machine that protects the organizing object from new desires by continually investing and overinvesting in the dead corpse that is the depressive object.

Raphael accepts the magical skin because its possession still guarantees his demise. He is still killing himself, but, of course, more slowly. As the owner of the antique shop puts it, it is a “suicide retardé:” “Après tout, vous vouliez mourir ? hé ! bien, votre suicide n’est que retardé.”¹⁰⁶

His first wish is to attend a dinner party with the most famous and beautiful guests from society:

Voyons ! ajouta-t-il en serrant le talisman d’une main convulsive et regardant le vieillard.

Je veux un dîner royalement splendide, quelque bacchanale digne du siècle où tout s’est,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁶ Balzac, *La Peau*, 88.

dit-on, perfectionné ! Que mes convives soient jeunes, spirituels et sans préjugés, joyeux jusqu'à la folie ! Que les vins se succèdent toujours plus incisifs, plus pétillants, et soient de force à nous enivrer pour trois jours ! Que la nuit soit parée de femmes ardentes ! Je veux que la Débauche en délire et rugissante nous emporte dans son char à quatre chevaux, par-delà les bornes du monde, pour nous verser sur des plages inconnues.¹⁰⁷

During this orgy, he gains everything, but the Fœdora whom he has lost. He indeed suddenly finds out that he is the inheritor of the fortune that a distant uncle left to his mother.

After being granted his wish, Raphaël sees that the skin has shrunk and suddenly no longer wants to die. The skin in its diminishing state forces him to “see” and measure his life. It becomes a physical representation of his life wasted by the excessive desires of debauchery. Death becomes real and thus a true threat for the self. Raphaël's decision to protect his life by organizing it so that he has no desire to express exemplifies this newly found fear of death based on the understanding of the value of life itself. On a slightly darker note, it may very well be that Raphaël's valorization of life is directly related to the fact that he found financial stability during the orgy.

PAULINE: THE MELANCHOLIC OBJECT

Fearful of the talisman's continual shrinkage and the nearness of his end, Raphaël promises himself to never again look at a woman with interest. To prevent any temptation, he uses glasses that distort his vision and destroy all the beauty or desirable aspects of a woman.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 87-88.

La vie de Raphaël dépendait d'un pacte encore inviolé qu'il avait fait avec lui-même, il s'était promis de ne jamais regarder attentivement aucune femme, et pour se mettre à l'abri d'une tentation, il portait un lorgnon dont le verre microscopique artistement disposé, détruisait l'harmonie des plus beaux traits, en leur donnant un hideux aspect. Encore en proie à la terreur qui l'avait saisi le matin, quand, pour un simple vœu de politesse, le talisman s'était si promptement resserré, Raphaël résolut fermement de ne pas se retourner vers sa voisine.¹⁰⁸

One night, Raphaël is by himself at the Opera until a mysterious woman (“divine inconnue”¹⁰⁹) enters the box and sits next to him. Despite the public’s murmurs and admiring looks showered on the unknown woman sitting next to him, Raphaël refuses to look at her as he is stricken with terror that the talisman might shrink again. Therefore, he only sees her frame or shadow.

Balzac’s descriptions treat the two characters seated next to each other as if they were side-by-side reflections of each other:

Assis comme une duchesse, il présentait le dos au coin de sa loge, et dérobaient avec impertinence la moitié de la scène à l’inconnue, ayant l’air de la mépriser, d’ignorer même qu’une jolie femme se trouvât derrière lui. La voisine copiait avec exactitude la posture de Valentin. Elle avait appuyé son coude sur le bord de la loge, et se mettait la

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 225-226.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 225.

tête de trois quarts, en regardant les chanteurs, comme si elle se fût posée devant un peintre.¹¹⁰

In near exact imitation of Raphael's posture that is described to be against and away from her, Pauline's silhouette mirrors this frame of Raphaël's body. Pauline appears in the text like a shadow, an image of an apparition, which is meant to mimic or fill Raphaël. Hyper aware of her presence and anticipatory of her every move and gesture, Raphaël paints an image of her by interpreting (imagining) the awe, wonder and admiration that she provokes on the spellbound faces of the strangers in the room. Before he is able to see who she is, he begins imagining her by looking at Society's reflective praise of her beauty. His active avoidance of actually seeing her makes him sense her all the more. With this restriction imposed on his vision, Raphaël distills her entire being into a scent of Aloe and Sandalwood, the two scents that transport his mind to exotic faraway places. He concentrates on her scent and senses her movement in relation to him, her feminine frame, dress and hair. This process of perceptive filtering and layering allows Raphaël to invest first in the image of the person rather than the real person herself. This same process occurred with Fœdora with whom he became infatuated by imagining her through Rastignac's description of her as "la plus belle femme" and "une femme à la mode." This intrusion of societal judgment and approval are the seeds from which the image of the Ideal sprouts.

It is only after Raphaël's mind has performed its creative work that he is able to "see" Pauline as his ideal love object: "Les pénétrants parfums de l'aloès achevèrent d'enivrer Raphaël. Son imagination irritée par un obstacle, et que les entraves rendaient encore plus

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 226.

fantasque, lui dessina rapidement une femme en traits de feu. Il se retourna brusquement.”¹¹¹ As he turns around, he realizes that the beautiful unknown woman is Pauline. Raphaël is shocked to realize that Pauline is no longer “la Pauline de l’hôtel Saint-Quentin”¹¹², the girl from his past whom he could only regard as a sister because she was poor, but is now a beautiful woman who is rich with the millions her father inherited. The Pauline of the Opera is indeed Raphaël’s ideal of love, what he had dreamt that “la Pauline de l’hôtel Saint-Quentin” could become: “cette maîtresse accomplie, si souvent rêvée, jeune fille spirituelle, aimante, artiste, comprenant les poètes, comprenant la poésie et vivant au sein du luxe.”¹¹³

In her present form, Pauline is twice the woman that Fœdora will ever be: “En un mot Fœdora douée d’une belle âme, ou Pauline comtesse et deux fois millionnaire comme l’était Fœdora.”¹¹⁴ The discovery of Pauline releases Raphaël from the grip of Fœdora. As he leaves the Opera, he finds Fœdora ugly: “Elle se leva précipitamment et disparut; Raphaël voulut suivre Pauline, il craignit de la compromettre, resta, regarda Fœdora, la trouva laide [...]”¹¹⁵ In an instant, Pauline replaces Fœdora. Like Fœdora, the previous ideal loved object, she has money, and is admired. But Pauline, unlike Fœdora, is imbued with a soul. According to Raphaël, Pauline is indeed Fœdora but with a beautiful soul, a Fœdora who loves him. Pauline with her riches and beautiful soul is a combination that seems to dislodge the internal depressive object (composed of both Fœdora and the dead mother) lodged in Raphaël’s mind. With Pauline who is

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 227.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

the embodiment of beauty, fortune, spiritual wisdom, maternal grace and true love, a love that satisfies seems to be finally possible.

While Raphaël confronted in Fœdora an empty object unable to give love, Pauline appears as the object that can fill this lack. But the very fact that Pauline is presented as a “Fœdora with a soul”, i.e., a Fœdora endowed with the capacity of loving, indicates that she is not so much a replacement of Fœdora, as a melancholic refinement of the depressive object. Having encountered the emptiness of the object, internalized this object, and identified with it, the subject still wishes to maintain his relation to love by positing a figure “out there” who can give him what this internalized object is incapable of giving. Although she is presented as real, Pauline is in fact the fulfillment of this unexpressed wish. The Pauline that appears at the Opera, I will suggest, is the product of the talisman, which I believe represents the melancholic psyche. This psyche can both internalize the disappointingly empty depressive object and still imagine/fantasize out there, in “reality,” an object that would fill the lack of the disappointing internalized object.

It is worth noting that in his Préface to the first edition of the novel (August 1831), Balzac seems to compare the talisman to the creative mind of the man of genius in that both of them hold the power to transcend and escape time and space and create universes:

Nous ne trouvons pas de terme moyen à cette proposition cervico-littéraire. Mais, à ceux qui étudient la nature humaine, il est démontré clairement que l’homme de génie possède les deux puissances. Il va, en esprit, à travers les espaces, aussi facilement que les choses, jadis observées, renaissent fidèlement en lui, belles de la grâce ou terribles de l’horreur primitive qui l’avaient saisi. Il a réellement vu le monde, ou son âme le lui a révélé

intuitivement... Les hommes ont-ils le pouvoir de faire venir l'univers dans leur cerveau, ou leur cerveau est-il un talisman avec lequel ils abolissent les lois du temps et de l'espace? ... La science hésitera longtemps à choisir entre ces deux mystères également inexplicables.¹¹⁶

According to Balzac, the talisman's magical power to fulfill wishes and desires represents the mind's limitless power to create universes.

Born out of the talisman that is Raphaël's melancholic creative mind, Pauline maintains his relation to love by screening and filling the lack of the depressive object. The melancholic object emerges as a narcissistically fulfilling fantasy that promises to give precisely that which the depressive object did not give. However, this seemingly "positive" figure still functions, as we shall see, within the deadly economy that the *peau de chagrin* exemplifies. To desire such an object inexorably depletes the vital energies of the subject. The more Raphaël desires Pauline, the more his life shrinks.

Following their brief yet significant chance encounter at the Opera house, Raphaël hopes to have a relationship with Pauline and even considers the talisman to be a silly ruse. For a moment, he believes in the potential power of true love to override the destructive power of the talisman. But, of course, with the growth of his love for Pauline, Raphaël realizes that their perfect union is killing him: the talisman keeps shriveling up. His love for Pauline does not nullify his pact with the talisman. True Love will not save him by putting an end to the continual shrinkage of the talisman. Seeing only two more months to live, Raphaël is faced with an impossible predicament and leaves on a quest to find some kind of solution that would allow him

¹¹⁶ Balzac, « Préface de la Première Édition (1831) » in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. X., Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1979), 53.

to love Pauline without, in so doing, shrinking the talisman and hence his life. He meets with scientists, physicians, mechanics, religious men and philosophers, but cannot find anyone capable of explaining the strange phenomenon of this magical skin, which kills him. After close observations, doctors diagnose Raphaël with “monomania.”¹¹⁷ The talisman and the belief that it is somehow related to his life would obsess Raphaël to his death.

Raphaël leaves Pauline in order to remain alive; he flees from her out of the terrifying fear that every day with her might lead him to express desires that would end up killing him. The more he sees her and desires her, the more his life shrinks to nothing. To steer away from this horrible outcome, Raphaël creates for himself an existence in the countryside, which shelters him from the external world. If he is not resting or sleeping, he keeps his mind incessantly preoccupied with distractions of little significance. He constructs an existence that prevents him from making any wishes. However, in spite of these dogged efforts to avoid desires, Raphaël’s love for Pauline and her love for him persist in killing him and destroying the talisman. Their relationship uses up his life as well as the skin of the talisman, which represents his life, and Raphaël dies.

At the end of the novel, Raphaël, overcome with passion and love, runs indeed towards Pauline, desires her and is willing to pay for it with his life. He collapses on her and dies biting her breast. The most foreboding moment of this final scene is Pauline’s utterance that she has become the death of Raphaël:

¹¹⁷ “Il y a monomanie. Le malade est sous le poids d’une idée fixe. Pour lui cette Peau de chagrin se rétrécit réellement, peut-être a-t-elle toujours été comme nous l’avons vue ; mais, qu’il se contracte ou non, ce *chagrin* est pour lui la mouche que certain grand vizir avait sur le nez.” (Balzac, *La Peau*, 260).

Le moribond chercha des paroles pour exprimer le désir qui dévorait toutes ses forces ; mais il ne trouva que les sons étranglés du râle dans sa poitrine, dont chaque respiration creusée plus avant, semblait partir de ses entrailles. Enfin, ne pouvant bientôt plus former de sons, il mordit Pauline au sein. Jonathas se présenta tout épouvanté des cris qu'il entendait, et tenta d'arracher à la jeune fille le cadavre sur lequel elle s'était accroupie dans un coin.

– Que demandez-vous ? dit-elle. Il est à moi, je l'ai tué, ne l'avais-je pas prédit ?¹¹⁸

In the end, it is therefore Pauline who kills Raphael. If “Fœdora” names the depressive object, Pauline names the melancholic object that emerges from depression. Depression, as we have seen, internalizes the lost loved object which has revealed itself to be empty, disappointing, an empty shadow because it lacks the love and riches that could narcissistically sustain the subject. The identification of the ego with this disappointing internalized object can lead to the literal suicide that Raphaël considers. Melancholia interrupts this suicidal tendency by calling forth the fantasy of an object that could fulfill the depressed subject's persistent longing for love in spite of the disappointments that he suffered. Presented as the source of the great fortune and pure love that could at last fulfill Raphaël, Pauline is such a fantasy. Although she seems to offer the realization of a full and reciprocal love, she is in fact a melancholic fantasy who ultimately kills the subject who created it. If depression leads to a shrunken life that refuses to invest desire in any new object to preserve the internal depressive object, melancholia shrinks the subject's life by exhausting its vital energies in the creation of a perfect fantasy object that can never be reached.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 292.

It is indeed important to note that, although she is described as a real and external character, the text repeatedly suggests that Pauline is Raphael's creation. Her status as fantasy is already indicated at the beginning of the text when Raphaël turns the maternal, caring but poor Pauline into an angel: "C'était Ariel se glissant comme un sylphe sous mon toit, et prévoyant mes besoins."¹¹⁹ As Pauline paints "écrans" "screens" for money, she is herself being painted by Raphaël:

Peut-être aussi n'avais-je point encore bien sérieusement examiné la scène assez souvent offerte à mes regards par ces deux femmes au milieu de cette salle ; mais alors j'admirai dans sa réalité le plus délicieux tableau de cette nature modeste si naïvement reproduite par les peintres flamands. La mère, assise au coin d'un foyer à demi éteint, tricotait des bas, et laissait errer sur ses lèvres un bon sourire. Pauline coloriait des écrans : ses couleurs, ses pinceaux, étalés sur une petite table, parlaient aux yeux par de piquants effets ; mais, ayant quitté sa place et se tenant debout pour allumer ma lampe, sa blanche figure en recevait toute la lumière. Il fallait être subjugué par une bien terrible passion pour ne pas adorer ses mains transparentes et roses, l'idéal de sa tête et sa virginale attitude ! La nuit et le silence prêtaient leur charme à cette laborieuse veillée, à ce paisible intérieur.¹²⁰

As Pauline is coloring ("*coloriait*") screens ("*écrans*"), Raphaël perceives her as if she were an angel and, in so doing, both "paints" and "screens" her i.e., occludes her reality. He seems

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 140.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 162.

indeed to be painting over her, covering her with the image of the maternal angel that he desires. With her painting materials messily strewn about her, the hands of Pauline with their rosy complexion and pale white skin (“*ses mains transparentes et roses*”) are illuminated by the light of the lamp that shines beside and through her. In nearly trancelike precision, Raphaël’s eyes traces the fantasy of a translucent and angelic Pauline. In this screened and interiorized moment, everything is muted and veiled in an *ambedo*.¹²¹ John Koenig’s *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* defines “ambedo” as: “A kind of melancholic trance in which you become completely absorbed in vivid sensory details—raindrops skittering down a window, tall trees leaning in the wind, clouds of cream swirling in your coffee—briefly soaking in the experience of being alive, an act that is done purely for its own sake.” In this affective state of “ambedo,” Raphaël is intensely painting/creating Pauline into an angelic creature, the very incarnation of the maternal love that remained “foreign” to him because he was deprived of it. Indeed, his very name evokes the name of the painter “Raphaël” (born in 1483 in Urbino, Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino was an Italian painter of the High Renaissance who died in 1520 at the age of 37 in Rome) whom Balzac admired and whose work is mentioned in the *Peau de chagrin*. In the Antique shop where he discovers the talisman, Raphaël also admires a painting of Jesus-Christ painted by Raffaello.

In plain sight and quite effortlessly, Raphaël thus paints the subjects that he perceives. It should be noted that Raphaël does not only paint Pauline, but Fœdora as well by applying over

¹²¹According to Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short’s *A Latin Dictionary*, the word, “ambedo,” comes from the Latin verb, *ambedō*, which means “to eat, gnaw around,” or, in rare occasions, “to waste, consume.” (*A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “Ambedo” [accessed on March 19, 2019: <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/LewisShort.html>].)

The word, “ambedo,” is used in this chapter in order to describe what seems to occur within the perception of Raphaël. Though “ambedo” is exempt from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it appears in John Koenig’s *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, a dictionary of the invented words, which capture complex emotions. (*Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, s.v. “Ambedo” [accessed on March 19, 2019: <http://www.dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com>].)

her features bold and unnatural colors of reds and oranges. Upon her lips (“*ses lèvres fraîches et rouges*”¹²²), he applies another fresh layer of red, a bright scarlet too bright to be real which recalls “*les lèvres vermeilles*”¹²³ of Raphaël’s portrait of Jesus-Christ. To further complement this pictorial idealization, Fœdora’s eyes are tinted with an orange hue that resembles a Florentine stone with its storm-like veins while her shoulders are compared to those of the Vénus de Milo, an ancient Greek statue of Aphrodite, made of marble and carved by Alexandros: “Ses cheveux bruns faisaient assez bien valoir la couleur orangée de ses yeux mêlés de veines comme une pierre de Florence... L’amour était écrit sur ses paupières italiennes, sur ses belles épaules dignes de la Vénus de Milo.”¹²⁴ As for Fœdora’s head, it too resembles Christ’s head. Both their heads seem to be cut out. Of Fœdora’s head, Raphaël remarks: “La tête seule semblait être amoureuse.”¹²⁵ As for the head of Christ, he singles it out by accentuating the nimbus-like halo that illuminates it against the blackness of the painting’s background:

La tête du Sauveur des hommes paraissait sortir des ténèbres figurées par un fond noir ; une auréole de rayons étincelait vivement autour de sa chevelure d’où cette lumière voulait sortir [...] Le prestige de la lumière agissait encore sur cette merveille ; par moments il semblait que la tête s’élevât dans le lointain, au sein de quelque nuage.¹²⁶

¹²² Balzac, *La Peau*, 151.

¹²³ Ibid., 80.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 151.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 151.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 79-80.

Raphaël is a painter who covers/obstructs reality by painting over it the colors and outlines of its fantasies. Thus, over the cold, calculating, and unloving head of Fœdora, he paints a loving head that recalls the head of Christ, the loving Savior, as Raphaël painted it. While he tries to paint the rich yet unloving Fœdora as a loving savior, he paints the poor yet loving Pauline as a divine angel.

Although he makes her look like an angel, Raphaël cannot, however, conceive of falling in love with the poor Pauline. To love her she would have to become like Fœdora, i.e., she would have to be able to conform to its ideal fantasy of a rich woman. Raphaël does engage in this fantasy early on in the text when, in his imagination, he clothes Pauline in luxury:

Combien de fois n'ai-je pas vêtu de satin les pieds mignons de Pauline, emprisonné sa taille svelte comme un jeune peuplier dans une robe de gaze, jeté sur son sein une légère écharpe en lui faisant fouler les tapis de son hôtel et la conduisant à une voiture élégante. Je l'eusse adorée ainsi.¹²⁷

Pauline whose beautiful foot wears “ignobles souliers”¹²⁸ is transformed in his imagination in a finely dressed princess just as *Peau d'Âne* in the conte of Perrault. But as soon as Pauline appears surrounded in luxury, she begins to lose all of her angelic nature to turn into the rich but “dry” and “cold” Fœdora whom he loves because she resembles the dead maternal object:

¹²⁷ Ibid., 143.

¹²⁸ “Comme l’héroïne du conte de *Peau d’Âne*, elle laissait voir un pied mignon dans d’ignobles souliers.” (Balzac, *La Peau*, 141).

Je lui donnais une fierté qu'elle n'avait pas, je la dépouillais de toutes ses vertus, de ses grâces naïves, de son délicieux naturel, de son sourire ingénu, pour la plonger dans le Styx de nos vices et lui rendre le cœur invulnérable, pour la farder de nos crimes, pour en faire la poupée fantasque de nos salons, une femme fluette qui se couche au matin pour renaître le soir, à l'aurore des bougies. Elle était tout sentiment, tout fraîcheur, je la voulais sèche et froide. Dans les derniers jours de ma folie, le souvenir m'a montré Pauline, comme il nous peint les scènes de notre enfance.¹²⁹

What is most remarkable is that the Pauline whom Raphaël tries to imagine in this scene later becomes real and comes to life. From the poor “Pauline de l’hôtel de-Quentin” she becomes “cette maîtresse accomplie, si souvent rêvée, jeune fille spirituelle, aimante, artiste, comprenant les poètes, comprenant la poésie et vivant au sein du luxe”¹³⁰ whom he discovers at the Opera. Although presented as a real character, this new Pauline seems to be the creation of the talisman that is of Raphaël’s psyche, a psyche that creates the perfect object that he is still wishing for. After having been thoroughly disappointed by Fœdora, Raphaël creates indeed the fantasy of perfect love object that combines the fortune of Fœdora with the angelic love of Pauline.

The rest of the text increasingly stresses the fantasmatic quality of this new Pauline. In their short time together as lovers, she is presented as always a bit covered, strangely hidden from complete visual and thus mental exposition:

¹²⁹ Ibid., 143-144.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 227.

Raphaël feignait toujours de lire sa feuille, et contemplait à la dérobée Pauline aux prises avec le chat, sa Pauline enveloppée d'un long peignoir qui la lui voilait imparfaitement, sa Pauline les cheveux en désordre et montrant un petit pied blanc veiné de bleu dans une pantoufle de velours noir. Charmante à voir en déshabillé, délicieuse comme les fantastiques figures de Westall, elle semblait être tout à la fois jeune fille et femme.¹³¹

The scene replicates the previous scene where Raphaël tried to transform the poor Pauline whose foot wears an “ignoble soulier”¹³² into an elegant woman dressed in fine clothing and living in luxury. The wishful fantasy is, as it were, realized.

However revealing her morning attire, her clothing is nevertheless a reminder of her distance from him, of her “fantastique” quality: she looks like the “fantastiques figures de Westall.” As José-Luis Diaz points out in his article on the “fantastique balzacien,” Balzac refers here to the women “rendues fantastiques par le crayon du dessinateur anglais Westall.”¹³³ As one of the “éléments favoris du fantastique balzacien,” these women appear also in another text: “Dans *Eugénie Grandet* (décembre 1833), le narrateur évoque « les émotions de fine volupté que causent à un jeune homme les fantastiques figures de femmes dessinées par Westall dans les Keepsake anglais » (*Pl.*, t. III, p. 1059).”¹³⁴ As “fantastique” as these drawings, Pauline is implicitly presented as an artistic creation, the outline of Raphaël’s fantasy.

¹³¹ Ibid., 235.

¹³² Ibid., 141.

¹³³ José-Luis Diaz, “Ce que Balzac fait au fantastique” in *L'Année balzacienne* 1, no.13 (2012): 83.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 68.

But it is in the Epilogue that Balzac appends to the text that Pauline i.e. the ideal because loving maternal object that offers everything that Raphaël ever wanted but never received, is explicitly presented as a fantastic creature. In this Epilogue, an unnamed questioner keeps asking one question to an equally unnamed interlocutor: “Et que devint Pauline? [...] Mais Pauline? [...] Mais, monsieur, Pauline!”¹³⁵ Through the series of answers that are given to this question, Balzac shows that “Pauline” is indeed nothing but a fantasy. She is no longer simply an angelic person but an ever-fleeting vision, a queen of illusions (“*la reine des illusions*”), a specter that is impossible to capture. She only appears in one’s dreams as:

[...] une figure surnaturelle et d’une délicatesse inouïe, phénomène fugitif que le hasard ne recommencera jamais: c’est une femme aux cheveux emportés par le vent, et dont le profil respire une passion délicieuse: du feu dans le feu! elle sourit, elle expire ; vous ne la reverrez plus.”¹³⁶

As that “fire within fire” that burns in the soul, she is the representation of the desire that consumes the subject as well as of the “flower,” the fantasy that this desire calls forth. Perhaps unrestrained and free since he has now finally stepped outside the frame of the narrative plot, Balzac (or Balzac as Raphaël) can now describe Pauline as a mythic, legendary, fictional creation, a fantasy that can never be reached or materialized in real life: “Adieu fleur de la flamme, adieu principe incomplet, inattendu, venu trop tôt ou trop tard pour être quelque beau diamant.” Pauline who is all spirit (*tout esprit*) and all love (*tout amour*) is forever incomplete

¹³⁵ Balzac, *La Peau*, 292-293.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 293.

(an incomplete principle), an uncreated being (l'être incréé), who like a fantasy of perfect maternal love, can never be incarnated in a real body. She appears in the epilogue as an illusion or shadowy figure lingering upon the Loire:

Au-dessus des larges eaux de la Loire, une blanche figure, artificiellement éclosée au sein du brouillard comme un fruit des eaux et du soleil, ou comme un caprice des nuées et de l'air. Tour à tour ondine ou sylphide, cette fluide créature voltigeait dans les airs comme un mot vainement cherché qui court dans la mémoire sans se laisser saisir, elle se promenait entre les îles, elle agitant sa tête à travers les hauts peupliers.¹³⁷

As a “*fluid creature*” that runs through one’s mind, she seems completely disembodied, or rather as impossible to embody in any shape. The distillation of all the bright and wonderful aspects of ideal maternal love, she is an elusive and ethereal “principle” that cannot be captured in any definite physical form. Instead of being located in a body, her shape seems to dissolve over the whole of nature: “puis devenue gigantesque elle faisait ou resplendir les mille plis de sa robe, ou briller l’auréole décrite par le soleil autour de son visage; elle planait sur les hameaux, sur les collines et semblait défendre au bateau à vapeur de passer devant le château d’Ussé.” The scattering and dissolving of her incomplete shape throughout nature stresses her unreality. She is purposely made as unattainable as a misty and evaporating vision.

In her final description, she is the ghost of “la Dame des Belles Cousines” who stays afloat to keep away modernity: “Vous eussiez dit le fantôme de la Dame des Belles Cousines qui voulait protéger son pays contre les invasions modernes.” Haunting the castle of the Sleeping

¹³⁷ Ibid., 293-294.

Beauty (*le château d'Ussé*), Pauline stands as the reminder of an inescapable fantasy, a dream that keeps one away from reality and locked into one's dreams. As such, she is rare and her presence, however fleeting, is permanent. Unlike Fœdora who is apparently everywhere ("Oh! Fœdora, vous la rencontrerez. Elle était hier aux Bouffons, elle ira ce soir à l'Opéra, elle est partout, c'est, si vous voulez, la Société."¹³⁸ Pauline's elusiveness and fragile reality makes her difficult to retrieve at will. Despite Raphaël's ultimate death, Pauline lingers at the end of the text as the unfulfilled melancholic dream of a love (a "bonheur sans nom") that never existed.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 294.

CHAPTER II

DECAPITATION AS MELANCHOLIC AMBIVALENCE

In “Trophées de têtes chez Balzac,” Roland Chollet offers us an array of “trophies” of decapitated heads in Balzac’s oeuvre. According to Chollet, Balzac’s work is haunted by the image of the cut heads of women that evoke a literal decapitation¹³⁹. Critics have often viewed the recurrent images of detached feminine heads as the result of Balzac’s own personal history, Oedipal fantasies, and a historical fixation on the execution of Louis XVI.

The image of decapitation seems to have propelled the writing of *La duchesse de Langeais* that Balzac published in 1834 as part of the *Histoire des Treize*. *Ne touchez pas à la hache*, such was indeed the title that Balzac originally gave to this novella. The sentence: “Ne

¹³⁹ Chollet relates the prevalence of decapitated heads in the text to the execution (actual decapitation by the guillotine) of Balzac’s uncle, Louis Balssa on August 16, 1819: “J’ai été frappé depuis longtemps, en étudiant les quelques quinze années qui s’étendent des débuts de Balzac au *Médecin de campagne* en 1833, par l’omniprésence dans son œuvre du thème de la décapitation et des images avec l’inconscient balzacien – celui de l’homme et celui de l’œuvre. Dans son dernier livre sur Balzac, Pierre Citron a relevé, à la date de 1830, « au moins » quatre mises en œuvre du thème par l’écrivain ; Mme Lucette Besson a étoffé cette liste de quelques exemples qu’elle a remarquablement analysés. C’est un bilan qu’il serait facile de tripler... Reprenant une suggestion de P. Citron, Lucette Besson a proposé de considérer la condamnation à mort et l’exécution de Louis Balssa, oncle paternel de Balzac, en 1819, comme le facteur déclenchant de cette idée obsessionnelle. Il y a quelques présomptions sans doute pour que Balzac, rue Lesdiguières, ait eu connaissance de la mort de son oncle, mais rien dans la *Correspondance* ou dans les témoignages de ses proches ne me semble accréditer l’idée d’un choc psychique ou moral profond, durable, en relation avec la disparition de cet oncle inconnu. Dans cette incertitude, je ne crois pas que cet événement puisse rendre compte, à lui seul, de la récurrence d’une image – je ne puis faire ici état que d’une faible part de mes observations -, que, faute de mieux, j’aborderai sous le nom de fantasme.” (Chollet, “Trophées de têtes chez Balzac” in *L’Année balzacienne*, no. 11. (Paris: Éditions Garnier, 1990): 257-258). The story of Louis Balssa is well detailed in *La vie prodigieuse* (Déga 1998, 427-456). According to Déga, Balssa was convicted of violently murdering Cécile Soulié, his maidservant of nine months to a year, who had also been pregnant at the time of her death. During her time at Balssa’s home, Cécile Soulié had been beaten and strangled, according to two witnesses.

touchez pas à la hache” evokes the decapitation by the axe of Charles the First, King of England, who supposedly pronounced this sentence shortly before his beheading. As critics have mentioned the decapitation by the axe of Charles the First echoes the decapitation by the guillotine of Louis XVI. But, as we shall see, the head that is threatened of decapitation in Balzac’s text is not the head of a man but of a woman: Antoinette, i.e. Madame la Duchesse de Langeais. As Nathalie Buchet Rogers points out, the Duchess evokes the figure of the Queen Marie-Antoinette. Their proper names resemble each other. The absence of “Marie” in the name of the Duchess de Langeais recalls that “Marie” (which reminds us of the Virgin Mary, a symbol of perfect motherhood) was also cut out from the name of the Queen Marie-Antoinette during the Revolution:

Pendant le procès, le diminutif « Antoinette » est souvent employé pour désigner la reine. Chantal Thomas lie cette « coupure » symbolique de « Marie » à la volonté du discours révolutionnaire de couper l’image de la reine de toute imagerie religieuse liée à la maternité de la Vierge, coupure symbolique qui préfigure aussi, bien sûr, celle de la guillotine.¹⁴⁰

The revolution indeed denounced Marie-Antoinette as the bad mother who did not care for the nation. The cut of the first name “Marie” from her proper name already intimated the literal decapitation that the Revolution would inflict on her. As we shall see, the Duchess does evoke the figure of the decapitated queen. She is not, however, literally decapitated. But she is nevertheless, as I will argue, the victim of a metaphorical decapitation. In this chapter, I will

¹⁴⁰ Rogers, “De 93 à l’Histoire des Treize: la Terreur de (Marie-) Antoinette de Langeais” in *La Revue de l’Histoire Littéraire de la France* 101, no. 1 (2001): 54.

study this metaphorical decapitation in relation to melancholia. I will suggest that the image of a metaphorical decapitation by the axe foregrounds the rage that melancholia performs against a disappointing maternal object, a rage that is both destructive and creative.

THE NOBILITY (OR, THE HEAD OF THE NATION)

La duchesse de Langeais takes place during the Bourbon Restoration. As critics have noted, Balzac proposes in this text, which he completed in January 26, 1834, i.e. after the failure of the Restoration, a sharp criticism of the nobility of this period. Peter Brooks writes:

In this novel – as in most of the *Comédie humaine* – he writes about the Restoration from the perspective of the period that followed it. This critical distance in time allows him to see the Restoration as a completed epoch, brought to its end by revolution – and enables him to pass judgment on the Restoration as a whole.¹⁴¹

Balzac's criticism is important to understand since the author himself, as we shall see, not only anchors the personal and family history of the Duchesse de Langeais into the political failures of the nobility during the Bourbon restoration, but also presents the character of the Duchess as a representative of her social class.

The Bourbon restoration (1814-1830) begins with the abdication of Napoleon I, and the resurrection of the Bourbon regime with Louis XVIII's ascension to power on May 3, 1814.

¹⁴¹ Peter Brooks, "Balzac: Epistemophilia and the Collapse of the Restoration" in *Yale French Studies*, no. 101 (2001): 120.

Less than a year into the revival of the Bourbon regime, Louis XVIII's reign is cut short by Napoleon's escape from exile in Elba and his return to France. During what is known as the "one hundred days" (the "Cent Jours") that took place between March 20, 1815 and July 8, 1815, Napoleon fights to regain his empire. Louis XVIII flees to Ghent and remains there until Napoleon's devastating defeat at the Battle of Waterloo and his second abdication from power. Marking the start of the Second Restoration, Napoleon's abdication begins a period during which the *constitutional monarchy* (1816-1820), established by the Charter of 1814¹⁴², and its competition, the *ultra royalists* (1815-1830), established by the "ultras" or the ultra-royalist¹⁴³ movement in 1815, both vied for political power and social influence. With the death of Louis XVIII in September 1824, his brother, Charles X, the once Count d'Artois and the leader of the king's Cabinet from 1821 to 1824, succeeded the throne and slowly began the processes of discarding the liberal promises of the Charter of 1814. Charles X's ultra-royalist bent soon

¹⁴² A promise by Louis XVIII that certain liberal changes, influences and effects of the Revolution and Napoleon would remain intact. The Charter protected civil liberties gained during the Revolution and guaranteed a constitutional monarchy upon which Catholicism would be reestablished as the state religion. Leo Gershoy in *The French Revolution and Napoleon* (1961) writes: "The Charter of 1814, as we have seen, was rich in possibilities. It was markedly antidemocratic, for the king had the exclusive initiative of legislation, and the high property qualifications disbarred the great majority of his subjects from active political life; but it entrusted the government jointly to the monarch and to such political representatives as the country had. It retained the administrative system of the empire, and with the system many of its experienced officials; and it had accepted many of the fundamental changes of the Revolution. But the Bourbon government failed signally to rally public opinion behind it. The country could not forget that its new ruler and his émigré supporters had come back to France in the 'baggage of allies.' The nation was not permitted to forget that the Charter was Louis XVIII's gift to France, because various groups of emigrants who were more royalist than the king himself gained control of the situation and destroyed the liberal possibilities of the Charter." (Gershoy 1961, 527).

¹⁴³ The "ultras" and their ultra-royalist movement represented the extreme right's interest in securing the power of the rich and wealthy, which included both the aristocracy and large landowners.

sparked the July Revolution of 1830 and the end of the Bourbon Restoration, which inevitably led to Charles's final relinquishment of the throne. The ultras and Charles X were severely disconnected from the rest of France, and, according to Balzac, it was this removal from reality that resulted in the end of the Bourbon Restoration and the failure of the *new* regime.

The Bourbon Restoration is split into two parts by the invasive cut or interruption (i.e. the reemergence) of Napoleon I during his Cent Jours. Balzac praises Louis XVIII for having understood in 1816, i.e., after Napoleon's fruitless return, the need to secure his power. In the text, Balzac calls Louis XVIII "this Louis XI, without an axe:" "[...] Louis XVIII, éclairé par la révolution des Cent Jours, comprit sa situation et son siècle, malgré son entourage, qui, néanmoins, triompha plus tard de ce Louis XI moins la hache, lorsqu'il fut abattu par la maladie."¹⁴⁴ King Louis XI (1423-1483) became famous for destroying the power of the ducal house of Burgundy and weakening the French aristocracy in order to guarantee the survival of his own crown and authoritarian rule. Balzac praises Louis XVIII for perceiving early that the only kind of rule acceptable for the changed public and altered social structures of his time was a moderate ruling, i.e. a constitutional monarchy. While Balzac praises this king for having tried, like Louis XI, to protect his royal power by instituting a constitutional monarchy, he implicitly criticizes him for not having been as forceful as Louis XI, i.e. for not having used an axe on the ultra-royalist movement.

With the advent to power of Louis XVIII, the proper social order is restored according to the monarchist beliefs that Balzac held (as Baron points out, he was "rallié en 1832 au parti

¹⁴⁴ Balzac, *La Duchesse de Langeais* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. V., Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1977), 936.

légitimiste”¹⁴⁵) and that he expresses in *La duchesse de Langeais*. In every society, e.g. body and organism, there is a place reserved for the “head,” or the “chef.” In French, the word “chef” takes on two distinct meanings. In the Littré, the etymology of “chef”¹⁴⁶ links the term to either the literal “head,” as in the Dictionary’s example of: “Le chef de saint Jean-Baptiste,” or the figurative “head,” as used to refer to leaders and principles of organizations, i.e. “Celui qui est à la tête, qui dirige ou commande. Le pape est le chef de l’Église. Les chefs des douze tribus.” Balzac’s use of “chef” in the following passage exemplifies the overlapping double meanings of the word: “Dans toutes les créations, la tête a sa place marquée. Si par hasard une nation fait tomber son chef à ses pieds, elle s’aperçoit tôt ou tard qu’elle s’est suicidée. Comme les nations ne veulent pas mourir, elles travaillent alors à se refaire une tête.”¹⁴⁷ When a nation cuts off its head, i.e. executes its king, it does seem, in a way, a bit “suicidal,” as Balzac just put it in the previous quote. However, according to Balzac, a nation is rarely so shortsighted or self-destructive. In other words, a nation that is willing to cut its head would never discard it without finding another “head” to replace the previous one.

In Balzac’s view, the only way the head of a nation can avoid the brutal cut is by becoming the nation’s soul and mind so that it can actually control its various faculties, i.e. “set its hands in motion.” “Pour rester à la tête d’un pays, ne faut-il pas être toujours digne de le conduire; en être l’âme et l’esprit, pour en faire agir les mains?”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the head must

¹⁴⁵ Anne-Marie Baron, “La Duchesse de Langeais ou la coquetterie du narrateur” in *Le Courrier balzacien* 34, no.1 (Paris: Société des Amis d’Honoré de Balzac, 1989), 9.

¹⁴⁶ *Dictionnaire Littré: Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. “chef” [accessed on May 10, 2018: <http://www.littre.org/definition/chef>].

¹⁴⁷ Balzac, *La Duchesse de Langeais*, 926.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 928.

also be the “pensée,” the thought or general intellect of society: “Une aristocratie est en quelque sorte la pensée d'une société, comme la bourgeoisie et les prolétaires en sont l'organisme et l'action.”¹⁴⁹ A well-rounded and thus victorious “head” of the nation is one that possesses the heart (soul), brain (mind) and intellect necessary to lead Society. A successful “head” must also be able to “faire agir,” i.e. make move or bring into action, the rest of the social body that is composed of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, who are its hands, according to Balzac. These parts, and others, of the body will do what the head thinks, desires and wills them to.

If the head’s primary and predominant function is to think, organize (order) and direct, it seems that the nobility, which should be the nation’s head, failed to do the kind of thinking that would ensure its continued existence and permanent restoration as the new “head” of a disparate nation, i.e. its body. As Anne-Marie Baron points out, Balzac advocates an *intelligent* adaptability to the unavoidable realities of the times (“réalisme intelligent qui s’adapte aux réalités incontournables d’une époque”) while criticizing the twisted, aristocratic attitude that is incapable of adapting to the “necessities of the modern world (“l’attitude sclérosée de l’aristocratie incapable de s’adapter aux nécessités du monde moderne”).¹⁵⁰ As she notes, Balzac had already produced a constructive criticism of the nobility in two articles that he published, *l’Essai sur la situation du parti royaliste* and *Du Gouvernement moderne* where he diagnoses what the nobility should have done but failed to do.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 925.

¹⁵⁰ Baron, “La Duchesse de Langeais ou la coquetterie du narrateur,” 9.

¹⁵¹ “Il y [in *Essai sur la situation du parti royaliste* and *Du Gouvernement moderne*] affirme d’abord la nécessité de la légitimité et du catholicisme puis montre que l’erreur de l’aristocratie a été de ne pas avoir voulu rester sur ses terres et occuper en province les postes administratifs qui auraient consolidé sa position et l’auraient rendue populaire. Il se demande alors quelle doit être l’attitude des royalistes après la Révolution de 1830 : susciter une guerre civile, se retirer de la

Peter Brooks pays also close attention to Balzac's criticism of the Bourbon Restoration in *La duchesse de Langeais*. As he puts it, "His principal indictment of the Restoration concerns its egotism, its fixation on class privilege rather than on national good, and most of all its failure of intelligence."¹⁵² The nobility of the Restoration "thought only in terms of consolidating its own power, riches, and privileges, and did not establish roots in the hearts and minds of the whole nation."¹⁵³ Where there should have been progressivism or flexibility, there was the singular stubbornness to uphold the kind of power that the nobility (as representing both aristocracy and the monarchy) had before the Revolution. Because the nobility stringently remained within its own circle—isolated and detached—it failed to recognize the value of the men of genius who did not belong to its class but who held the "principles of the desiring machine" that, according to Brooks, represents Society herself.

Revisiting James Strachey's translation of the Freudian term, *Wisstrieb* ("epistemophilic instinct"), which essentially is a combination of epistemophilia¹⁵⁴ (which echoes the epistemophiliac, i.e. a person with an obsessive fixation on knowing or containing "too much

vie politique en refusant le serment ou rester présents dans la vie politique en ayant des représentants dans les Chambres. C'est bien entendu la troisième attitude qui lui paraît la seule viable. Il préconise donc une reconnaissance des acquis révolutionnaires et la fusion des hommes et des choses par l'utilisation des armes les plus modernes : la presse et la tribune. Ainsi, en laissant la bourgeoisie se déconsidérer au pouvoir, l'aristocratie s'appuierait sur le peuple pour rétablir la légitimité. On voit ce que les idées de Balzac ont de très actuel. L'autre article, intitulé *Du Gouvernement moderne*, critique vivement le ministérielisme constitutionnel et défend la pairie héréditaire comme « la seule institution possible aujourd'hui pour consacrer et reconnaître, sans injustice ni sans tyrannie les supériorités nécessaires au maintien des sociétés »." (Baron, "La Duchesse de Langeais," 9).

¹⁵² Peter Brooks, "Balzac: Epistemophilia and the Collapse of the Restoration," 119-131.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁴ Epistemophilia is the "love of knowledge; *specifically*: excessive striving for or preoccupation with knowledge." (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, s.v. "Epistemophilia" [accessed on September 7, 2018: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epistemophilia>].)

love” for knowledge), and Freud’s take on it as a drive for knowledge, Brooks offers a Balzacian interpretation of Freud’s *Wissstrieb* as “the lust to know”¹⁵⁵, claiming that this sexualized appetite for knowledge exists in all of Balzac’s fictional characters, “even [down to] the porters” but especially within the figure of the writer, philosopher and artist (either by trade or by having lived and observed life, intensely). For Brooks, Balzac has “stuffed”¹⁵⁶ his characters with this lust to know, a certain *genius*¹⁵⁷, that is missing from the nobility but ever-present in the writer and the literary subjects of his novels. According to Brooks’s Balzac, the writer produces within Society the necessary “steam,” i.e. intellectual power, infusing it with a desiring (sexualized) energy, which would propel the world forward into the future.

The writer is comparable to a high-compression steam engine; talent results in a personal conquest of the individual over society, imposing one’s power through the energy of the intellect. The mention of the general’s sword evokes not only Napoleon, but Balzac himself as the writer who would finish the work of that sword with his pen. A ruling class that does not include within itself the dynamic principles of the desiring machine is doomed... to run out of *steam*. It has no source of energy to propel it forward: “enfin, loin de se rajeunir, le faubourg Saint-Germain s’est avieilli” (224) [finally, far from

¹⁵⁵ Brooks, “Balzac: Epistemophilia,” 120.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 122.

¹⁵⁷ Balzac often brings up the subject of genius in his works of fiction. In *La Duchesse de Langeais*, he describes the “génie du poète” (Balzac [1834] 1977, 928) as one of the key invisible forces that has the power to conquer, dominate, manipulate and control an entire nation and its people. There is a strange reversal of the definition of power in Balzac, from that which was once only physical into something that is now intangible, like talent and genius.

rejuvenating itself, the Faubourg Saint-Germain made itself aged]. It lacks sexual force, and the intellectual curiosity and dynamism that are driven by that force.¹⁵⁸

As a result, the nobility of the Restoration was in fact dying: its life was only a “vie agonisante.” As André Vanoncini points out, Balzac prescribes a “shock therapy” for this *agonized nobility* whose head will finally be axed when “l'hérédité de la pairie et ses majorats tombèrent.”¹⁵⁹

Balzac souligne ensuite la faiblesse de la caste noble depuis que « la plate figure d'un petit avocat s'avança [donnant] un coup de hache pour trancher le fil de sa vie agonisante » (p. 213). Enfin, il appelle l'aristocratie à trouver en son sein l'autorité capable de « retrancher ses branches pourries » (p. 211) ; finalement, il l'invite à se soumettre au « scalpel des chirurgiens » qui « est dur à sentir [mais] rend parfois la vie aux mourants » (p. 213). Au vu de la thérapie de choc que Balzac propose d'appliquer à l'aristocratie du Faubourg Saint-Germain, il n'est guère surprenant que la représentante-type de ce milieu subisse à son tour un traitement descriptif peu respectueux d'une image de la totalité harmonieuse.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Brooks, “Balzac: Epistemophilia,” 129.

¹⁵⁹ “Tissue dans le pays, elle devenait indestructible ; acculée dans son faubourg, adossée au château, étendue dans le budget, il suffisait d'un coup de hache pour trancher le fil de sa vie agonisante, et la plate figure d'un petit avocat s'avança pour donner ce coup de hache. Malgré l'admirable discours de monsieur Royer-Collard, l'hérédité de la pairie et ses majorats tombèrent sous les pasquinades d'un homme qui se vantait d'avoir adroitement disputé quelques têtes au bourreau, mais qui tuait maladroitement de grandes institutions.” (Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 932).

¹⁶⁰ André Vanoncini, “La Duchesse de Langeais ou la mise à mort de l'objet textuel” in *Travaux de littérature* (Paris: L'Adirel, 1994): 212.

The nobility failed to recognize that, in order to fully restore itself, it needed a man of genius who could have “recéper l’arbre aristocratique:”

Pour se réintégrer, pour fonder un grand gouvernement oligarchique, la noblesse du faubourg devait se fouiller avec bonne foi afin de trouver en elle-même la monnaie de Napoléon, s'éventrer pour demander aux creux de ses entrailles un Richelieu constitutionnel ; si ce génie n'était pas en elle, aller le chercher jusque dans le froid grenier où il pouvait être en train de mourir, et se l'assimiler, comme la chambre des lords anglais s'assimile constamment les aristocrates de hasard. Puis, ordonner à cet homme d'être implacable, de retrancher les branches pourries, de recéper l'arbre aristocratique.¹⁶¹

In this line of analysis, the nobility of the Restoration deserved to be axed because it did not assimilate the man of genius who could have regenerated it by “axing” it, i.e. by cutting its rotten limbs, its rotten elements that prevented it from functioning as the leading head of the nation. These rotten elements within the nobility needed to be *surgically* removed, so that from that place of amputation (pruning), a new and reinvigorated “noble” head could reemerge.

UNE FEMME DE TÊTE

The text anchors very precisely both the family and personal history of the Duchesse de Langeais in the history of the Restoration. At the start of the novel, Balzac provides a family history of the duchess. She is described to have come from the “famille ducale” of the

¹⁶¹ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 931.

“Navarreins:” “La duchesse de Langeais était une Navarreins, famille ducale, qui, depuis Louis XIV, avait pour principe de ne point abdiquer son titre dans ses alliances.”¹⁶² A distinctive characteristic of those from a “ducale” family, such as the Navarreins, is that they neither marry their daughters below their social rank nor outside their noble lineage of dukes, in an effort to avoid them losing the title of Duchess. Antoinette de Navarreins, therefore, marries the Duke of Langeais. This exemplifies what Balzac will later criticize as a failure of the restoration, which is the nobility’s mindless hold on titles, and its adamant refusal to either understand or incorporate non-nobles.

Ever faithful to the House of Bourbon, both the families of Langeais and Navarreins have “*nobly* resisted all the seductions and imperial glory” brought forth by Napoleon I: “Les ducs de Navarreins et de Langeais, restés fidèles aux Bourbons, avaient noblement résisté à toutes les séductions de la gloire impériale, et, dans les circonstances où ils se trouvaient lors de cette union, ils durent naturellement obéir à la vieille politique de leurs familles.”¹⁶³ When the Empire of Napoleon fell and the Bourbons finally regained power, the two families took back “their rank, offices, and dignity at Court” and occupied the highest yet most isolating social and political position – one nearest to the king, but, again, far from the rest of the nation: “reprirent leur rang, leurs charges, leurs dignités à la cour, et rentrèrent dans le mouvement social, en dehors duquel elles s'étaient tenues jusqu'alors. Elles devinrent les plus éclatantes sommités de ce nouveau monde politique.” The two families were alike in their “loftiness of view” (“l'élévation de leurs vues, la sagesse de leurs principes”), which kept the affairs of the general public (“écartées des affaires”) at a comfortable distance. As other families proceeded to take positions

¹⁶² Ibid., 936.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

of power and enrich themselves, the Langeais and Navarreins did not. These nobles remained in the “high sphere of the Court” without establishing any financial security or political power; thus the *loftiness* of their position did not enhance nor improve their inheritance (“leur patrimoine ne s'augmenta point”). Additionally, despite their undying allegiance to aristocratic names and conservative perceptions of power, these nobles were accused of *gorging* themselves with honors and wealth (“*se gorger d'honneurs et de richesses*”). The Liberal party at the time reproached them for their outdated and inundating “duties of etiquette,” extravagant Court ceremonies and the costly maintenance of their ever-dwindling estates. In his political analysis, Balzac speaks about the role that this etiquette of the nobles plays in leading up to the failed Restoration of the Bourbons.

Balzac also ties closely the Duchess's personal history to the Bourbon Restoration. She has been married to the Duke for four years when “la Restauration fut consommée, c'est-à-dire en 1816 [...]”¹⁶⁴ In 1818, she is separated from her husband who is away fulfilling military duties (“commandait une division militaire”¹⁶⁵). In an attempt to evade scandal for living apart from her husband, the Duchess finds herself in a “position” near one of the royals of Paris.¹⁶⁶ There, she leads an active social life: “lorsque vinrent des fêtes données à l'occasion du mariage du duc de Berri.” In 1823, General Montriveau, a.k.a. M. Armand de Montriveau, and his army

¹⁶⁴ “La duchesse de Langeais, ainsi se nommait-elle, était mariée depuis environ quatre ans quand la Restauration fut consommée, c'est-à-dire en 1816, époque à laquelle Louis XVIII, éclairé par la révolution des Cent Jours, comprit sa situation et son siècle, malgré son entourage, qui, néanmoins, triompha plus tard de ce Louis XI moins la hache, lorsqu'il fut abattu par la maladie.” (Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 935-936).

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 937.

¹⁶⁶ “En 1818, monsieur le duc de Langeais commandait une division militaire, et la duchesse avait, près d'une princesse, une place qui l'autorisait à demeurer à Paris, loin de son mari, sans scandale.” (Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 937).

of French soldiers find her in the convent of the Barefoot Carmelites, located in an unnamed island of the Spanish Mediterranean. This is the same year during which the French intervention in Spain takes place in an effort to support the Bourbon King Ferdinand VII who had been fighting in vain with the Liberal Spanish government.¹⁶⁷ After General Montriveau meets with the Duchess now turned (*his*) Sister, he reflects on his past relation with her, shifting the novel backwards in time and space. We are suddenly transported to a France of five years ago, when the Duchess's life as an aristocrat during the Bourbon Restorations would stand in direct opposition to her current religious status and spiritually devoted life in Spain. In consideration of this timeline of events, the love story between Montriveau and the Duchess (as Antoinette) actually begins sometime between 1818 and 1819. This would place this particular moment of the novel at least two years into the Second Restoration when the new regime, a constitutional monarchy (a monarchy less absolute in power than the one of the Ancien Regime) would be well established under King Louis XVIII.

The Duchesse de Langeais is presented as a “personnage-type,”¹⁶⁸ a fictional character who signifies an entire social class: “Une jeune femme fut passagèrement le type le plus complet de la nature à la fois supérieure et faible, grande et petite, de sa caste.”¹⁶⁹ This same quote is revisited in Isabelle Pitteloud's “Romanesque, pudeur et sublime dans ‘La duchesse de

¹⁶⁷The Ultra-royalists broadened their support of the Bourbons by aiding Ferdinand VII and bringing to an end to the political and military dissent that was happening in Spain.

¹⁶⁸ “[...] Le personnage type condense les traits, sociaux et psychologiques, caractéristiques de ceux qu’il représente.” (Mireille Labouret, “Personnages et personnel de *La Comédie humaine*,” in *Problématique du personnage* (Paris : Groupe d’Études balzacienes, 2013): 3 [accessed on September 11, 2018 : Balzac-etudes.org.]).

¹⁶⁹ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 934.

Langeais” as the description that reveals how the coquettish qualities of the Duchess-type represent the ‘*general spirit*’ of the Restoration:

La duchesse de Langeais est d’abord présentée comme « le type le plus complet de la nature à la fois supérieure et faible, grande et petite, de sa caste » (p. 934). Elle est ensuite décrite comme le type même de la coquette parisienne. Le personnage est ainsi placé sous l’égide d’une double typologie, à la fois sociale et psychologique – et d’une typologie dont les termes communiquent : car Balzac découvre dans la coquetterie de sa duchesse le trait saillant à même de faire comprendre « l’esprit général » de la Restauration (p. 933).¹⁷⁰

The Duchesse de Langeais personifies the weakness that is the arrogant superiority of the nobility during the Bourbon Restoration. In her contradictions, she reflects all of her caste’s greatness and its *petitesse*,¹⁷¹ i.e. small-mindedness and superficialities, which, as Balzac indicates, deprive the nobility of any real power or political force. A long psychological description of the Duchess’s antitheses is offered in his text:

C’était une femme artificiellement instruite, réellement ignorante ; pleine de sentiments élevés, mais manquant d’une pensée qui les coordonnât ; dépensant les plus riches trésors de l’âme à obéir aux convenances ; prête à braver la société, mais hésitant et arrivant à

¹⁷⁰ Isabelle Pitteloud, “Romanesque, pudeur et sublime dans *La duchesse de Langeais*” in *L’Année Balzacienne* 1, no. 8 (2007): 391.

¹⁷¹ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 935.

l'artifice par suite de ses scrupules ; ayant plus d'entêtement que de caractère, plus d'engouement que d'enthousiasme, plus de tête que de cœur ; souverainement femme et souverainement coquette, Parisienne surtout ; aimant l'éclat, les fêtes, ne réfléchissant pas, ou réfléchissant trop tard ; d'une imprudence qui arrivait presque à de la poésie ; insolente à ravir, mais humble au fond du cœur ; affichant la force comme un roseau bien droit, mais, comme ce roseau, prête à fléchir sous une main puissante; parlant beaucoup de la religion, mais ne l'aimant pas, et cependant prête à l'accepter comme un dénouement. Comment expliquer une créature véritablement multiple, susceptible d'héroïsme, et oubliant d'être héroïque pour dire une méchanceté ; jeune et suave, moins vieille de cœur que vieillie par les maximes de ceux qui l'entouraient, et comprenant leur philosophie égoïste sans l'avoir appliquée ; ayant tous les vices du courtisan et toutes les noblesses de la femme adolescente; se défiant de tout, et néanmoins se laissant parfois aller à tout croire ?¹⁷²

In “Un enlèvement peut en cacher un autre: Kidnapping the Past in *La Duchesse de Langeais*,” Elizabeth Gerwin points out that the Duchess is “a character of internal contradictions” who symbolizes the “latent heroism,” the “chivalric values” and “potential for grandeur” of her class, as well as the repression that is caused by its petty preoccupation with “appearance” and “convenance:”

The Duchess herself embodies all the qualities of latent heroism and manifest pettiness that characterize the milieu from which she will be extracted, that is, the Restoration

¹⁷² Ibid.

aristocracy of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. [...] Arlette Michel proposes that in this tableau of “un monde fossilisé” where nothing moves with the times, Antoinette de Langeais is the last incarnation “dans l'aristocratie de style Restauration, des valeurs chevaleresques autrefois spécifiques de sa caste” (94), values that, while admirable, have nevertheless lost the power to signify in the wake of the first Empire. True to the *mœurs* and “passions [...] hypocrites” that govern “la femme du Faubourg Saint-Germain” (5:934) – and true also to the duality that is often associated with Balzac's representation of femininity –, Antoinette de Langeais is drawn as a character of internal contradictions [...] Her personal evolution has been arrested within an early modern matrix of repression, artifice and appearance: “elle était ce qu'elle voulait être ou paraître” (5:948). Ironically in all of this, affirms Balzac, “rien n'était joué”; all her repressed potential for grandeur “ressortaient de sa situation autant que de celle de l'aristocratie à laquelle elle appartenait” (5:935). [...] Antoinette de Langeais is, true to her kin, “une créature véritablement multiple, susceptible d'héroïsme, et oubliant d'être héroïque” (5:935). The repressed nature of her latent heroism means that prior to her kidnapping, the Duchess remains enslaved to the worst social “convenances”, caught in a private/ public bind that results in her being “souverainement coquette” (5:935).¹⁷³

In addition to the latent heroism that Gerwin notes, I will point out that the Duchess has potential for “elevated feeling.” Balzac also mentions the “treasures of her soul,” her humility, and her “élans chaleureux” [“warm impulses”]: “Ces passions, ces demi-passions, cette velléité de

¹⁷³ Elizabeth Gerwin, “Un enlèvement peut en cacher un autre: Kidnapping the Past in *La Duchesse de Langeais*” in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 41, no. 1 & 2 (2012-2013): 26-27.

grandeur, cette réalité de petitesse, ces sentiments froids et ces élans chaleureux étaient naturels et ressortaient de sa situation autant que de celle de l'aristocratie à laquelle elle appartenait.”¹⁷⁴

The Duchess's so-called *half-passions* seem to hold a certain “velléité de grandeur,” i.e. potential for greatness, which I read as an inherent promise of true emotions and feelings within the Duchess. This *velléité de grandeur* as a sort of latent aspiration towards the ability to feel predisposes the aforementioned latent heroism. The Duchess is only almost but never fully the greatness that the *treasures of her soul* would actually promise. Therefore, this *potential* inside of her is wasted and made ineffectual. *Velléité* is defined as: “Volonté faible et qui reste sans effet” [“a weak will, wish or desire that is without effect or outcome”].¹⁷⁵ The Duchess's potential for “elevated feelings” hides a desire that is inhibited by the “philosophie égoïste” and the petty preoccupations of her class.

Much like her “caste,” the Duchess is only concerned with the “convenances” [“social conventions and traditions”], “éclats” [i.e. the *brilliances* that indicate a “bright” life or golden existence] and “fêtes” [parties and gathering spots for rumors]. These petty preoccupations freeze her ability to love and feel. She is “more head than heart” [*plus de tête que de cœur*]. For Ronquerolles, she is “toute tête:”

Nous connaissons ces sortes de femmes, la Parisienne pure. As-tu jamais vu dans les rues une grisette trottant menu ? sa tête vaut un tableau : joli bonnet, joues fraîches, cheveux coquets, fin sourire, le reste est à peine soigné. N'en est-ce pas bien le portrait ? Voilà la

¹⁷⁴ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 935.

¹⁷⁵ *Dictionnaire Littré : Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. “velléité” [accessed on February 18, 2018: <https://www.littre.org/definition/velléité>.].

Parisienne, elle sait que sa tête seule sera vue ; à sa tête, tous les soins, les parures, les vanités. Hé ! bien, la duchesse est tout tête, elle ne sent que par sa tête, elle a un cœur dans la tête, une voix de tête, elle est friande par la tête.¹⁷⁶

In other words, the Duchess is a “femme de tête” not because she is an intellectual with the ability to reach depths in her thoughts, perceptions and feelings, but rather because her head, i.e. her mind, is not filled with any significant or real “pensée” that could possibly “coordinate” her feelings. The prejudices and preoccupations of her class, which dominate her mind, seem to thwart all great thoughts and feelings.

In this respect, the Duchess is an antithetical construction, full of contradictions and complexities that do not form an organized self. Without any psychological cohesion or unity, she is described as “multiple.” Composed of “the most shimmering hues” [*les teintes les plus chatoyantes*] that “collide” [*se heurtaient*], she is presented as a superior and seductive blur or blend of light that moves and glows in the eye of her lover:

Ne serait-ce pas toujours un portrait inachevé que celui de cette femme en qui les teintes les plus chatoyantes se heurtaient, mais en produisant une confusion poétique, parce qu'il y avait une lumière divine, un éclat de jeunesse qui donnait à ces traits confus une sorte d'ensemble ? La grâce lui servait d'unité. Rien n'était joué.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 982.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 935.

Furthermore, Balzac describes her as an incomplete portrait [*un portrait inachevé*], which stirs a poetic confusion [*une confusion poétique*] in Montriveau. In addition to this, a divine light [*une lumière divine*] that also shines a strange brightness of youth [*un éclat de jeunesse qui donnait à ces traits confus une sorte d'ensemble*] stems from within the Duchess. This brightness seems to offer a false cohesion to her chaotic and disjointed jumble of “confused” and incomprehensible *inner* traits. From this stance, nothing is feigned [*Rien n’était joué*] in her; her personality and the bright light (energy) that emanates from her opposes the concept of the classical coquette.

With that said, Balzac describes her in a particular way that hacks her up. At the level of her body, the Duchess lacks unity. Critics have noted that the Duchess’s body does not coalesce into a whole but is presented in body parts. In “La Duchesse de Langeais ou la mise à mort de l’objet textuel,” Vanoncini notes a subtle violent “ambivalence” in Balzac’s text [“l’ambivalence balzacienne entre amour et destruction”], which he relates to the author’s childhood and “somasochistic”¹⁷⁸ relationship to his mother. Although Montriveau sees the Duchess as “whole” and “ideal,” Balzac’s writing increasingly mutilates her body:

Plus le texte avance, plus le corps d’Antoinette est mutilé par le scalpel cynique d’un discours masculin destructeur de l’amour et de l’identité féminine. Cette logique de la prostitution et de la mise à mort d’un idéal auparavant rêvé semble si inévitable que sa seule suspension, tout provisoire, doit intervenir dans un espace clos et bien éloigné des réalités parisiennes : c’est dans une île de la Méditerranée, à proximité de la côte espagnole, où se côtoient les images du désert et de l’oasis, de la stérilité et de la

¹⁷⁸ Vanoncini 201.

fécondité, qu'Antoinette et Armand vivent pour la seule fois l'union de leurs âmes émues par les harmonies d'une musique divine.¹⁷⁹

Furthermore, this fragmentation of her body becomes the very mark of her coquetry. The Duchess's seductive nature tantalizes her lover with only parts of herself. Montriveau desires to conquer her in her totality but he can only do so, piece by piece.

Deemed "reine de la mode à Paris,"¹⁸⁰ the Duchess indeed knows how to manipulate clothing or use fashion to tease and seduce her admirers. When Montriveau privately meets the Duchess for the first time, she is found languidly laying on a sofa [*languissamment couchée sur le divan*] with loose hair retained by a veil [*les cheveux étaient en désordre, quoique retenus dans un voile*]. Manipulating the light in the darkness of her dimly lit boudoir, she had designed the layering of the fabric to expose only her head and her white marble hands [*blanche comme une main de marbre*]. Balzac seems to test the limits of light, its capabilities and characterizations, by extending the play with candlelight to the Duchess's voice, which is described in the text as soft as light [*d'une voix aussi douce que l'était la lueur*]. Like the flickering candlelight, she feigns a weak condition due to an unspecified illness, which seems to perpetuate a demure and passive femininity. The Duchess-coquette was no fair opponent to the inexperienced Montriveau whom Balzac called a "pauvre écolier!"¹⁸¹ :

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 213.

¹⁸⁰ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 919, 938.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 951.

Il trouva sa vaporeuse sylphide enveloppée d'un peignoir de cachemire brun habilement bouillonné, languissamment couchée sur le divan d'un obscur boudoir. Madame de Langeais ne se leva même pas, elle ne montra que sa tête, dont les cheveux étaient en désordre, quoique retenus dans un voile. Puis d'une main qui, dans le clair obscur produit par la tremblante lueur d'une seule bougie placée loin d'elle, parut aux yeux de Montriveau blanche comme une main de marbre, elle lui fit signe de s'asseoir, et lui dit d'une voix aussi douce que l'était la lueur.¹⁸²

At the beginning of her encounter with Montriveau, the Duchess is vain, egotistical and status seeking. She asserts her power through the use of “coquetterie.” she is “souverainement femme et souverainement coquette.”¹⁸³ Critics have noted that the Duchess is marked by narcissism. According to Gerwin, she represents a “*feminized form of narcissism*,” “a form that tapers with Freud’s characterization of narcissism as a predominantly feminine misdirection of object choice. For Balzac, the self-satisfied coquette manifests in feminized terms a more general trait, that is among the most frequent critical targets: that is, the tendency to hoard.”¹⁸⁴ In addition, Gerwin points out that while the specific hoarding of money represents a masculine form of narcissism in Balzac’s work, the hoarding of love, i.e. the refusal to love or the “withholding of affection,”¹⁸⁵ represents its feminine counterpart. The Duchess-coquette narcissistically hoards love as she sets herself on display for all to see, love and admire, but never to touch or to have:

¹⁸² Ibid., 951-952.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 935.

¹⁸⁴ Gerwin, “Un enlèvement peut en cacher un autre,” 27.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 28.

[...] The duchess betters the courtly love model by wisely investing only what she can afford to lose, thereby creating an affective stockpile while remaining physically and emotionally untouched by what she has set in motion. In so doing, she fosters public admiration while retaining private control of her sentiments, upholding a powerful Lacanian *noli me tangere* that bolsters the egotism of the proud, frail aristocratic set, “qui se mourait sans vouloir [...] ni toucher, ni être touchée” (5:935).¹⁸⁶

For Balzac, love is currency. The Duchess is a representation of love that is hoarded. Narcissistic in her orientation, the Duchess decides to seduce the Marquis de Montriveau (a.k.a. Armand, in more personal and familiar terms) who, although “boring,” was considered *à la mode* by Society. Montriveau was a noble by courtesy title [*quoique noble et titré*¹⁸⁷] and the only son of a late Napoleonic general: “Personne n’est plus ennuyeux ni plus sombre, ma chère, mais il est à la mode.”¹⁸⁸ “Alone in the world” [*seul dans le monde*¹⁸⁹] with no material or political benefit to advance his military career, Montriveau became a *fearless* man of *action*: “Son intrépidité sur les champs de bataille n’était point fanfaronne.” He gained his successes by his own merit and not by the various rewards of nepotism. As Balzac would narrate, he joined early on the Army’s Artillery, a division that held the fewest number of officers and the least amount of promotions because Napoleon feared and disfavored the fact that it actually held the most liberal, highly

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 942.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 940.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 941.

educated and freethinking of men in the military.¹⁹⁰ In essence, Montriveau belonged to a battalion unit, which threatened its head, the Emperor, because of its ability to think on its own. As mentioned by Balzac, Napoleon could only ever rule over this faction of the body “in action,” i.e. in war; otherwise, the Artillery was nearly a state, *a body*, of its own: “L’artillerie faisait un corps à part dans l’armée, et n’appartenait à Napoléon que sur les champs de bataille.”¹⁹¹

Critics have noted that Montriveau resembles Balzac – that he is the “double of the novelist:”

Montriveau a bien été comme un reflet ou un double du romancier; il est « petit, large de buste, musculeux comme un lion », il a une « tête grosse et carrée » surmontée d’une « énorme et abondante chevelure noire » au-dessus d’un front vigoureux. A part cela, il n’est pas décrit en détail, son âge n’est jamais précisé. Son état de militaire l’éloigne du romancier, il est vrai, mais Balzac dit bien qu’il est un poète en action. De plus, fils de la Révolution et de l’Empire, il pourrait pousser l’aristocratie à un compromis intelligent, mais il est noble et ne pourrait être méprisé comme son créateur en tant que roturier.¹⁹²

In the passage above, Baron brings our attention to the key physical trait of Montriveau, his “lion’s head” which resembles the head of the great novelist, Balzac. Montriveau’s glorious and

¹⁹⁰ “L’arme à laquelle appartenait Armand de Montriveau lui avait offert peu de chances d’avancement. D’abord le nombre des officiers y est plus limité que dans les autres corps de l’armée ; puis, les opinions libérales et presque républicaines que professait l’artillerie, les craintes inspirées à l’Empereur par une réunion d’hommes savants accoutumés à réfléchir, s’opposaient à la fortune militaire de la plupart d’entre eux.” (Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 941).

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Baron, “La Duchesse de Langeais,” 8.

regal head parallels the various statue heads (monumental busts) of Balzac that exist today in museums and galleries. This attention to the upper part of their bodies accentuates the importance of the head to the rest of the body. Although not mentioned here, I will note that the description of Montriveau's short and "somewhat despotic" [*quelque chose de despotique*] stature reminds one of Napoleon Bonaparte. In my view, it isn't just Montriveau's military links or his physical appearance that creates a perfect fictional hybrid of Balzac and Napoleon, but also their attachment, whether reciprocated or not, to their mothers.

Montriveau becomes for the Duchess the conquest to be won:

La duchesse de Langeais, sachant de quel prix passager était la conquête de cet homme, résolut, pendant le peu de temps que mit la duchesse de Maufrigneuse à l'aller prendre pour le lui présenter, d'en faire un de ses amants, de lui donner le pas sur tous les autres, de l'attacher à sa personne, et de déployer pour lui toutes ses coquetteries [...] Elle voulut que cet homme ne fût à aucune femme, et n'imagina pas d'être à lui.¹⁹³

Incapable of love, the Duchess mimics sublime love. Believing this imitation to be real, Montriveau begins to love her "like a child:" "Mon Dieu, s'écria-t-il, je suis comme un enfant."¹⁹⁴ To which the Duchess, in a tone used to speak to children, says that he is *willingly* a spoiled child: "Un enfant volontaire et bien gâté... Oh ! oui, bien plus aimé qu'il ne le croit, et cependant bien désobéissant."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 947.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 978.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

As Vanoncini points out, Montriveau falls in love with the Duchesse because he sees in her the Ideal woman: “De même, quand elle se montre parée pour recevoir la première visite de Montriveau, Antoinette apparaît comme une figure idéale, un de ces « jolis insectes bleus qui voltigent au-dessus des eaux » (p. 244): l’éblouissement de l’admirateur rappelle ici l’intuition fulgurante de la beauté féminine que ressent Félix de Vandenesse à la vue de Mme de Mortsau. ”¹⁹⁶

Montriveau believes to have found in her his ideal woman. He is blind to her “petitesse,” i.e. her narcissism and her emotional coldness. When he discovers that the Duchesse, his Antoinette, is nothing but a lie, that she has feigned her feelings, he deliberately withdraws his love from her. He immediately stops visiting her and cuts all social and physical relation with her. We see a melancholic transformation in Montriveau when he remarks that the Duchess’s negligent game of love has stripped him of life, reducing him to nothing, a blank extinction:

Assez, madame, consolez-vous. Je ne puis plus souffrir. D'autres vous diront que vous leur avez donné la vie, moi je vous dis avec délices que vous m'avez donné le néant. Peut-être devinez-vous que je ne m'appartiens pas, que je dois vivre pour mes amis, et qu'alors j'aurai la froideur de la mort et les chagrins de la vie à supporter ensemble.¹⁹⁷

Although he has cut all external relation to her, Montriveau keeps an internal relationship to her. In this process of incorporation, he takes *his Duchesse* inside of him so that he becomes, like her, a “nothing” that deserves to be killed. As he suggests in the quote above, he stays alive only

¹⁹⁶ Vanoncini 213.

¹⁹⁷ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 995.

because he “does not belong to himself” but to his friends: “Peut-être devinez-vous que je ne m'appartiens pas, que je dois vivre pour mes amis.” Montriveau wishes he could kill himself. As we learned from Raphaël’s suicidal depression in *La peau de chagrin*, to kill oneself would mean in fact to kill the other inside of oneself. It is worth noting that, as Raphaël contemplates jumping into the Seine, the text evokes the image of the guillotine:

Il marchait comme au milieu d’un désert, coudoyé par des hommes qu’il ne voyait pas, n’écoulant à travers les clameurs populaires qu’une seule voix, celle de la mort ; enfin perdu dans une engourdissante méditation, semblable à celle dont jadis étaient saisis les criminels qu’une charrette conduisait du Palais à la Grève, vers cet échafaud, rouge de tout le sang versé depuis 1793.¹⁹⁸

In *La Duchesse de Langeais*, suicide is not the solution that Montriveau chooses. He does not kill himself but goes on living for his friends. More importantly, as we shall see, his rage turns outward: instead of killing himself, he turns the blade, the axe, against the Duchess who had caused him such grief and pain. Instead of killing himself, he wants to take his revenge for the crime that she committed when she played with the hearts of men.

Vous avez sur les hommes un pouvoir sans bornes ; mais souvenez-vous qu’un jour vous avez appelé l’amour : il est venu pur et candide, autant qu’il peut l’être sur cette terre ; aussi respectueux qu’il était violent ; caressant, comme l’est l’amour d’une femme

¹⁹⁸ Balzac, *La Peau*, 64.

dévouée, ou comme l'est celui d'une mère pour son enfant ; enfin, si grand, qu'il était une folie. Vous êtes jouée de cet amour, vous avez commis un crime.¹⁹⁹

As we shall see, his revenge will take the form of a metaphorical decapitation.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 993.

²⁰⁰ Critics have widely noted that the character of the Duchesse de Langeais was based on an actual Duchesse (Henriette Marie) de Castries on whom Balzac wanted to exert his revenge after she had rejected his advances. The similitude of her noble name “de Castries” to the word *castration* may only be coincidental, but if history proves right, it would be the *cut* that the Duchesse de Castries inflicted on Balzac as well as the cut that he in turn inflicted on her that would give birth to the novel, *La Duchesse de Langeais*. At the start of their correspondence, the Duchesse de Castries was a 35-year-old aristocrat. She was once described as beautiful, overly educated, unhappily abandoned by and estranged from her husband. Alone and handicapped from an unfortunate hunting accident, which had permanently “damaged her spine” and limited her to “reclining on a sofa or in bed” (Zweig 1946, 154), the Duchesse de Castries was completely enamored with the genius of Balzac while the author himself was obsessively determined to make her his ideal woman. Unfortunately, the epistolary relationship later became mere frustrations and humiliations in the end: “Balzac wanted more than intellectual communion, and his wooing grew tempestuous. He showed her plainly that she was the object of his desires, and he demanded more and more urgently the first and then the final pledges of her submission. Madame de Castries could not help feeling flattered, though perhaps unconsciously, at being loved by a man whose genius she admired and honored, and she did not ward off his little intimacies with cold disdain. She may even have provoked him to them, though we cannot completely trust Balzac’s description in his later novel of revenge, *La Duchesse de Langeais*: ‘This woman not only received me kindly, but also displayed for my benefit all the arts of her very considerable powers of coquetry. She desired to please me and exerted herself to the utmost to keep me in my state of intoxication and to spur me on. She did all she could to force a quiet and timorous lover to declare himself.’ When, however, the situation began to reach the danger point, she parried his advances determinedly. Perhaps she wished to remain faithful to the father of her child, for whom she had surrendered her position in the social world, perhaps she felt inhibited by her physical infirmity, or possibly she really was in the last resort repelled by the commonplace element in Balzac’s appearance. She may also, and not unjustly, have feared that his vanity would lead him to boast in public of his aristocratic liaison, so she allowed him no more than what in *La Duchesse de Langeais* he calls ‘the small, slow conquests with which timorous lovers have to be content,’ and stubbornly refused ‘to confirm the surrender of her heart by the surrender of her body.’ For the first time in his life he was compelled to admit that his will was not omnipotent. After months of the most insistent wooing, daily visits, and literary activity on behalf of the Royalist Party, in spite of the humbling to which his pride had been subjected, he was still only on terms of intellectual friendship with Madame de Castries, and not her lover.” (Stefan Zweig, *Balzac* (1946), 156-157).

NE TOUCHEZ PAS À LA HACHE

The most notable party scene in the novel takes place at the great ball of the Comtesse de Serizy, the Marquis de Ronquerolles's sister, soon after Montriveau has cut all relationship with the Duchess. Angrily looking up at the glowing windows of yet another ballroom with yet another mindless, chatter-filled party, *luminous* and full of *the most beautiful and seductive women of Paris*, Montriveau, now the jilted admirer and slighted lover, declares a silent war on the cold, hard-hearted Duchess:

S'il n'y a pas de bourreaux pour de semblables crimes, dit-il en regardant les croisées lumineuses des salons où dansaient, causaient et riaient les plus séduisantes femmes de Paris, je te prendrai par le chignon du cou, madame la duchesse, et t'y ferai sentir un fer plus mordant que ne l'est le couteau de la Grève. Acier contre acier, nous verrons quel cœur sera plus tranchant.²⁰¹

According to Zweig, Balzac tirelessly sought out the attention (love) of aristocratic widows to inspire his literary creations. Of the Duchesse de Castries, Zweig writes: "Balzac's almost morbid craze for the aristocracy could hardly have been more completely satisfied than by a family tree with branches so impressively entwined on both sides. In age, too, she fulfilled his ideal to perfection. She was thirty-five, and could therefore be regarded as a '*femme de trente ans*.' In other respects she was the most Balzacian type of all, for she was a sentimental, unhappy, disappointed woman with a love story in her past that was no less celebrated in Parisian society than *La Peau de chagrin* and had even been utilized by Stendhal in his first book, *Armance*." (Zweig 1946, 153). The Duchesse de Castries's distanced, strained and limited "love" for Balzac proved cruel to the author who later realized that her letters and gestures of kindness were solely expressions of friendly admiration rather than of the romantic love that he so desired.

²⁰¹ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 986-987.

Montriveau, who is now completely convinced that the Duchess had played with his heart, wants nothing but revenge for a crime that does not have an executioner. As he puts it, the Duchess's heart is made of "acier," of a "steel" that cuts those who fall in love with her. Against the "steel" of her unloving heart, he will turn his own heart into "steel", into an "iron," "*un fer plus mordant que ne l'est le couteau de la Grève*" ["an iron more biting than the knife in the Place de la Grève"]. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Place de Grève was the open square in front of the City Hall of Paris, also known today as L'Hôtel de Ville, where most public executions took place for convicted criminals. Between the years 1310 to 1832, the Place de Grève was Paris's principal place of execution. Though the styles of executions varied from crime to crime, many were beheaded — and, according to historians, commoners usually got the axe while the nobles received the sword, if they paid a fee. Montriveau thus compares his heart to a blade more "cutting" than the blade of the Duchess's heart, a blade that threatens her of decapitation. Like an imagined executioner, he will take the Duchesse by her neck and make her feel the "blade" of his heart.

As soon as she enters the ballroom, the Duchess notices that Montriveau's face is *beaming*, as sharp as the sun, *with happy hatred* ["rayonnait de haine heureuse"]. This oxymoronic coupling of jubilation and hatred captures the ecstatic glee that seems to be within Montriveau's as he schemes his vengeance towards the Duchess. Absorbedly looking at the Duchess's face, Montriveau hovers right above her, breathing down her neck, as she dances and flutters glances of fear and curiosity across the room towards him. The Duchess can feel the wrathful destruction that he intends to bring upon her from the moment she enters the party. His brooding presence glimmers with a spark that is described as so brightly burning with rage that it causes the Duchess to perspire with *cold sweat* throughout the night:

La première figure que vit la duchesse en entrant fut celle d'Armand, Armand l'attendait cette fois, elle le pensa du moins. Tous deux échangèrent un regard. Une sueur froide sortit soudain de tous les pores de cette femme. Elle avait cru Montriveau capable de quelque vengeance inouïe, proportionnée à leur état ; cette vengeance était trouvée, elle était prête, elle était chaude, elle bouillonnait. Les yeux de cet amant trahi lui lancèrent les éclairs de la foudre et son visage rayonnait de haine heureuse.²⁰²

When she stops dancing, the Duchess becomes the witness of a strange conversation:

La valse finie, la duchesse vint s'asseoir près de la comtesse, et le marquis ne cessa de la regarder en s'entretenant avec un inconnu.

« Monsieur, lui disait-il, l'une des choses qui m'ont le plus frappé dans ce voyage... »

La duchesse était tout oreilles.

« ... Est la phrase que prononce le gardien de Westminster en vous montrant la hache avec laquelle un homme masqué trancha, dit-on, la tête de Charles Ier en mémoire du roi qui les dit à un curieux.

– Que dit-il ? demanda madame de Sérizy.

– *Ne touchez pas à la hache*, répondit Montriveau d'un son de voix où il y avait de la menace.²⁰³

²⁰² Ibid., 988.

²⁰³ Ibid., 989.

Montriveau reiterates the last words that King Charles the First spoke on the day of his execution in 1648 at Westminster, on the scaffold.²⁰⁴ According to Montriveau, the King tells a bystander: “*Ne touchez pas à la hache.*”²⁰⁵ Historians have concluded that such a statement may have been made because the King was actually afraid that the blade might become dull, if mishandled before his execution. The phrase exhibited the King’s fear, not of death, precisely, but of the actual cut itself and the manner in which this cut would be achieved. There are many ways to read this final phrase. One could read it as a direct order, a plea or a stern warning. For Montriveau, it is obvious that the phrase was more a stern warning, if not a decree, never to be broken or compromised. Like the “curieux” who wanted to touch the axe that was meant for the beheading of King Charles I, the Duchess, too, has touched, out of curiosity, the heart of Montriveau. She carelessly and recklessly played with his heart by feigning her love. For this crime of (non) love or inability to love with sincerity, Montriveau vows that the Duchess will experience the “tranchant” (“the sharpness”) of his heart, i.e. his axe and the rage that defines it. This rage, which will initiate the “axe” to swing towards the Duchess, will be what metaphorically cuts or decapitates her.

Although Montriveau’s retelling of the grim end of King Charles the First was nearly a passing remark to a stranger, the Duchess, who has felt herself to be the target of Montriveau’s seething anger, has been paying close attention to the story and understands that there is a

²⁰⁴ From the Speech of King Charles the First: “For the King, indeed I will not, (then turning to a Gentlemen that touched the Ax, said, Hurt not the Ax, that may hurt me) [meaning if he did blunt the edg[e]]” (*Project Canterbury*, s.v. “King Charls His Speech Made Upon the Scaffold At Whitehall-Gate, Immediately before his Execution, On Tuesday the 30 of *Ian*. 1648, VVith a Relation of the manner of his going to Execution” on Project Canterbury. London: Special Authority, 1649 [accessed on March 7, 2018: <http://anglicanhistory.org/charles/charles1.html>]).

²⁰⁵ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 989.

specific and “*mélodramatique*” message that is addressed to her through the King’s story: “En vérité, monsieur le marquis, dit la duchesse de Langeais, vous regardez mon cou d'un air si mélodramatique en répétant cette vieille histoire, connue de tous ceux qui vont à Londres, qu'il me semble vous voir une hache à la main.”²⁰⁶

« UNE VRAIE FEMME »

Montriveau’s vengeance does not take the form of a literal decapitation. Montriveau orders his men to kidnap the Duchess and bring her to his room. When the blindfold that the men put over her eyes come down, the Duchess finds herself with Montriveau who taunts her and threatens to brand her forehead with a “Croix de Lorraine” that will mark her as infamous and damned. The Croix de Lorraine is indeed the branded mark put, as he himself points out, on the shoulder of the “forçats” [*convicts*]:

Il lui montra une croix de Lorraine adaptée au bout d'une tige d'acier. « Deux de mes amis font rougir en ce moment une croix dont voici le modèle. Nous vous l'appliquerons au front, là, entre les deux yeux, pour que vous ne puissiez pas la cacher par quelques diamants, et vous soustraire ainsi aux interrogations du monde. Vous aurez enfin sur le front la marque infamante appliquée sur l'épaule de vos frères les forçats [...]. »²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 998.

Although the branding with the “Croix de Lorraine” was applied to the shoulder, Montriveau intends to apply it on her face between her eyes. In his “De *Dezesperance D’Amour* à *La Duchesse de Langeais*,” Roland Chollet suggests that by branding the Duchess’s head, Montriveau desires to publicly shame the Duchess by imposing the very sign of her crime and infamy on the most visible part of her face.

Chollet also notes the parallelism between *La Duchesse de Langeais* and a tale from *Les Contes drolatiques*²⁰⁸ (“The Droll Stories”), which Balzac wrote in 1833 entitled *Désespérance D’Amour*.²⁰⁹ In this tale, Angelo Cappara, the shamed lover, deliberately slices off the left cheek of his Florentine mistress:

Il est extrêmement curieux d’observer que la vengeance de Montriveau sort littéralement du coup d’épée de Cappara. Comme le premier titre de *la Duchesse de Langeais*: *Ne touchez pas à la Hache* l’illustre bien, l’écrivain prend pour ainsi dire au mot l’anecdote

²⁰⁸ “Les *Cent Contes drolatiques* d’Honoré de Balzac est une œuvre méconnue qui parut entre 1832 et 1837. Sur les cent contes envisagés, Balzac n’en écrivit que trente, répartis en trois dizains. Cette œuvre fut conçue comme le second pilier de l’édifice balzacien, face à *La Comédie humaine*. Il s’agit de contes s’inscrivant dans la tradition des fabliaux du Moyen Âge et rédigés dans une langue du XVI^e siècle réinventée. La facture archaïsante, anachronique de cette œuvre rendit la réception impossible, heurta la critique, surprit et découragea le public. Cette réception demeure aujourd’hui problématique, la familiarité avec la graphie et la syntaxe médiévales étant réservée à une élite de lecteurs.” (Caroline Delville, « Les Cent Contes drolatiques d’Honoré de Balzac: une écriture des limites » in *Sciences Humaines Combinées: Revue électronique des écoles doctorales* [accessed on March 27, 2018: <https://revuesshs.u-bourgogne.fr/lisit491/document.php?id=574.>]).

²⁰⁹ “La structure du grand roman est en effet étroitement tributaire du petit conte drolatique. Il serait ridicule évidemment d’insinuer que toute *la Duchesse de Langeais* se trouve déjà dans *Dezesperance*, ou que, d’en être inspirée, elle y perde quoi que se soit de son originalité. Notre seul but est de mettre en évidence une filiation étroite entre deux œuvres apparemment étrangères l’une à l’autre, filiation qui témoigne de l’unité dynamique de la création balzacienne.” (Chollet, “De *Dezesperance D’Amour* à *La Duchesse de Langeais*” in *L’Année balzacienne* (Paris: Éditions Garnier, 1965): 114).

de *Dezesperance*, et il n'y a pas loin de l'épée du Florentin à cette hache mythique dont la duchesse est menacée. C'est par l'intermédiaire d'une métaphore créatrice que le drame de *Dezesperance* anime une fois de plus le drame du grand roman. A cette double vengeance, mêmes mobiles, même visée qui ressortit du roman noir: imprimer sur le visage de la femme la marque de son crime. Cappara, d'une estafilade, entaille la joue gauche de sa grande dame, et Montriveau s'apprête à marquer au fer rouge le front de la sienne. Il y renonce in extremis, c'est vrai, mais la scène n'en a pas moins lieu, et elle constitue le faite de la construction dramatique. Celui qui objecterait qu'entre le noble coup de dague et le chiffre du bagnard il y a un monde, il est à craindre que *Dezesperance* ne lui apporte un démenti. Dès ce conte – Balzac en eut-il conscience ? – une image annonce la vengeance de Montriveau. N'est-il pas dit du petit Florentin, qu'il « se lamentoyt de porter ung cueur si chauld que, sans doubte aulcun, *les femmes s'en garioient comme d'ung fer rouge* » (p. 755) ? Peut-être y a-t-il, chez Balzac et chez d'autres, tout un champ mystérieux à explorer dans ces métaphores où l'invention de l'image préfigure celle du drame...²¹⁰

Chollet compares Montriveau's heart full of rage with Cappara's heart, which is described as "red-hot iron," in *Désespérance*: "N'est-il pas dit du petit Florentin, qu'il "se lamentoyt de porter ung cueur si chauld que, sans doubte aulcun, *les femmes s'en garioient comme d'ung fer rouge*" (p. 755)?"²¹¹ In other words, according to Chollet, the image of branding the head with a burning iron is already implicit in the *Contes drolatiques*.

²¹⁰ Chollet, "De *Dezesperance* D'Amour à *La Duchesse de Langeais*," 117.

²¹¹ Ibid.

Cappara cuts the cheek of his disappointing loved object when he recognizes that she is not the ideal. Montriveau wants to brand the forehead of his disappointing loved object – to inscribe upon the Duchess's forehead a mark that identifies her as a criminal. With Cappara's literal slashing and Montriveau's desire to brand the Duchesse with two intersecting crosses between her eyes, so that she will not be able to hide it, it seems that a public display of both their loved objects's crimes is desired. The only difference then between Cappara and Montriveau resides in the way they choose to exact revenge. While Cappara physically disfigures the head of his mistress, in order to reveal her true identity as a criminal, Montriveau uses words to brand her. Instead of actually branding the Duchess, Montriveau indeed delivers a long speech that aims at obliterating her into pieces. He details her weaknesses, her sickening elitism and the pettiness of her class, her heartless venture to toy with innocent loves and her criminal inability to truly love. He accuses her of hypocrisy and shallowness:

Madame, dit-il après une pause, lorsque, dans Paris, le bourreau devra mettre la main sur un pauvre assassin, et le couchera sur la planche où la loi veut qu'un assassin soit couché pour perdre la tête... Vous savez, les journaux en préviennent les riches et les pauvres, afin de dire aux uns de dormir tranquilles, et aux autres de veiller pour vivre. Eh ! bien, vous qui êtes religieuse, et même un peu dévote, allez faire dire des messes pour cet homme : vous êtes de la famille ; mais vous êtes de la branche aînée. Celle-là peut trôner en paix, exister heureuse et sans soucis. Poussé par la misère ou par la colère, votre frère de bagné n'a tué qu'un homme ; et vous ! vous avez tué le bonheur d'un homme, sa plus belle vie, ses plus chères croyances. L'autre a tout naïvement attendu sa victime ; il l'a tuée malgré lui, par peur de l'échafaud ; mais vous !... vous avez entassé tous les forfaits

de la faiblesse contre une force innocente ; vous avez apprivoisé votre patient pour en mieux dévorer le cœur ; vous l'avez appâté de caresses ; vous n'en avez omis aucune de celles qui pouvaient lui faire supposer, rêver, désirer les délices de l'amour. Vous lui avez demandé mille sacrifices pour les refuser tous. Vous lui avez bien fait voir la lumière avant de lui crever les yeux. Admirable courage !²¹²

With Montriveau, we thus get a particular and metaphorical method of branding: to burn his failed Ideal loved object with a wretched description of her crime.

Montriveau's speech has a deeply transformative effect on the Duchess. The more he speaks and attacks her with his "burning" words, the more the Duchess realizes her wrongdoings. His speech seems to have cut off all the superficialities and the social conditionings that had once characterized her and prevented her from the greatness, which loving would have afforded. In so doing, Montriveau has managed to turn the Duchess into a "vraie femme" – a woman who is capable of loving and the ideal woman that he had wanted all along. After her abduction and metaphorical "branding," the Duchess begins indeed to show her love for Montriveau through various signs. She sacrifices her reputation and social status. But her love comes too late. In the long tirade that he fired against the Duchess, Montriveau stated that he would never be able to believe her again: "Epargnez-vous donc ces pleurs, madame. Si j'y croyais, ce serait pour m'en défier."²¹³

So it seems that Montriveau has performed upon the Duchess the regenerative cut that Balzac prescribed for the nobility of the Restoration. Through his verbal indictment of the

²¹² Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 994.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 995.

Duchess, he has cut off what was “rotten” in her and liberated in her the potential to truly love. In a metaphorical manner, he has applied the violent therapy that Ronquerolles previously prescribed:

Sois inflexible comme la loi. N'aie pas plus de charité que n'en a le bourreau. Frappe. Quand tu auras frappé, frappe encore. Frappe toujours, comme si tu donnais le knout. Les duchesses sont dures, mon cher Armand, et ces natures de femme ne s'amollissent que sous les coups ; la souffrance leur donne un cœur, et c'est œuvre de charité que de les frapper. Frappe donc sans cesse. Ah ! quand la douleur aura bien attendri ces nerfs, ramolli ces fibres que tu crois douces et molles ; fait battre un cœur sec, qui, à ce jeu, reprendra de l'élasticité ; quand la cervelle aura cédé, la passion entrera peut-être dans les ressorts métalliques de cette machine à larmes, à manières, à évanouissements, à phrases fondantes ; et tu verras le plus magnifique des incendies, si toutefois la cheminée prend feu. Ce système d'acier femelle aura le rouge du fer dans la forge ! une chaleur plus durable que tout, et cette incandescence deviendra peut-être de l'amour. Néanmoins, j'en doute.²¹⁴

With the harshness of his words, Montriveau breaks the Duchess's head, her *cervelle*, which is treacherously filled with the pettiness of her social cast. By inflicting this violence on her head, he allows her to have a heart at last. His violent words have regenerated her by burning, cutting off, everything that was rotten in her. Essentially, he has decapitated her cold head, full of pettiness and harmful effects, and replaced it with a head that is now burning with a love so

²¹⁴ Ibid., 982-983.

intense that it burns like a red iron. He has set her heart on fire. As she is about to be branded, the Duchess says:

Ah ! mon Armand, marque, marque vite ta créature comme une pauvre petite chose à toi ! Tu demandais des gages à mon amour ; mais les voilà tous dans un seul. Ah ! je ne vois que clémence et pardon, que bonheur éternel en ta vengeance... Quand tu auras ainsi désigné une femme pour la tienne, quand tu auras une âme serve qui portera ton chiffre rouge, eh ! bien, tu ne pourras jamais l'abandonner, tu seras à jamais à moi. En m'isolant sur la terre, tu seras chargé de mon bonheur, sous peine d'être un lâche, et je te sais noble, grand ! Mais la femme qui aime se marque toujours elle-même. Venez, messieurs, entrez et marquez, marquez la duchesse de Langeais. Elle est à jamais à monsieur de Montriveau. Entrez vite, et tous, mon front brûle plus que votre fer.”²¹⁵

Her forehead has become the “fer rouge,” i.e. the heart that now burns red-hot with love. As the title of this section, “La vraie femme,” suggests, Montriveau has transformed the coquette into a “true woman” who now burns with love for him. In her last letter to Montriveau, the Duchess writes that she “was not a woman” prior to her transformation:

J'ai su, par mes propres douleurs, combien mes coquetteries vous ont fait souffrir ; mais alors, j'étais dans une complète ignorance de l'amour. Vous êtes, vous, dans le secret de ces tortures, et vous me les imposez. Pendant les huit premiers mois que vous m'avez accordés, vous ne vous êtes point fait aimer. Pourquoi, mon ami ? Je ne sais pas plus vous

²¹⁵ Ibid., 998.

le dire, que je ne puis vous expliquer pourquoi je vous aime. Ah ! certes, j'étais flattée de me voir l'objet de vos discours passionnés, de recevoir vos regards de feu ; mais vous me laissiez froide et sans désirs. Non, je n'étais point femme, je ne concevais ni le dévouement ni le bonheur de notre sexe.²¹⁶

Believing she is now a true woman, the Duchess wants to be loved. She makes multiple compromising attempts to reach Montriveau. He, however, does not realize nor would even believe that she now loves him. If she cannot have Montriveau's love, she will have God's. In her final letter to her lover, the Duchess takes back her dignity by taking her axe (heart) away from Montriveau who is now in the position of the blind:

Adieu, vous ne toucherez point à ma hache ; la vôtre était celle du bourreau, la mienne est celle de Dieu ; la vôtre tue, et la mienne sauve. Votre amour était mortel, il ne savait supporter ni le dédain ni la raillerie ; le mien peut tout endurer sans faiblir, il est immortellement vivace. Ah ! j'éprouve une joie sombre à vous écraser, vous qui vous croyez si grand, à vous humilier par le sourire calme et protecteur des anges faibles qui prennent, en se couchant aux pieds de Dieu, le droit et la force de veiller en son nom sur les hommes. Vous n'avez eu que de passagers désirs ; tandis que la pauvre religieuse vous éclairera sans cesse de ses ardentes prières, et vous couvrira toujours des ailes de l'amour divin.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Ibid., 1026-1027.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 1028.

In taking back the axe, the Duchess makes two distinct points that separates her love from his. The Duchess says that her axe (heart) is divine in that it can save, while Montriveau's axe (heart) is mortal in that it only seeks to kill: "la vôtre était celle du bourreau, la mienne est celle de Dieu; la vôtre tue, et la mienne sauve." With this differentiation between their hearts, the Duchess regains her dignity and assumes a superior status – that of a divine or celestial being with a greater capacity to love. It is important to note that whenever Balzac stages the destruction of the loved object, he sets in its place the creation of an Ideal object. We see the same process in *The Duchesse de Langeais*: as soon as the Duchess is destroyed she is regenerated, idealized as a "vraie femme."

The Duchess's unrequited love drives her to God and the convent where the taking of the veil is both a demonstration of pure love and a form of suicide:

Une rigidité conventuelle que rien n'avait altérée recommandait cet asile dans toutes les mémoires du monde catholique. Aussi, la pureté de sa règle y attira-t-elle, des points les plus éloignés de l'Europe, de tristes femmes dont l'âme, dépouillée de tous liens humains, soupirait après ce long suicide accompli dans le sein de Dieu.²¹⁸

After countless searches throughout all of France's convents, Montriveau finally finds his Duchess, now a barefoot Carmelite nun, in Spain. This act of ultimate sacrifice and devotion convinces him of the Duchess's true love for him. Montriveau is able to have one meeting with the Duchess now turned nun, but, after their initial meeting, she suddenly dies from unknown

²¹⁸ Ibid., 905.

causes. Although the cause of her death is unknown, it is clear that her meeting with Montriveau wore her out by excessive love and melancholy.

DESTRUCTION OF THE IDEAL OBJECT

The text thus narrates a progression: the fake love of the coquette is replaced with the true and sublime love of the nun. After realizing the coquette's inability to love, Montriveau metaphorically decapitates her, which liberates within her the potential of divine love. Just as the act of pruning requires a cutting in order for the rest of the organism to survive, the coquette within the Duchess needed to be cut so that sublime Love, (metaphorized as the divine light, which attracted Montriveau from the beginning and was always present in Antoinette but thwarted by her "coquetterie,") could be materialized.

While the "coquette" was attacked as a cold and unloving figure, the nun is presented as a sublime figure of love. However, rage is still present. At the end of the novel, Montriveau, with the help of his friends, decides to abduct the nun. But when they enter her cell, they discover that she is dead. Nevertheless, they decide to abduct her dead body. On board their ship back to France, Ronquerolles suggests that they tie both her feet with a cannon ball and throw her into the sea. Nonchalantly, he tells Montriveau that if the Duchess had once been a woman, she is now nothing:

- Ah ! ça, dit Ronquerolles à Montriveau quand celui-ci reparut sur le tillac, c'était une femme, maintenant ce n'est rien. Attachons un boulet à chacun de ses pieds,

jetons-la dans la mer, et n'y pense plus que comme nous pensons à un livre lu pendant notre enfance.

- Oui, dit Montriveau, car ce n'est plus qu'un poème.
- Te voilà sage. Désormais aie des passions ; mais de l'amour, il faut savoir le bien placer, et il n'y a que le dernier amour d'une femme qui satisfasse le premier amour d'un homme.²¹⁹

Once her dead body is discarded, the Duchess becomes a “poem,” i.e. a literary representation.

Critics have noticed the violence with which the dead body of the nun is discarded at the end of the text. Vanoncini interprets the violent discarding of the nun's body as a “mise à mort de l'idéal.” As he points out, the Duchess attracts Montriveau at the beginning of the text because she looks to him like a “sublime totality.” But Montriveau's desire soon fragments this totality: “L'adoration de la duchesse en tant que totalité sublime s'arrête cependant quand elle s'expose au désir de Montriveau. Son corps se morcelle alors en des fragments érotiquement significatifs.”²²⁰ As the text progresses, Vanoncini points out that Antoinette's body keeps being “mutilated” by the “scalpel” of the narration. He concludes that, although the text narrates the “quest of an exemplary passion,” a “recherche de l'absolu,” the narrative itself only exists by destroying its own fantasy of ideals (“rêve des idéalités”):

Le récit auquel nous nous attachons est suspendu tout entier à la quête d'une passion et d'une vertu exemplaires, mais n'arrive à exister qu'en détruisant ce rêve des idéalités. Il

²¹⁹ Ibid., 1037.

²²⁰ Vanoncini 213.

doit, en s'étirant, évacuer jusqu'au fétiche le plus adoré dans une logique du morcellement, le pied, ce fragment qui résume déjà la beauté féminine dans le chaos pictural de Frenhofer.²²¹

The story that narrates Montriveau's quest for an ideal female figure shows the actual killing of the Ideal ("la mise à mort d'un idéal"²²²).

Although Vanoncini argues that the ideal feminine figure is put to death, I will argue that the text does not simply show the killing of that ideal ("la mise à mort d'un idéal"), but also the very genesis of the sublime female figure, which is endowed with what Balzac considers to be pure and perfect love. It is precisely the rage, aggression and destruction directed at the disappointing idealized figure, and especially at its head, that creates a new head that is Sublime Ideal Love. Balzac's text does not simply discard once and for all the original idealized loved object. To the very last, it uses the failed object of idealized love as a signifier, a starting mark, upon which a new creation is birthed.

It is indeed important to note that there are similarities between the disappointing coquette and the sublime nun. Both are decapitated by Balzac through the character of Montriveau who does not only represent a random jilted lover but also the author who created him to kill "her" as the ideal loved object, both real and fictional. Even before Montriveau explicitly threatens the Duchess with decapitation, Balzac's writing had already decapitated her. When Montriveau first meets the Duchess privately, her head appears separate from the rest of her body: "Il trouva sa vaporeuse sylphide enveloppée d'un peignoir de cachemire brun

²²¹ Ibid., 214.

²²² Ibid., 215.

habilement bouillonné (...). [Elle] ne montra que sa tête, dont les cheveux étaient (...) retenus dans un voile.”²²³ The text accentuates the importance of the Duchess’s head by framing it within a veil, which is used to draw back unnecessary excess, i.e. her hair. While Montriveau sees the Duchess as a “sublime totality,” Balzac’s writing softly severs her head. In this gesture of quiet and intentional preparation for ultimate violence, he denounces this seemingly ideal figure as already a disappointing illusion. The rage that Montriveau will voice later in the narrative is already at work in Balzac’s writing at the very beginning of the story.

Nathalie Buchet Rogers in “De 93 À L’Histoire Des Treize: La Terreur de (Marie-) Antoinette De Langeais” refers to the scene when Montriveau meets Antoinette as Sister Thérèse for the first time in the convent, in order to underline the division between the head and the body of the Duchess, now turned nun. In the scene below, there appears to be a screen of light, separating Montriveau and Sister Thérèse. Furthermore, her head appears strangely decapitated by the veil, which frames and covers her head, while the rest of her body is cloaked under thick folds of the coarse fabric worn by the nuns:

Il vit dans la lumière une femme debout, mais dont la figure lui était cachée par le prolongement du voile plié sur la tête: suivant la règle de la maison, elle était vêtue de cette robe dont la couleur est devenue proverbiale. Le général ne put apercevoir les pieds nus de la religieuse, qui lui en auraient attesté l’effrayante maigreur ; cependant, malgré les plis nombreux de la robe grossière qui couvrait et ne paraît plus cette femme, il devina

²²³ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 951-952.

que les larmes, la prière, la passion, la vie solitaire l'avaient déjà desséchée. La main glacée d'une femme, celle de la Supérieure sans doute, tenait encore le rideau.²²⁴

Rogers notes that "[...] seule la tête apparaît dans un rai de lumière, comme déjà séparée du corps."²²⁵ She draws a connection between the detached head of the nun and the detached head of the coquette:

Du parloir au boudoir, peu de choses ont changé : mêmes jeux d'ombre et de lumière, mêmes couleurs, de la bougie, du peignoir, qui tout comme la robe de bure efface les lignes du corps. Mêmes gros plans : sur la tête enveloppée d'un voile et qui semble flotter sur le bouillonnement du col, puis sur la main et le pied.²²⁶

The text thus decapitates both the coquette and the sublime nun. It is clear why the coquette deserved decapitation, as she is vain and void of love. However, one might wonder why it was that the sublime nun also deserved the same brutal cut to the head, especially when she (the "vraie femme") has become the symbol of ultimate love and selflessness. The text seems to suggest that the sacrifice of the nun, i.e. the Duchesse's renunciation of her humanly desire for love's gratification, is just another form of betrayal, disguised as love. In the following dialogue between Sister Thérèse and Montriveau, Montriveau accuses her of denying her true sentiments

²²⁴ Ibid., 918.

²²⁵ Rogers, "De 93 À L'Histoire Des Treize," 29.

²²⁶ Ibid., 33.

for him. In this self-denial, the Duchesse turned nun is lying to herself and is therefore, again, deserving of decapitation:

- Antoinette, veux-tu me suivre ?
- Mais je ne vous quitte pas. Je vis dans votre cœur, mais autrement que par un intérêt de plaisir mondain, de vanité, de jouissance égoïste ; je vis ici pour vous, pâle et flétrie, dans le sein de Dieu ! S'il est juste, vous serez heureux...
- Phrases que tout cela ! Et si je te veux pâle et flétrie ? Et si je ne puis être heureux qu'en te possédant ? Tu connaîtras donc toujours des devoirs en présence de ton amant ? Il n'est donc jamais au-dessus de tout dans ton cœur ? Naguère, tu lui préférerais la société, toi, je ne sais quoi ; maintenant, c'est Dieu, c'est mon salut. Dans la sœur Thérèse, je reconnais toujours la duchesse ignorante des plaisirs de l'amour, et toujours insensible sous les apparences de la sensibilité. Tu ne m'aimes pas, tu n'as jamais aimé...
- Ha, mon frère...
- Tu ne veux pas quitter cette tombe, tu aimes mon âme, dis-tu ? Eh ! bien, tu la perdras à jamais, cette âme, je me tuerai...
- Ma mère, cria la sœur Thérèse en espagnol, je vous ai menti, cet homme est mon amant!

Aussitôt le rideau tomba. Le général, demeuré stupide, entendit à peine les portes intérieures se fermant avec violence.²²⁷

²²⁷ Balzac, *La Duchesse*, 923.

Montriveau leaves the Duchess, stating that she had never loved him. Behind the veil that is “la sœur Thérèse,” Montriveau recognizes the coquette who refused to love him: “Dans la sœur Thérèse, je reconnais toujours la duchesse ignorante des plaisirs de l'amour, et toujours insensible sous les apparences de la sensibilité. Tu ne m'aimes pas, tu n'as jamais aimé...”²²⁸ It is important to note that the sublime figure of ideal (divine) love is here denounced as a veiling: the representation of an ideal love that is motherly, pure and completely selfless is but an illusion hiding a lack of love. Montriveau experiences with the nun another loss of love and, thus, another disappointment, which justifies the decapitation that his rage inflicts. The decapitated head of the nun is a sign of the unconscious rage against the maternal object.

Montriveau tries to abduct the Duchess with the help of his friends but discovers that she has died. He takes her dead body from the convent to a ship. On board of the ship, Montriveau studies *the sublime, unearthly beautiful face* of the dead Antoinette: “Montriveau resta seul dans sa cabine avec Antoinette de Navarreins, dont, pendant quelques heures, le visage resplendit complaisamment pour lui des sublimes beautés dues au calme particulier que prête la mort à nos dépouilles mortelles.”²²⁹ Even in this final scene, her head appears detached from her body and thus she is once again completely decapitated. From the head of the dead Antoinette radiates a sublime light. I will argue that this sublime light fills the emptiness of the disappointing and empty loved object. This infusion of light where there was nothing conceals the disappointing truth of the failed loved object that could not love back – the *illuminating* effect of the fantasy conceals the terrible disappointing reality of the maternal object.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid., 1037.

At the end of the novel, Ronquerolles suggests that they tie both her feet with a cannon ball and throw her into the sea: “Attachons un boulet à chacun de ses pieds, jetons-la dans la mer....” Nonchalantly, he tells Montriveau that if the Duchess had been a woman once, she is nothing now: “c'était une femme, maintenant ce n'est rien.” Ronquerolles's use of the pronoun “it” to refer to the Duchess maintains her object-position as a thing to either love or toss away. He suggests that they think nothing more of her than a childhood fairytale: “[...] n'y pense plus que comme nous pensons à un livre lu pendant notre enfance.”²³⁰ As much as he claimed to have loved her, Montriveau reaffirms the object status of the Duchess by calling her a poem: “ce n'est plus qu'un poème.”²³¹ Cold and dead, the body of the Duchess is dumped into the ocean as the Duchess as an idealized object of love is immortalized through literature and the nostalgia of childhood.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER III

A SOUL DROWNED IN LIGHT: MYSTICAL MELANCHOLIA AND THE IMMATERIALITY OF THE OBJECT

Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit, which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life. The urge to destroy is also a creative urge.
-- Mikhail Bakunin

S'il y a vraiment désir, si l'objet du désir est vraiment la lumière, le désir de lumière produit la lumière. Il y a vraiment désir quand il y a effort d'attention. C'est vraiment la lumière qui est désirée si tout autre mobile est absent. Quand même les efforts d'attention resteraient en apparence stériles pendant des années, un jour une lumière exactement proportionnelle à ces efforts inondera l'âme. Chaque effort ajoute un peu d'or à ce trésor que rien au monde ne peut ravir. – Simone Weil

In a letter written on November 20th 1833 to Éveline de Hańska, a married countess of Polish descent, with whom Balzac had begun a correspondence in 1832, Balzac describes his novel *Séraphîta* (1834) in the following terms:

J'ai été dimanche chez Bra le sculpteur, j'y ai vu le plus beau chef-d'œuvre qui existe, je n'en excepte ni le *Jupiter Olympien*, ni *Moïse*, ni la *Vénus*, ni l'*Apollon*. C'est *Marie tenant le Christ enfant adoré par deux anges* [...] Là j'ai conçu le plus beau livre, un petit volume dont *Louis Lambert* serait la préface, une œuvre intitulée *Séraphîta*. *Séraphîta* serait les deux natures en un seul être, comme *Fragoletta*, mais avec cette différence que

je suppose cette créature un ange arrivé à sa dernière transformation, et brisant son enveloppe pour monter aux cieux [...].²³²

The inspiration for *Séraphîta* is therefore multiple. On the one hand the text is inspired by Théophile Bra's sculpture which represents an angel at the right side of the artist's Madonna ("sa madone"). In a letter to Louise, another correspondent whom Balzac had never met, Balzac writes: "Si vous voulez voir la réalisation de cette figure, il faut aller dans l'atelier de M. Bra et demander à voir sa madone, et rester quelque temps devant l'ange de droite, là est Séraphîta."²³³ But Séraphîta is also and above all an angel as conceived by the Christian mystic, Swedenborg, whom Balzac repeatedly cites and summarizes in his text.²³⁴ According to Swedenborg, certain human beings,²³⁵ after a process of spiritual detachment from earthly attachments, can become

²³² Balzac, "Histoire du texte, documents, variantes, notes, indications bibliographiques" in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 1603.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Emanuel Swedenborg (né Emanuel Swedberg (or Svedberg)) was a Christian mystic who was born on January 29, 1688 in Stockholm, Sweden. As once an engineer by trade, Swedenborg's studies expanded across many different fields of science before making a cross over to religious studies. According to the "Biographical Note" of Swedenborg Foundation's translated print of Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Wisdom*, originally published in 1763 as *Sapientia Angelica de Divino Amore*, Swedenborg's transition from science to theology took place between the years 1743 and 1745: "Throughout the rest of his life he maintained that this shift was brought about by Jesus Christ, who appeared to him, called him to a new mission, and opened up his perception to a permanent dual consciousness of this life and the life after death. He devoted the last decades of his life to studying Scripture and publishing eighteen theological titles that draw on the Bible, reasoning, and his own spiritual experiences. These works present a Christian theology with unique perspectives on the nature of God, the spiritual world, the Bible, the human mind, and the path to salvation. Swedenborg died in London on March 29, 1772 (Gregorian calendar), at the age of eighty-four." (*Divine Love and Wisdom*, op. cit., 211).

²³⁵ The novel explains that there are "certain individuals" who are given "visions of the spiritual world." Through some process of complete detachment between the body and the "inner being"

angels, i.e. ascend into heaven. *Séraphîta* is the story of an angelic creature, which has reached its last transformation before entering into the heavens. This angelic creature is, according to Balzac, “comme Fragoletta,” a double-sexed, hermaphroditic (arguably, androgynous) and bisexual (arguably, homosexual) love interest in a poem²³⁶ by Algernon Charles Swinburne. “Like *Fragoletta*,” *Séraphîta* is a strange creature in which “the two natures,” i.e. the male and female natures converge within one entity (“one being”). Seen as a man by the female character, Minna, and as a young woman by the male characters, Wilfrid, M. Becker and David, it²³⁷ is an indefinite being which bears therefore a double name: Séraphîtus-Séraphîta.

of man (*l'homme intérieur*), man is able to be “elevated:” “Néanmoins, certaines personnes ont des visions du monde spirituel par le détachement complet que le somnambulisme opère entre leur forme extérieure et leur homme intérieur. *Dans cet état*, dit Swedenborg en son traité de LA SAGESSE ANGÉLIQUE (n° 257), *l'homme peut être élevé jusque dans la lumière céleste, parce que les sens corporels étant abolis, l'influence du ciel agit sans obstacle sur l'homme intérieur.*” (Balzac, *Séraphîta* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI., Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 773-774).

²³⁶ Refer to the poem, “Fragoletta,” reprinted from *Poetica Erotica*. Ed. T.R. Smith (New York: Crown Publishers, 1921) [accessed on February 24, 2019: <http://www.poetry-archive.com/s/fragoletta.html>.].

²³⁷ I have decided to use the pronoun “it” to refer to this mysterious being whose transitional status makes it neither fully human nor fully celestial. A “homogenous” being of “indeterminate sex,” as Balzac had portrayed it in his text, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is a neutral figure whose fusion of the sexes denotes the inherent and melancholic desire of the mystical subject to unite with God, i.e. the celestial origin, which is Unconditional, Perfect (Ideal) Love. In order to highlight the *angelic* being’s ambiguous and neutral state, I have refrained from gendering and thus restricting this figure by the usage of pronouns: she or he. The being’s original investment in a sexless Ideal, i.e. (divine) Love, makes “it” also sexless and outside the simple parameters of gender attribution.

The story of an angel who has “arrived at its last transformation,”²³⁸ *Séraphîta* was first included in the *Livre Mystique* (alongside *Les Proscrits* and *Louis Lambert*)²³⁹, which Balzac describes in the following terms in its Préface:

Les Proscrits sont le péristyle de l'édifice; là, l'idée apparaît au Moyen Âge dans son naïf triomphe. *Louis Lambert* est le mysticisme pris sur le fait, le Voyant marchant à sa vision, conduit au Ciel par les faits, par ses idées, par son tempérament : là est l'histoire des Voyants. *Séraphîta* est le mysticisme tenu pour vrai, personnifié, montré dans toutes ses conséquences.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Balzac's own words in his November 1833 letter, cited at the beginning of this chapter, serve as a pivotal descriptor of *Séraphîta* who, according to Balzac, has reached the very “last stage of its transformation” into a full-fledged angel: “*Séraphîta* serait les deux natures en un seul être, comme *Fragoletta*, mais avec cette différence que je suppose cette créature un ange arrivé à sa dernière transformation.” (Balzac, “Histoire du texte, documents, variantes, notes, indications bibliographiques” in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 1603).

²³⁹ This is as noted by Grivel who has tracked the first appearance, corrections and modifications, and the overall development of the text, *Séraphîta*. He also mentions the fashion in which the text was first presented, i.e. “the text was bound in Hańska's gray woolen dress – the one she wore in Geneva, presumably at her first meeting with Balzac:” “Quatre chapitres ont été publiés, en pré-originale, dans la Revue de Paris, numéros du 1^{er} juin et du 19 juillet 1834. Epigraphe : « Les anges sont blancs (Histoire intellectuelle de Louis Lambert) ». Le reste parut au tome II du Livre mystique, Werdet, 1835. – Manuscrit de 91 feuillets et états successifs dans trois dossiers du fonds Lovenjoul, sous les cotes A 211, A 212 et A 213. Balzac a fait l'hommage du manuscrit à Madame Hanska, dédicataire de l'ouvrage, relié en drap de laine gris provenant d'une robe portée par celle-ci à Genève. – Première édition: Le Livre mystique. *Séraphîta* (extrait des Etudes philosophiques). Tome II, in-8, mis en vente, avec le tome I qui contient, suite à une Préface, Les Proscrits et Histoire intellectuelle de Louis Lambert, le 2 décembre 1835 par Werdet.” (Grivel, « IV. LECTURES ET COMMENTAIRES » of « *Notice pour Séraphîta* » in *Balzac : La Comédie humaine : Edition critique en ligne* [accessed on March 7, 2019: www.v1.paris.fr/commun/v2asp/musees/balzac/furne/notices/seraphita.htm].)

²⁴⁰ Balzac, *Préface du « Livre mystique »* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI., Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 506-507.

A “personification” of mysticism “in all of its consequences,” *Séraphîta* was previously included in the *Livre Mystique*, before being eventually placed at the end of the *Études philosophiques*, which opens with *La peau de chagrin*. Why do the *Études philosophiques* begin with *La peau de chagrin*, a text about suicidal melancholia, and end with the mysticism of *Séraphîta*? As I hope to show, *Séraphîta* completes the movement from depression towards melancholia that I have tried to trace in my dissertation. The melancholic creation of a sublime object reaches indeed its culminating point in *Séraphîta*, which deploys the ultimate consequences of the idealization of the loved object in melancholia; that is the annihilation not only of the melancholic subject but also of the very notion of object.

THE NON-OBJECT “OBJECT” OF MELANCHOLIA AS MYSTICAL “LIGHT”

In “*Séraphîta, le mysticisme et la dissolution du tiers*,” Paul Denis argues that depression and mysticism are two distinct ways of dealing with the loss of an object. For Denis, depression is equivalent to the Freudian interpretation of melancholia. In depression, there is at first love and the loss of an object of love that disappoints. The relationship to this object of love (or, the intimate significance of love that this object represents for the depressed subject) is completely “shattered,”²⁴¹ and thus the external relation to the disappointing object also breaks. However,

²⁴¹ “An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was *shattered*. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different, for whose coming-about various conditions seem to be necessary. The object-cathexis proved to have little power of resistance and was brought to an end. But the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego.” (Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 248-249).

because the depressed subject cannot psychically afford to break all relation to the loved object, it keeps an internal relation to the lost object. Once internalized, this object, however, becomes, as Freud puts it, a “shadow cast over the ego.” “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.”²⁴²

Denis argues that the shadow of the lost loved object that is cast over the ego in depression is the recognition by the depressed person of the emptiness of the loved object. The depressed subject identifies with this shadow of the object, i.e. an object that it “vacuous,” empty and unable to love: “Dans la dépression, le sujet surinvestit l’ombre de l’objet, [...] le déprimé constate la vacuité de l’ombre.”²⁴³ Denis seems to suggest that the internalized object in depression is reduced to a shadow, a void that is emptied out of any *valeur hédonique*. This shadowy object of depression has no *hedonic value* because it is an *object* from which no pleasure can be expected, an object to which the subject remains attached although it has nothing, no pleasure and no love to give: “[...] dans la dépression la figuration de l’objet, l’ombre qui en persiste, n’a plus de valeur hédonique et épuise les forces du sujet à sa maintenance.”²⁴⁴ By remaining attached to such an object, which has no pleasure and no love to give, the depressed subject exhausts his energy and life force, i.e. his “*fluide vital*” or libido.

²⁴² Ibid., 249.

²⁴³ Denis, “Sérâphîta, le mysticisme et la dissolution du tiers” in *Revue française de Psychanalyse* 69 (2005): 829.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Like depression, mysticism is, for Denis, a denial of loss and, thus, a refusal to mourn: “Le mysticisme refuse la perte, refuse le deuil [...]”.²⁴⁵ However, he argues that mysticism is opposed to depression, and could even be a “possible alternative to depression.” “Le mysticisme est [...] comme une alternative possible à la dépression.”²⁴⁶ While depression “overinvests the shadow of the object” (“*surinvestit l’ombre de l’objet*”), mysticism “invests in a form of brightness of the object” (“*le mysticisme investit, comme dans la nostalgie, une forme de l’éclat de l’objet*”).²⁴⁷ As opposed to the shadowy and emptied out internal representation of the lost loved object in depression, we see in mysticism not only a denial of the emptiness of the object, but also a replacement of it with a shining object that is *lit up* because it is an idealized representation of the object.

While depression internalizes the shadowy (empty) object of love, mysticism on the other hand does not internalize its idealized object but projects it outside: “Dans le mysticisme, la situation de l’objet est ailleurs. L’objet du mysticisme n’est pas reconnu comme objet interne mais se trouve projeté à l’extérieur, ce qui va de pair avec une altération de la perception de la réalité dans son ensemble.”²⁴⁸ This outward projection of an inner idealized mystical object devalorizes the external reality, which is judged unsatisfactory in comparison to the bright, idealized mystical object that is situated in “heaven,” i.e. “ailleurs”²⁴⁹. The outward projection of the mystical object in fact creates another reality: “L’espace où est situé l’objet du mysticisme

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 831.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 829.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 830.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

est psychiquement irréel, il organise une sorte de néoréalité en secteur, si bien qu'il faut admettre dans l'investissement mystique une forme de délire partiel."²⁵⁰ The mystic's object of love is nowhere to be found in the material world. It constitutes "une sorte de néoréalité en secteur" that is a psychical space specifically reserved for the mystical object, which organizes another reality. This *new reality* is in many ways split off, i.e. "en secteur," and away from material reality. Like delirium, mysticism creates an *other* kind of reality. The "néoréalité en secteur" of mysticism is equivalent to the Heavens, i.e. the "ailleurs," which is, in the logic of the melancholic mystic, even more "real" than material reality itself. And it is this other reality, which contains the bright mystical object that the mystic subject tries to reach. Mysticism perpetually works to reach upwards, towards a "God" who constitutes an "unreal" (*irréel*) object.

According to Denis, the mystical mechanism appears to be the exact "inversion of the movement in nostalgia:"

D'une certaine manière le mysticisme peut nous apparaître comme l'inversion d'un mouvement nostalgique, comme la transposition d'une nostalgie dans un monde autre et dans un avenir hypothétique mais affirmé comme certain. Une activité représentationnelle reste à l'œuvre comme dans la nostalgie mais elle projette son objet sur le futur et l'au-delà.²⁵¹

According to Denis, the object of "nostalgia" is rooted in the hope for the return of an object that remains stuck in the past. The nostalgic subject is able to maintain an internal representation of a

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

much longed for object that has been lost yet still has the “présence précieuse d’un objet disparu”²⁵². As such, this lost (past) object is kept alive in the mind. For this reason, nostalgia, like melancholia, avoids mourning: “La nostalgie évite le deuil en maintenant l’objet vivant dans l’esprit.”²⁵³ In other words, it refuses to acknowledge the death of the lost object of love. Like the nostalgic subject, the mystic rejoices in the “life” that it infuses in the object: “Le mysticisme refuse la perte, refuse le deuil et dotera l’objet perdu d’une vie autre.”²⁵⁴ Mysticism, however, inverts nostalgia in that the bright (and “alive”) object is projected outside/ out there into the future rather than placed somewhere back into the past, as is the case in nostalgia. Unlike nostalgia where the object is “internalized,” mysticism projects the object, this “*alive*” representation, in another space that is outside of the subject. By projecting the object outside, the mystic subject is also turned towards the future since it hopes that it will eventually reach or cross the distance that separates it from its bright object.

Denis thus stresses the move from depression to mysticism. Mysticism would be a creative re-working of depression that transforms the shadowy object of love lost into a bright because ideal object – not found in the present reality but projected outside into an external reality that is distinct from “normal” reality, from which the melancholic and mystic subject tries to extract himself. In his analysis of Balzac’s *Séraphîta*, Denis insists on the brightness of the mystical object, but does not analyze the strangeness of the function of celestial light in the novel. If the mystical object illuminates, as Denis rightfully points out, what does this light connote in *Séraphîta*?

²⁵² Ibid., 829.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

The text stages a strange and indeterminate subject in the process of transforming into an angel. Called “this being” [*cet être*²⁵⁵ / *cette créature*²⁵⁶], this subject bears a double name: Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta. The indeterminate angelic being that is Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta is repeatedly described as the container of a strange Light:

Si quelque habile physiologiste eût examiné cette créature, qui dans ce moment, à voir la fierté de son front et l'éclair de ses yeux, paraissait être un jeune homme de dix-sept ans ; s'il eût cherché les ressorts de cette florissante vie sous le tissu le plus blanc que jamais le nord ait fait à l'un de ses enfants, il aurait cru sans doute à l'existence d'un fluide phosphorique en des nerfs qui semblaient reluire sous l'épiderme, ou à la constante présence d'une lumière intérieure qui colorait Séraphîtüs à la manière de ces lueurs continues dans une coupe d'albâtre [...] Les feux jaillissant de son regard d'or luttèrent évidemment avec les rayons du soleil, et il semblait ne pas en recevoir, mais lui donner de la lumière.²⁵⁷

Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta holds within itself “the permanent presence of an inward light” [*la constante présence d'une lumière intérieure*]. This inner light pierces through the being's body, previously described, as opaquely “white” like an “alabaster vase.” It radiates like solar rays through the being's lightening eyes [*l'éclair de ses yeux*] which emit a soft and foreign light that is not only fluid but also melodious: “Wilfrid ne voyait plus les yeux de Séraphîta, mais une

²⁵⁵ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 738.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 741.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

fluide lumière dont les tremblements ressemblaient aux dernières vibrations d'un chant plein de mollesse italienne."²⁵⁸ Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta's face beams with a mystical brightness that makes its observers wonder if its light is just a reflection of natural light. The light that emanates from Séraphîta has subliminal aspects that seem to parallel if not compete with the sublimity of nature itself, i.e. the radiance of the sun:

Jamais, à la vérité, Séraphîtüs n'avait brillé d'un si vif éclat, seule expression qui rende l'animation de son visage et l'aspect de sa personne. Cette splendeur était-elle due à la nitescence que donnent au teint l'air pur des montagnes et le reflet des neiges ? provenait-elle du contraste subit entre la clarté d'or projetée par le soleil, et l'obscurité des nuées à travers lesquelles ce joli couple avait passé ?²⁵⁹

The source of the light that shines within Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta is not natural: it proceeds from God defined as "True Light" that is, as the source of pure and ideal Love. Divine and perfect Love is signified by Light. In the following citation, Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta elaborates on this connection between True Light and Divine Love:

[...] car cet amour est la vraie lumière. Conçois-tu maintenant avec quelle ardeur je voudrais te savoir quitte de cette vie qui te pèse, et te voir plus près que tu ne l'es encore du monde où l'on aime toujours. N'est-ce pas souffrir que d'aimer pour une vie seulement? N'as-tu pas senti le goût des éternelles amours? Comprends-tu maintenant à

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 749.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 741.

quels ravissements une créature s'élève, alors qu'elle est double à aimer celui qui ne trahit jamais l'amour, celui devant lequel on s'agenouille en adorant.²⁶⁰

“True Light” [*la vraie lumière*] is true (Ideal) Love – a perfect Love that is True because It is Eternal: it never betrays, and thus never disappoints. The representation of divine love as light is a mystical topos. “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8)²⁶¹. In the First Part of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Mechthild of Magdeburg (a beloved medieval mystic and poet who recounted many of her spiritual revelations and heavenly visions through books that consisted of personal dialogues between the Soul and God) reiterates the mystical truth of God being Love in the following conversation:

The Soul:

Ah Lord! Love me greatly, love me often and long! For the more continuously Thou lovest me, the purer I shall be; the more fervently Thou lovest me, the more lovely I shall be; the longer Thou lovest me the more holy I shall become, even here on earth.

God:

That I love thee continuously is My Nature
For I Myself am Love;
That I love thee fervently is My Desire

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 754.

²⁶¹ *The Holy Bible: The English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 430.

For I long to be greatly loved.
 That I love thee long comes from My Eternity,
 For I am everlasting and without end.²⁶²

This Love, which comes from Heaven, promises “*félicités*.” “*La lumière explique seule les félicités du ciel*”²⁶³. Celestial Light, conceived as divine Love, is the purveyor of infinite “bliss,” “joys” [*félicités*] and *jouissances*. Balzac further amplifies on the qualities of divine love in the sixth section²⁶⁴ of the novel where God is described as a love that *never betrays, abandons or grows weary*; it never *leaves*. It is a love that always *smiles* and *satisfies all wishes* and *answers prayers*. God is a love that *blossoms* within its creatures, *reviving, magnifying* and *multiplying Himself* within them. God, as this most ideal and perfect love, is all *flame*.

Dieu ! répondit Séraphîtüs dont la voix brilla dans les âmes comme un feu de liberté qui s’allume de montagne en montagne. Dieu qui ne nous trahit jamais ! Dieu qui ne nous abandonne pas et comble incessamment nos désirs, qui seul peut constamment abreuver sa créature d’une joie infinie et sans mélange ! Dieu qui ne se lasse jamais et n’a que des

²⁶² Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297) Or The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, 14.

²⁶³ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 783.

²⁶⁴ According to the Pléiade, the section entitled “Le chemin pour aller au ciel” in *Séraphîta* was originally titled “Le chemin pour aller à Dieu” in two previous editions of the *Livre mystique* (in December 1835 and in January 1836) and one other additional print from Édition Charpentier (in May 1842). The fact that “Heaven” or “celestial space” (*ciel*) replaced “God” (*Dieu*) further confirms the interchangeable use of both words in *Séraphîta*. (Balzac, “Histoire du texte, documents, variantes, notes, indications bibliographiques” in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 1698).

sourires ! Dieu qui, toujours nouveau, jette dans l'âme ses trésors, qui purifie et n'a rien d'amer, qui est tout harmonie et tout flamme ! Dieu qui se met en nous pour y fleurir, exauce tous nos vœux, ne compte plus avec nous quand nous sommes à lui, mais se donne tout entier ; nous ravit, nous amplifie, nous multiplie en lui ! enfin Dieu !²⁶⁵

Sérâphîtüs-Sérâphîta's discourse on divine Love as celestial Light cites Emanuel Swedenborg. Balzac refers extensively to Swedenborg in *Sérâphîta* and even includes him as a character in the story. Sérâphîta's father is the "beloved cousin of Swedenborg:" "Les circonstances auxquelles nous avons dû de posséder dans ce canton le baron Sérâphîtüs, cousin bien-aimé de Swedenborg, ne m'ont laissé étranger à aucun événement de cette vie extraordinaire."²⁶⁶ Swedenborg appears at Sérâphîta's birth and the pastor, M. Becker, recounts his life. According to Swedenborg, a human being can ascend into this pure, celestial Light; to ascend into this divine Light/Love is to become an "angel." The following is Balzac's summary and interpretation of Swedenborg's understanding of what angels are:

[...] Certaines personnes ont des visions du monde spirituel par le détachement complet que le somnambulisme opère entre leur forme extérieure et leur homme intérieur. Dans cet état, dit Swedenborg en son traité de LA SAGESSE ANGÉLIQUE (n° 257), l'homme peut être élevé jusque dans la lumière céleste, parce que les sens corporels étant abolis, l'influence du ciel agit sans obstacle sur l'homme intérieur.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Balzac, *Sérâphîta*, 842.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 770.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 773-774.

Balzac adds that, according to Swedenborg, “certain persons,” meaning certain human beings can become celestial beings, i.e. angels:

Néanmoins, certaines personnes ont des visions du monde spirituel par le détachement complet que le somnambulisme opère entre leur forme extérieure et leur homme intérieur. *Dans cet état*, dit Swedenborg en son traité de LA SAGESSE ANGÉLIQUE (n° 257), *l’homme peut être élevé jusqu’à la lumière céleste, parce que les sens corporels étant abolis, l’influence du ciel agit sans obstacle sur l’homme intérieur.*²⁶⁸

Only a human being, who exhibits the ability to see and interact with the spiritual world by completely detaching themselves from the material world around them, can transform into an angel. For this reason, “the earth is thus the breeding ground of Heaven.”

Après avoir mathématiquement établi que l’homme vit éternellement en des sphères, soit inférieures, soit supérieures, Swedenborg appelle Esprits Angéliques les êtres qui, dans ce monde, sont préparés pour le ciel, où ils deviennent Anges. Selon lui, Dieu n’a pas créé d’Anges spécialement, il n’en existe point qui n’ait été homme sur la terre. La terre est ainsi la pépinière du ciel. Les Anges ne sont donc pas Anges pour eux-mêmes (*Sag. ang.* 57) ; ils se transforment par une conjonction intime avec Dieu, à laquelle Dieu ne se refuse jamais.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 776-777.

According to Swedenborg, all angels were, at first, human beings who through their close proximity to God later became angels. All humans who are destined to become angels must pass through the three pivotal stages²⁷⁰ of love required so that human beings can transform into angels. As a nursery for angels, the Earth breeds angelic spirits who, like Séraphîtus-Séraphîta, are considered “flowers of humanity:” “Ces Esprits sont, pour ainsi dire, les fleurs de l’humanité qui s’y résume et travaille à s’y résumer.”²⁷¹ The fate and essence of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta as a spiritual “flower” is made clear at its birth: “Cet enfant restera fleur, vous ne le verrez pas vieillir, vous le verrez passer; vous avez l’*exister*, il a la vie; vous avez des sens extérieurs, il n’en a pas, il est tout intérieur.”²⁷² With no external senses, “the being is always inward.”

The name Séraphîtus-Séraphîta announces the angelic destiny of its bearer. Seemingly, the name is derived from the name of the angel, Seraphim. The Christian mystic and theologian, Dionysius the Areopagite, defined the name of “Seraphim” in the seventh chapter of *The Celestial Hierarchy*:

We are told by Hebrew scholars that the holy name Seraphim means 'those who kindle or make hot' [...] The name Seraphim clearly indicates their ceaseless and eternal revolution

²⁷⁰ Angelic beings must *pass through* the following three natures of love: “Love of Self,” “Love of Life” and “Love of Heaven:” “Les Esprits Angéliques passent par trois natures d’amour, car l’homme ne peut être régénéré que successivement (Vraie Religion). D’abord l’AMOUR DE SOI : la suprême expression de cet amour est le génie humain, dont les œuvres obtiennent un culte. Puis l’AMOUR DU MONDE, qui produit les prophètes, les grands hommes que la Terre prend pour guides et salue du nom de divins. Enfin l’AMOUR DU CIEL, qui fait les Esprits Angéliques.” (Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 777).

²⁷¹ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 777.

²⁷² Ibid., 786.

about Divine Principles, their heat and keenness, the exuberance of their intense, perpetual, tireless activity, and their elevative and energetic assimilation of those below, kindling them and firing them to their own heat, and wholly purifying them by a burning and all-consuming flame; and by the unhidden, unquenchable, changeless, radiant and enlightening power, dispelling and destroying the shadows of darkness.²⁷³

Angels ascend into a Divine Light that is pure, eternal and divine (Ideal) Love. To ascend into this Light (Love) is not only to fully become an angel, but also to reach God the Father: “Je vais vous laisser les clefs du royaume où brille sa lumière, où vous serez partout dans le sein du Père, dans le cœur de l’Époux.”²⁷⁴ Séraphîtus-Séraphîta seems to link the Divine (Perfect/ Ideal) Love with the traditional figure of God the Father. But this paternal figure is later displaced when Séraphîtus-Séraphîta compares this same celestial Light/Love to a mother’s face when it claims: “– Tu as raison, répondit-il, nous sommes nés pour tendre au ciel. La patrie, comme le visage d’une mère, n’effraie jamais un enfant.”²⁷⁵ The celestial “homeland,” or rather “fatherland” (since, according to the Dictionnaire Littré, “patrie” comes from the Latin “patria,” which is itself linked to “pater,” i.e. *père*²⁷⁶ (father)) looks like a mother’s face because of the Ideal Love that radiates from it. Celestial Light/Love as the source of infinite “jouissances” is thus presented as an idealized version of maternal love. Finally, this celestial Light is compared to a

²⁷³ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones* in *The Mystical Theology: And the Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 165-166.

²⁷⁴ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 843.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 738.

²⁷⁶ *Dictionnaire Littré : Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. “père” [accessed on January 18, 2019: <https://www.littre.org/definition/père>.].

“nurturer” [nourrice] of the human world who offers spiritual sustenance and nourishment:

Comme vous n’obtenez pas de son dans le vide, il est clair que la musique et la voix humaine sont le résultat de substances chimiques organisées qui se mettent à l’unisson des mêmes substances préparées en vous par votre pensée, coordonnées au moyen de la lumière, la grande nourrice de votre globe [...].²⁷⁷

Séraphîta seems to confirm Denis’s suggestion that God, the mystical object, is in Balzac’s works an idealized maternal object. “C’est chez Balzac une figure idéalisée de la mère qui, dans différents textes, vient constituer cet objet mystique.” And he adds: “Cet aspect de l’objet mystique est très clairement indiqué dans *Les proscrits*.”²⁷⁸ According to Denis, Godefroid, a young poet and an orphan from Flanders who had come to Paris to study Mystical Theology under Docteur Sigier²⁷⁹ (“pauvre orphelin venu de Flandre à Paris pour étudier à l’Université”²⁸⁰) “is banished from his mother:”

²⁷⁷ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 827.

²⁷⁸ Denis, “*Séraphîta*, le mysticisme,” 830.

²⁷⁹ Anachronistically, Balzac introduces Docteur Sigier (“L’illustre Sigier” as the text calls him), the “most celebrated” professor (“*le plus fameux docteur*” (Balzac, *Les Proscrits*, 536-537)) of Mystical Theology at the Sorbonne in Paris, over twenty years after the death of the real Sigier (Siger) who inspired this Balzacian character. The Pléiade records that this Sigier was in fact “Siger de Brabant” of the 13th century: “[...] né vers 1235, mort vers 1281, fut un des chefs du mouvement averroïste et eut des polémiques avec saint Thomas d’Aquin” (Balzac, “Histoire du texte, documents, variantes, notes, indications bibliographiques” in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 1461-1462). During his life, Siger de Brabant was constantly attacked by Christian scholars and the Roman Catholic Church and later condemned to a life in prison for his pure doctrinal teachings of Averroism, a school of medieval philosophy that branched from the reconciliation of Aristotelian philosophies and the Islamic faith put forth by Muslim philosopher, Averroës. At the time, averroism was thought to be just another word for atheism. According to the Encyclopedia

[...] est banni de sa mère : « Hélas ! dit Godefroid, je regrette une patrie plus belle que toutes les patries de la terre, une patrie que je n'ai point vue et dont j'ai souvenir. Oh ! si je pouvais fendre les espaces à plein vol, j'irais...

« – Où ? dit le Proscrit.

« – Là-haut », répondit l'enfant.²⁸¹

Denis indeed reads this idealization in *Les Proscrits* (1831) where Balzac aligns Dante's banishment from his motherland with the "celestial" banishment of Godefroid. As such, Godefroid becomes a relatable companion for the old exile from Florence, Dante Alighieri. In the novel, Godefroid, who believes that he is "an exiled angel" (*un ange banni du ciel*²⁸²), hears a voice *from above*, i.e. Heaven, calling him by his name in a *soft voice*.²⁸³ "Ah ! répondit Godefroid ne retenant plus les larmes qui roulaient dans ses yeux, j'ai entendu la voix d'en haut ! Elle m'appelait par mon nom ! Elle ne m'avait pas encore nommé ; [...]."²⁸⁴ Upon hearing this *voice from above* calling him by name, the young poet, overcome with grief and a desire to reach

Britannica: "The basic tenet of Latin Averroism was the assertion that reason and philosophy are superior to faith and knowledge founded on faith." [accessed on February 26, 2019: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-Averroism>.].

²⁸⁰ Balzac, *Les Proscrits* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 530.

²⁸¹ Denis, "Séraphîta, le mysticisme," 831.

²⁸² Balzac, *Les Proscrits*, 547.

²⁸³ Denis, "Séraphîta, le mysticisme," 831.

²⁸⁴ Balzac, *Les Proscrits*, 548.

the heavenly sphere that Denis reads as a maternal realm, attempts to hang himself: “Ne pouvant m’élancer dans les cieux, ajouta-t-il avec un geste naïf, j’ai pris pour aller à Dieu la seule route que nous ayons.”²⁸⁵ As an exiled angel, Godefroid is reminded of his banishment from his mother.²⁸⁶ Although Balzac does not specifically write that the voice from Heaven is indeed a mother’s voice, its softness has a maternal quality. For Denis, “the idealized representation of the mother” (*une figure idéalisée de la mère*) becomes the “mystical object” (*objet mystique*) in Balzac’s works.²⁸⁷

While he claims that, in *Les Proscrits*, the mystical object is an idealized representation of the mother, Denis suggests, in his interpretation of *Séraphîta*, that this mystical object is divine insofar as it combines both male and female genders.²⁸⁸ It is “« tout » parce que divin – c’est-à-dire à la fois homme et femme en un seul être: tout-puissant →”²⁸⁹. The divine is neither simply masculine nor feminine, which would imply a lack, but both (not in a bisexual sense) and

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 549.

²⁸⁶ Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 830-831.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 830.

²⁸⁸ In *L’androgynie romantique: Du mythe au mythe littéraire* (1994), Frédéric Monneyron insists that the androgynous figure is supposed to represent the ideal perfection: “Ce sont, avec la féminité, les caractéristiques signalées plus haut – la diaphanéité de la peau, le vaporeux des cheveux blonds, la taille svelte et les membres déliés – concourent à produire un effet de blancheur, de lumière, d’apesanteur qui indique en être à l’essence à peine sensible. Mais, bien que minutieusement choisies, ces caractéristiques ne sauraient suffire à elles seules à suggérer l’immatériel. Elles demandent une base solide sur laquelle s’inscrire, une base qui dégage l’être angélique du réel. Et cette base est fournie par l’androgynie. L’androgynie a en effet cette fonction importante de poser Séraphîta hors du commun. Sa double apparence la donne comme être incompréhensible, comme mystère. Davantage : comme perfection idéale en laquelle se résument les contraires. »” (Monneyron 1994, 70).

²⁸⁹ Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 834.

thus *homogenous*²⁹⁰ (in the sense that it is inclusive of everything). “Être un ange, ce n’est pas être bisexuel, c’est refuser la sexualité et par conséquent la bisexualité psychique, c’est être “tout” avec Dieu, le moyen étant de n’être rien: [...] c’est éviter le choix d’un objet sexuel défini.”²⁹¹ The mystic’s object of love is divine insofar as it is a whole without any lack and as such a unified single being (“à la fois homme et femme en un seul être: tout-puissant”). For Denis, this “homogeneity,” which consists in negating the self in order to become “*everything* with God,” unifies varying opposing forces. The sphere where there is this kind of union with God is, as Denis reads it, the *divine infinite*, which “abolishes all differences” including sexual differences: “L’infini divin dans Séraphîta est « homogène », il abolit les différences [...] ».”²⁹²

Since the divine is homogeneous, the mystical subject must also become homogeneous. A mystic subject in the process of transforming into an angel, Séraphîtus Séraphîta is presented as an indeterminate being, which cannot be categorized as either male or female. Called “this being” [*cet être*²⁹³ / *cette créature*²⁹⁴], it is indeed perceived as a man by the female character, Minna, who loves “him,” and as a woman by the two male characters of the novel, Wilfrid who

²⁹⁰ The mystical subject desires wholeness through homogeneity, or oneness with God. This desire for wholeness operates at the level of the mystical discourse that the text articulates. Balzac scholars have written on the homogeneity, wholeness, and oneness, which Balzac seeks to articulate in the mystical discourse that he proposes in *Séraphîta*. See René Guise’s “Balzac et Dante” (1963), Anne-Marie Baron’s *Balzac Occulte: Alchimie, Magnétisme, Sociétés Secrètes* (2012), Philippe Bertault’s *Balzac et la Religion* (1980), Ye Young Chung’s “Balzac et Le Système de Leibniz” (2008), Arlette Michel’s “Balzac, Ballanche et L’idée de Progrès” (1969) and *Le Réel et La Beauté Dans Le Roman Balzacien* (2001), and Saori Osuga’s “Swedenborg et la Théosophie Mystique dans *Séraphîta*” (2013).

²⁹¹ Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 834.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 738.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 741.

loves “her,” and Monsieur Becker, the pastor of Jarvis and Minna’s father, who recounts “her” mysterious birth. The following passage illustrates the double perception²⁹⁵ of Séraphîta. Perceived as a “siren,” and even a coquette by Wilfrid, it is perceived as a “young man” by Minna.

- Minna, vous vous trompez, la sirène que j’ai si souvent baignée de mes désirs, et qui se laissait admirer coquettement étendue sur son divan, gracieuse, faible et dolente, n’est pas un jeune homme.
- Monsieur, répondit Minna troublée, celui dont la main puissante m’a guidée sur le Falberg, à ce sœler abrité par le Bonnet de Glace ; là, dit-elle en montrant le haut du pic, n’est pas non plus une faible jeune fille. Ah ! si vous l’aviez entendu prophétisant ! Sa poésie était la musique de la pensée. Une jeune fille n’eût pas déployé les sons graves de la voix qui me remuait l’âme.
- Mais quelle certitude avez-vous ?... dit Wilfrid.
- Aucune autre que celle du cœur, répondit Minna confuse en se hâtant d’interrompre l’étranger.

²⁹⁵ In “La version spiritualiste du mythe littéraire,” Monneyron likens Séraphîta to a “precious stone” that changes color, depending on the angle/ position with which it is regarded. Similar to this capricious nature of the rare stone, Séraphîta has the ability to appear both masculine and feminine, depending on the viewer’s perception: “Aussi cet être est-il alternativement masculin ou féminin selon qu’il renvoie le regard de Minna ou de Wilfrid: il est comme une pierre précieuse qui nous apparaît d’une couleur différente selon l’angle sous lequel nous la regardons. Il se livre donc tel que chacun désire qu’il soit et cela, non seulement pour Minna et pour Wilfrid mais aussi pour M. Becker, le père de Minna, et pour le vieux serviteur qui, hommes, le voient femme. M. Becker lui donne du « mademoiselle » (p.747) et le vieux serviteur dit : « *Elle* souffre et ne veut pas me le dire ; *elle* se meurt comme une fleur frappée par un rayon de soleil trop vif. » (p. 748, nous soulignons).” (Monneyron, *L’androgynie romantique : Du mythe au mythe littéraire*, 65).

- Eh ! bien, moi, s'écria Wilfrid en jetant sur Minna l'effrayant regard du désir et de la volupté qui tuent, moi qui sais aussi combien est puissant son empire sur moi, je vous prouverai votre erreur.²⁹⁶

Minna and Wilfrid see with equal certainty either a man or woman in the angelic being that is Séraphîtus-Séraphîta. The text does not provide an answer nor does it offer any revelation.²⁹⁷ After all, no one has ever seen Séraphîtus-Séraphîta naked: "Jamais Séraphîta n'a été vue dans sa nudité, comme le sont quelquefois les enfants; jamais elle n'a été touchée ni par un homme ni par une femme; elle a vécu vierge sur le sein de sa mère, et n'a jamais crié."²⁹⁸

Seen and loved as a young girl by Wilfrid and as a man by Minna, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta combines both male and female characteristics, challenging any singular gender attribution. The

²⁹⁶ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 833.

²⁹⁷ Besides the title, *Séraphîta*, which chooses the feminine version of the name of the androgynous angel, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta, there seems to be a tendency amongst the characters as well as Balzac to refer to and represent it as more feminine than masculine. Monneyron accounts for this tendency by noting that the feminine was traditionally associated to the notion of idealization; and, therefore, it was actually closer to the "angélisme," i.e. the spiritualization, that Balzac sought in the figure of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta: "Si Balzac donne à l'ange une silhouette à dominante féminine, c'est que la féminité considérée dans sa forme subtile offrir la perfection de la spiritualité incarnée: le principe féminin est l'élément de spiritualisation de l'être humain. Dans *La Poétique de la rêverie*, Gaston Bachelard prête d'ailleurs à l'idéalisation de l'être humain par le principe féminin une valeur universelle : « Ce sera toujours un fait que la femme est l'être qu'on idéalise, l'être qui veut aussi son idéalisation de l'humain, le principe de la rêverie d'être, d'un être qui voudrait la tranquillité et, par conséquent, la continuité d'être." (Monneyron, *L'androgyne romantique*, 68).

Another possible explanation for why the being appears more female than male might also be because it is perpetually in the position of the one who *waits* and *believes* in the Love that it waits for and hopes to return to: "Croire, reprit Séraphîta de sa voix de Femme, car l'Homme venait de parler, croire est un don! Croire, c'est sentir. Pour croire en Dieu, il faut sentir Dieu." (Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 815).

²⁹⁸ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 787.

text refuses to ascribe a particular gender or sex to this being. It uses instead curious expressions, such as “cet être inexpliqué”²⁹⁹ and genre “difficilement défini.”

Séraphîtüs défit sa pelisse fourrée de martre, s’y roula, et dormit. Le vieux serviteur resta pendant quelques moments debout à contempler avec amour l’être singulier qui reposait sous ses yeux, et dont le genre eut été difficilement défini par qui que ce soit, même par les savants. À le voir ainsi posé, enveloppé de son vêtement habituel, qui ressemblait autant à un peignoir de femme qu’à un manteau d’homme, il était impossible de ne pas attribuer à une jeune fille les pieds menus qu’il laissait pendre, comme pour montrer la délicatesse avec laquelle la nature les avait attachés ; mais son front, mais le profil de sa tête eussent semblé l’expression de la force humaine arrivée à son plus haut degré.³⁰⁰

*Wrapped in a formless garment, which made difficult to determine its gender, the being’s androgyny*³⁰¹ carries traits of both femininity, i.e. its apparent fragile and languorous poise, and

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 840.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 748.

³⁰¹ Kari Weil in a chapter entitled, “Balzac’s Androgyne: Ideal Sex, Ideal Text,” in *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* (1992) notes that androgyny is a consistent trait in Balzac’s writings and that it is linked to the desire to posit an original unity both at the sexual and poetic level: “Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* is filled with characters described as having various mixtures of masculine and feminine traits. There is, however, only one androgyne, Séraphîtüs/a. [...] In his Avant Propos to the *Comédie humaine* (1842) for example, he explains the theory of synthetic unity that is said to govern biological life: “There is only one animal.... The animal is a principle that takes its exterior form, or to be more exact, the differences of its form, in the milieus where it is called upon to develop.” Séraphîtüs/a is that formal idea, that one animal from which the other creatures who people the *Comédie humaine* are derived. S/he is a figure of origins, of Man before his separation from God. S/he also, as we shall see, embodies the ideal of an original, unmediated poetry, one that precedes the linguistic differences that humans have to contend with. S/he is the eternal hymn itself, expressed “neither with words, nor with looks, nor with

slender feet, and masculinity, i.e. its *forehead* and the *outline of his head* that expressed the *human power of the highest degree*. Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is in fact called a *creature* that cannot be “explained” by biological, sexual or social differentiation: it evades all and every categorization of sexuality and sex, as it is biologically determined for human beings at birth and gendered accordingly by society.

Does this mean that it is biologically of both sexes and thus a hermaphrodite?³⁰² Or are we dealing with a psychic bisexuality since this strange being combines psychic traits that respectively define, according to Balzac, the male and female genders? As Denis rightfully points out, angelic beings are not bisexual: “[...] être un ange, ce n’est pas être bisexuel, c’est refuser la sexualité et par conséquent la bisexualité psychique, c’est être « tout » avec Dieu, le moyen étant de n’être rien ».”³⁰³ More precisely: “c’est éviter le choix d’un objet sexuel défini.

gestures, nor by any of the signs that men use to communicate their thoughts, but as the soul speaks to itself” (*Sér*, 7:607).” (Weil, *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*, 79).

³⁰² As Marian Rothstein in *The Androgyne in Early Modern France: Contextualizing the Power of Gender* (2015) notes, the androgyne, in contrast to the hermaphrodite, is a figure of completeness and perfection: “Leaving the hermaphrodite aside, there is a parallel and quite separate tradition concerning the androgyne (reserving *Androgyne* with an initial capital specifically for the creature described in Plato’s *Symposium*). The word *androgyne* itself did some gender switching: masculine in Greek, it was generally feminine in sixteenth-century usage, although by the time of the first *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* (1694) it had once again become masculine. In this it joins many other French words, like *amour* or *guide* that underwent gender changes in that period. [...] Rather than being monstrous, insufficient, indecisive, or excessive, the combined form denoted by the word *androgyne*, as it will be used here, is a figure of the completion, perfection, or plenitude, of originary and ultimate human possibilities and strengths. In contrast to hermaphrodite, the concept of androgyny is accompanied by a tendency to devalue the body and, along with it, sexuality. Indeed it often ignores the body, treating male and female instead as social, psychological, or moral tendencies and constructs. Alternatively, the androgyne itself can be a way of bringing together dissimilar similarities, *coincidentia oppositorum*: where the hermaphrodite offers both and neither, the androgyne offers instead both or either.” (Rothstein, *The Androgyne in Early Modern France: Contextualizing the Power of Gender*, 2-3).

³⁰³ Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 834.

C'est faire le choix d'un objet qui est « tout » parce que divin – c'est-à-dire à la fois homme et femme en un seul être : tout-puissant – et participer de cette toute-puissante.” Denis can then conclude: «Les discussions sur le sexe des anges se résolvent ainsi d'elles-mêmes: fondamentalement les anges se veulent sans sexes.” At the core, angels do not want to be sexed.³⁰⁴ They seek to become like the mystical object they desire, an object that is presented as the homogeneous combination of the paternal and the maternal figures in an all-powerful wholeness, which abolishes sexual demarcation. According to Denis's reading of the text, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta becomes like this mystical object through the incorporation of its dead parents. Faced with their death, it denies having lost anything since it keeps them forever combined within its inner being:

Quand elle eut 9 ans, son père et sa mère expirèrent ensemble, sans douleur, sans maladie visible, après avoir dit l'heure à laquelle ils cesseraient d'être. Debout à leurs pieds, elle les regardait d'un œil calme, sans témoigner ni tristesse, ni douleur, ni joie ni curiosité ; son père et sa mère lui souriaient. Quand nous vîmes prendre les deux corps, elle dit : “Emportez !” “Séraphîta, lui dis-je, car nous l'avons appelée ainsi, n'êtes-vous donc pas

³⁰⁴ Monneyron also notes that Séraphîta is not bisexual but asexual: “Loin, malgré tout, de représenter une bisexualité manifeste, c'est bien plutôt un manque total de sexualité qui semble le mieux la définir. Nous nous souvenons, de fait, que personne ne l'a vue dans sa nudité. Pris à la lettre, ce détail nous amènerait à penser qu'il s'agit d'un être sans sexe. Cette interprétation se justifie d'autant plus si l'on considère que Séraphîta n'est qu'un vide comblé par le regard des autres : ce sont les autres qui lui donnent un sexe, qui projettent sur elle le désir d'un sexe qu'elle n'a pas. Dans ce sens, va également l'inanité totale de désir sensuel chez cet être qui est tout amour. [...] Cette asexualité est la marque fondamentale du caractère supra-sensible de Séraphîta. C'est l'absence de sexe qui permet son désinvestissement des choses terrestres, qui la différencie des êtres matériels et la rapproche du monde des esprits : M. Becker, lui-même, ne se demande-t-il pas si elle n'est pas «un Esprit caché sous une forme humaine ? » (p.830).” (Monneyron, *L'androgynie romantique*, 70-71).

affectée de la mort de votre père et de votre mère ? ils vous aimaient tant ! – Morts ? dit-elle ? Non, ils sont en moi pour toujours. Cela n'est rien", ajouta-t-elle en montrant sans aucune émotion les corps que l'on enlevait.³⁰⁵

Instead of acknowledging the loss, it denies it and transforms the lack, i.e. the dead parental figures, into a combined internal object that it preserves within itself, that it desexualizes, and with which, as Denis argues, it identifies itself:

La forme mystique de la résolution de la bisexualité psychique par la déssexualisation est ainsi accomplie : le refus d'identification à l'une ou à l'autre des deux figures qui composent la scène primitive ne laisse pas d'autre voie d'organisation que celle d'une identification à un couple déssexualisé qui perd toute correspondance avec la réalité corporelle.³⁰⁶

Once Séraphîtus-Séraphîta identifies itself with this desexualized, combined parental object, it becomes "homogeneous," without sexual difference, and "whole:" "Wilfrid et Minna comprirent alors quelques-unes des paroles de Celui qui sur la terre leur était apparu à chacun d'eux sous la forme qui la leur rendait compréhensible, à l'un Séraphîtus, à l'autre Séraphîta, quand ils virent que là tout était homogène."³⁰⁷ This homogenous mystical subject can then try to reach the

³⁰⁵ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 787-788.

³⁰⁶ Denis, "Séraphîta, le mysticisme," 835.

³⁰⁷ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 855.

homogeneous divine object, which fuses the parental figures into a homogeneous whole, since it is described as both a “father” and a “mother.”

For Denis, in mysticism, all energy is concentrated on: “[...] l’objet mystique, lié à l’imago maternelle ou plutôt à l’imago parentale combinée déssexualisée. Un lien est maintenu avec cet objet immatériel auquel tout autre investissement est sacrifié.”³⁰⁸ The “mystical” object is singularly invested in: *all other investment* is sacrificed for its maintenance. Even if this object is made of the *desexualized maternal (parental) imago*, for Denis, melancholia is still positing and relying on the notion of object. However, I would like to question the very notion of a mystical “object,” which Denis invokes. It may be that mysticism is not addressed to an object, even a combined parental object, which is idealized as pure and eternal love.

Even before the death of its parents, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is longing for a divine and thus perfect Love that is somewhere in the celestial realms. From birth, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is indeed already lit from within by the celestial Light (Love = the Spirit of God), which surpasses even the purity and unconditional aspect of parental love.

Le jour de la naissance de Séraphîta, Swedenborg se manifesta dans Jarvis, et remplit de lumière la chambre où naissait l’enfant. Ses paroles furent, dit-on : – *L’œuvre est accomplie, les cieux se réjouissent !* Les gens de la maison entendirent les sons étranges d’une mélodie qui, disaient-ils, semblait être apportée des quatre points cardinaux par le souffle des vents. L’esprit de Swedenborg emmena le père hors de la maison et le conduisit sur le Fiord, où il le quitta.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 836.

³⁰⁹ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 785-786.

In the scene above, Swedenborg, although still in his human form, seems to be a bearer or vessel of mystical Light. Like a sort of angel in the making, Swedenborg fills the room with celestial Light and wind that is accompanied by a “strange melody” from Heaven. The infant Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is bathed – in some ways, baptized – in this mystical infusion, which seems to have successfully permeated its very *inner being*. Because it is permeated by this mystical infusion of divine Love, all *human* loves, including parental love, appear insufficient and “shadowy” to this angelic being in relation to the bright Ideal Love of God, which promises an infinite and eternal jouissance that cannot be contained within the anthropomorphic confines of any human object.

I will suggest that mysticism is an extreme form of melancholia insofar as it is never just the lost (dead or unavailable) object (i.e. person) that is pined for in melancholia. What is actually missed is the Ideal Love that was invested in the relation with a certain person of great significance. As Freud puts it, the melancholic invests in “some abstraction of love,” i.e. “one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.” The disappointment or slight that kills the fantasy of the ideal love, which this object of love once promised, brings to light the darkness of that reality, which is its very lack or inability to love back. The awareness that this Ideal cannot be real casts upon the individual a constant “shadow” made of excessive sadness, i.e. *acedia*³¹⁰ or

³¹⁰ In *L’Encre de la mélancolie* (2012), Jean Starobinski writes a chapter on *acedia* (51-58), tracing the origins of this intense form of sadness from Antiquity, when it used to be thought that an excess of “black bile” caused melancholia, to the Medieval Ages, when it was thought that spiritual weakness, and not an imbalance of the four humours in the body, was the cause of *acedia*. *Acedia* was thought to be a sin and a divine punishment, which the Fathers of the Church defined as: « une lourdeur, une torpeur, une absence d’initiative, un désespoir total à l’égard du salut... une tristesse qui rend muet, comme une aphonie spirituelle, véritable « extinction de voix » de l’âme » (Starobinski 2012, 51). Starobinski references Dante’s *Inferno*, which illustrates *acedia* in hell as being buried in a quagmire of indistinguishable speech or noise. *Acedia* was thus linked to a weightiness of the soul or a literal heaviness of the mouth, which

melancholia. While the depressed subject holds onto the disappointing loved *human* object, which s/he internalizes, the melancholic gets rid of any *human* object because it realizes its vacuity, i.e. its inability to ever provide the perfect and uniting love that is longed for. Where there should be a human-object that is capable of providing a fulfilling love, there is nothing but an empty space – an *abyss*, a gaping hole³¹¹ that will not close. It is in this infinite space of emptiness that divine “Love” resides, as celestial “Light,” which both penetrates and fills the mystic (melancholic) subject.

In Balzac’s text, the divine is not an anthropomorphic figure or object, but a space (i.e. a source that is from above) from which Perfect/ Ideal Love radiates, like the sun. Repeatedly, the divine is represented as a space far above the earth. In this blanketed, reserved space, that is

resulted in muteness, “idleness” and the subject’s removal from life and his adoption of the hermetic life.

³¹¹A similar image of a gaping hole or gap, experienced as the heavens or the sky, reappears at the level of the mystical description. In *Le Réel et La Beauté Dans Le Roman Balzacien* (2001), Arlette Michel notes that God is indeed characterized as an *abyss*. As for the light that emanates from this divine abyss, it is, as she notes, unbearable and destructive: “Par-delà les « abîmes supérieurs », l’altérité absolue de Dieu est abîme en mouvement, abîme d’énergie, combustion inaltérable et toujours en acte – lumière dans la nuit obscure, aurore à deviner par-delà les « nuées ». L’ange dont approche l’assomption séraphique dernière met en garde ses deux protégés, Minna et Wilfrid sur qui repose la grâce de la vision : leurs « plus vives clartés » ne sont encore que « Nuées », voile et obscurité (Ibid., p. 828). De Dieu émane un rayonnement insupportable et indicible. [...] Leur Dieu est abîme, lumière et ténèbres, à la fois transcendant et immanent. Si pour Balzac tout n’est pas Dieu, en revanche Dieu est en tout et, nous l’avons aperçu et nous y reviendrons, même l’enfer n’est pas hors de Dieu. Pour le romancier comme plus tard pour le poète visionnaire, aller vers Dieu c’est accepter dans l’amour de l’éprouver comme radicalement inaccessible. De Dieu, la conscience humaine, fût-elle visionnaire, ne perçoit que l’action, les « moyens » et les effets : le sublime dans ce qu’il a d’exaltant et de terrifiant à la fois : splendeur des cieux ouverts au finale de Séraphîta que rend seule supportable l’incapacité des regards humains à effacer les persistantes ténèbres qui voilent ce qui ne saurait être vu. Par ses voies propres, Balzac rejoint ainsi les joies douloureuses de l’expérience authentiquement mystique.” (Michel 2001, 229-230).

I believe that it is this description of the divine/ mystical object as an abyss that is filled with a sublime but destructive light, which interested Balzac as it allowed him to both reveal and deny the abyssal emptiness of his sublime melancholic idealizations.

filled with Love Divine, True and Perfect, “all is blue:” “[...] si tu lèves la tête au-dessus de nous, tout est bleu. Voici comme un diadème d’étoiles. Ici, disparaissent les nuances des expressions terrestres. Appuyée sur cette nature subtilisée par l’espace, ne sens-tu point en toi plus de profondeur que d’esprit ? n’as-tu pas plus de grandeur que d’enthousiasme, plus d’énergie que de volonté?”³¹² Even when Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta uses the notion of “Père,” it is to turn this parental or originary figure into a space, a “patrie,” a celestial homeland. As for the maternal face, which is applied onto this “patrie,” this home space in the skies, it is a mere anthropomorphic figure for the “nurturing” Love that fills it. As for this “nurturing” Love, it is important to note the association of this to a “nourrice,” i.e. a wet-nurse or a maternal substitute who feeds the child (i.e. man on Earth) whose mother (either the human parent or lover) does not want to feed or cannot feed it. The Ideal Love, i.e. God, is also this “nourrice” because it is able to fill the gaping hole left by the lack or absence of a “true” and nurturing love.

The infinite Love that radiates from the celestial space fills this gaping hole and underlines the fact that no *human* object can ever provide the kind of unconditional love that is yearned for by a mystic. In comparison to the Light that is divine Love, human love is only a shadow. To Wilfrid, Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta says: “Je voudrais avoir des ailes, Wilfrid, pour t’en couvrir, avoir de la force à te donner pour te faire entrer par avance dans le monde où les plus pures joies du plus pur attachement qu’on éprouve sur cette terre feraient une ombre dans le jour qui vient incessamment éclairer et réjouir les cœurs.”³¹³ Even “the purest joy of the purest attachment” [*les plus pures joies du plus pur attachement*] that the earth could provide looks like a “shadow” [*une ombre*] in comparison to divine Light (Love). This heavenly (divine) Light, as

³¹² Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 744.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 754.

Swedenborg defines it, is a sort of “vapor” and “a pure emanation” of God’s splendor: “La lumière explique seule les félicités du ciel. C’est, dit-il (Sap., Aug, 7, 15, 26, 27), une vapeur de la vertu de Dieu, une émanation pure de sa clarté, auprès de laquelle notre jour le plus éclatant est l’obscurité.”³¹⁴ The most brilliant of human “days,” i.e. earth’s light, are obscure “shadows” [*notre jour le plus éclatant est l’obscurité*], compared to the Light that is Divine Love.

Because it sees the void of human attachment, the mystical/melancholic subject, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta, takes an *aérienne* attitude; the melancholic mystic detaches itself from the material world. The “aérienne” moral attitude or “airy pose” of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta allows it to appear as if it were floating³¹⁵ above its earthly counterparts, in physical and moral isolation in the text.

Séraphîta se dressa sur ses pieds, resta, la tête mollement inclinée, les cheveux épars, dans la pose aérienne que les sublimes peintres ont tous donnée aux Messagers d’en haut : les plis de son vêtement eurent cette grâce indéfinissable qui arrête l’artiste, l’homme qui traduit tout par le sentiment, devant les délicieuses lignes du voile de la Polymnie antique.³¹⁶

BLANK MELANCHOLIA AS MYSTICAL ANNIHILATION

³¹⁴ Ibid., 783.

³¹⁵ As Denis reminds us: “les anges ont des pieds qui ne touchent pas le sol” (Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 834).

³¹⁶ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 755.

Because of this detachment, the subject can become the receptacle of Divine Light (Ideal Love). But, as forewarned in the Scriptures and repeated in the novel, the Light (Love as God) is so intense that it threatens to kill whomever is not prepared to receive (see) it: “Cette lumière tue tout homme qui n’est pas préparé à la recevoir. Nul ici-bas, ni même dans le ciel, ne peut voir Dieu et vivre.”³¹⁷

The Divine Love (Light) that Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta contains filters through its body including its eyes, which take a “golden” color: “Les feux jaillissant de son regard d’or luttèrent évidemment avec les rayons du soleil, et il semblait ne pas en recevoir, mais lui donner de la lumière.”³¹⁸ The golden light coming from its eyes does not reflect the sunlight; it comes from another source more intense than the sun. Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta warns Minna that if this celestial Light (Love) were ever to shine directly on her or anyone else, it would destroy them as the sun would:

Minna, la violette cachée au pied du chêne se dit : « Le soleil ne m’aime pas, il ne vient pas. » Le soleil se dit : « Si je l’éclairais, elle périrait, cette pauvre fleur ! » Ami de la fleur, il glisse ses rayons à travers les feuilles de chênes, et les affaiblit pour colorer le calice de sa bien aimée. Je ne me trouve pas assez de voiles et crains que tu ne me voies encore trop : tu frémirais si tu me connaissais mieux.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Ibid., 783.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 741.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 745.

Because the Light that shines through Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is filtered through the being's human form, i.e. its physical body, it does not destroy its observers by shining too directly or too harshly onto them. In this way, the physical body serves as a temporary veil, both for those who look at the celestial being and for the angelic being itself: its human body shields it from the potentially destructive impact of the divine light that it contains.

The divine love that shines within the angelic being is also a fever that eventually burns its body, its fleshy container. The celestial Light indeed speaks: its soft and melodious language speaks of an infinite love, an infinite jouissance that produces in the subject the desire to unite with it. Infused with this divine love which gives a sense of an infinite joy, the mystic (melancholic) subject longs, burns with the fever/desire to return to its source and, in so doing, to experience bliss. The fever of this mystical desire increasingly "whitens" the angelic body. "Les anges sont blancs," wrote Balzac in his personal Album, a phrase which he meant to use in *Louis Lambert* (1832)³²⁰ :

Le sujet de [Zaraphîtus rayé I Zaraph rayé 2] Séraphîta. Les deux natures comme *Fragoletta*, mais un ange à sa dernière épreuve. Au dénouement elle monte au Ciel, elle se transfigure. Amour céleste entre elle et un homme et une femme. Prendre pour épigraphe *Adoremus in aeternum* [ajout en marge : *Les anges sont blancs* de L.

³²⁰ "Dans son Album, Balzac avait noté: « Prendre pour épigraphe *Adoremus in aeternum* », puis il ajouta en marge: « *Les Anges sont blancs* de L. Lambert » [...]." (Balzac, "Histoire du texte, documents, variantes, notes, indications bibliographiques" in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 1624).

Lambert.] Séraphîta conçue en voyant dimanche 16 9bre [erreur pour 17 novembre] le Séraphin de Bra » (*Lov.* A 182, f° 42).³²¹

And indeed Balzac used this sentence in *Louis Lambert*. Perceived by everyone to have gone completely mad or, to the very least, be entirely detached from all external reality, Louis utters it in his most mystical or enlightened³²² state: “Tout à coup Louis cessa de frotter ses jambes l’une contre l’autre, et dit d’une voix lente: *Les anges sont blancs !*”³²³ Why are angels “white”? The Pléiade’s *Notes et variantes* section for *Louis Lambert* notes that the color “white” ties the representation of angels to truth and light: “C’est que, pour l’auteur de *Séraphîta*, l’âme est « lumière harmonieuse et parfumée ». Pour Oegger, qui a vu des anges de même couleur que Lambert, le blanc signifie « vérité pure, parce que le blanc réfléchit toute la lumière » (*Essai d’un dictionnaire [...]. op. cit., p. 16*).³²⁴ According to the Dictionnaire Littré, the meanings attached to “blanc” include moral characterizations of cleanliness, purity and blamelessness: “Propre, net. Mains blanches. Chemise blanche” or “Innocent.” Whiteness speaks to both a purity related to infants and children and a level of fragility that is linked to the mortality of

³²¹ Balzac, “La Conception du sujet” under “Histoire du texte” in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI., 1602-1603.

³²² “Louis se tenait debout comme je le voyais, jour et nuit, les yeux fixes, sans jamais baisser et relever les paupières comme nous en avons l’habitude. [...] Hélas ! déjà ridé, déjà blanchi, enfin déjà plus de lumière dans ses yeux, devenus vitreux comme ceux d’un aveugle. Tous ses traits semblaient tirés par une convulsion vers le haut de sa tête.” (Balzac, *Louis Lambert* in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1980), 682).

³²³ *Ibid.*, 682.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1590.

human beings. This use of *blanc*³²⁵ (“white”) to describe angelic creatures, such as Séraphîüs-Séraphîta, does not appear to be anything new, however. Understanding why Balzac ties whiteness to angels may require us to go beyond its obvious definitions as color or as moral quality. In French, “blanc” is also linked to literary productions and writing: “blanc” can mean an empty space or blankness in a text, i.e. a “blanc” on paper. “Sur quoi l'on n'a pas écrit. Papier blanc.” Therefore, it could be assumed that for Balzac, the use of “blanc” to describe the angels was not just a way to describe moral purity, innocence and faith, but also a way to describe an empty space. What appears to be *blanc* in the angelic figures is not a simple reference to color, i.e. “white,” but rather it is a sign of the blotting out effect, which divine Light (Love) has on the angelic beings. The *blanc* is evidence of a process of “blanking out” or annihilating the human envelop. If “les anges sont blancs,” as Balzac proclaims, it is because they are destined to be blanked out, annihilated. And this is indeed what happens: the desire for divine Love, and especially for the infinite jouissance that this non-human love promises, progressively blanks out Séraphîta.

As the story progresses, Séraphîüs-Séraphîta becomes indeed more and more unnaturally “white.” At the beginning of the novel, the being’s face is likened to white marble (“*cette figure marmorine*”³²⁶). As for its skin, it is described as “le tissu le plus blanc que jamais le nord ait fait à l’un de ses enfants.”³²⁷ As Balzac puts it, poets could have compared the whiteness of its skin to the whiteness of diamonds: “les poètes en eussent comparé la blancheur à celle des

³²⁵ *Dictionnaire Littré : Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. “blanc” [accessed on January 20, 2019: <https://www.littre.org/definition/blanc>.].

³²⁶ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 742.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 741.

diamants.”³²⁸ The whiteness of the purest grade of diamonds is not a color: it is the whiteness of a colorless light being reflected. The being’s skin evokes the same kind of luster, i.e. fire, brilliance, radiance, found only in the clearest of diamonds. Casing an ever-burning celestial light, the “white” body of the being is heated up to such a point that it now emits the “white” that is, colorless light of the purest of diamonds. In other words, the inner light that fills the body seems to burn through the white matter that is its flesh: this white flesh starts to radiate with a pure, clear, and colorless light. The body is no longer simply “white” “blanc:” it is also pure and clear light (fire). The once “whitened” skin slowly turns into the colorless “blanc” of the internal light, the divine love that it contains, reflects and projects.

Burned by an “inward fever” (*feu intérieur*), the body of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is weakened. Its skin becomes increasingly pallid (*son teint commençait à blondir*):” “Minna reconnut en lui les ravages d’un feu intérieur: sa voix était devenue profonde, son teint commençait à blondir; et, si jusque-là les poètes en eussent comparé la blancheur à celle des diamants, elle avait alors l’éclat des topazes.”³²⁹ The intensification of the fire that burns within Séraphîtus-Séraphîta prepares the being for its final ascension, or, as the literal translation would be: the Assumption (*L’Assomption de l’esprit angélique*³³⁰). Yearning to enjoy the full

³²⁸ Ibid., 832.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ “Le dernier chapitre de la *Transfiguration* doit être pour moi, ce que, toute comparaison gardée, était le tableau pour Raphaël » (*LH*, 15 juillet 1834, t. I, p. 231). Ce chapitre, couronnement de la doctrine mystique, transmue l’idée en image. À travers l’assomption de l’esprit angélique, se purifiant de sphère en sphère, suivant l’eschatologie gnostique, le philosophe visionnaire dépeint le spectacle du ciel. De nombreuses influences peuvent se déceler dans ce tableau, mais que Balzac a magnifiquement assimilées et dominées. D’abord les grandes œuvres littéraires : les « épopées de Klopstock, de Milton, du Tasse et de Dante » citées dans *Séraphîta* (p. 769) ; le *Phèdre* de Platon, que Balzac a lu, qui retrace la procession céleste des immortels et décrit les spectacles béatifiques « qu’offrent les évolutions dont le ciel est le

jouissance of divine Love, Séraphîta ascends to the Heavens, i.e. the space filled with divine Love.

This ascension³³¹ into the light is described as a scene of intense joy, celebration, worship. As Séraphîtus-Séraphîta rises higher and higher through the circles of Heaven to reach

domaine et qu’accomplit circulairement l’heureuse race des dieux », contemplant les Réalités avant de regagner le lieu qui leur est assigné et revenant – non comme Séraphîta qui se perd au sein du Sanctuaire, mais comme Wilfrid et Minna – nourris de l’ambrosie et du nectar de la Vérité [...]” (Balzac, “Notes et variantes,” T. XI., 1702).

³³¹ Séraphîta’s ascension follows the mystical organization of the world in “degrees of existence” which Baron details: “L’univers de Swedenborg est une sorte de cône du sommet duquel descendent les rayons de Dieu, soleil spirituel. Tout l’effort de l’homme doit être de capter ces rayons pour passer de l’état naturel au spirituel en se rendant disponible pour l’illumination de la vérité, qui dissipe les mensonges successifs : fausses apparences de bonheur, adultère, luxure, tromperies des amis, adulation des puissants. Balzac adapte aux besoins narratifs de son roman la notion de « degrés d’exister » pour l’homme naturel comme pour l’homme spirituel. Il ne s’agit pas, comme le pense Charles Grolleau, de réincarnation, mais de degrés de vie, plus ou moins épanouie. [...] Pour la Kabbale, on l’a vu, le monde divin, premier degré de l’être, est constitué par l’*Ein-Soph* (Infini), et par les dix sephirot de l’Arbre de Vie, hypostases engendrées par l’Infini. Le monde angélique est le deuxième degré de l’être ; il est lui-même gradué en dix degré ou Intelligences : les *Haiioth*, les *Ophanim*, les *Aralim*, les *Hasmalim*, les *Séraphim*, les *Malachim*, les *Elohim*, les *Bene Elohim*, les *Cherubim*, les *Issim*. Le monde céleste, troisième degré de l’être, comprend également – influencés par les Intelligences du monde angélique – dix degrés, qui sont dix sphères. Ayant pour recteur Métatron, l’ange suprême, métamorphose céleste d’Énoch après son enlèvement au Ciel, les séraphins sont en relation directe avec L’Énergie Divine Suprême et Créatrice. Ils ont en charge le Feu Divin et ses manifestations universelles : purification, lumières, illumination, dissipation des ténèbres. Le mor séraphin (Isaïe, 6, 2 et 6, 6) évoque Klopstock, à qui Balzac se réfère ironiquement, citant Diderot dans la *Physiologie du mariage* à propos des femmes et de la guerre conjugale (« Belles comme les Séraphins de Klopstock, terribles comme les diables de Milton »). Et surtout Bœhme, Saint-Martin, Swedenborg et la franc-maçonnerie ; le Grand Ordre de Suède, très attiré par les Illuminés d’Avignon créés par Pernety sous le patronage de Swedenborg, est connu sous le nom de Séraphins. Mais les séraphins au sens théologique sont des anges du premier rang siégeant auprès de Dieu à la tête du premier chœur de la catégorie supérieure pour Denys l’Aréopagite – auteur de la Hiérarchie céleste considéré comme le père de cette Théologie mystique enseignée par Sigier dans *Les Proscrits* – et pour Grégoire le Grand dans la 34^e de ses Homélies. Ils se signalent, dans la *Somme théologique* de Thomas d’Aquin, par l’ardeur de leur amour (*caritas*), qui, comme le feu, s’élève sans cesse, par la vertu active d’une chaleur pénétrante et par leur éclat lumineux (*claritas*). Le jeu sur les mots *caritas* et *claritas* et sur les mots *ardor* et *fervor* est tout à fait biblique.” (Baron, *Balzac Occulte: Alchimie, Magnétisme, Sociétés Secrètes*, 229-230).

the Divine Light that is Love, the Spirits sing hymns to it, calling it a “flower of the Worlds,” “diamond from the fires of suffering,” “spotless pearl,” “desire without flesh,” a “link between earth and Heaven,” and a “Queen” and “Victor” of the world. They invite it to “be light.”

« Salut à qui monte vivant ! Viens, fleur des Mondes ! Diamant sorti du feu des douleurs ! perle sans tache, désir sans chair, lien nouveau de la terre et du ciel, sois lumière ! Esprit vainqueur, Reine du monde, vole à ta couronne ! Triomphateur de la terre, prends ton diadème ! Sois à nous ! »³³²

As the prayers coming from the Heavens invite the angelic being to keep ascending “alive” into the light, Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta, for its part, also prays. But its body progressively grows weak as its prayers become more and more violent. In its last Prayer, the being finally achieves the final step of what Balzac calls “Resignation:”

Ceux qui sont arrivés au point où leurs yeux découvrent la Porte Sainte, et qui, sans jeter un seul regard en arrière, sans exprimer un seul regret, contemplent les mondes en en pénétrant les destinées ; ceux-là se taisent, attendent, et souffrent leurs dernières luttes ; la plus difficile est la dernière, la vertu suprême est la Résignation : être en exil et ne pas se plaindre, n’avoir plus goût aux choses d’ici-bas et sourire, être à Dieu, rester parmi les hommes ! Vous entendez bien la Voix qui vous crie : – Marche ! marche ! Souvent en de célestes visions, des Anges descendent et vous enveloppent de leurs chants ! Il faut sans pleurs ni murmures, les voir revolant à la ruche. Se plaindre, ce serait déchoir. La

³³² Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 857.

résignation est le fruit qui mûrit à la porte du ciel. Combien est puissant et beau le sourire calme et le front pur de la créature résignée !³³³

Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta who has left behind the taste for human pleasures stands in front of the gate of Heaven, i.e. it no longer belongs to the earthly world but is still exiled from the heavenly world that it desires to enter. As it stands outside the Heavens that promise the full bliss that it is longing for, the being does not “complain.” Resignation, which does not “complain,” does not demand anything in exchange for the total relinquishment of earthly desires; this spirit of Resignation is the surrender to the Heavens, the “total submission” to its will. Such “Resignation” corresponds to a “whitening” or a blanking (blotching) out of the subject: “L’Amour divin l’entoura de ses roses, et sa Résignation pieuse lui enleva par sa blancheur tout vestige terrestre.”³³⁴ Resigned, Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta prays outside Heavens’ gate:

Ces derniers chants ne furent exprimés ni par la parole, ni par le regard, ni par le geste, ni par aucun des signes qui servent aux hommes pour se communiquer leurs pensées, mais comme l’âme se parle à elle-même ; car à l’instant où Séraphîta se dévoilait dans sa vraie nature, ses idées n’étaient plus esclaves des mots humains. La violence de sa dernière prière avait brisé les liens. Comme une blanche colombe, son âme demeura pendant un moment posée sur ce corps dont les substances épuisées allaient s’anéantir.³³⁵

³³³ Ibid., 849.

³³⁴ Ibid., 857.

³³⁵ Ibid., 850-851.

It is through the weakness brought on by the “violence of the last prayer” that the annihilation of Séraphîta’s body begins. In the mystical world, prayer³³⁶ sets things in motion, and, in the case of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta, it releases the being from its earthly ties and “breaks the bonds” (*brisé les liens*) that its *human* counterparts keep with the human world. Through the violence of its prayer, the being is also no longer beholden to human words (*des mots humains*). With this last prayer, the being violently cuts the bond that once attached its “ideas” to human words. At the same time, it also cuts the bond that attached its soul to its body, which is now exhausted and about to die. Through the act of spiritual surrender that is its passionate prayer, the soul of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is freed from the dying shell of its body, no longer contained “in” it but posed “upon” it, ready to leave it behind: “Comme une blanche colombe, son âme demeura pendant un moment posée sur ce corps dont les substances épuisées allaient s’anéantir.”³³⁷ The being’s soul detaches itself from its exhausted body, which is left aside as the soul hovers above it and waits.

It is at the very moment when the soul of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta expresses hope “towards heaven” (*vers le ciel*) that, in the next few lines, what was previously called “l’âme” mysteriously and rather radically turns into “he” (*il*), a transformation that the text underlines by italicizing “*il*.” “Ils [Wilfrid et Minna] étaient tombés à genoux quand *il* s’était dressé vers son

³³⁶ Baron analyzes the role that prayer plays in the text: “Pour accéder à la Lumière, notion essentielle du roman, Séraphîta, comme Saint-Martin, recommande la prière, qui purifie l’âme. L’homme de désir a pour sauvegarder et pour vocation, selon le théosophe, d’être « machine priante ». La prière est pour lui une ressource, un devoir, une œuvre.” (Baron 233) Furthermore, she notes that Balzac’s text has an incantative quality that likens it to a hymn: “[...] la mystique angélique de *Séraphîta*, plutôt inspirée de la vision d’Isaïe, dont la formule liturgique et scripturaire: « Saint, saint, saint... » (VI,3), transformée par Balzac en « ÉTERNEL ! ÉTERNEL ! ÉTERNEL ! », possède une vertu extatique due à une technique incantatoire caractéristique des hymnes ou des traités qui composent la littérature mystique des Palais (*Hekhalot*).” (Baron, *Balzac Occulte*, 230).

³³⁷ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 851.

orient, et partageaient son extase.”³³⁸ This “il” marks the transition from “soul” (gendered feminine in the French “âme”) to “spirit” (gendered masculine in the French “esprit”). When the soul (which has detached from the body) yearns to reach its “orient,” it becomes what the text later calls the “esprit,” that is, a soul, which, because it is now freed from the body, can proceed to soar into “son orient.” *Son orient* appears to be God as the source of Divine Love and Light. This *esprit* is compared to a “blanche colombe,” a white dove whose whiteness refers, I believe, to the blanking out of the body from which the soul has detached itself.

Turned into a “spirit,” the seraph-to-be cries forth to the Heavens in order to be able to resume its ascension (assumption) into the celestial Light:

Malgré ces tempéraments, ils frissonnèrent quand éclata la VOIX de l’âme souffrante, le chant de l’ESPRIT qui attendait la vie et l’implorait par un cri.

Ce cri les glaça jusque dans la moelle de leurs os.

L’ESPRIT frappait à la PORTE-SAINTÉ. – Que veux-tu ? répondit un Chœur dont l’interrogation retentit dans les mondes. – Aller à Dieu. – As-tu vaincu ? – J’ai vaincu la chair par l’abstinence, j’ai vaincu la fausse parole par le silence, j’ai vaincu la fausse science par l’humilité, j’ai vaincu l’orgueil par la charité, j’ai vaincu la terre par l’amour, j’ai payé mon tribut par la souffrance, je me suis purifié en brûlant dans la foi, j’ai souhaité la vie par la prière : j’attends en adorant, et suis résigné.

Nulle réponse ne se fit entendre.

– Que Dieu soit béni, répondit l’ESPRIT en croyant qu’il allait être rejeté.

³³⁸ Ibid.

Ses pleurs coulèrent et tombèrent en rosée sur les deux témoins agenouillés qui frémirent devant la justice de Dieu.

Tout à coup sonnèrent les trompettes de la Victoire remportée par l'Ange dans cette dernière épreuve, les retentissements arrivèrent aux espaces comme un son dans l'écho, les remplirent et firent trembler l'univers que Wilfrid et Minna sentirent être petit sous leurs pieds. Ils tressaillirent, agités d'une angoisse causée par l'appréhension du mystère qui devait s'accomplir.³³⁹

Its scream having been heard, the “spirit” now undergoes another transformation when it becomes a Seraph endowed with white wings: “Il [*le Messager chargé d'annoncer la bonne nouvelle*] avait une palme et une épée, il toucha l'ESPRIT de sa palme. L'ESPRIT se transfigura, ses ailes blanches se déployèrent sans bruit. La communication de la LUMIÈRE qui changeait l'ESPRIT en SÉRAPHIN, le revêtement de sa forme glorieuse, armure céleste, jetèrent de tels rayonnements, que les deux Voyants en furent foudroyés.”³⁴⁰ It is this *communication with the Light* that changes the “spirit” into a “Séraphin” whose white wings recall the “white dove.” Whiteness connotes, I believe, the blanking (blotching) out i.e. the progressive annihilation of the subject that is taking place as the spirit progresses in its levels of ascension. This annihilation culminates with the last transformation, i.e. transfiguration. As the white wings of the Seraph allows it to rise further into Heavens, the Seraph transforms, most poignantly, into *flamme* (“flame”): “Aux yeux de Wilfrid et de Minna, bientôt il ne fut plus qu'un point de flamme qui s'avivait toujours et dont le mouvement se perdait dans la mélodieuse acclamation qui célébrait

³³⁹ Ibid., 852-853.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 853.

sa venue au ciel.”³⁴¹ According to mystical and religious texts, the Seraph is linked to the element of fire and is traditionally known as an *angel of fire*.

The being’s reduction into a flame implies the total obliteration of any form. When Séraphîta as a Seraph reaches the abyssal place that is divine Love, it gets destroyed: it burns out like a flame. As it ascends into Light, the being that was once known as Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta is thus progressively blotted out, blanked out, by being transformed, first into a “soul,” then a “spirit,” a Seraph, and finally into celestial fire. By the end of its ascension, Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta will have disappeared and become utterly invisible, a blank space. Divine Love ultimately destroys the human “object” that it loves: it blanks it out into nothingness.

While in depression, the investment in the shadow of the lost loved object can lead to suicide, in mysticism, the investment in the bright celestial (at times, maternal) Light thus leads to a sublime form of suicide. The melancholic-mystic subject does not love a human object, but the Infinite Love that no human object can contain. It is driven by the desire to experience the infinite and everlasting jouissance that this Love promises, a jouissance so intense that human enjoyments (such as those found in erotic relations) pale in comparison and seem vacuous. But experiencing this jouissance implies self-annihilation. The enjoyment of Divine, that is, Perfect Love is an all-consuming jouissance: it consumes, engulfs and annihilates (burns/ blanks/ blotches out) the human “object.”

FILLING IN THE BLANKS: WRITING TO LIVE

³⁴¹ Ibid., 857.

In both *Les Proscrits* and *Séraphîta*, the text stages the figure of the writer. In *Les Proscrits*, it is represented in the character of Dante who avidly attends the sublime lectures of Siger de Brabant in Paris. Besides Dante, the text stages another writer: the young poet Godefroid who considers suicide to reunite with his mother in heaven. The great poet Dante tries to dissuade him from killing himself. As Denis puts it, “Dante pour l’aider à vivre va lui montrer à quoi il a échappé et va faire la description du supplice que lui aurait valu son suicide. Pour les besoins de la cause, le romancier met dans la bouche de Dante un nouveau chant de L’enfer dans lequel une ‘ombre’ rapporte son malheur.”³⁴² Dante recounts the torture that is inflicted upon a man who has killed himself out of despair after the death of his wife who used to say to him. For having killed himself, this man is condemned to be in “hell,” but as Denis points out, in a “zone toute proche du paradis” where he is subjected to the following torture:

Debout et dans une attitude ardente, cette âme dévorait les espaces du regard, ses pieds restaient attachés par le pouvoir de Dieu sur le dernier point de cette ligne où elle accomplissait sans cesse la tension pénible par laquelle nous projetons nos forces lorsque nous voulons prendre notre élan, comme des oiseaux prêts à s’envoler. Je reconnus un homme, il ne nous regarda, ne nous entendit pas ; tous ses muscles tressaillaient et haletaient ; par chaque parcelle de temps, il semblait éprouver sans faire un seul pas la fatigue de traverser l’infini qui le séparait du Paradis où sa vue plongeait sans cesse ; où il croyait entrevoir une image chérie. Sur la dernière porte de l’Enfer comme sur la première, je lus une expression de désespoir dans l’espérance.³⁴³

³⁴² Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 831.

³⁴³ Balzac, *Les Proscrits*, 551.

After death, the man does not unite with his dead wife, but is condemned to want to reach Paradise where he believes he sees her “image chérie,” her “beloved image.” He makes constant efforts to reach this “beloved image” but cannot. His hope to reach it is thus constantly linked to the despair of being unable to do so. When he seems to fall into utter despair and loses all hope, a figure appears that renews his hope by saying: “À demain!” but then it quickly disappears. As Denis points out, this figure, which appears in the “splendeur lumineuse,” is an “archange,” that is “lumière dans la lumière.”

Dante uses the figure of this tortured man to dissuade Godefroid from killing himself. Instead of reuniting him with his mother, death will only reiterate his distance from her and increase his despair. Dante warns Godefroid, the young depressed poet, that suicide will in fact eternally exclude him from Heaven and thus from the maternal ideal with which he tries to reunite. Denis, for his part, interprets the torture inflicted to the man as “l’aggravation éternelle de sa douleur nostalgique et où l’on peut reconnaître une position mystique. Le mysticisme est ainsi une fois encore donné par Balzac comme une alternative possible à la dépression.”³⁴⁴ The torture is the “aggravation” of the man’s “nostalgic suffering.” In other words, the torture represents in an aggravated form his nostalgia: like the nostalgic subject, he refuses to mourn and maintains the past/dead object “alive” in his mind. Nostalgia, however, becomes mystical when he projects this object outward and hopes to reach it elsewhere, in the heavens, and in the future. Because it preserves this hope in spite of the fact that it is constantly disappointed, mysticism is an “alternative to depression.” Denis notes that it is such a mystical position that Balzac himself

³⁴⁴ Denis, “Séraphîta, le mysticisme,” 831.

entertains with Hańska whom he keeps loving and idealizing although she remains unavailable.³⁴⁵

Séraphîta was dedicated to Hańska with whom Balzac had begun a correspondence in 1832. Balzac, who was a well-known author at that time, received his first letter from Hańska under the pseudonym “l’Étrangère.” From thence on, they would have a long epistolary relation interspersed with brief meetings. According to Denis, Balzac’s understanding of mysticism is linked to his capacity to hope for an enduring ideal love. It is during Hańska’s absence that an investment in this love is most detected:

La compréhension du mysticisme par Balzac est sans doute liée à sa capacité à espérer, à investir pendant des années une femme absente comme Mme Hańska, comme à maintenir autrefois l’investissement idéalisé de sa mère dont il aurait vraisemblablement attendu qu’elle lui dise : « Honorino, je t’aime ! »³⁴⁶

In *Les Proscrits*, Dante as the figure of the writer does not participate in this mystical hope. He denounces the fallacious hope of ever being able to reach the ideal lost beloved. In *Séraphîta*, however, Balzac seems to fulfill the mystical hope that Dante denounces in *Les Proscrits*. Unlike Dante, who only returns to his country, Italy, *Séraphîta* rejoins and reunites, as we saw, with the mystical Love projected in the Heavens. What, then, is the position given to the writer in this text?

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

In *Séraphîta*, Balzac represents himself in the figure of Wilfrid. Some critics have indeed noted the physical resemblances between Wilfrid and Balzac.³⁴⁷ Was it mere coincidence that Balzac, like Wilfrid, was thirty-six years of age when this novel was written? As for the description of Wilfrid's body, it shares a striking resemblance to the body of the author of *Séraphîta*, Balzac:

Wilfrid était un homme de trente-six ans. Quoique largement développées, ses proportions ne manquaient pas d'harmonie. Sa taille était médiocre, comme celle de presque tous les hommes qui sont élevés au-dessus des autres ; sa poitrine et ses épaules étaient larges, et son col était court comme celui des hommes dont le cœur doit être rapproché de la tête ; ses cheveux étaient noirs, épais et fins.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Several critics have noted Balzac's recurrent practice of creating characters, which resemble himself, in his work. Anne-Marie Baron in *Le fils prodige: L'inconscient de 'La Comédie humaine'* (1993) connects the physical and moral traits of Wilfrid in *Séraphîta* to Balzac. Referring to what Pierre Abraham and Pierre Citron called "les notions de 'fantôme du miroir', de 'sosies' et d'homologues'," Baron affirms that Balzac indeed wanted the characters in *La Comédie humaine* to carry some of his personal traits (Baron 1993, 209). Additionally, Baron uses the idea of "dédoublement" to show how a writer's work reflects both his life and his deepest fantasies at the same time. The writer hides an unconscious fantasy behind the dream that is his work of literature. Balzac's characters not only physically resemble the author but also are indeed idealized versions of him in the text. Balzac created a world that mirrored his life, but in an idealized fashion: "ce texte semblait retracer une expérience déterminante de son enfance, dont le rapprochement me paraissait s'imposer avec ce que Lacan appelle « le stade du miroir » [...] tous les rêves où le sujet rêvant joue un rôle créent un dédoublement qui évoque le fait de se regarder dans un miroir [...] les rêves balzaciens projettent toujours « l'imaginaire du corps propre » du rêveur. [...] il multiplie par deux l'image que voit d'elle-même la rêveuse." (Baron 1993, 210). Baron brings up Lacan's mirror stage to illustrate how Balzac's literary creations function as near perfect doubles of the author himself. In many ways, Balzac seems to regard the text as a mirror upon which he can study himself and create different versions of himself.

³⁴⁸ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 792.

Wilfrid does not only resemble Balzac physically, he is an idealized representation of Balzac, the writer. Wilfrid manages to combine in himself two “portions of the humanity” that are usually kept distinct: he “tenait aux deux premières portions de l’humanité si distinctes, aux hommes de force et aux hommes de pensée [...]”³⁴⁹ As a man of “strength” and of “thought,” he represents the writer as a genius. According to Balzac, such a writer is one who has squeezed out every element of life and now thirsts for the unknown: “Wilfrid avait trop bien pressé le monde dans ses deux formes, la Matière et l’Esprit, pour ne pas être atteint de la soif de l’inconnu, du désir d’aller au-delà (...)”³⁵⁰ Despite the passion and fervor with which he has lived, he has not yet found the love that he longed for.

Driven by a thirst for the “unknown,” Wilfrid, like the mystic, has the gift of vision. From the start of the novel, he is indeed able to see that the strange being that is Séraphîta is more than a “creature” and is in fact a “whole creation.” “Qu’ai-je donc vu? se demandait-il. Non, ce n’est point une simple créature, mais toute une création.”³⁵¹ This kind of insight elevates Wilfrid to a more superior position – that of the seer. If Wilfrid can see the supernatural quality of Séraphîta, it is because his eyes seem to share the same golden quality. As we recall, the divine Love that shines through Séraphîtus-Séraphîta’s eyes gives to its gaze a golden quality. Parallel to the golden light that stems from the eyes of Séraphîtus-Séraphîta, Wilfrid’s “yellow-brown” eyes also shine with a “solar brilliancy.” “[...] ses yeux, d’un jaune brun, possédaient un éclat solaire qui annonçait avec quelle avidité sa nature aspirait la lumière.”³⁵² As Balzac puts it, the “yellow

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 795.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 756.

³⁵² Ibid., 792-793.

brown” quality of his eyes indicates the “avidity” with which his “nature” “aspires to Light.” The “yellow” and “solar brilliancy” of Wilfrid’s eyes is thus a visual proof of his capacity to “aspire to the Light,” i.e. to a Divine (Perfect) Love. Like Séraphîtus-Séraphîta, Wilfrid aspires to this celestial Light as divine Love and it is this aspiration, which allows him to see Séraphîta as a mystical being at the center of a circle of radiating spiritual Light.

Although they share the same aspiration, Wilfrid’s “avidity” for divine Love is not as great as the being’s. While the being’s eyes are entirely golden, Wilfrid’s are merely “yellow brown.” While Séraphîtus-Séraphîta is overflowing with divine Light (Love), to the point that it is later completely consumed by it and becomes “like the sun” (“Il monta comme un soleil radieux qui sort du sein des ondes; mais, plus majestueux que l’astre et promis à de plus belles destinées, il ne devait pas être enchaîné comme les créations inférieures dans une vie circulaire ; il suivit la ligue de l’infini [...]”³⁵³), the golden light of divine love only left specks of gold in Wilfrid’s eyes. Wilfrid does not live in the same Light as Séraphîtus-Séraphîta. As the angelic being puts it, a gulf divides them. Wilfrid is still in the darkness (du côté des ténèbres) since there are aspects to him that can neither fully receive nor fully accept the Light, i.e. completely sacrifice of himself to this Light: “Nous sommes séparés par des abîmes: vous êtes du côté des ténèbres, et moi je vis dans la vraie lumière.”³⁵⁴ The part that resists completely “living in the true light” is Wilfrid’s earthly desires.

Wilfrid is indeed the symbol of human desire. Confronted with Séraphîta, the pastor “doubts,” Minna “adores” and Wilfrid “desires:” “Ils revinrent en silence; aucun d’eux ne comprenait les effets de cette vision de la même manière: Monsieur Becker doutait, Minna

³⁵³ Ibid., 855.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 826.

adorait, Wilfrid désirait.”³⁵⁵ Balzac describes Wilfrid as a man driven by passions and instincts, which have led him to live his material life to the fullest. In this way also Wilfrid represents the figure of the writer.

Wilfrid’s desire for Séraphîtus-Séraphîta drives him to want to marry her. Séraphîtus-Séraphîta can only reject his love since s/he has been betrothed to God since birth. She has been destined to experience the jouissance of a divine Love far superior to the human and imperfect love that Wilfrid proposes. This rejection provokes murderous impulses that ironically negate Wilfrid’s proclamations of love. In his jealousy and craving for a love that does not belong to him, he fluctuates between what Balzac calls a “redeemable Cain”³⁵⁶ and a “robber”³⁵⁷:

- Puisque nous revenons à Jarvis, dit Wilfrid dont les yeux s’attachaient à Séraphîta comme ceux d’un voleur caché dans l’ombre s’attachent à l’endroit où gît le trésor, dites-moi, pourquoi vous ne vous mariez pas?”
- Vous naissez tous veufs ou veuves, répondit elle, mais mon mariage était préparé dès ma naissance, et je suis fiancée...
- À qui ? dirent-ils tous à la fois.
- Laissez-moi mon secret, dit-elle. Je vous promets, si notre père le veut, de vous convier à ces noces mystérieuses.
- Sera-ce bientôt ?

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 792.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 794.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 828.

– J’attends.³⁵⁸

In another part of the text, Wilfrid’s hunger for Séraphîta’s love is likened to a lion’s desire to devour a prey: “comme le lion qui, lancé sur sa proie dans une plaine d’Afrique.”³⁵⁹

In a final and desperate attempt, the celestial being advises Wilfrid to let go of his human desires, which are described as “evil thoughts” that glitter with greed in the “fire” (les étincelles) in his eyes:

Cessez, Wilfrid, cessez d’enfanter de mauvaises pensées dont le triomphe vous serait pénible à porter. Qui ne lirait vos désirs dans les étincelles de vos regards ? Soyez bon, faites un pas dans le bien ? N’est-ce pas aller au-delà de l’aimer des hommes que de se sacrifier complètement au bonheur de celle qu’on aime ? Obéissez-moi, je vous mènerai dans une voie où vous obtiendrez toutes les grandeurs que vous rêvez, et où l’amour sera vraiment infini.³⁶⁰

Wilfrid’s eyes thus mix the “étincelles” of an earthly human desire with the golden specks of an aspiration to divine Love. Despite his ability to aspire to divine love, Wilfrid is unable to thirst for God (Love Divine and Perfect) because of his fleshly desires.

This attachment to fleshly desires prevents him from following the heavenly path that Séraphîtus-Séraphîta would like him to follow. During the ascension scene, Wilfred rejects

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 796.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 829.

joining Séraphîta in her mystical quest towards the light. Instead of joining his beloved being in her mystical annihilation, he only witnesses it. In so doing, he exemplifies the power of the writer to recognize the seductive attraction of mystical Light/Love without becoming consumed and destroyed by it.

As Minna and Wilfrid become witnesses of the *Assumption* (the heavenly annihilation) of Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta, they both become “Seers.” They are given another kind of vision, which allows them to see with Divine Wisdom:

Leurs yeux se voilèrent aux choses de la Terre, et s’ouvrirent aux clartés du Ciel.

Quoique saisis par le tremblement de Dieu, comme le furent quelques-uns de ces Voyants nommés Prophètes parmi les hommes, ils y restèrent comme eux en se trouvant dans le rayon où brillait la gloire de l’ESPRIT.³⁶¹

The specific position that Wilfrid and Minna occupy in the scene keeps them safe from the death that would be provoked in seeing this Light. Both are standing in the *crépuscule* (“twilight” / “dusk”) of the “Coming Dawn,” that is to say, are not directly exposed to the Divine Light that would kill them instantly. This shaded light (*crépuscule*), as I read it, allows them to see a glimpse of the Light and “hear the Living Word, without dying;” it also seems to “prepare their eyes to see the True Light.” “Le voile de chair qui le leur avait caché jusqu’alors s’évaporerait insensiblement et leur en laissait voir la divine substance. Ils demeurèrent dans le crépuscule de l’Aurore Naissante dont les faibles lueurs les préparaient à voir la Vraie Lumière, à entendre la

³⁶¹ Ibid., 851.

Parole Vive, sans en mourir.”³⁶² Instead of following Séraphîta in its self-annihilation, Wilfrid and Minna survive by merely witnessing it from the “shadow” which protects them.

Having survived the spectacle of mystical annihilation, Wilfrid and Minna join in marriage. In a letter to Hańska, Balzac describes the role that Séraphîta plays in their union in the following terms: “il est aimé par un homme et par une femme, auxquels il dit, en s’envolant aux cieux qu’ils ont aimé l’un et l’autre, l’amour qui les liait, en le voyant en lui, ange tout pur, et il leur révèle leur passion, leur laisse l’amour, en échappant à nos misères terrestres.”³⁶³ Balzac suggests that Minna and Wilfrid are bound together by the love that they have seen in the angelic being that they mutually loved and with whom they desired to join and unite. And indeed, throughout the text, Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta’s divinely sourced love repeatedly binds together Wilfrid and Minna.³⁶⁴ The angelic being first binds them through its touch: “Abattu par la fatigue, cet être inexplicable s’appuya pour la première fois sur Wilfrid et sur Minna pour revenir à son logis. Wilfrid et Minna se sentirent alors atteints par une contagion inconnue.”³⁶⁵ Séraphîtüs-Séraphîta’s touch sends a shock wave that connects all three beings together. The mysterious

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Balzac, “Histoire du texte” in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI., 1603.

³⁶⁴ Michel notes that Séraphîta tries to turn Wilfrid and Minna into an androgynous couple that would represent a tri-partite divine perfection once united by their *search of God*: “L’androgynie Séraphîta-Séraphîtüs joint en lui les pouvoirs masculins de l’esprit positif d’analyse et les puissances féminines de la foi. Il s’adresse, pout le convertir totalement à la recherche de Dieu, à un couple humain qui, à son tour, formera un androgynie, un esprit angélique : dans ce couple, Minna est tendresse, compassion, absolue confiance ; Wilfrid est, quant à lui, puissance de la volonté s’exerçant à la fois dans la passion et dans l’action. Annonçant la Tête d’or claudélien, il pousse l’esprit de révolte, d’opposition jusqu’à se faire conquérant universel et fléau de Dieu.” (Michel, *Le Réel et la beauté dans le roman balzacien*, 230-231).

³⁶⁵ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 840.

love that consumes the being communicates itself through its physical contact with Minna and Wilfrid; it penetrates their bodies like a contagious sickness that binds them together.

This physical contagion announces a spiritual contagion. It is only in and through their common love for God that Minna, Wilfrid and Séraphîta can be united. Séraphîtus says to Minna:

Dieu qui se met en nous pour y fleurir, exauce tous nos vœux, ne compte plus avec nous quand nous sommes à lui, mais se donne tout entier; nous ravit, nous amplifie, nous multiplie en lui ! enfin DIEU ! Minna, je t'aime, parce que tu peux être à lui ! Je t'aime, parce que, si tu viens à lui, tu seras à moi.³⁶⁶

At this point, Wilfrid cries out, in near unison with Minna:

Conduisez-nous, Séraphîta ! [...] tu m'as enfin donné soif de la Lumière et soif de la Parole ; je suis altéré de l'amour que tu m'as mis au cœur, je conserverai ton âme en la mienne ; jettes-y ton vouloir, je ferai ce que tu me diras de faire. Si je ne puis t'obtenir, je veux garder de toi tous les sentiments que tu me communiqueras ! Si je ne puis m'unir à toi que par ma seule force, je m'y attacherai comme le feu s'attache à ce qu'il dévore.³⁶⁷

The final union of Minna and Wilfrid occurs at the end of the novel, when, as Gwendolyn Bays writes in "Balzac as Seer:" "the eyes of Wilfrid and Minna are opened (i.e., they become seers)

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 842.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

and they are permitted to witness Séraphîta's entry into heaven after her death."³⁶⁸ Bays notes a shift in the types of love involved in the ascension scene. According to Bays, agape (Perfect, Divine Love/ God as Love) "triumphs" over eros (human love): "The climax of the novel comes when the androgyne is engaged in her one last struggle to break the bonds of the human condition. This consists in the total triumph within Séraphîta of agape over eros, of the impartial love of all creatures over the partial possession of one."³⁶⁹

Because of the Divine Love that it contains, Séraphîtus-Séraphîta breaks finally with its human lovers, Minna and Wilfrid. Divine Love triumphs over erotic love. But as Séraphîtus-Séraphîta breaks away from its human lovers to experience the all-consuming *jouissance* of Divine Love (translated as: God, at this point), it leaves behind, in its human lovers, a trace of this Divine Love. Even more, it is this trace of Divine Love, which is supposed to bind them in marriage.³⁷⁰ Minna and Wilfrid are thus bonded together by the love that they share for "God," i.e. Perfect, Eternal Love; however, this is a love for God that they do not fulfill by following Séraphîtus-Séraphîta's self-annihilating blissful experience. They are bound by a Divine Love, which is, as it were mitigated, in an erotic relationship. Although Divine Love is within them,

³⁶⁸ Bays, "Balzac the Seer" in *Yale French Studies*, no. 13, Romanticism Revisited (Yale University Press, 1954), 92.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

³⁷⁰ In *Balzac Occulte: Alchimie, Magnétisme, Sociétés Secrètes* (2012), Baron notes that this vision of the married couple as an androgynous unity, which Balzac derives from Swedenborg, fits his own conception of marriage: "Quant à l'idée swedenborgienne des deux essences divines, Amour et Sagesse, attribuées aux Esprits Angéliques, l'homme naturel, transformé d'abord par l'Amour, puis par la Sagesse, peut atteindre son accomplissement divin d'abord en devenant une créature dont l'âme est femme et le corps homme, puis par le mariage avec la femme, qui réalise l'union de l'Esprit d'Amour féminin et de l'Esprit de Sagesse masculin, de la volonté de la femme et de l'entendement de l'homme en un seul être et une seule chair. Vision idéale du couple humain qui comble l'amoureux de Mme Hanska. Séraphîta incarne l'être intérieur de sa prison corporelle, un ange en puissance. (Baron 2012, 228).

they will not unite with “God” and experience the all-consuming *jouissance* that would annihilate them as it did of the angelic being. Instead they will use this Divine Love to bind themselves erotically to each other in a human, erotic relationship that preserves them from a divine but annihilating *jouissance*.

At the end of the text, Balzac thus seems to prevent an idealized version of erotic relationship. It is this idyllic representation of human erotic relationship that he tries to practice in his epistolary relationship with Hańska whom he both describes and refers to as his human “angel” and “flower of heaven.”³⁷¹ In his letters to Hańska, Balzac indeed expresses in mystical terms his love for her. Their souls fuse together in “amour celeste,”³⁷² which forever unites him to her. She is his angel, his Eve, his beginning and end: “Je t'aime, mon ange de la terre, comme

³⁷¹ “Mon travail et toi, voilà le monde pour moi. Au-delà plus rien. J’évite tout ce qui n’est pas mon Éva, mes pensées. Chère fleur du ciel, ma fée, tu touches ici tout de ta baguette ; ici par toi, tout est beau. Quelque embarrassée que soit la vie, elle est unie, elle est plane ; au-dessus de ma tête, tu vois de beaux cieux !” (Balzac, “Letter no. 20: [Paris], mercredi [6 novembre 1833]” in *LETTRES A MADAME HANSKA* (1832-1844), T.I., Ed. Roger Pierrot (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1990), 85).

³⁷² “Amour céleste, que de choses j’ai à te dire, et pour lesquelles il faudrait les saintes heures pendant lesquelles le cœur sent le besoin de se mettre à nu. Les adorables plaisirs de l’amour ne sont que les moyens d’arriver à cette union, cette fusion des âmes.” (Balzac, “Letter no. 33: [Genève, janvier 1834]” in *LETTRES A MADAME HANSKA* (1832-1844), T.I., 113).

In a previous letter, Balzac’s reference to “amour céleste” is that of a place, which Hańska is for him. She is a heavenly sphere to which he desires to return to, whether that be in Geneva or Ukraine: “Je pense que chaque ligne écrite me rapproche de toi, comme un tour de roue, et alors je puise dans cette espérance, un courage infernal. Donc le 10 au plus tard je te verrai. Le 10 ! Je sais bien que les travaux immenses qui me restent vont un peu me raccourcir le temps, mon Dieu ! mon Dieu, Dieu auquel je crois, il me devait bien de douces émotions à la vue de Genève, car je l’ai quitté désolé, maudissant tout, abhorrant la femme. Avec quelle joie j’y rentrerai, mon céleste amour, mon Éva. Emmène moi dans ton Ukraine, allons avant en Italie, tout cela sera possible, le *Études de mœurs* une fois publiées.” (Balzac, “Letter no. 26: Samedi [23-dimanche 24 novembre]” in *LETTRES A MADAME HANSKA* (1832-1844), T.I., 101-102).

on aimait au Moyen-âge, avec la plus entière des fidélités.”³⁷³ She is described as the sole reason for his need to succeed in his writing; and thus, he works tirelessly to be worthy of her and praise her with the glory of his accomplishments. In particular, he writes to his “angel,” Hańska, this story of an angel that is *Séraphîta*.

Dedicated to a human angel, *Séraphîta* was, I believe, Balzac’s attempt to both explore and survive the destructive appeal of melancholia through the act of writing. In the writing of *Séraphîta*, he both engages with and remains distant from the menacing gaping hole of melancholia and the sublime but destructive light, which emanates from it. This distance allows him to write the sublime light of melancholia, and to write it in violet ink. Although it is unknown today whether Balzac purposely or unwittingly, perhaps out of mere convenience, wrote more than half the novel with “violet ink” on “pale blue” paper, the fact that he did is oddly evocative of the image of Heaven as a *blue sky* and of the blankness that is also implied by the space offered to write, i.e. the blank paper itself:

Le manuscrit de *Séraphîta* (91 feuillets) est écrit sur papier bleu pâle, au filigrane J.

Whatman, de format 21 X 27. Les quatre premiers chapitres sont écrits à l’encre violâtre employée en 1833 et 1834. Les chapitres V, VI, VIII, IX et le projet d’*Envoi* à Mme Hanska sont écrits à l’encre mordorée, employée postérieurement à juillet 1834 et antérieurement à l’automne de 1835. Le chapitre VII, rédigé à la fin de novembre 1835,

³⁷³ Balzac, “Letter no. 33: [Genève, janvier 1834]” in *LETTRES A MADAME HANSKA* (1832-1844), T.I., 113.

est écrit à l'encre brun noir, ainsi que la Préface du *Livre mystique* (celle-ci sur papier crème).³⁷⁴

Violet³⁷⁵, as a derivation of purple, which is comprised of the colors red and blue, is in itself a *poetic* color, in that *violet* is only achieved by the harmonious and “fluid”³⁷⁶ combination of the

³⁷⁴ Balzac, “Histoire du texte” in *La Comédie Humaine*, T. XI., 1613.

³⁷⁵ In *The Secret Language of Color* (2013), Joann Eckstut and Arielle Eckstut define violet as: “[...] a spectral color unto itself – a wavelength in the form of visible light – and the shortest wavelength visible to humans. It lies at the opposite end of the visible spectrum from the color we perceive as red, which boasts the spectrum’s longest wavelength. [...] Unlike on a color wheel, you will not see red-violet in the form of visible light. Red sits all the way at one end of the spectrum and violet on the other. If they’re not next to each other, they can’t mix.” (Eckstut & Eckstut 2013, 222). This definition of violet exposes an elusive quality to the color that further complicates its nature and distinguishes it from purple, which is just a mixture of the colors, red and blue.

³⁷⁶ According to Eckstut & Eckstut, there is an arbitrariness to color because color “merges” and blends with light, which makes its components seem “fluid,” difficult to “pin down,” and, in more Newtonian terms, even “musical” (Eckstut & Eckstut 2013, 13). However, despite these *fluid* aspects and violet’s “bluish purple” appearance, violet is marked as completely separate from purple: “The language of color is fluid, morphing over time and across geographies in response to cultural forces that are sometimes too complex to pin down. For example, the color Newton called indigo is the one most people would identify as plain old blue or a true blue that falls midway between green and violet. Newton’s blue is what we now call cyan, a more turquoise blue that falls between blue and green. As for the name of the last color in the rainbow, why is it violet as opposed to purple? Violet refers to the spectral color that looks bluish purple. Purple refers not to a spectral color but to a color created by a mix of light. [...] Regardless of their numbers, the colors Newton called spectral should not be confused with the colors we’ve been taught are the primary colors that cannot be mixed and are therefore fundamental (i.e. red, blue, and yellow) or the class of shades known as secondary colors (i.e. orange, green, and purple). These secondary colors, we’ve been taught, result from the mixing of the primary colors – red and yellow make orange, red and blue make purple, and blue and yellow make green – and therefore are not fundamental. But what Newton found was that orange, green, and violet (which, to repeat, differs from purple) can be spectral and just as fundamental as the colors we call primary. Orange, for example, can result from a mix of light, but it can also be pure. The same is true for red, blue, and yellow, even though we call them ‘primaries.’ You can tell a color that is a mixture of light from a spectral color by passing the light through a prism. The orange light that is a mix will break into its components when passed through a prism, but pure orange light will not.” (Eckstut & Eckstut 2013, 13-16).

color, blue, and ultraviolet³⁷⁷ light, which is not visible to the naked eye. This small but significant factor shows that violet is a hybrid of elements of that which is visible and that which is not. *Séraphîta*, the text, is also metaphorically “violet” in the sense that Balzac’s poetic style in this text manages to make its reader feel the ultraviolet light of melancholia which itself combines the visible with the invisible, the material with the immaterial, insofar as it comes from an empty abyss.

With *Séraphîta* and in the poetry of his style, Balzac also managed to give his readers a sense of the “melody” of melancholia. To ascend into the celestial light of melancholia is indeed to ascend into a melodious (harmonious) light that is disconnected from and beyond human language:

La lumière enfantait la mélodie, la mélodie enfantait la lumière, les couleurs étaient lumière et mélodie, le mouvement était un Nombre doué de la Parole ; enfin, tout y était à la fois sonore, diaphane, mobile, en sorte que chaque chose se pénétrant l’une par l’autre, l’étendue était sans obstacle et pouvait être parcourue par les Anges dans la profondeur de l’infini. [...] Ce fut pour eux une vue sans ligne d’horizon, un abîme dans lequel un dévorant désir les forçait à se plonger ; mais, attachés à leur misérable corps, ils avaient le désir sans avoir la puissance.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ “Ultraviolet isn’t actually a form of violet; its wavelength lies somewhere between that of violet and x-rays. Although it is invisible to humans (many birds and insects can see it), it plays an important role in our lives.” (Ibid., 226).

³⁷⁸ Balzac, *Séraphîta*, 855.

To ascend into the light of melancholia, as *Séraphîta* does, means then to lose both one's life and one's speech by going beyond human language. Melancholia in that sense is an idealized version of the speechlessness attached to a depression, i.e. *acedia*, which Starobinski describes in the following terms:

C'est une lourdeur, une torpeur, une absence d'initiative, un désespoir total à l'égard du salut. Certains la décrivent comme une tristesse qui rend muet, comme une aphonie spirituelle, véritable « extinction de voix » de l'âme. Elle tarit en nous le pouvoir de parole et d'oraison. L'être intérieur s'enferme dans son mutisme et refuse de se communiquer au-dehors. (Kierkegaard parlera d'*hermétisme*.) Ainsi le dialogue avec autrui et avec Dieu est asséché, tari dans sa source même. Un bâillon couvre la bouche de la victime de l'*acedia*. L'homme a comme englouti et dévoré sa propre langue : le langage lui est retiré.³⁷⁹

While depression views its muteness as incapacity, melancholia idealizes muteness as bliss beyond language. In order to write, Balzac remains within articulated language, at a distance from the melodious call of melancholia. But his poetic style in *Séraphîta*, nevertheless, gives a sense of the deadly ecstasy of melancholia, a bliss that would render one speechless.

³⁷⁹ Jean Starobinski, *L'Encre de la Mélancolie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012), 51-52.

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