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The letter as a narrative device in the novels of Balzac

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City University of New York, 1990

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THE LETTER AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE IN THE NOVELS OF BALZAC

by

MARIAN WASSNER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in French
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1990

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in French in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

THE LETTER AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE IN THE NOVELS OF BALZAC

by

Marian Wassner

Adviser: Professor Rosette Lamont

Letters abound in Balzac's novels: letters of courtship and love, moralizing and philosophical letters, letters of confidence and confession. This dissertation will examine epistolary texts in La Comédie humaine to see how Balzac made them serve the requirements of his fiction.

Balzac used letters to construct plot and manipulate action: prospectively, to impinge upon the course of events; retrospectively, to influence our interpretation of their meaning; or dispersed at key junctures, to highlight critical nodes of narrative structure. This master of prose fiction distilled the lyricism inherent in epistolary discourse; by using letters to elaborate thematic elements, he enhanced the poetic resonance of his narratives. Balzac exploited letters to complete the portraits sketched by his narrator, balancing the latter's less-than-omniscient perspective with biographical information from other sources. These missives stand, like all personal documents,

as powerful, irrefutable testimony in which characters exonerate or indict themselves, without the narrator's often biased support or accusations.

Letters, Balzac realized, firmly supported the didactic orientation of his fictional enterprise: to describe the social world in its myriad manifestations, to explain the causes and laws regulating its functioning, to analyze the principles underlying its existence. The moral, political, or philosophical disquisitions that advance such an endeavor--lengthy, abstract, and ponderous--are readily accommodated by the epistolary form. Balzac also recognized that as a narrative instrument, the power of the letter is magnified by its linguistic status. In substance, letters are words, and as such, they deploy all of language's wily and duplicitous potential--a potential that can boomerang, betraying the unwary writer just as readily as it misleads and mystifies the hapless reader. In form, letters replicate the relationship of author to reader, and Balzac exploited this mirroring to benefit both parties, the one engaged in the process of inventing and shaping narrative, the other, in the equally creative process of interpreting it.

Thus, the correspondences that fill the pages of La Comédie humaine develop the structures, themes, characters, and ideas of its narratives in a variety of aesthetically valuable ways.

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I am indebted to two other persons for their assistance. The fine editorial judgment of my colleague, Robert Ginsberg, helped me to clarify and simplify my writing; he is truly an "editor's editor." The involvement and insights of my friend, Herbert Edlis, have, from the earliest stages, been of enormous value to me.

To the memory of my father, Milton Wassner

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Introduction

The richness and diversity of the world created by Balzac in La Comédie humaine never fails to dazzle its readers. An abundance of milieux and settings, a wealth of personalities displaying characters, temperaments, and intellects of multiform range, a vast repertoire of humble events, melodramatic situations, and dramatic crises, the full spectrum of popular and religious beliefs, political and moral attitudes, philosophical theories and systems of thought: no aspect of existence, no matter how mundane or lofty, is neglected by the creator of the universe comprised by La Comédie humaine. Balzac's art, however, is multifarious not only in what it represents, but in the means of narrative representation at its disposal. Intricate plotlines, portraits, landscapes and interiors, dialogues and letters, techniques of autobiographical and sentimental narrative, devices of melodramatic and gothic adventure: there is no narrative strategy available to novelists of his time that Balzac did not exploit and master--and he even invented a few, expanding the art of the novelist and raising it to a new height.

Balzac was deeply interested in the question of narrative technique, especially as it pertained to enhancing the novelist's power to create a heterogeneous and real-

seeming fictional world. He returns to this issue quite often in his articles, correspondence, and novels. In his "Avant-propos" to La Comédie humaine he lauds Walter Scott's contribution to the art of the novel: "il y réunissait à la fois le drame, le dialogue, le portrait, le paysage, la description . . ." (1: 10).¹ Among the characters who populate his fictional world, he creates writers such as Emile Blondet, who expound his own conception of the novel: "'Notre jeune littérature procède par tableaux'" explains Blondet to Lucien de Rubempré, "'où se concentrent tous les genres, la comédie et le drame, les descriptions, les caractères, le dialogue sertis par les noeuds brillants d'une intrigue intéressante.'"² The "roman image totale de la vie"³ is thus as much a matter of the technical diversity of the art available to the artist as it is the substantive diversity of the world he creates. Indeed, the extent to which the latter reflects the real world is a function of the scope and richness of the former.

This dissertation will focus on a narrative technique particularly favored by Balzac, that of letters written by characters to each other. The epistolary aspect of Balzac's

¹ All references to La Comédie humaine are to the Pléiade edition, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-81). Volume and page numbers are given in parentheses immediately following each quotation.

² Illusions perdues, 5: 459. Qtd. by Madeleine Fargeaud, notes, "Avant-propos," La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 1: 1123, note 7.

³ Fargeaud 1123, note 7.

art is appealing for reasons both biographical and aesthetic. Balzac was himself an indefatigable letter writer, maintaining a prolific correspondence with family, friends, and lovers, with editors and publishers, with other writers and thinkers of his time, despite the demands of an arduous writing schedule. His correspondence with Laure de Berny exhibits the full range of amorous epistolary discourse, including letters of courtship and passion, as well as those of affection and devotion. The letters exchanged with his unusually sensitive friend, Zulma Carraud, reveal a side of the writer that he shared with few others. His extensive correspondence with Evelina Hanska includes lengthy discourses on his opinions and values as well as on his literary vision: it is in a letter to Mme Hanska that Balzac first articulates the guiding concept behind La Comédie humaine. And, of course, to l'Etrangère he wrote romantic missives both passionate and tender--but deceptive ones as well. To allay the jealous suspicions of his distant lover, Balzac resorted without qualm to epistolary poses, exaggerations, and outright lies. Through his own experience, then, Balzac was adept at exploiting the opportunities offered by the art of letter writing, both to communicate and to conceal. He could be expansive and revealing in his letters--about his work, his ideas, and his feelings--but guarded or secretive as well. He was expressive and sincere in some letters, manipulative and dishonest in others.

The epistolary aspect is a compelling angle from which to study La Comédie humaine because of Balzac's own interest in the genre and the significant role that letters play in the fictional world he created. He was familiar with the work of Samuel Richardson, whose Pamela had launched the vogue of the epistolary novel in Europe in 1742.

Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe is evoked in Balzac's correspondence as well as in several of his novels: Le Lys dans la vallée, La Peau de chagrin, La Fille aux yeux d'or, and the preface to L'Histoire des treize.⁴ He seems to have been especially intrigued by the pathos of that novel's heroine, a quality fostered by the immediacy of Richardson's epistolary method: writing "to the moment, while the heart is agitated by hopes and fears."⁵ Balzac's interest in the genre was not, of course, solely a theoretical one. The young author's earliest attempt at writing fiction was an epistolary novel, Sténie ou les erreurs de la philosophie, which bore the unmistakable stamp of the great French epistolary novel that swept late eighteenth century Europe, Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse. It is notable that both the theme (marriage in its relation to love) and the structure (a debate between opposing points of view) of Rousseau's

⁴ Moïse Le Yaouanc, notes, Le Lys dans la vallée (Paris: Garnier, 1966) 96, note 2.

⁵ Samuel Richardson, preface, Sir Charles Grandison. Qtd. by François Jost, "L'Évolution d'un genre: le roman épistolaire dans les lettres occidentales," Essais de Littérature Comparée, 2 vols. (Fribourg, Switzerland: Ed. Universitaires, 1968) 2: 132.

novel were to leave an indelible mark on Balzac's subsequent work,⁶ especially Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées, his only other attempt in the epistolary genre. Sténie, written at the beginning of his career, was to remain unfinished, but Mémoires, published in 1842 toward the end, is considered one of his finest novels.

If we were to judge the epistolary aspect of Balzac's art only from his references to such novels as Clarissa Harlowe, La Nouvelle Héloïse, and Laclos' Les Liaisons dangereuses, and by his own two endeavors (one incomplete, the other, masterful) in the genre, our perspective would be rather limited. For one of the most striking aspects of La Comédie humaine is the preponderance of letters that fill its pages: letters of courtship and love, letters of separation and rupture, moralizing and philosophical letters, letters of confidence and confession, letters sincere and treacherous. Correspondences abound in La Comédie humaine, developing the themes, characters, and plots of its novels in diverse and fascinating ways. We may well ask why Balzac resorted so frequently and with such obvious delight to this device. What aesthetic functions are served by the fictional correspondences in La Comédie humaine?

For Balzac's predecessors, the appeal of the epistolary genre was linked to the diminishing importance of exoticism

⁶ Arlette Michel, "Balzac, le roman par lettres et les genres du roman," Le Genre du roman--les genres de romans (Paris: PUF, 1980) 84.

and escapist tendencies in the novel.⁷ Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, the novel is viewed as a medium for reflecting, if not representing, the truth, and psychological truth is especially valued. As a result, the modern novel increasingly favors observation over fantasy and exhibits a trend toward reportage and documentary. In keeping with the belief that documents somehow guarantee the truth, almost all novels published in the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century take the form of a document: *mémoires*, journals, biographies, and, with increasing frequency, correspondences. Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées certainly falls into this category of novel-as-document, even though it is written during a period when the seriousness of fiction writing has been rather well established. Balzac poses as the editor of the correspondence between Louise de Chaulieu and René de l'Estorade, which he pretends to have discovered rather than created as the basis for his fiction (1: 193-94). This narratorial posture seems a contrived effort to satisfy the by this time rather quaint eighteenth-century requirement for providing the illusion of authenticity in fiction.⁸ The contrivance is hardly central to the interest of this novel,

⁷ The following remarks on the connection between the development of the epistolary genre and the evolution of eighteenth-century fictional aesthetics are based on Jost 96-99.

⁸ See Jean Rousset, Forme et signification (Paris: José Corti, 1962) 75-76 and Laurent Versini, Le Roman épistolaire (Paris: PUF, 1979) 51-52.

and it does not accompany other letters found in Balzac's novels. This is because the epistolarity of La Comédie humaine is not primarily a device to guarantee fictional realism, a function that is served by the lengthy descriptions--detailed portraits, landscapes, cityscapes, and interiors--accorded so prominent a place in its pages. These descriptions, by their abundance and richness of detail, establish an extensive and solid foundation upon which a very real universe is easily erected.

The epistolary aspect of Balzac's fiction is related to factors other than literary realism, and foremost among those factors is Balzac's abiding interest in language. "Language," Martin Kanes writes, "is one of the great themes, if not the greatest theme, of Balzac's work."⁹ The centrality of language to Balzac's art is apparent in several ways. It can be argued, first, that the artist's ambition to become the "secrétaire de la société" was inspired and sustained by his belief in the power of language. After all, that enterprise relied, by definition, on the representation of reality through the manipulation of words. More pertinent to this study is the fact that linguistic elements pervade La Comédie humaine at every level of its conception and realization.¹⁰ In its pages,

⁹ Balzac's Comedy of Words (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975) 6.

¹⁰ The following discussion is based on the comprehensive analysis of linguistic elements in La Comédie humaine that Kanes provides in Balzac's Comedy of Words.

language functions in such diverse ways as theme, as metaphor, or as a catalyst of action.¹¹ Individual characters and groups in the novels are endowed with distinctive patterns of speech and even, at times, their own languages. A richly variegated universe of types and milieux, La Comédie humaine constitutes a correspondingly extensive universe of languages: the linguistic mannerisms of aristocrats and bourgeois, the speech of merchants and peasants, the lingo of students and artists, the quirky tongues of criminals and outcasts. Moreover, the narrator frequently comments on the characters' choice of words, on the imagery they use, on the tone in which they speak. He speculates on the nature of language, thereby weaving into the narrative texture such inherently linguistic themes as music, gesture, and creativity. And this orientation toward abstract matters affords him ample opportunity to explore the mind-world question, an ancient epistemological problem hotly debated by Cartesians and sensualists of the time, which was inseparable from linguistic considerations. Indeed, language in its relation to will, thought, and expression is the very subject matter of such novels as La Peau de chagrin and Louis Lambert.

Correspondences and letters must certainly be considered a key linguistic phenomenon of La Comédie humaine, which we may add to this catalogue. From the point

¹¹ See Kanes's discussion of the "word-event," 167-88.

of view of language, epistolary passages occupy a privileged position within narrative. Not only do they comprise (along with descriptions, dialogues, and other elements out of which the novel is constructed) the text of narrative; they function as text within it. They are written words that represent the written word, composed by authors and read by readers who, in a very active sense, replicate the author-reader relationship on which the enterprise of fiction rests. In its linguistic aspect, then, the letter may be seen as a kind of microcosm of the fictional world created by the collaboration of novelist and reader.

Like dialogue, epistolary passages in novels are the directly quoted words of the characters, and typographically they are presented as such. As a result, they are external to the stream of discourse emanating from the narrator. This characteristic of letters gives them a very important role within the dynamics of narrative, one whose appeal to Balzac merits closer scrutiny. To the extent that it incorporates texts for which the narrator is not responsible, which he cannot use to manipulate the reader, with which he cannot in any way tamper to alter the development or outcome of the narrative, the novel escapes the central problem of narratorial omniscience: its attempt to encompass all of reality. Novels written during the heyday of realism have been challenged, in the most fundamental way, for their assumption that a story can be narrated at all, much less by one individual. Balzac's

fictional world, with its ubiquitous, domineering narrator, is particularly vulnerable to this criticism. Balzac is often accused of throwing his support, via the coercive effect of his narrator's vociferous presence, to this character or that one, of showing his sympathies for one side or the other. As a result, the universe of La Comédie humaine, its critics have contended, is strongly colored by its author's beliefs, opinions, and prejudices, a coloration that distorts its reflection and representation of reality.

The frequency with which Balzac has recourse to devices such as dialogue and letters, which shut out the narrator and build into the narrative interpretations that undermine and challenge his limited and often skewed perspective, reveals a considerably more complex narrative dynamics at work in La Comédie humaine than the one suggested by this criticism. Epistolary passages, because they are usually less well integrated into the narrative than dialogue, offer an especially good opportunity for the novelist to vary the point of view. In Balzac's fictional world, letters often complete or expand the narrator's picture, as is the case with the correspondence between Rastignac and his family in Le Père Goriot. Just as often, they serve to balance the narrator's representation of events, and they may even outright oppose it. In Le Lys dans la vallée, Mme de Mortsauf's letters, for example, are not transformed by the prism of Félix's interpretation, which mediates all other events in his confession; her posthumous letter reveals her

impassioned sensuality, which Félix's narration had overlooked, repressed, or concealed. And Henri de Marsay's long letter at the close of Le Contrat de mariage contains a series of revelations that leave Paul de Manerville stunned. While somewhat less in the dark about Mme Evangelista than the hapless hero of this novel, the reader is nonetheless surprised by the extent of the duplicity and opportunism of which de Marsay impugns her daughter. Balzac's characters need not rely on the strong arm of the narrator to point an accusing finger! Through letters they challenge, judge, and indict each other.

With even greater frequency, the letters these characters write serve as powerful, often damning self-indictments. This, of course, is a natural characteristic of epistolary discourse, indeed, of all discourse: Qui s'excuse, s'accuse. As soon as they open their lips to speak or take pen to paper to explain, these characters reveal secret motivations, hidden attachments, unshakable involvements. In the absence or silence of their interlocutors--which is, by definition, the letter writer's position--they talk on, building a mountain of evidence with which to incriminate themselves, sealing the case for their condemnation. Count Octave de Bauvan's erotic attachment to his estranged wife (Honorine); Félix de Vandenesse's astonishingly insensitive courtship of one woman by his obsessive confession of passion for another (Le Lys dans la vallée); Charles Grandet's callous abandonment of his

amorous and generous cousin (Eugénie Grandet): these are but a few examples of fundamental attitudes revealed by these characters' own self-incriminating epistolary texts, rather than by the narrator's intrusive testimony. Balzac's masterful exploitation of the judgmental potential of letters is certainly central to the power they hold in his novels.

The epistolary aspect of Balzac's art is extremely rich and might lend itself to a number of topics for study. Arlette Michel has provided an overview of the categories of epistolary texts in La Comédie humaine and examined them for clues to the aesthetic principles of the Balzacian novel.¹² François Jost has suggested that the degree of epistolarity of certain of Balzac's novels might be a fruitful topic to explore.¹³ The subject of this dissertation is the letter as a narrative device. We will examine the texts of letters in La Comédie humaine to see how they serve the diverse needs of the novelist and storyteller with regard to structuring plot and action, developing theme and character, expounding theories and ideas. We will explore Balzac's mastery of epistolary discourse to advance the narrative by the circuitous means of deception and concealment as well as through the reader's reactions, which may occasionally appear to undermine or thwart it.

¹² "roman par lettres" 81-104.

¹³ Jost 127.

In chapter 1 we shall analyze narrative segments built upon letters to show how Balzac used them to structure narrative. Le Lys dans la vallée provides the most notable example among his novels (with the obvious exception of Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées) of the centrality of letters to narrative structure. In some novels (Modeste Mignon), the initial epistolarity of the structure has a powerful influence on the subsequent course of the action. In others (Le Contrat de mariage), the closing epistolary structure provides a retrospective analysis of the events in the narrative, bringing it into a sharp and surprising focus. Even when letters are not concentrated in any one portion of the narrative but scattered judiciously throughout it, they articulate its fundamental turning points and catalyze the tensions that drive it forward (La Femme abandonnée). Or they may provide a scaffolding that gives the narrative the structure of classical tragedy (Honorine).

Chapter 2 will examine the use of letters to introduce or develop key motifs and themes in the novel. The character writing a letter may resort more freely to metaphor, may lapse more readily into the suggestive language of reverie or uninhibited thought than the character engaged in dialogue. This emotional freedom frequently affords them sad or unwelcome insights into events or vaguely articulated intuitions about their unfortunate destinies. Thus letters may enrich the thematic structure

of the novel by providing a lyrical, often tragic, resonance to the various motifs present within it. In this chapter we will analyze thematic elements of letters in Pierrette, Le Curé de village, and Honorine, in order to highlight the poetic dimension that letters bring to narrative.

Chapter 3 will focus on the ease with which the epistolary form lends itself to the diverse requirements of characterization within the narrative. In addition to the portraits painted by the Balzacian narrator, an entire gallery of portraits emerges from the observations and information conveyed by writers of letters in the novel: self-portraits, portraits of the recipient, portraits of a third party. In this chapter we will show how Balzac uses letters to develop essential aspects of main characters (Félix de Vandenesse in Le Lys dans la vallée, Rastignac in Le Père Goriot), to sketch background characters (Grossetête in Le Curé de village) or characters wholly absent from the action (Guillaume Grandet in Eugénie Grandet).

In chapter 4 the didactic aspects of epistolary texts in Le Curé de village, Le Contrat de mariage, Béatrix, and Le Lys dans la vallée will be examined. Letters are a natural and effective tool of influence. They may be used to give advice and warnings for very specific ends and to propose codes of behavior that offer more general and extensive guidance. Whatever form they take--pleas, exhortations, confessions, testaments--they manifest the letter writer's efforts to influence from afar, from a

perspective that may be spiritually or morally exalted as well as geographically remote. Because of the letter writers' constant concern to buttress their advice and counsel with reasons and explanations of underlying principles and causes, the letter frequently fills the important role of exploring the more profound considerations--social, political, philosophical--behind the scenes of everyday life. This chapter will demonstrate how the letter in its capacity as a vehicle of influence may double as a vehicle of ideas.

Letters in which language is used to mislead and mystify rather than to clarify and communicate openly will be the subject of chapter 5: we shall examine how style, tone, imagery, and structure convey concealed messages, meanings "between the lines." Sometimes the letter writer is unaware of the covert messages buried in his or her letter. Such hidden messages may appear in the form of subliminal disclosures. Her epistolary assertions and denials notwithstanding, the fact that Béatrix de Rochefide no longer loves Gennaro Conti is immediately apparent to certain alert readers of her letter to Félicité des Touches (Béatrix). And Claire de Beauséant does not seem consciously aware of the message of invitation contained in her letter of rupture to Gaston de Neuil (La Femme abandonnée). More frequently, letter writers have hidden agendas of which they may be very aware but which, through cunning and trickery, they labor to conceal from their

interlocutors. These covert messages take the shape of probes, snares and traps, subtle posturing, or overt lies, examples of which will be found in the letters of Natalie de Manerville to her husband Paul (Le Contrat de mariage), and of Béatrix to Calyste du Guénic (Béatrix). Occasionally, however, it happens that letters deliberately written to conceal the truth subtly function to advance a rightful cause, which in Modeste Mignon is the crystallization of authentic sentiments between two correspondents. In this chapter we shall explore the ways in which epistolary language may be manipulated to create multiple layers of meaning; we shall see how the letter may serve as a device to convey meaning in narrative by disguising and concealing it.

In chapter 6 our perspective will shift from the letter itself to that of its reader. Within the novel, a letter may fall into many different hands--those of characters for whom the letter is clearly not intended, as well as those of the character to whom it is addressed. Readers of letters may be attentive or inattentive, consentive or nonconsentive to the messages contained in the letters they read. They may react in ways that advance or thwart the letter writer's efforts. The cognitive responses of readers to letters may vary as widely as their behavior. Readers may be astute or naïve in deciphering messages; they may "read" the messages they wish to find; they may misapprehend a letter's message entirely. In this chapter we shall consider how the

interpretations and reactions of letter readers in Eugénie Grandet, Béatrix, Albert Savarus, and Le Lys dans la vallée shape the narrative. We shall also examine the significance of the fictional relationship between letter reader and letter writer for the pragmatic relationship (between novel reader and author) that it mirrors.

The narrative uses of the letter in La Comédie humaine is a rich subject that will not be exhausted in this dissertation. Given the wealth of novels in which Balzac resorts to the letter as a narrative device, an explanation of the rationale for the choice of novels treated here is in order. First, since our focus is on narrative strategies rather than the epistolary novel per se, Sténie and Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées were excluded from the scope of this study. Second, our selection was guided by the narrative functions for which we will analyze the letter's use: structure, theme, character, etc. Certainly Balzac exploited letters to develop narrative in ways not considered in this dissertation; manipulation of the temporal framework of the novel through epistolary maneuvers is but one example. Admittedly, this is another way of saying that our choice of novels was in good part arbitrary; unavoidably, there is a certain degree of arbitrariness in all limitations of subject matter. The novels examined in this study are those that offered the best illustrations of the subject as delineated in the chapters described above.

Chapter 1. Constructing Novels through Letters:

Modeste Mignon, Béatrix, Honorine, Le Contrat de mariage,
Le Lys dans la vallée, La Femme abandonnée

The study of the formal characteristics of any genre or subgenre leads quite naturally to a fundamental aesthetic question: What is the relation of structure to meaning? Jean Rousset, who devoted an entire chapter of his Forme et signification to an analysis of the epistolary genre, saw structure as the key perspective for literary understanding, the one through which a work's meaning can be grasped; "saisir des significations à travers des formes"¹ is his guiding purpose. In Janet Altman's study of epistolarity, the focus is on "those occasions . . . when the creation of meaning derives from the structures and potential specific to the letter form."² In studies such as these, the term structure designates any configuration of recurring characteristics that confers unity to a literary work; we may speak of formal structures, but also of thematic,

¹ Rousset i.

² Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982) 4.

metaphoric, or philosophical structures, and so on. For Rousset, the autonomous universe comprised by a work is a function of these underlying structures.³ In this chapter, the term structure will be used to refer to a more specific and limited aesthetic entity, that of narrative action. In an epistolary novel, the structure or narrative action (we shall use the terms interchangeably) is entirely relayed or controlled through letters. However, letters may be used to develop the action even when they are only part of the narrative mosaic, indeed, even in novels in which the proportion of letters to other components of narrative is very limited. How, then, does the creation or manipulation of narrative structure through letters generate meaning?

The novels in La Comédie humaine vary widely in their degree of epistolarity, ranging from those in which only one or two letters influence the course of the action to those in which an extensive correspondence has a critical impact on it. The effect of a correspondence, however, may not always be proportionate to its volume within the narrative. In the first part of Béatrix, the single letter Béatrix writes Félicité from Italy has, as we shall see, a rather significant impact on the action. But this is not the case for the packet of correspondence with which the third part of that novel opens. A veritable diary in epistolary form,

³ Rousset (xii) defines structures as: "ces constantes formelles, ces liaisons qui trahissent un univers mental et que chaque artiste réinvente selon ses besoins."

these eight lengthy letters written by Sabine de Grandlieu to her mother over a six-month period paint the neglected bride's unhappiness and her longing for her husband's affection. Despite their vividness and rather important psychological function, these letters have no effect whatever on the action; the essence of this narrative lies elsewhere. Thus, the bulk of a correspondence does not always provide a reliable indication of its significance within the narrative structure.

The approach we shall take to the question of how the construction of narrative through letters generates meaning is to examine the role of the letter as a vehicle for revealing information that moves the narrative forward. How is the narrative affected by the use of letters, rather than by such other devices as dialogue or narratorial commentary, to stimulate, deter, or illuminate the action? The location of letters within the framework of the action, not solely a matter of logistical interest, is closely related to their role. We may distinguish among those letters that are concentrated at the beginning of a narrative and have a prospective influence on its action, those whose proliferation toward the end have a retrospective effect on the action, and those that appear at, or in some way articulate, its fundamental turning points. As we shall see, the development, interpretation, or reverberation of events within a narrative may be significantly affected by epistolary intervention.

Some fifty pages at the beginning of Modeste Mignon (a novel itself inspired by the correspondence of the celebrated author with his distant Polish mistress) are taken up by the letters exchanged between two of its characters. The structure of this narrative is determined by its initial epistolarity, whose convoluted effects may strike some readers as bizarre. Modeste Mignon is a young girl hopelessly caught up with the romantic dreams that an addiction to literature nourish and misled by the excesses of her vivid imagination. A lithograph of the poet Canalis, drawn with deliberate falseness (the better to feed the fantasies of his adoring female public) inspires her to initiate a correspondence with the man of her dreams. Her anonymous letter is answered, not by the blasé poet, a vain, pretentious social climber, but by his secretary, Ernest de La Brière, a highly intelligent young man whose modesty and sensitivity make him quite willing to hide his own light beneath the bushel of Canalis's glory. The correspondents divulge their innermost feelings and thoughts in the epistolary romance in which they become engaged, but steadfastly maintain the secret of their identities.

We might normally expect that a correspondence of courtship, which the letters between Modeste Mignon and Ernest de La Brière certainly comprise, would end with a betrothal. But the anticipated marriage does not take place until an additional one hundred fifty pages of narrative have unfolded. The correspondence is itself directly

responsible for this subsequent protraction and complication of the action, for it instigates a new ritual of courtship once its elaborate admixture of sincerity and subterfuge is exposed. La Brière passes the difficult trial-by-correspondence that Modeste imposes, proving himself, through his letters, to be a man of integrity. But the disclosure of his imposture completely undermines his position, and he must submit to a new round of trials to prove himself worthy of her love. Thus the novel's structure is grounded on the correspondence that occupies a relatively brief portion of its opening pages. At first, narrative interest is concentrated in the exchange of letters between the enraptured heroine and the "faux Canalis." Then it subsides along with the correspondence that draws to a close, only to vigorously rebound with the shock and mistrust that the revelation of La Brière's identity (whose concealment the correspondence fostered) inspire in the heroine.

If we reduce the action of Modeste Mignon to its simplest terms, we see that the support provided by the opening letters is achieved through rather circuitous means. The narrative follows a young girl as she relinquishes her cherished illusions and becomes an adult: "C'est la lutte entre la poésie et le fait, entre l'illusion et la société. C'est le dernier enseignement avant de passer aux scènes de

l'âge mûr."⁴ Instead of supporting the narrative's demystifying mission, however, the correspondence leads the heroine down a blind alley, nurturing her illusion that words are the mirror of a man's heart, the very error that first drew her to the poet so ill-suited to her. The irony is that Modeste rejects her romantic notions precisely when they correspond to reality: La Brière's letters do reflect his character, despite the deception of which they partake. In the non-epistolary portion of the narrative, the heroine learns to distinguish between phony or empty expressions of feeling and sincere ones, a distinction that, as we shall see in chapter 5, the letter form may frequently serve to obfuscate.

The prospective influence of correspondence in the first part of Béatrix is even more striking, because a single letter is involved, making its impact on the narrative action greatly out of proportion to its volume. The letter in which Béatrix de Rochefide announces to Félicité des Touches her plans to visit her at her country manor in Brittany does not function as an isolated stimulus to the action; but it does serve as a focal point for the other devices through which the action is manipulated, and it is designated by the narrator as the single most

⁴ Honoré de Balzac, March 16-17, 1844, letter 219 of Lettres à Madame Hanska, ed. Roger Pierrot, 4 vols. (Paris: Editions du Delta, 1967-71) 2: 404.

important influence on it. Béatrix's letter symbolically highlights a critical moment of the larger drama that is played out in this narrative, the one that pits Calyste's family and the traditions of the past against all that is represented by des Touches and the attraction of Paris and modern life. True, Calyste has yielded to the pull of des Touches long before Béatrix's entry on the scene. But, owing largely to Félicité's stubborn resistance, nothing has as yet occurred to sever his bond to his family. Béatrix's impending arrival threatens to do just that, and this critical event is prepared by three narrative devices: Félicité's portrait of Béatrix, Claude Vignon's provocative remarks to Calyste about her, and Béatrix's letter. The letter links these three devices and concentrates their impact. The portrait that Félicité paints of her friend is artfully composed to provide a tantalizing backdrop for the young man as he reads Béatrix's missive. Claude Vignon's taunting suggestion of a romance between Calyste and the woman whose image has taken hold of his imagination is a sarcastic jab prompted by the youth's misinterpretation of the letter. The letter itself cements the spell on Calyste, for its words give concrete form to the romantic aura surrounding Béatrix and disseminate (for Calyste, at any rate) the myth of the beautiful Parisian woman in love trailing a charmed existence across the byways of Europe. Moreover, by situating its fateful reading amidst a scene of domestic harmony worthy of a Dutch interior, the narrator

pinpoints the letter as the cause of the imminent rift between Calyste and his family: "Jamais tableau flamand ou hollandais n'a représenté d'intérieur d'un ton si brun, meublé de figures si harmonieusement suaves" (2: 725). Calyste, we are told, "avait tiré de sa poche cette lettre de Béatrix, qui peut-être allait détruire tout le bonheur dont jouissait cette noble famille" (2: 725). Thus, the narrator's speculation about future domestic tragedy serves to foreshadow it and designates the letter as the agent of that ominous turn. By its very physical presence, then, Béatrix's letter insinuates itself in the midst of the family whose tranquillity and happiness it will threaten and nearly destroy.

As we shall see in chapter 4, the final letter in the narrative, written by Félicité (using her pen name, Camille Maupin) to Calyste, provides a happy resolution to the dramatic conflict instigated by Béatrix's letter; it thus underscores the prospective impact of this missive, the first epistolary text in the novel. If Béatrix's letter served to heighten the pull exerted on Calyste by a world inimical to his family and its traditions, Félicité's letter attempts to counter that attraction and reinstate him in the center of his world by bolstering the family and its fortunes.

A more pervasive epistolary substructure is found in Honorine, throughout which letters are constantly alluded to or quoted. However, the cluster of four lengthy letters at

the end of the narrative suggests a predominantly retrospective function, the exact nature of which emerges only in relation to the other elements that comprise its narrative structure. The narrative frame--"le cadre dialogué du récit"⁵--is provided by the polite discourse of a social gathering of the artistic and diplomatic elite. The celebrated writer, Camille Maupin, the water-colorist, Léon de Lora, and the critic, Claude Vignon, are the guests, along with the French ambassador to Italy, of Maurice de l'Hostal, the French Consul in Genoa. After dinner, the conversation, turning on the subject of ascribing fault in the matter of wifely adultery, is monopolized by Maurice, who offers up a true example for debate: the failed marriage of the brilliant magistrate, Octave de Bauvan, to Honorine, his beautiful, troubled bride, and the tragic consequences that ensued from their reconciliation. Embedded in Maurice's récit, the primary narrative structure of the novel, are several secondary textual structures that he quotes in recounting the sad story of the renowned judge, whom, as a young man, he had served as secretary: a number of long monologues, dialogues, and letters, the latter of which contain, in turn, their own narrations and dialogued scenes.

This epistolary substructure of Honorine plays a critical role in articulating the various levels of meaning

⁵ Pierre Citron, introduction, Honorine, by Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 2: 517.

that emerge from the narrative. The vastness of the gulf separating husband and wife is emphasized by their constant recourse to letters, which signal, on a metaphorical level, the obstacles impeding their reunion. On the level of form, meaning, associated with the tragic fate of the heroine, is a function of the tale's classical structure, which the correspondence underpins. On a moral level, meaning is inextricable from the responsibility borne by Maurice, whose ambivalent role in the story is clarified by the correspondence that brings it to its unhappy conclusion. In order to see how the letters function to develop these levels of meaning within the narrative structure, it will be helpful to have an overview of them, those that are directly cited as well as those to which the text merely alludes.

If the contents of the first two letters mentioned in the narrative are withheld--and perhaps this is because Maurice did not have direct access to these texts--the emotional impact they have on their recipients is depicted with clarity and sharpness. When Octave receives the letter in which Honorine announces that she is leaving him to go off with her lover, he falls into a state of shock that lasts a month. Two years later, having discovered the whereabouts of his wife, whose lover has by now abandoned her, Octave, hopeful for a reconciliation, writes her. The letter has dramatic consequences: as soon as she recognizes the handwriting on the envelope, Honorine tosses it in the

fire and, determined to elude her husband, changes her domicile the very next day.

The first letter actually cited in the text is addressed by Honorine to Maurice. At the instigation of Octave, who, unbeknownst to his reclusive wife, has been her protector during the years of their separation, Maurice has taken up residence in the property abutting hers, a charming, flower-strewn abode in which her days are spent creating magnificent artificial bouquets. Posing as a somewhat lunatic florist, Maurice wins the young woman's confidence. When he confronts her with the knowledge of her identity and probes her motives for renouncing the privileged life of an aristocrat to live in poverty and possible disgrace, Honorine abruptly breaks off the discussion: she can no longer tolerate the tension of face-to-face encounter and chooses instead the reflective solitude of correspondence to explain her feelings and behavior: "*D'ailleurs, dit-elle, ne parlons plus de ceci. La discussion amoindrit tout. Je vous exprimerai par écrit mes idées à ce sujet; car, en ce moment, elles m'étouffent, j'ai la fièvre*" (2: 578).

The second letter cited by Maurice is Octave's response to Honorine. Although Maurice was the recipient of Honorine's letter, he did not hesitate to show it to the man whose interests he represents. Octave's is a response Honorine never sought, and one that Maurice forces her to "hear": "*Il fallait une réponse à votre lettre, n'est-ce*

pas? et il n'y avait qu'un seul homme au monde qui pût l'écrire... Vous lirez donc la réponse'" (2: 586).

Octave writes the third letter that Maurice quotes in his story. It is a terrible plea, heavy with impending tragedy: Octave, realizing the impossibility of a true marriage between himself and Honorine, turns to Maurice for advice. Despite its note of desperation, his plea goes unanswered.

In that letter, Octave relates to Maurice the events leading up to the dilemma he now faces and makes mention of, but does not divulge, the contents of the letter Honorine wrote him after their long separation, "la lettre douce et mélancolique d'une femme qui redoutait les émotions d'une entrevue'" (2: 590). Mindful of her extreme reticence, Octave lets more than a month elapse before venturing to visit her. The reader can only imagine the explosive contents of the letter Octave writes his wife during his second courtship; the letter, in which he attempts to describe "ces orages qui m'agitaient'" (2: 591) leaves Honorine withdrawn and Octave overcome with guilt for having upset her.

The final letter Maurice reads to his assembled guests is the one that Honorine writes him just before her death. The tragedy disturbingly foreshadowed in Octave's letter to Maurice is now imminent, and perhaps it has already transpired, given the temporal hiatus between the letter's composition and its receipt.

Its heroine's tragic fate is a fundamental aspect of Honorine's classicism, in which "comme La Princesse de Clèves ou comme Bérénice . . . trois personnages à l'âme noble, frappés par une fatalité, ne rencontrent que le malheur."⁶ In addition to the classicism displayed by the nobility of its central characters and the relentless inevitability that governs the action as it proceeds toward a tragic conclusion, Honorine's classicism is also evidenced in the structure of Maurice's narrative and the letters that serve as the principal supports of its exposition, crisis, and dénouement. In the long exposition, the drama unfolds slowly and suspensefully. Psychological motifs are gradually, but only partially, revealed; key elements of the characters' psychology remain shrouded in mystery or scored by ambiguity. After this protracted narration, dominated almost entirely by Maurice, the perspective suddenly shifts as the text opens up with four letters in which the voices of the two other protagonists are directly heard. These closing letters are marked by a tone of immediacy and urgency which only the directly-quoted words of characters can exude and which is, by comparison, only faintly conveyed when events are reported by the narrator. The final epistolary texts thus move the narrative into a dramatic register; they also serve as its crisis and dénouement.

⁶ Citron, introduction 519.

The first two letters provide the drama's crisis, for they permit the two protagonists to address each other for the first time in the many years of their separation. Although Honorine's letter is addressed to Maurice, his action in delivering it to Octave makes the latter its unintended recipient. This is significant, since the letter contains the answer to the question that has haunted Octave all these years: Why did Honorine desert him? What can account for this act by which she severed all ties with a man who adored her, a man for whom her admiration and respect remain intact ("Mon mari serait encore choisi par moi, si j'étais jeune fille . . ." [2: 583])? The distance and quasi-privacy afforded in a discussion carried on by correspondence permit Honorine to give voice to what has heretofore remained a closely-guarded secret: her aversion for her husband is sexual in nature and as beyond her control as her attraction for the lover with whom she ran off:

"je ne puis pas aimer le comte. . . . Jamais le mariage n'éveillera dans mon être les cruelles délices, le délire mortel de la passion; je tuerai mon mari par ma froideur, par des comparaisons qui se devineront, quoique cachées au fond de ma conscience" (2: 581).

In his response to the explanation that is so clearly and unequivocally stated in Honorine's letter, Octave attempts to deny the true nature of his bond to his wife. Far from the gentle, paternal affection portrayed in his letter, his devotion is passionate, obsessive, bordering on violent. The crisis provided by this first epistolary duo

is thus psychological and indirect: Honorine's attempted avoidance of direct communication and Octave's aversion for the truth lead to an absence of confrontation that is a kind of anti-crisis. It is more dangerous than true crisis, since it suppresses conflict, which can only continue to intensify and must eventually erupt.

The last two letters of the final four are written in a narrative time that is distinct from that of the first two. Honorine writes her first letter to Maurice the day following his confrontation and revelation of her identity. Octave's letter to Honorine seems to be written only several days later. In contrast, at least five months elapse before Octave writes the third letter, the first in the closing series, to Maurice, and the time lapse separating the last letter in Maurice's recital from the other correspondence is even greater: Honorine's closing letter to Maurice is composed several years after Octave's troubled missive to him. In addition to the temporal hiatus, social and geographical ruptures set the final letters apart from the earlier ones. Maurice, no longer in service to Octave, has left France to begin a diplomatic career, first in Spain, later in Italy.

Just as the first two epistolary texts comprise a dramatic crisis, so the last two function as a dénouement. Recalling classical tragedy's injunction against the direct representation of portentous events, the third letter, that of Octave to Maurice, contains the narration and recalled

dialogue of his first meeting with his estranged wife. The reunion is a strained one, full of the same irreconcilable tensions that drove the couple apart seven years earlier: Octave's irresistible attraction to his wife ("`En venant de chez moi, rue Saint-Maur, je m'animais, les pensées d'amour me gonflaient le coeur . . .'" [2: 591]) and Honorine's equally intractable aversion to her husband ("`Ainsi, elle ne m'avait reçu que par violence sur elle-même.'" [2: 591])). Although Octave's epistolary narration provides, to some extent, a filter for the explosive intensity of these events, it also serves to heighten the dramatic tension. For his belated awareness of the chasm separating him from his wife is evident throughout his tortured missive. It drives him to call out for Maurice's help and motivates the desperate, twice repeated question, which stands in lieu of a closing salutation: "`Voici deux mois que je combats. Que faire?... j'ai le coeur trop plein, j'ai cherché celui d'un ami pour y jeter ce cri: "Que faire?" '" (2: 592). The intensity of Octave's narration is further heightened by Maurice's failure to respond. Thus the dénouement unfolds: the fatal reconciliation has taken place; Octave senses, for the first time, the impending disaster; he seeks advice--or, realizing that none can be forthcoming, simply cries out in distress to his trusted friend; the absence of response ("`Je ne répondis rien'" [2: 592]), strikingly disproportionate to the urgency with which one was solicited, serves as significant a role in this epistolary

dénouement as the letters that surround it.

With Honorine's final letter to Maurice, the dénouement is completed. The tragedy announced in her first letter to him ("`Je ne vivrai pas! . . . je serai dans mon linceul, parée de la pâleur irréprochable de la mort.'" [2: 581]) is now irremediably playing itself out. Honorine is on the verge of death, as the very first and last words of her letter proclaim ("`Monsieur Maurice, je meurs . . .'" [2: 593]; "`il y a longtemps que je suis morte, si saint Bernard a eu raison de dire qu'il n'y a plus de vie là où il n'y a plus d'amour.'" [2: 594]). Despite the figurative nature of the demise conjured in her closing salutation, Honorine's death is probably a cold fact by the time Maurice reads her plaintive report of its occurrence.

If the correspondence in Honorine serves to highlight its classicism and the tragic role of its heroine, in revealing the hidden role of its narrator, it also points to the novel's modernism. Only as we make our way through the packet of letters Maurice seems compelled to include in his narrative do we come to realize that he is no innocent bystander. This closing correspondence, of which the first two letters play a decisive role in the action, is provoked by his role of spy and his attempt to bring about a reconciliation between Octave and Honorine. In turning over the letter in which Honorine shares her innermost secrets with him ("`Est-ce assez vous ouvrir mon coeur?'" [2: 581]) to the very man with whom she has shunned all contact for

the last seven years, he betrays a fundamental confidence, that between the letter's author and the reader her letter exclusively addresses. Three of the four letters cited in his narrative are addressed to Maurice, and he arranges the delivery of the only letter not addressed to him, that of Octave to Honorine. Moreover he compels Honorine to read that letter, overcoming her recalcitrance by sheer insistence: "'Vous avez jusqu'à présent condamné, comme les enfants, en vous bouchant les oreilles. Un dévouement de sept ans a ses droits. Vous lirez donc la réponse que fera votre mari'" (2: 586). In this way, he serves as a middleman who facilitates the communication that Honorine has heretofore sought desperately to avoid.

The degree of Maurice's entanglement and responsibility is nowhere more apparent than in Octave's letter to him. Realizing the tragic error of his reunion with Honorine and struggling to ward off the looming catastrophe, Octave turns to Maurice for understanding, support, advice: "'Que faire? Que faire?'" (2: 592). But Maurice offers nothing, does not even respond to his friend's urgent cry of despair--a shocking act of negligence given his central role in effecting the reconciliation of husband and wife. Not only does Maurice default when Honorine's death is imminent, he betrays her when she is no longer alive. He fails to obey her dying wish ("'Gardez mes secrets comme la tombe me gardera'" [2: 594]), telling, in intimate detail, the story of this secluded woman before a gathering of strangers, and

going so far as to divulge the contents of correspondence in which she disclosed her most private feelings to him. Thus it can be said that the correspondence in this narrative reveals the extent and nature of the culpability of one of its principal players. Maurice's role as spy, matchmaker, middleman, and confidant is highlighted in the letters that manifest his active involvement in a story of which he first appears to be no more than a mildly detached narrator. But, gradually and incontrovertibly, the letters reveal a pattern of involvement and responsibility that lead the reader of Honorine to question, as Mlle des Touches does of Count Octave, "'Connaissait-il sa position d'assassin?'" (2: 595).

The retrospective potential of a correspondence that occupies a final position in narrative is thus inseparable from its revelatory nature. In Honorine, revelation is linked to the themes of fatality, which, as we shall see in chapter 2, the illumination of awareness cannot forestall, and responsibility, the awareness of which comes too late to be effective. The letters in Le Contrat de mariage exhibit similarly potent retrospective and revelatory capacities, and they underscore the inherent weakness and strength of endmost correspondences: powerless on the level of action, powerful on the level of meaning and understanding.

The epistolarity of Le Contrat de mariage must be examined in light of Balzac's well-known propensity to revise and restructure his novels, even in the galley stage.

One important aspect of the rather significant structural modification that Le Contrat de mariage underwent during the course of its composition involved the use of letters to provide closure to the narrative. The conclusion consists of four letters (Paul de Manerville to his wife, Natalie, and to his friend, Henri de Marsay, and their responses) that provide a retrospective analysis of the events in the novel and, specifically, of the causes of Paul's ruin. The correspondence is impotent vis-à-vis the action, but delivers a heavy dosage of belated understanding. This ironic perspective succeeds in putting the central theme of the novel--the misfortunes and victimization of the husband in marriage--into sharp focus. Moreover, the use of letters afforded Balzac with the means to give the narrative a stronger structure, one which more forcefully exploited its psychological underpinnings: Paul's weakness, Natalie's selfishness, Mme Evangelista's ruthlessness. The way these letters function within the narrative structure is best understood by looking more closely at how the novel evolved.

In its original conception, Le Contrat de mariage, or La Fleur des pois, as Balzac first called it, contained four chapters.⁷ Balzac wrote the first three chapters in quick

⁷ The following discussion on the structural evolution of Le Contrat de mariage is based on Henri Gauthier, introduction, Le Contrat de mariage and histoire du texte in La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 3: 503-10 and 1419-22; and Maurice Bardèche, notice, Le Contrat de mariage, Oeuvres complètes de Balzac, 24 vols. (Paris: Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1968) 4: 429-30.

succession and sent them off to the printer. These were: chapter 1, or Préambule, describing the education of Paul de Manerville in Parisian society and his return to the provinces to seek a bride; chapter 2, Le Contrat de mariage, in which the Manerville and Evangelista families are pitted against each other in a legal battle culminating in the signing of the all-important marriage contract; and chapter 3, La Lune de miel, relating the mishaps of the first five months of the marriage and forecasting the inevitable dénouement: Paul's complete financial and emotional ruin.

Then, with the manuscript in the above-described stage at the printer, Balzac completely restructured the narrative. He wrote an additional chapter, La Séparation, which shows Paul five years later, completely destroyed, relating the whole sad story to his notary before departing for a six-year stay in India, where he hopes to rebuild his fortune. The chapter ends with Paul on the ship bound for Calcutta, about to read his mail. It is important to note that the four letters, anticipated in the original plan, had not yet been composed. At this point, Balzac cut chapter 3, La Lune de miel, and considerably expanded chapter 2, Le Contrat de mariage: he divided it into three "journées," analyzed the motivation of Mme Evangelista in greater depth, and, most important, provided a judicial basis for her vengeance--her "crime moral"⁸--by giving it a legally

⁸ Gauthier, introduction 507. The term appears in one of the manuscript variants.

sanctioned instrument in the clause that her notary manages to add to the contract. Thus Balzac was able to concentrate the drama by eliminating a scene that had become superfluous once the inevitability of the outcome was built into the dramatic core. With this, the signing of the contract became the central scene of the narrative: "J'ai représenté tout un avenir de deux époux par la scène seule du contrat de mariage," Balzac wrote his sister, Laure.⁹

But material from the discarded Lune de miel chapter found its way into other portions of the narrative, further modifying its structure and changing its own aspect in the process. A significant portion was used in the opening conversation between Paul de Manerville and Henri de Marsay on the subject of marriage. De Marsay's tirade contrasting the successful conquests of the bachelor with the miserable situation of the married man, constantly scorned and rejected by his own wife, had originally appeared in the narrative of the five-month honeymoon period. Other important passages were incorporated into the long letter in which de Marsay attempts to disabuse his friend by revealing the truth about his wife, her lover, and the scheming behavior by which Paul's mother-in-law brings about his financial ruin. As we shall see in chapter 4, a broader purpose of this letter is to reveal the fundamental causes of this tragic dénouement, and to suggest the principles

⁹ October, 1835, letter 980 of Correspondance, ed. Roger Pierrot, 5 vols. (Paris: Garner, 1960-69) 2: 749.

allowing such a mechanism to operate. The material picked up from the discarded chapter served this end very well. The passage in de Marsay's letter on "la femme à la mode," for example, found originally in La Lune de miel, establishes the sociological context that permitted, indeed abetted, Natalie's frivolous behavior and her attitude toward marriage: she is shown to be a type, one of a class of Parisian women who thrive on an empty and self-centered existence. Moreover, in the letter, the development is expanded to include numerous psychological considerations, such as those explaining Natalie's coldness to her husband and her readiness to take a lover.¹⁰

Three of the four letters also contain material found originally in the manuscript but later deleted from the galleys of the final chapter, La Séparation. This discarded material, concerning steps Paul took to rent his hôtel to de Marsay in order to prevent its being seized by creditors, reappeared in the revised version, in Paul's letters to his wife and de Marsay. Moreover, de Marsay's response to Paul describes Natalie's refusal to grant the guarantee that Paul had promised him for the large sum of money he had loaned his friend. The revised version cast this information in a somewhat truncated version, one that enjoys a decided advantage over the original: the effect of an epistolary dialogue between the characters on this matter heightens its

¹⁰ Gauthier, *histoire du texte* 1422.

dramatic interest and gives it greater impact than if it had appeared in the narrator's more detached commentary.

Balzac changed the title of the final chapter from La Séparation to Conclusion, and a critical aspect of the four letters in Le Contrat de mariage is their endmost position in the narrative. Coming after all major events have taken place, they are significant by the very lack of real impact they can have on the action. The position of some of this material in La Lune de miel, the intermediary chapter, of the original version, made its effect somewhat ambiguous. For example, the injection of the "femme à la mode" development prior to the dénouement placed the explanation of the tragedy before its occurrence, or at least before it had completely unfolded. The knowledge and insight conveyed by this development is annulled, in the final version, by the certainty of the failure of Paul's marriage, a given even in the earliest version of the manuscript. It is, quite simply, too late for Paul to benefit from this understanding and so, in a very real sense, de Marsay's "lesson" is to no avail. This adds a pathetic dimension to the narrative and makes the structure more rigorous. Thus, discarding chapter 3 was a change important not only for the material recycled into other chapters, but for the effect that its absence had on the text of the chapter entitled Conclusion, and most specifically, on the letters with which that chapter culminates. They became a stronger pillar of the narrative structure because their explanatory function

was more sharply defined.

One key marker of the letters' impotence vis-à-vis the action is the efforts or posturing of the letter writers to influence Paul to act in a way that might change the course of events--and their failure to do so. Much is said in this correspondence about preventing Paul from beginning his long exile. Paul himself describes the steps he has taken to keep Natalie from learning the details of his journey. He is convinced that she might take extravagant measures to stop him, or even be tempted to join him on the rigorous journey:

"Je t'ai trompée; mais ne le fallait-il pas? Tu te serais inutilement gênée, tu m'aurais voulu sacrifier ta fortune. . . . Peut-être m'aurais-tu suivi! Je te cacherai le nom du vaisseau, le lieu de mon départ et le jour. Un ami te dira tout quand il ne sera plus temps." (3: 628-29)

Natalie goes on at length about her dramatic attempt, against all reason, to fly to her husband's side. If we are to believe her, she could scarcely be restrained from making what would surely have been, in her pregnant condition, an extremely perilous journey:

"J'ai voulu partir, voler à tes pieds; mais ma mère m'a fait observer que le départ de la Belle-Caroline devait avoir lieu le lendemain; que la poste seule pouvait aller assez vite, et que, dans l'état où j'étais, ce serait une insigne folie que de risquer tout un avenir dans un cahot. Quoique déjà mère, j'ai demandé des chevaux, ma mère m'a trompée en me laissant croire qu'on les amènerait." (3: 633-34)

And de Marsay relates his frantic efforts to get his letter into Paul's hands before the ship departs. He hopes the

facts and explanations it contains will enlighten his friend and dissuade him from taking the irrevocable step that will change the course of his life: "je t'envoie ma lettre par un courrier, afin que tu sois encore à temps de suivre les conseils que je vais te donner'" (3: 640). Paul's notary, Mathias, also takes extreme measures to get the urgent missives into his client's hands before his vessel sets sail, entrusting a sailor with the correspondence and the message to disembark. But, tragically, the message is not conveyed, and Paul, out of obstinate adherence to his plans, or perhaps the depressed lethargy into which he has sunk, does not read the letters until his ship is far out to sea. Thus, although the efforts to prevent Paul's departure run through this correspondence like an anxious, staccato refrain, in fact nothing will come of them, and the reader knows this. They represent false assertions (Natalie) or are simply futile measures (de Marsay). The die was cast from the moment the marriage contract was signed. The letters merely shed light on the complicated network of inevitable events flowing from that decisive episode.

As a structural unit, the packet of correspondence with which the narrative closes shows some resemblance to an epilogue. While not addressed directly to the reader, as an epilogue often is, the shift into epistolary discourse represents a complete and abrupt change of tone. This sudden injection of voices directly addressing each other--pleading, lamenting, lying, persuading--across vast

distances, places the events of the narrative into a sharply different perspective. The disclosures these letters contain are not, for the reader, especially startling. The germs of the tragedy--Paul's weakness, Natalie's indifference, Mme Evangelista's hatred--were, after all, clearly present in the central scene, the signing of the marriage contract. However, Paul's apprehension of these unpleasant realities leaves him dazed, and it is through the medium of correspondence that this shock is delivered. The letters provide a retrospective illumination, enabling the protagonist--a victim--to understand the events that brought about his own destruction. By thus drawing the "moral" of the preceding "fable," the function of the letters in Le Contrat de mariage further parallels that of an epilogue.

Like Le Contrat de mariage, Balzac's extensive, late revisions of Le Lys dans la vallée involved the use of epistolary passages at key points in the narrative. Indeed, the opening and closing letters were extremely tardy additions to this novel, ones that transformed the lengthy text they surrounded into an epistolary confession.¹¹ In fact, the use of letters in Le Lys dans la vallée has put it at the center of a minor aesthetic controversy. Jean Rousset has argued that it is not an epistolary novel, but

¹¹ Victor Brombert, "Natalie ou le lecteur caché de Balzac," Mouvements premiers: Etudes offertes à Georges Poulet (Paris: José Corti, 1972) 178-79.

rather "un roman autobiographique au passé,"¹² and other critics have shared and expanded upon his opinion.¹³ François Jost, on the other hand, has included Le Lys dans la vallée in his analytic survey of epistolary novels, in which he classifies it within the category "Type Marianne" (after Marivaux's La Vie de Marianne): epistolary novels characterized by a lengthy, intimate confidence.¹⁴ The question is an intriguing one, but it is not the purpose of this study to examine the status of Balzac's novels vis-à-vis the subgenre of the epistolary novel. More pertinent here is another issue that has occupied critics of this novel: the centrality of letters to its structure.¹⁵

The action of Le Lys dans la vallée is predominantly, though subtly, controlled by letters. Driving it forward by what they conceal at some points, shedding new light on past events at others, the letters in Le Lys are the backbone of

¹² Forme et signification 100, note 32.

¹³ See Julia Przyboś, "L'Épistolarité déchiffrée: Etude sur Le Lys dans la vallée de Balzac," Modern Language Studies, 16.2 (Spring 1986): 68-69, note 5. Przyboś cites, most notably, Rose Fortassier ("Balzac et le roman par lettres," Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises, 29 [May 1977]) and Claude Lachet (Thématique et Technique du Lys dans la vallée de Balzac [Paris: Nouvelles Editions Debesse, 1978]).

¹⁴ Jost 127-28.

¹⁵ See especially the two previously-cited articles by Victor Brombert and Julia Przyboś. Brombert's article (177-90) focuses on the exchange of correspondence (between Natalie and Félix) that frames the narrative; Przyboś's article (62-70) examines the role played by the various letters cited within Félix's narrative.

its narrative structure. The novel is comprised of Félix's long confessional letter, itself framed by a correspondence: the opening letter in which Félix explains to Natalie his reasons for writing, demands her indulgence as she reads, and attempts to win her love; and Natalie's closing letter, which is both a reaction to Félix's story and a response to his proposal. Within his confession, Félix alludes to a correspondence between himself and Mme de Mortsauf and cites a number of these letters: his impassioned declaration of love to her; her maternal letter of advice and counsel prior to his departure for Paris; a fragment of a letter in which she dwells anxiously on her children's health; her deathbed confession, with its surprising revelation of the sensuality she had concealed beneath her saintly posture.

As Julia Przyboś has shown,¹⁶ each of the letters Félix cites plays a key role, either positive or negative, in his narrative. The formal importance of each letter relates to the narrative enterprise itself, which can be defined as an effort to tell the story of a repressed desire, the suffering it causes, the conflicts it engenders, and the tragedy to which it leads. But there is a paradox inherent in this undertaking: the "telling" of desire removes it from the domain of repression. The overt depiction of passion threatens the narrative endeavor, which requires that

¹⁶ The analysis on the following pages concerning the function of letters in Le Lys dans la vallée draws heavily on Przyboś's study in the article previously cited.

passion be concealed, stifled, narratively speaking, thwarted. Yet if desire is not in some way alluded to, how will the reader sense it is being repressed, or even know that it exists? The narrative enterprise at the core of Le Lys dans la vallée rests on this irreconcilable tension. The letters Félix quotes within his confession either undermine the narrative endeavor or support it. The two love letters constitute threats, latent or manifest, to the narrative. If Félix's early declaration had been met with acceptance, the story would have come to an early resolution. In fact, Mme de Mortsauf's testament letter, which openly relates intensely passionate feelings, brings closure to the narrative.

In contrast, the two letters in which Mme de Mortsauf conceals her true feelings allow the narrative to continue, because they permit her assertion of purely maternal interest in Félix to go unchallenged. In her long didactic letter, she likens her epistolary attitude to the blissful vigilance of a mother leaning over her infant's cradle:

"Pendant que j'écrivais ceci, phrase à phrase, en me transportant par avance dans la vie que vous mènerez, . . . souvent je me disais: 'Il dort, et je veille pour lui!' Sensations charmantes qui m'ont rappelé les premiers bonheurs de ma vie, alors que je contemplais Jacques endormi dans son berceau, en attendant son réveil pour lui donner mon lait." (9: 1084)

Her fragmentary letter, ostensibly preoccupied with concerns over her children's health, masks her fears, which cannot be openly expressed, that she may be losing Félix. Thus Mme de

Mortsauf's two "maternal" letters, by disseminating ambiguous and misleading signs about her passionate love for Félix, fuel the narrative, which is fed by the energy of repressed desire:

Grâce aux lettres, le récit peut reprendre comme si de rien n'était et semer, chemin faisant, de nouveaux signes de l'amour d'Henriette. Ces lettres-pièges aident donc le récit à redémarrer, à se déployer librement et à mener à son terme l'histoire d'un désir refoulé.¹⁷

These letters function prospectively within the narrative, because the information they withhold permits it to continue and contributes to the subtle layer of tension, created by unacknowledged or unspoken feelings and ambiguous words and gestures, which feeds the action.

The responses in the two sets of love letters function retrospectively, because they influence our interpretation of events in the narrative, rather than the events themselves. The first set, within the narrative, is comprised of Félix's declaration and Mme de Mortsauf's confession; the latter constitutes, in both tone and content, a delayed response to the former.¹⁸ As such, it directs our attention backward instead of forward, causing us to reexamine Mme de Mortsauf's behavior, to reconsider her assertions of pure maternal interest, indeed, to reinterpret the entire narrative. Thus this mechanism benefits the narrative at the expense of the characters, for

¹⁷ Przyboś 65.

¹⁸ Przyboś 66.

Félix's love, ultimately accepted, is never actually returned, and Mme de Mortsauf dies after a terrible moral and physical struggle. The same "mécanisme épistolaire à retardement"¹⁹ regulates the dynamics of the romantic correspondence, between Félix and Natalie, that frames the narrative. Unlike Mme de Mortsauf's confession, which manifests a posthumous acceptance of Félix's love, Natalie's response constitutes a rejection of his affections. But like Mme de Mortsauf's testament-response, Natalie's response to Félix's confession is also delayed in the narrative. This postponement explains the intensity of her negative reaction, for she has had to hold in her irritation, hurt, and anger during Félix's long written monologue. Natalie's delayed response, like that of her tragic predecessor, invites the reader to look back over Félix's narrative and reinterpret it in this new light of her correspondent's feelings.²⁰

The role of letters in La Femme abandonnée is no less critical in reinforcing meaning, but they function differently within the narrative. The story's epistolarity controls and reflects the action in a subtle and elegant manner. Letters articulate the fundamental turning points

¹⁹ Przyboś 66.

²⁰ These two letters will be examined more closely in chapter 6, since a discussion of their function vis-à-vis the novel's structure cannot be fully undertaken without considering the role of the reader.

of the narrative and illuminate its crises in the emotionally charged language of epistolary discourse. La Femme abandonnée is constructed in three movements: the first highlights the crystallization of love in the two protagonists; the second focuses on the idyll itself; in the third unfolds its dissolution. This structure is buttressed by four letters that mark the transitions from one movement of the narrative to the next. (The text of the fourth letter is not given. But, apprehending its contents indirectly, through the reactions of its afflicted recipient, we are in a position to evaluate its role in the narrative.)

The four letters constitute an interchange that is chiasmic in nature. The first letter, in which Gaston de Neuil, against all odds, woos Claire de Beauséant, may be called a proposal. The discourse of proposal also characterizes the fourth letter, in which he attempts to win her back. The tone and sincerity of these two letters could not be more different, and not only because they are separated by an expanse of nine years. This disparity is grasped immediately and intuitively by their recipient, who may be relegated to the passive role of abandoned woman, but who nonetheless exercises complete control in initiating and terminating this love affair. Consequently, Gaston's two proposals play very different, although parallel, roles in this narrative: the first, ambiguously accepted, marks the

opening of his romance with Claire de Beauséant, the second, categorically rejected, its end.

The second and third letters, both written by Mme de Beauséant to Gaston, take the form and language of rejection. But they, too, signal in their author completely different frames of mind and intent. The second letter, which will be more fully analyzed in chapter 5, contains, among other things, a concealed invitation, and its recipient understands and acts upon this hidden meaning. Because the letter serves as a trial through which Gaston must pass in order to win his lady, it is instrumental in bringing the two lovers together. It thus initiates the second movement of the narrative: a long, idyllic union, telescoped into a few brief pages and rendered externally. The reader views this blissful episode from afar. The third letter, scored in a heavier, darker key, is an interrogation that preludes a dismissal: painful, final, absolute. Its tragic accents, announcing the dissolution of the bond between the lovers, mark the opening of the third and final episode of this narrative and state its themes: separation, loss, death.

A brief, piercing coda is provided by Mme de Beauséant's "response" to Gaston's second invitation: the return to him of one of his first love letters, in which he had vowed his undying devotion to her. Thus closes the circle begun with the first piece of correspondence to pass between the couple. The return of a symbolic gift to signal

the rupture of an alliance is certainly a convention of love, marriage, and divorce. Most often, however, the object symbolizing union is a ring. It is striking that for Claire de Beauséant, that object is a letter, the means through which their alliance was established.

Thus the letters comprise a series of interrogations and responses, invitations and dismissals that orchestrate this tale in an elegant, almost balletic line. Moments of tension and heightened awareness are spotlighted in the correspondence, which focuses on the beginning and end of the romance, leaving its eventless duration to the narrator's poetic, but remote, evocation. The third letter in the sequence, Claire de Beauséant's second missive to her lover, provides an exquisite model of the importance of a single letter within the architecture of narrative.

The letter plays a pivotal role in the action. Until receiving it, Gaston de Neuil had wavered in his decision to marry Mlle de la Rodière. Despite the strong influence his mother held over him and the pressure she exerted in favor of this marriage of convenience, something restrained him from taking this step. Ironically, Claire's letter acts as a catalyst, moving him to break with this woman whom, he later comes to realize, he still loves very deeply: "La lettre de Mme de Beauséant arriva dans un moment où l'amour de Gaston luttait contre toutes les séductions d'une vie arrangée convenablement et conforme aux idées du monde; mais

cette lettre décida le combat. Il résolut de quitter la marquise et de se marier" (2: 498).

But the letter is a keystone of the narrative structure not only because it instigates this critical turning point. In tense, style, and mood, it "looks" in several directions at once, to different "corners" of the narrative: to its inception as well as to its imagined (by the letter writer) unfolding; within the writer of the letter and within its recipient. This multivalence is felt in the breadth and duality of the themes the letter embraces, offering, between the poles of past and future, a dialectic of union and separation, of pride and doubt, of fidelity and abandonment. In her troubled, searching interrogation, Claire de Beauséant's voice recalls that of the great tragic heroines, magnificent in their suffering, larger than the mundane sorrows that overcome them. Not a single aspect of the diverse durations through which her experience has taken her escapes her piercing examination: remote past of abandonment, with its pain and humiliation, more recent past of uneventful bliss, the present moment with its excruciating awareness, insistent doubts, and threats of impending doom, the not-too-distant future, with its promise, once again, of abandonment.

A fundamental rupture is announced in the very first line of the letter: the fact of writing itself signifies divorce, for it implies separation and distance, emotional as well as physical: "'Mon ange aimé, t'écrire quand nous

vivons coeur à coeur, quand rien ne nous sépare, quand nos caresses nous servent si souvent de langage, et que les paroles sont aussi des caresses, n'est-ce pas un contresens?" (2: 494). The choice of words renders this dichotomy instantly apparent: "'coeur à coeur'--"'sépare'"; "'caresses'--"'paroles.'" But the painful nature of her communication precludes a face-to-face dialogue, in which she fears losing her voice or worse still, consciousness ("'la seule pensée de ces choses lui ôte la voix, lui fait refluer tout son sang vers le coeur; elle est sans force et sans esprit'" [2: 494]). Written language, offering the possibility of communication from afar, is the only medium that can guarantee Claire de Beauséant's desire for complete honesty ("'Je sens que mon coeur doit être tout vérité pour toi, ne te déguiser aucune de ses pensées . . .'" [2: 494]). Such absolute candor would surely be compromised if, out of sheer habit, caresses--which "'servent si souvent de langage'" (2: 495) between the lovers--were offered to console the troubled mistress at a loss for words. Words alone, not caresses, glances, or any other language will serve Claire de Beauséant at this critical moment. Her choice of the letter over the tête-à-tête thus has an important strategic value.

The wistful, nostalgic mood of the next section of the letter contrasts sharply with this imperative for honesty, underscoring the split within Claire and the "'contresens'" inherent in the act of writing to one's lover. The

retrospective vision begins on an unmistakable note of intimacy: "'Aussi vais-je te confier mon angoisse: oui, c'est une angoisse. Ecoute-moi? Ne fais pas ce petit: ta ta ta... par lequel tu me fais taire avec une impertinence que j'aime, parce que de toi tout me plaît'" (2: 494).

Through details such as this the letter makes the everyday reality of the bond between its correspondents palpable. We almost glimpse the lovers' exchange as it hovers between playfulness and seriousness, between Gaston's teasing and Claire's insistent searching. The language of memory ("'éffacé,'" "souvenir,'" "jadis'") initiates Claire's restrained evocation of her earlier abandonment, a distant past of sorrows: "'Cher époux du ciel, laisse-moi te dire que tu as effacé tout souvenir des douleurs sous le poids desquelles jadis ma vie allait succomber'" (2: 494). The dominant feature of this section is, precisely, its pastness, stylistically expressed in the tense in which it is almost exclusively written:

"Je n'ai connu l'amour que par toi. Il a fallu la candeur de ta belle jeunesse . . . j'ai bien souvent palpité de joie . . . ma jalousie n'a jamais été réveillée. J'ai eu toutes les fleurs de ton âme . . . Il n'y a pas eu le plus léger nuage dans notre ciel, nous n'avons pas su ce qu'était un sacrifice, nous avons toujours obéi aux inspirations de nos cœurs. J'ai joui d'un bonheur sans bornes pour une femme." (2: 494; my italics)

The imperfect tense, which we might expect to find in a nostalgic evocation of past love is conspicuously absent here. The passé composé, the tense of completion,

eloquently conveys the "'angoisse'" which, a few lines earlier, Claire had announced. Although her letter functions within the narrative as an interrogation, and although all questions are, theoretically, open--that is, they may be answered in either the affirmative or the negative--it is as if, by her choice of the compound past over the imperfect tense, Claire de Beauséant has, within her own heart, answered the question. The romance is over; this finality is stated in the unfailing logic of language.

The writer's understandable emotion in surveying a union so perfect and so recently intact gives rise to a certain degree of banality. These palpitations of joy, this cloudless sky, this boundless happiness are clichés of the love letter, the text ideally suited, almost by definition, to effusive expressions of ardor. Even the slight suggestion of excess, the somewhat melodramatic posture that suddenly places the writer of the letter directly in the text, does not seem out of place here: "'Les larmes qui mouillent cette page te diront-elles bien toute ma reconnaissance?'" (2: 494).

However, Claire's very next words cause her to rebound, shifting the letter into a very different mood and tense. The posture of humble gratitude ("'j'aurais voulu l'avoir écrite à genoux'" [2: 494]) gives rise in the writer to a reverie that ends by placing her in the opposite posture, that of dignity and pride. Indeed, these are the only sentiments capable of instigating Mme de Beauséant's

voluntary surrender of her ties to Gaston. This section of the letter is dominated by Claire's evocation of her lover's reservations and cooled ardor, of his passion turned to pity. Its tense is, appropriately, a hypothetical rather than real one, the future of probability, for it narrates a scenario that takes place only in the anxious imagination of Claire, as she herself suggests: "Combien de terreurs cette différence d'âge n'inspire-t-elle à une femme aimante?" (2: 495). The passage moves subtly into the modality of probability, from the use of a simple verb ("Tu peux avoir . . . senti les sacrifices que tu m'as faits" [2: 495; my italics]) to the appearance of a characteristic adverb ("Tu as pensé peut-être à ta destinée sociale" [2: 495; my italics]) to the inflected forms that signal this mood:

"Mais tu auras réprimé ces pensées . . ."

"tu auras voulu rester fidèle aux serments qui ne nous lient qu'à la face de Dieu."

"Mes douleurs passées te seront apparues . . ."

"j'aurai été protégée par le malheur d'où tu m'as tirée." (2: 495; my italics)

Thus Claire evokes the frame of mind of a hypothetical Gaston as he senses the price of his sacrifice, chafes under the oppression of their bond, rejects the burden of his obligation. This is the portrait of a Gaston who might, and quite probably will--as one before him--abandon her.

This sequence of images of fading passion and dying love ends with a sharp utterance that boldly states the

dominant motif of this section. In contrast to her earlier attitude of beholden appreciation ("à genoux") Claire's words now reveal her essential nature: "Devoir ton amour à la pitié! cette pensée m'est plus horrible encore que la crainte de te faire manquer ta vie" (2: 495). In her regal sorrow, Claire de Beauséant envies the fortune of mistresses murdered by their own lovers, before love, along with the happy illusions it nurtures, could vanish.

This haunting evocation of love and death, murder and passion underscores an extraordinary transformation that has taken place in the letter writer's mood, a transformation that mirrors the course of the narrative action. The change occurs abruptly, within the very first sentence of the section: "Eh bien, cette félicité m'a fait connaître un supplice plus affreux que ne l'était celui de l'abandon" (2: 494; my italics). The blissful--albeit melancholically blissful--tonality of the preceding section of the letter ("ta belle jeunesse," "la pureté de ta grande âme," "les fleurs de ton âme," "inspirations de nos coeurs," "bonheur sans bornes" [2: 494]) has given away to a darker tone, as pathetic and even violent motifs invade the writer's thoughts: "misères," "malheur," "oppresse," "dégrade," "tue," "humiliation," "terreurs," "douleurs," "pitié," "horrible," "poignarder" (2: 495). The vocabulary of tragedy--of high classical tragedy--has taken over, and the final image of death ("Oui, la mort est préférable . . ." [2: 495]) contrasts

poignantly with the note of happiness ("un bonheur sans bornes'" [2: 494]) on which the preceding section closed.

With the immediacy of the adverb "'hier'" the letter shifts, once again rather abruptly into a different key and a new time, that of the very recent past. In contrast to Mme de Beauséant's rendering of her love affair in its entire duration, she now focuses on a pivotal moment, freshly past, of their liaison, a moment in which she glimpsed the imminence of its dissolution. Thus the passé composé, which in the earlier passage compressed their romance and relegated it to history, now singles out a moment in it and dramatizes its duration. Once again, in Claire's opening words and throughout this section, the reality of intimate experience is keenly felt: "'Hier, quand tu m'as demandé si doucement: "Qu'as-tu?" ta voix m'a fait frissonner'" (2: 495). Now Claire's words narrate a little scene in which an almost imperceptible intonation in Gaston's voice, the faintest suggestion of excess in his attentiveness to her, an expression hidden beneath his glance--clues to which all but an anxious lover would be deaf and blind--unleash in her all the torments of doubt. She goes off to weep in the solitude of her room, concealing from her lover, along with her tears, the apprehension of betrayal and abandonment that her letter now divulges. Not surprisingly, the dominant mood of this passage finds expression in the lexicon of separation and reflects the emotional distance of which Claire has suddenly become so

sharply aware; the repetition of the words "'séparer'" and "'quitter'" reinforces the effect of the newly-discovered chasm:

"En effet, le sort ne nous a-t-il pas séparés? Tu te seras dit: 'Tôt ou tard, je dois quitter la pauvre Claire, pourquoi ne pas m'en séparer à temps?' . . . Je t'ai quitté pour aller pleurer loin de toi." (2: 495-96; my italics)

The letter veers, once again, into a new register, as Claire, besieged with doubts about her doubts, once more recoils from her own mood and thoughts. Perhaps she is mistaken? Could she have possibly misread the signs? Has she simply fallen prey to the demons of jealousy?: "'Mais si je me trompais?... si j'avais pris une de tes mélancolies d'amour pour une pensée de raison?... '" (2: 496). Now Mme de Beauséant, falling back momentarily from her posture of fierce pride, beseeches her lover to chase away her qualmish insecurity: "'ah! mon ange, ne me laisse pas dans l'incertitude, punis ta jalouse femme; mais rends-lui la conscience de son amour et du tien... '" (2: 496). The tense and mood are those of direct supplication, immediate and imperative:

"ne me laisse pas dans l'incertitude . . . "

"punis ta jalouse femme . . . "

"rends-lui la conscience de son amour . . . "

"Fais-moi souffrir, mais ne me trompe pas . . . "
(2: 496; my italics)

The passage culminates with the ultimate expression of Claire de Beauséant's pride, her supreme sacrifice: an offer

to release her beloved from the bonds that tie him to her:
 "'Je te rends ta liberté'" (2: 496).

From here the letter writer quite naturally moves--collapses might more aptly describe this shift--into still another tense, that of the immediate present, in which she is composing her missive. Indeed, it seems as if she has no choice, as a powerful wave of anguish overcomes her, causing a momentary loss of consciousness--the very circumstance she feared in a direct encounter. The lapse is registered by a gap in the text itself:

"Oh! je m'arrête, mon coeur se brise.
 "Je suis restée morne et stupide pendant quelques instants." (2: 496)

As she regains her hold on consciousness, Claire reasserts her inner strength and pride, reiterating her demand for absolute honesty on the part of her lover, however painful the consequences: "'mais tu me diras la vérité, quelque cruelle qu'elle puisse être'" (2: 496).

This demand for truth threads insistently through the correspondence of Gaston and Claire, establishing a substructure based on the motif of sincerity. The principle is central to the act of letter writing, for we always want to know: Do the words on paper reflect the writer's true sentiments? Or are they merely empty phrases, devoid of emotional content? "'Je voudrais pouvoir vous ouvrir mon coeur, afin de vous persuader que mon humble demande ne cache aucune arrière-pensée'" (2: 487), wrote Gaston in his

first letter to Claire. "'Je vous ai parlé sinon à coeur ouvert, . . . du moins avec franchise'" (2: 489), Claire asserted in her response, and, "'ma conduite vous démontrera . . . la sincérité de mon âme'" (2: 489).²¹ Most notably, Claire intuitively deciphers the clues of Gaston's absence of sincerity in his response to her final letter: "La voix secrète de son coeur lui criait: 'Il ment'" (2: 499).

The imperative of absolute honesty, central to the requirements of Claire de Beauséant's heroic nature, might explain her motivation in writing this anguished missive. Why indeed compose a letter to a man who, she senses, is on the verge of forsaking her, out of coldly practical reasons, to marry another woman? There is nothing she can do to prevent a second abandonment--an event which, she is all too aware, would leave her more wretchedly vulnerable to social criticism and rejection than before. If this situation cannot be forestalled, then why write at all, and how can this seeming gesture of supplication be reconciled with a nature as superbly proud and uncompromising as that of Claire de Beauséant?

The answer is that Claire's message to Gaston is not: "Even if you no longer love me, do not leave me," but

²¹ Similar assertions of sincerity weave through the letters of the youthful Honoré de Balzac as he courted Laure de Berny: "Ainsi sachez, Madame, que cette lettre n'est point un jeu, c'est l'expression franche d'une jeune âme" (March 1822, letter 42 of Correspondance 1: 140). Like Claire de Beauseant, Mme de Berny at first resisted, with gentleness, the ardent advances of her insistent suitor.

rather, "If you no longer love me, you must leave me." Gaston, after all, is not overtly threatening a break with Claire. If anything, he is uncertain about the direction in which his mother is pushing him and is resisting it. But Gaston's passive acceptance of their bond is not enough for Claire de Beauséant. Not for her the faded ardor of a tired romance (such as the one that Béatrix and Conti dragged sadly across Europe), offering little more than the empty security of appearances. Anything less than the purest sentiment, the most complete and passionate devotion, draws only the scorn of this regal heroine. In the next scene, upon divining the diminishment of her lover's passion after reading a few scant words of his letter, Mme de Beauséant, filled with horror, will exclaim, "'Oh! l'infâme! il m'a possédée ne m'aimant plus!...'" (2: 499). Although his response will ravage her, Mme de Beauséant has no choice but to sound his heart and soul. She cannot allow a liaison with a man who does not love her to continue, even if this means living in complete disgrace, the bleak fate to which a second abandonment will most surely condemn her.

To encourage a forthright response to the question on which their future hinges, Mme de Beauséant attempts to persuade her lover that their coming rupture will not devastate her. In a lyrically tender passage, Claire evokes the past joy of which no future suffering can rob her: she has loved the young Gaston, a person whom his future bride

can never know, because he no longer exists. The passage (exhibiting an awareness, which Proust was later to exploit, of the birth and death of different selves over time) is tinged with a sad poetry and remarkably devoid of bitterness. The future tense predominates; it is the future imagined through the prism of Claire de Beauséant's sorrow:

"Non, tu n'aimeras plus comme tu m'as aimée, comme tu m'aimes . . . maintenant, tu obéiras à ta destinée en calculant tout. Tu auras des soins, des inquiétudes, des ambitions, des soucis qui la priveront de ce sourire constant et inaltérable par lequel tes lèvres étaient embellies pour moi. Ta voix, pour moi toujours si douce, sera parfois chagrine." (2: 496-97; my italics, except "la")

As she looks toward her own desolate future, Claire de Beauséant lovingly paints a portrait of the man who is about to abandon her. Seen through the eyes of the woman whom he has showered with his love, this portrait recalls the charming, somewhat awkward, persistent young man who first visited the solitary heroine in her chateau in Normandy, some nine years earlier.

The contrasting tonalities of sorrow and happiness, which rend this letter from beginning to end, intertwine yet again in the final brushstrokes of Claire's portrait of Gaston: "'Oui, l'homme, le coeur, l'âme que j'aurais connus n'existeront plus; je les ensevelirai dans mon souvenir pour en jouir encore, et vivre heureuse de cette belle vie passée, mais inconnue à tout ce qui n'est pas nous'" (2: 497). An almost perfect equilibrium between the poles of death and life, future and past, is achieved in the

structure of the sentence itself: "'souvenir'" acts as a fulcrum, balancing the shadowy elements of nullity and expiration ("n'existeront plus,'" "ensevelirai,'" "inconnue'") with the brighter motifs of plenitude and pleasure ("jouir,'" "vivre heureuse,'" "belle vie passée'").

The final section of the letter is set off by a new paragraph, an infrequent occurrence in these epistolary texts. The indentation signals a shift in the writer's frame of mind, from the lyricism of the preceding passage back into a more imperious mood. Once again, Claire's insistence on complete candor, her demand for the unmitigated truth ("parle! sois franc: ne me trompe pas, ce serait un crime.'" [2: 497]) take command of the language and syntax of her text. The style and rhythm of her phrasing communicate a heightened sense of urgency: exclamations (five in all) and interrogations (four) course through this relatively brief paragraph, intensifying the writer's "voice". This emphatic closing text is all the more extraordinary for the manner in which it reasserts a fundamental contradiction of language, stated at the very outset of the letter. The pledge that Claire seems to be soliciting from her lover cannot be given in words. If language--writing a letter--was the chosen modality of Claire's "question" to her lover, action is the modality of the response she is seeking from him. Or is it? "'Viens! accours!'" she first insists; but, only a few lines later,

"'Ainsi, parle!'" and again, "'mais parle!'" (2: 497). Gaston's misinterpretation of the form of response required of him (can it be because, no longer loving his mistress, he fails to "read" the need she is expressing?) signals the dissolution of their union; Mme de Beauséant has only to glimpse the small triangular fold of paper to know that it is over: "S'il n'accourait pas à ses genoux, s'il n'y venait pas pleurant, pâle, amoureux, tout était dit" (2: 499). The acute command, "'parle!'" twice repeated, refers, then, to another kind of language, the language (like the "'caresses'" that were opposed to words at the opening of the letter) of lovers. The rupture of language is now responsible for instigating their divorce.

This entire final paragraph is enclosed between two conditional propositions, grammatically similar but emotionally very different. A rapid succession of four "si-" clauses, which brings about an immediate intensification of tone, initiates this development. They state the conditions that Gaston must meet, if his bond to Claire is to remain intact. As nine years earlier, Claire's letter confronts Gaston with a trial, more straightforward perhaps, but more demanding as well: he must prove complete devotion to his mistress, acknowledge her as his "'EVE, la seule femme qu'il y ait dans le monde'" (2: 497) and pledge emotional fidelity to her ("'si cependant tu n'as pas conçu la plus légère idée de liberté, si mon amour ne te pèse pas . . .'" [2: 497]). Very different is the solitary "si-" clause that closes this

development, and with it the entire letter. In contrast to her earlier posture welcoming her lover, if he can prove his love ("Ah, je t'aimerai dans un instant plus que je ne t'ai aimé, je crois, pendant ces neuf années.'" [2: 497]), Claire's final statement looks out toward the bleak and isolated future that will be hers if he fails to meet her conditions. The image which closes this letter, and which remains hauntingly in the mind's eye, is that of Claire de Beauséant, sad and alone: "Je te suis soumise, comme à Dieu, à ce seul consolateur qui me reste si tu m'abandonnes'" (2: 497). The image announces her future and recalls her past as well, for she was an abandoned woman at the outset of this tale, and is abandoned again at its close. With this final, solemn image, the letter's structure reflects the symmetrical structure of the narrative envelope that encloses it.

Claire de Beauséant's letter functions as the clef de voûte of this narrative, whose action may be summarized as follows: Claire's self-imposed exile in Normandy following her abandonment by her first lover; the romantic idyll of Claire and Gaston in Switzerland; Claire's second exile in Normandy following Gaston's abandonment; the brusque and shocking dénouement provided by Gaston's suicide. The letter arrests the action at its moment of climax,²² immediately

²² See Madeleine Ambrière-Fargeaud, introduction, La Femme abandonnée, by Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 2: 461.

preceding the couple's definitive rupture, and permits the heroine to cast a searching glance backward and forward, toward the beginning of her "story" and toward its end, recalling its critical moments and anticipating its tragic unfolding. In keeping with the sparseness of the action, which focuses on psychological events, the vantage point provided by the letter gives perspective on the inner events of the narrative: sorrow and bliss, humiliation and pride, doubt and suffering, isolation and mourning. Such insights could be conveyed only with great awkwardness by a narrator, and they might seem forced and even ridiculous in a dialogue between the lovers.²³ Framed within the context of a letter, however, they reinforce the tale's noble tone and call attention to its tragic scope. Through its heroine's epistolary reminiscences and premonitions, which enhance the psychological dimensions of its narrative structure, La Femme abandonnée achieves a measure of Racinian grandeur.

Balzac uses letters in a variety of ways to construct narrative and manipulate the significance of its design. Sometimes their early exchange controls the subsequent action, definitively setting its course or making it veer off in unexpected directions. A single letter in the early pages of Béatrix catalyzes the psychological forces that set the drama in motion; but the epistolary courtship with which Modeste Mignon opens initially thwarts and thereby postpones the betrothal with which that narrative closes. Quite

²³ Diana Festa-McCormick, Les Nouvelles de Balzac (Paris: Nizet, 1973) 171.

often, the tardy insertion of a correspondence in a story has a powerful influence on the interpretation of its meaning, an effect that serves to buttress narrative structure. The exchange of desperate missives in the final pages of Honorine, an indispensable component of that narrative's classical construction, reveals its moral dimension. And the correspondence with which Le Contrat de mariage closes confers a retrospective understanding upon its protagonist that reinforces the psychological supports of its architecture. Sometimes letters function unobtrusively but pervasively to control the development of narrative. In Le Lys dans la vallée, epistolary poses that remain unchallenged allow the action to move forward, while epistolary overtures that must be held in check threaten to bring it to a halt--and ultimately succeed in doing so. Correspondences may also reinforce narrative action by calling attention to its critical turning points, as is the case with the strategically placed missives in La Femme abandonnée. And occasionally, one letter, through a kind of miniaturization of narrative structure, achieves a remarkable concentration of meaning. Claire de Beauséant's epistolary dismissal of her young lover functions as just such a prism of meaning, refracting the entire spectrum of emotions in her experience of love and abandonment.

Chapter 2. Developing Themes and Motifs Through Letters:

Pierrette, Le Curé de village, Honorine

Thematic studies of literary topics are not usually guided by questions of form. They tend to focus on themes and motifs as pure content, patterns of dominant ideas and recurrent figures that are independent of the genre in which they are found or the formal techniques that give them expression. Such an approach tends to concern itself with an artist's creative fantasy world or personal imagery and obsessions more than with a work's formal distinctiveness. Modern critics have shown that thematic analysis need not be divorced from formal considerations. In her study of epistolarity,¹ Janet Altman devotes as much attention to defining and analyzing the thematic configurations typical of the epistolary genre as she does to examining technical aspects of the epistolary approach to narrative; in fact, she views these two critical endeavors as interdependent.² At the opposite pole of critics who treat theme exclusively as content, Wolfgang Iser has redefined it as a concept peculiar to the genre of narrative fiction. For Iser, the

¹ Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982).

² Altman 10.

theme of a narrative is that one of its four perspectives--the narrator, the characters, the plot, the reader--with which the reader is involved at any given moment.³ This approach to theme views it as a continually evolving aesthetic reality that is a function of the process of reading.

This chapter will examine the content-related aspects of theme within the context of the narrative's formal aspects. The opportunities available to the novelist for expanding and elaborating thematic content are almost limitless. What, then, is unique about the epistolary development of theme? And how does Balzac use this device to enrich the thematic structure of his narratives?

As with their role in structuring narrative, the way letters function to elaborate theme is a question that should give some consideration to their point of appearance in the unfolding storyline. In addition to the sequential disposition of letters relative to the narrative fabric into which they are woven, the density of motifs occurring at any given point is also a matter of significance. The novels we shall examine in this chapter demonstrate the diverse potential offered by the epistolary development of theme. In Pierrette, for example, the development of key themes is largely relegated to the correspondence exchanged by the two youthful protagonists. Although the contents of their

³ The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 96-99.

letters are not fully revealed until some three-quarters of the narrative have unfolded, this correspondence is the fundamental repository of two motifs central to narrative interest: lost childhood and doomed love. In contrast, one letter appearing in the earliest pages of Le Curé de village exhibits the annunciatory power that discrete texts like letters may wield within the narrative framework. In the relatively brief letter that the heroine writes to a minor background character, all the motifs that will later receive their full development within the broader scope of the narrative are present. The convergence of thematic elements en puissance achieved in this letter--a kind of epistolary overture--contrasts with the way Balzac uses letters to expand motifs in Honorine. The two epistolary texts written by its heroine give overt and concentrated attention to thematic elements that are only latent in the preceding portion of the narrative. It will be clear, as we analyze the letters in these novels, that both the location and concentration of thematic elements receiving epistolary development within a narrative are essential components of their impact on it.

But we must examine, as well, the nature of this impact. The epistolary development of theme may affect the action in a significant manner (as in Pierrette), or not at all. Its influence more often lies with a feature we shall call its poetic resonance, that is, its introduction to the narrative of lyric aspects and its prolongation or

intensification of those effects. Lyricism denotes the expression of the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker in an intense and often sensual manner. The subjectivity of epistolary texts is determined by their status as discourse--text in which the speaker speaks in his own name⁴--rather than narrative. This is not to say that letters cannot serve to narrate events: Sabine de Grandlieu's detailed missives to her mother in Béatrix comprise an almost day-by-day account of the disintegration of her marriage to Calyste du Guénic. But the fact of speaking in one's own name necessarily limits the letter writer to a perspective that is strongly personal and intimate. Then too, the restricted nature of the letter as text--it is intended for one (or several) specific, selected interlocutors--reinforces its status as a personal, rather than public, document. Equally significant with regard to the letter's subjective orientation and emotional quality are the opportunities that correspondence offers over conversation: the letter frequently serves as a vehicle for thoughts and feelings it would not be possible to express openly or directly, as we shall see in the letters of Pierrette Lorrain to Jacques Brigaut, of Véronique Graslin to Grossetête, of Honorine to Maurice.

Such characteristics favor the lyrical development of the novel's themes, a development distinguished by strong

⁴ Gérard Genette, "Frontières du récit," Figures II: essais (Paris: Seuil, 1969) 61-62.

emotional flavor, recourse to rich imagery, and a quality of poetic suggestiveness. Indeed, a blank page destined to a sympathetic interlocutor seems to invite expansiveness and poetic language. As social restrictions (Véronique), real dangers (Pierrette), or personal inhibitions (Honorine) momentarily recede, the letter writer gives free reign to deeper emotions and lapses more readily into the language of metaphor. The silent interlocutor, it turns out, is a powerful instigator of unfettered expression. An idealized listener, the recipient of the letter does not react, interact, or interrupt. The lyrical quality of many epistolary developments is as much determined by the remoteness of the letter's audience as it is by the letter writer's isolation, which directs him or her inward.

The characters whose missives are marked by lyrical developments are not the sturdy victors in Balzac's world. They are, most often, anguished, complex souls (Véronique), abused and suffering children (Pierrette), isolated, doomed creatures (Honorine). We hear their troubled, plaintive voices. These are private voices, poignant and touching, bespeaking searching, inner vision (Véronique) as well as benighted innocence (Pierrette). The sincerity of this group of letter writers is unmistakable. Devoid of social posturing and machination, their letters offer a unique perspective on the events in the novel: that of the victim. It often seems that the victors predominate in Balzac's fictional universe: unscrupulous bullies or manipulative

climbers, these robust connivers are never at a loss for words, and their admonitions and disquisitions fill many pages of La Comédie humaine. But Balzac's world is populated by victims as well. Theirs is the discourse of lament and defeat. They languish and perish, but not before baring their souls, and the letter offers them an emotional haven in which to do this. Their missives are oases of lyricism in the sometimes vulgar, often harsh, always power-driven world of La Comédie humaine.

When Balzac set out to write Pierrette, he intended, his correspondence shows, to write a charming story for Mme Hanska's adolescent daughter, Anna.⁵ He wrote instead one of the bleakest, most despairing scenes in La Comédie humaine⁶ about just such a victim. Given the heroine's innocence and extreme youth, Pierrette may be viewed either in ancient terms, as a tale of sacrifice in which a ritualistic offering restores peace to the community but does not purify it,⁷ or, in modern terms, as a case of child abuse, in which letters give the perspective of the suffering child and a sympathetic outsider.

⁵ June 4, 1839 (letter 142) and July 1839 (letter 143), Lettres à Madame Hanska 1: 646 and 650.

⁶ Jean-Louis Tritten, introduction, Pierrette, by Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 4: 3.

⁷ Tritten 17.

The letters occupy a relatively small portion of the entire text of this novel. But their aesthetic interest cannot be measured by their limited volume. In Pierrette, the letters serve as a textual territory that favors the lyrical development of certain key themes: doomed love; idyllic, lost childhood; relentless persecution; the counterpoint of hope and despair.

The love story of Pierrette Lorrain and Jacques Brigaut may be seen as a variant of an ancient literary model. There is a long tradition, in epistolary fiction, of letters written by young lovers separated by hostile parents. The influence of this scenario, especially popular in Greek epistolary adventure novels written between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D., extends to non-epistolary fiction as well, as seen in such relatively modern novels as Prévost's Cleveland and Voltaire's Candide.⁸ The given elements in Pierrette are somewhat different, since there is no question of an unsuitable match, nor any overt opposition to the union of the young couple; indeed, Pierrette's guardians are not even aware of the romance they are foiling. The emphasis in the novel lies elsewhere, on the persecution and martyrdom of Pierrette herself. Nonetheless, the love story of Pierrette and Brigaut, thwarted like so many of its literary predecessors, remains a key theme.

⁸ Versini 10.

This love story is told almost exclusively through the text of the letters these two children write each other, and in the events surrounding their surreptitious exchange. So unified is the tone in the sections containing or dominated by epistolary texts that they seem to constitute a discrete piece which may be lifted out of the novel and given the title, "les amours de Pierrette et de Brigaut." In so isolating this correspondence, we shall take the license of designating as the first "letter" in the series the lovely wedding song that Jacques Brigaut sings to his beloved childhood companion. The end of the series is marked by the narrator, who solemnly intones, "Là finirent les amours de Pierrette et de Brigaut," (4: 133), immediately after Pierrette receives her last, fateful missive from Brigaut.

The chant aux mariés with which the narrative opens is more than a serenade: it is the means by which Brigaut captures Pierrette's attention and informs her of his presence. Three years earlier, Pierrette Lorrain had left her impoverished grandparents in Brittany to live with her cousins, prosperous thread and trimmings merchants in Provins. They have exploited the poor girl, now fourteen years old, making her a servant in their house and treating her with indifference and insensitivity, if not out-and-out cruelty. The sixteen-year-old Brigaut knows none of this. His separation from his childhood playmate has catalyzed his feelings, made him realize the depth of his affection, and brought him to Provins. In resorting to song to summon his

young friend to her window, Brigaut seems to manifest an intuitive awareness that overt communication would endanger her. The song awakens, like a letter from home, stirring memories of landscapes, people, and a way of life that the young girl has left behind. Jacques sings the traditional Breton wedding ballad in the style typical of his native village, "sur le ton traînant particulier aux gens de l'Ouest" (4: 31). The sweetly familiar melody succeeds in bringing Pierrette to her window. The first contact between the couple is established.

As if to reinforce this evocation of Pierrette's distant home and heritage, Brigaut suddenly flourishes a golden furze flower, which grows wildly and abundantly in their native Brittany. The flower serves as an emblem, confirming Brigaut's identity to Pierrette, whose whispered words awaken her spinster cousin (and her cousin's suspicions) and provoke her hasty dismissal of the confused young man. Thus takes place the first exchange of letters, so to speak, between Brigaut and Pierrette, if by letter we mean a stylized form of communication between persons whom distance or some other obstacle prevent from communicating directly: Brigaut's "letter" to Pierrette takes the form of a serenade and emblematic bouquet; Pierrette's whispered words of recognition and gesture warning Brigaut to flee (4: 32) comprise her response. In assimilating messages conveyed through song and gesture with the epistolary communications that follow them, we are taking the liberty

of stretching the definition of the letter, a central characteristic of which is its written status. This extension of meaning corresponds inversely to the restrictions to which the youthful interlocutors are subject. Under close surveillance, they are forced to resort to an oblique, largely non-verbal avenue of communication until they can devise measures to exchange their written correspondence in safety. By expanding the meaning of the epistolary event to encompass song, we are also identifying lyricism, through the musicality from which it springs, as a key element of epistolary language. It is important to note that the theme, "les amours de Pierrette et de Brigaut," inherently charged with emotion and poetic potential, begins on a note of formal lyricism by accompanying its motifs with melody.

The lyrical development of the motifs associated with this theme is bound to the correspondence of Pierrette and Brigaut. The setting in which their letters are exchanged--at midnight, beneath the moon and stars--is itself highly romantic. It is a perfect backdrop for young lovers, whose gaze conveys the most intense communication possible:

Quand il fut au milieu de la place, elle put le voir indistinctement à la clarté des étoiles; mais lui la contemplait dans la zone lumineuse de la lumière projetée par la chandelle. Ces deux enfants demeurèrent ainsi pendant une heure . . .
(4: 129)

For these two would-be lovers, written communication, coupled with the language of the eyes--mutual contemplation

in the moonlight--replaces the binding intimacy of the tête-à-tête.

In addition to its nocturnal setting, the extravagance of their endeavor further enhances its lyrical aspect. Brigaut must take excessive precautions and circuitious measures to slip his first written letter to Pierrette, which he manages to do one day while she is accompanying her cousin to the market. The need to maintain the secrecy of their correspondence makes the nightly exchange an elaborate ritual: Brigaut's secret military call that sounds like the hoot of an owl; the cord to which the couple attaches their missives, secreted into the Rogron's house through Pierrette's window; Pierrette's dangerous nighttime search for paper, pen, and ink. Jean-Louis Tritten suggests the possible influence of an equally devoted, similarly doomed couple in Stendhal's Chartreuse de Parme, Fabrice and Clélia Conti.⁹ Intrigued by the covert correspondence between the prisoner and his beloved in Stendhal's novel, Balzac wrote: "Vous y lirez une encyclopédie de toutes les ressources du prisonnier, ses merveilleux langages auxquels il emploie la nature, les moyens par lesquels il donne la vie au chant et un sens au bruit."¹⁰ The material solutions that the couples in the two novels devise to carry on their forbidden correspondences are markedly similar. Both improvise the

⁹ Tritten 16.

¹⁰ Revue parisienne, September 1840 (Geneva: Slatkine reprints, 1968) 310. Qtd. in Tritten 16.

same mechanism to exchange their letters, a cord or ribbon, dropped from the prisoner's window under cover of darkness. (It is clear that Pierrette is no less a prisoner than Fabrice.) Both captives must somehow contend with an untimely shortage of writing implements, which causes Pierrette's frantic search and Fabrice's use of a piece of coal to compose his first epistle--a few passionately scribbled words--on the back of his hand. Clélia uses the pulley device to send Fabrice water and sustenance; Brigaut would resort to the same measure to dispatch to his beloved the money he believes she needs for her survival. Quite strikingly, the initial contact of both couples is achieved by means of music; however, Clélia's first "letter" to Fabrice really is a letter, disguised as an operatic recitative that she sings at her piano to avoid alerting the prison guards.

Against this romantic backdrop, confronted by great obstacles and perils, Pierrette and Brigaut manage to carry on the correspondence that comprises their brief romance. The material hindrances facing the lovers are not the only difficulties made apparent in their letters. Dissimulation is so foreign to these two innocents that, as Brigaut succeeds in slipping his first letter to Pierrette, they are nearly overwhelmed with shame. It is as if their stealth--dictated by real danger--were somehow to be equated with the physical act of passion, so much more vulgar than the pure emotion that fills them. Brigaut is agitated by pounding

temples and violent palpitations, and Pierrette, whose cheeks turn fiery red, nearly swoons: "Ces deux enfants éprouvèrent de part et d'autre, à leur insu, des sensations à défrayer dix amours vulgaires." (4: 126).

The innocence of Pierrette and Brigaut, a key motif of the novel, receives a touching, if ironic, development in Pierrette's letter. The blossoming of their love is an outgrowth of a deep, pure childhood affection. Balzac, fascinated with the evolution of such naïve passion, creates an intertextual frame¹¹ by evoking other famous childhood romances, both literary and real: those of Paul et Virginie (4: 77, 98), and of the marquise de Pescaire and her husband (4: 98). There is, perhaps, a suggestion of ambiguity in Balzac's youthful sweethearts: Brigaut, at least, seems at the turning point where childhood affection becomes adult love. But about Pierrette there can be no question: her innocence in matters of the heart is complete. Balzac artfully exploits this moral trait in the text of one of his heroine's missives as well as in the interpretation to which these letters and the behavior surrounding their writing and exchange are later subject. Pierrette addresses Brigaut as "'mon ami'"; she asks him to be her lover ("'Si tu veux être mon amant . . .'" [4: 129]); and she repeatedly (seven times) uses the word "aimer" either to state her feeling for him or to solicit his affection ("'aime-moi bien; je te

¹¹ Concerning intertextual frames, see Umberto Eco, The Role of the Reader (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979) 21.

promets de t'aimer toujours . . ." [4: 129]); her poignant postscript asks, "'Tu m'aimeras toujours, n'est-ce pas?'" (4: 129). But Pierrette's use of the terms "'ami,'" "'amant,'" and "'aimer'" do not have the same meaning in the text of her letter as they do on the lips of her jealous cousin. Sylvie, awakened by Brigaut's serenade, accuses Pierrette of having a lover. Pierrette does not even understand the meaning of the word. Sylvie takes her naïve candor for dissimulation; her evasive answer to Pierrette's question ("'"Un amant, Pierrette, est un homme qui nous aime et qui veut nous épouser'" [4: 109]) will give rise to the latter's innocent misuse of the word in her letter.

After Pierrette's death, the lawyer Vinet tries to use Brigaut's letters to suggest that the young couple's conduct was questionable, perhaps immoral, certainly malicious; he hopes thereby to clear his client, Sylvie Rogron, of charges that her brutal mistreatment of Pierrette resulted in the young girl's death. But Brigaut "produisit la lettre qu'il avait reçue de Pierrette et qui prouvait leur mutuelle innocence" (4: 151). For the moment, at least, Pierrette's memory is vindicated, thanks to the posthumous testimony of her innocence, provided by her letter.

The correspondence documents Pierrette's suffering, both physical and moral, at the hands of her cousins. But these very missives, the single source of happiness in Pierrette's bleak existence, also bring about the exacerbation of her torments and, perhaps too, in a dumb

way, her death. Here the letters function in the capacity of "letter-object," that is, their influence on the action of the narrative is wholly independent of their content.¹² From the very first, the communiqués between Pierrette and Brigaut cause a series of quiproquos whose repercussions put Pierrette in extreme peril. Brigaut's morning serenade arouses Sylvie's jealousy of her cousin: she mistakes the young man for Colonel Gouraud, whom she had hoped to ensnare for a husband. Feeling scorned, the vulturine spinster intensifies her persecution of the girl, whom she now perceives as her rival. On the night that Pierrette receives her last letter from Brigaut, Sylvie is awakened by the owl-like cries with which Brigaut signals his sweetheart. She bursts into Pierrette's room, surprises her in the act of unsealing her letter, and, in an effort to seize the missive, pounces on her. A violent, clawing struggle ensues that ends with the mangling of Pierrette's hand by her enraged cousin. Pierrette eventually dies of her injuries, as much from the moral violence inflicted during her long martyrdom as from the physical wounds she sustains on this terrible night. And so, the letters that nearly save Pierrette are also the agent that escalates her persecutor's venomous and ultimately murderous attacks. In this they merit the epithet by which the narrator refers to them, "les fatales lettres" (4: 139).

¹² Concerning letter-objects, see Jost 167.

Thus, "les amours de Pierrette et de Brigaut," a key theme of this novel, receives its most concentrated and lyrical treatment in the text of the letters exchanged by the characters and in their violent impact on the action. It is a tragic story of doomed, aborted love: "Pierrette et Brigaut ne connaîtront qu'un amour-affection. Leur destin est profondément mutilé."¹³

A group of themes in Pierrette is organized around contrasting poles whose features are sharply outlined in the letters. The past and the present stand as one such set of thematic poles; hope and despair are another.

The past evokes for these correspondents a cluster of motifs that have rich lyric potential: native village, childhood, love and happiness. The presence of Brittany in this narrative is marked and poetic. Pierrette is raised in Pen-Hoël, a village whose name is shared by one of the characters in Béatrix, which takes place in Guérande. Brigaut's unexpected arrival in Provins, the lovely wedding song, the yellow furze flower: all evoke Brittany. Indeed, Jacques Brigaut symbolizes Brittany: "Si, pour elle [Pierrette], il était la Bretagne et la plus heureuse enfance, pour lui, Pierrette était la vie! (4: 99; my italics). This thought punctuates the brief, desperate exchange of letters between the doomed couple. Brigaut's serenade, we have pointed out, functions as a letter from

¹³ Tritter 17.

home, provoking a rush of achingly sweet memories for the homesick, persecuted girl: "Les souvenirs de son enfance avaient mélodieusement chanté leurs poésies dans son âme" (4: 34). The pull of Brittany is felt throughout the letters, whose text it scores like a refrain. "'Oh! Pierrette, retournons en Bretagne'" (4: 127), we read in Jacques's first letter; and again, more emphatically, "'Retournons en Bretagne!'" (4: 127). "'Je veux nous en aller en Bretagne retrouver ma grand-maman qui m'aime. . .'" (4: 128) asserts the childlike voice of Pierrette in her letter, which dares to imagine her flight home. And, to give Pierrette courage while she awaits rescue, Jacques's second letter evokes the Brittany of their childhood games: "'prends patience, Pierrette! Brigaut veille sur toi comme au temps où nous allions glisser sur l'étang et que je t'ai retirée du grand trou où nous avons manqué périr ensemble'" (4: 131).

As the above passage shows, the Brittany of Jacques and Pierrette's letters is an idealized, as opposed to realistic, landscape. Rather than the minute description of terrain and setting (which we might expect if Balzac's narrator were taking pen in hand), the technique is highly evocative and suggestive: a small boat, vague outlines of a pond and open fields, humble, happy childhood occupations, the loving faces of Pierrette's grandparents. The Brittany that Jacques and Pierrette evoke in their letters is not only a place, but a time: that of an idyllic childhood, the

longing for which these two correspondents painfully share. It is a time when Pierrette's health glowed in her cheeks, and when, as for Paul and Virginie, the days of Jacques and Pierrette stretched out in an uninterrupted string of childhood games. "'Voilà donc où sont en allées tes jolies couleurs et ta belle santé! Qu'est devenue ma Pierrette? qu'en ont-ils fait?'" (4: 126-27) laments Jacques, whose ungrammatical syntax ("où sont en allées," "qu'en ont-ils fait'") and archaic language ("Tu ne marches plus à Provins comme tu te mouvais en Bretagne'" [4: 127]; my italics, all three quotes) must constitute, for Pierrette, the style and language of home.¹⁴ These epistolary evocations of place highlight Balzac's stylistic artistry. How appropriate to her character is the emotional posture that Pierrette takes as she writes: given her tender age and anguished frame of mind, she would more likely depict her blissful childhood and beloved home through the rosy lens of feeling than take the analytic stance of an objective narrator. Brigaut's tone and language are similarly emotional, poetic, and true to character.

In sharp contrast to this joyous past, with its images of children running, laughing, and playing in the bosom of adoring family and townspeople, stands a miserable present. The motifs that cluster around this pole are bleak and

¹⁴ This analysis of the language in Jacques's letter was proposed by Jean-Louis Tritten in his notes to Pierrette, Pléiade, 4: 1162.

ominous, encompassing, on the one hand, the harsh reality of the daily chores that Pierrette must complete, and, on the other, the mistreatment and persecution that announce her death and, more darkly, cause it. If Brittany is a poetized locale that evokes a childhood idyll, Provins is a moral setting against which the action of the narrative unfolds. The jealousies and rivalries of the inhabitants of Provins, the political machinations that absorb them, the very atmosphere of hostility that permeates their environment: these sinister forces are as much responsible for Pierrette's suffering and eventual death, Balzac's narrator repeatedly takes pains to point out, as the accumulated punishments and direct blows she suffers at the hands of the Rogron. In Provins, "un certain climat de haine et de cruauté"¹⁵ abets the forces that bring about Pierrette's martyrdom. The Provinois landscape is not even indirectly sketched in the text of these letters, but the correspondents' frequent evocations of their beloved Breton home summon forth, if only by poetic contrast, Pierrette's present environment in all its affective grayness. Provins hovers between the lines of the couple's letters, a potent, invisible presence, a moral landscape.

In opposition to Pierrette's past happiness and loving family, motifs tied to the Brittany theme, Brigaut's letter depicts the subdued appearance of his once vibrant companion

¹⁵ Tritter 12.

and her cruel exploitation by her present guardians: "'Ces Rogron sont vénimeux, ils t'ont ôté ta gaité'" (4: 127); "'ces misérables parents qui te devaient faire tant de bien et qui te font tant de mal! Toi, Pierrette, fille d'un colonel mort pour la France, réduite par ces monstres à faire leur cuisine? . . .'" (4: 126). The domestic subjugation that Jacques's words so bitterly deplore reveals the presence in his letter of the Cinderella motif that threads through this novel. The delicate Pierrette is constantly depicted performing heavy household labors: cooking, washing, sweeping, scrubbing. At one point, Balzac's narrator makes the comparison overt: "'Pierrette était Cendrillon . . .'" (4: 121). The motif is reinforced in Pierrette's letter, as she describes the heavy basket of provisions that cuts her frail arm; her melancholy recollection of the pampering lavished on her by an adoring grandmother suggests the harshness of her current enslavement: "'Ah! si elle savait qu'on fait laver la vaisselle à sa petite fille, elle qui me disait: Laisse ça, ma mignonne, quand dans ses malheurs je voulais l'aider; laisse, laisse, mon mignon, tu gâterais tes jolies menottes'" (4: 128).

The text of Pierrette's letter provides evidence of her moral, as well as physical, misery. She suffers as much from the cruel and humiliating way she is spoken to as she does from the material deprivations and abuse to which she is subjected: "'On me parle comme nous ne parlons pas aux

chiens! on me traite comme la dernière des dernières!" (4: 128). Her torment is exacerbated by the Rogrons' brutal repression of the very feelings of pain and misery that their maltreatment of her elicit: "'Il y a des moments où je pleurerais si j'étais seule, car on ne me laisse rien faire à ma guise, et je n'ai même pas la permission de pleurer'" (4: 128-29). Perhaps the freedom of expression that Pierrette's letter writing permits offers some meager palliative to the moral isolation that is so cruelly imposed on her.

The poles of hope and despair provide a second axis along which contrasting motifs in Pierrette are organized. Somewhat more abstract than the first axis, which has a distinctive geographical (Brittany-Provins) as well as temporal (past-present) orientation, this second axis is firmly supported in the narrative by the brief correspondence. Functioning as letter-objects, Brigaut's missives cast a slim ray of hope into Pierrette's bleak existence; they promise her the simple happiness of home and family. Small wonder, then, that Pierrette clutches his first letter to her as if it were some treasure ("Pierrette revint au logis avec son trésor" [4: 126]). Beneath her pillow, the letter seems magically to suffuse her dreams with radiant, joyous figures; the extravagant imagery of ecstasy is reinforced by the sinuous line of the phrase that evokes it:

Une fois au lit, elle s'endormit heureuse, quoique souffrante: elle avait la lettre de Brigaut sous

son chevet. Elle dort comme dorment les persécutés, d'un sommeil embelli par les anges, ce sommeil aux atmosphères d'or et d'outremer, pleines d'arabesques divines entrevues et rendues par Raphaël. (4: 129)

The letter's beneficent potency does not diminish when she awakens, "joyeuse et légère comme une alouette, radieuse et gaie" (4: 129), and the hope that Brigaut would return that night to bring a response to her letter "était le viatique de sa journée" (4: 130). Jacques's second letter "la combla de joie" (4: 130). Although she does not understand all its enigmatic references, the devotion it articulates and the salvation it promises are a balm to her soul: "Son coeur éprouva la sensation que les voyageurs du désert ressentent en apercevant de loin les palmiers autour du puits" (4: 132). Thus if Pierrette, constantly "maltraitée en paroles," is, as Martin Kanes observes,¹⁶ a victim of her cousins' speech--that is, of harsh spoken language--she is also comforted by language, which, in Jacques's lovingly composed letters, is responsible for the few moments of happiness she is to know during her sad captivity.

But the soothing correspondence is darkened by an insistent motif that stands opposite this pole of hope and happiness. Pierrette's letters reveal a disturbing resignation to and acceptance of her unjust fate:

"Avant que tu ne me chantes le chant des mariées, je reconnaissais la bonté de Dieu dans mes douleurs; car, comme je le priais de me retirer de

¹⁶ Balzac's Comedy of Words 173.

ce monde, et que je me sentais bien malade, je me disais: Dieu m'entend!" (4: 128)

This despair manifests itself physically, in bizarre symptoms that plague the tormented child:

"il me semble que je vais à mal. Je suis bien malade, Jacques! J'ai dans la tête des douleurs à crier, et dans les os, dans le dos, puis je ne sais quoi aux reins qui me tue, et je n'ai d'appétit que pour de vilaines choses, des racines, des feuilles; enfin j'aime à sentir l'odeur des papiers imprimés." (4: 128)

Jacques's letter picks up the troubled note in Pierrette's words and reverberates with the terrible thought: "'Oh! Pierrette, mourir! mais, Pierrette, y penses-tu? Tout mon coeur a tremblé; je me suis cru mort moi-même à cette idée'" (4: 131). Thus in their letters, Jacques and Pierrette give voice to the malaise which threads through this narrative and which announces its tragic conclusion.

In Pierrette the dominant thematic elements are closely linked to a correspondence that is spread across a significant portion of the narrative, a fact which, to some extent, dilutes their impact. In Le Curé de village, a single letter provides a superb example of the use of the epistolary form to introduce key themes within the narrative context. Every major motif that will be developed in this novel is present in the early, brief letter that Véronique Graslin writes to Grossetête: passion and death, waste and destructive energy, spiritual malady and redemption, cultivation as an act of faith and means of salvation. The

letter also serves to deepen the reader's understanding of Véronique's character and sensibility and, by its poetic quality and mysterious allusions, heightens the "intérêt romanesque," which Balzac felt may have been lacking from his original conception of the novel.¹⁷

The letter, the narrator tells us, "peindra la situation où se trouvait cette femme qui devait donner un jour les gages d'un caractère si ferme et si élevé" (9: 670). That situation--the state of Véronique's mind and soul--is an emotional one, and the bounds of social propriety prohibit her from revealing anything direct to her interlocutor. Owing to this circumstance, and to the writer's reflectiveness and reserve, her letter is all suggestion and metaphor, intense, troubled, and disturbing. The letter writer is on the brink of an emotional crisis, on the verge of despair. Despite the moral courage and strength that Véronique will eventually manifest, her spiritual suffering, deliberate mortification, and ultimate death bespeak the victim's tormented existence. Her martyrdom prophetically invades the text of her letter and determines its anguished tone and dolorous elaboration of theme.

Two contrasting motifs, those of passion and death, are introduced with bold strokes in the opening lines. This

¹⁷ "Préface de la première édition" (1841), Le Curé de village in La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) 9: 637.

antithesis is trumpeted, in the first sentence, by the juxtaposition of the "'charmantes fleurs'" with the "'cruelles réflexions'" they elicit (9: 670). The motif of flowers is highly suggestive, for flowers have been associated with Véronique from her earliest appearance in the novel: the flowers with which her father lovingly fills her room following her recovery from a near-fatal illness; the flowers that frame her face as she gazes, herself a flower ("de même qu'une fleur empourprée" [9: 653]), from her window; the forbidden flowers whose existence she merely divines in Paul et Virginie, and which exude the heady aura of passion ("la révélation de l'amour . . . lui fut faite par un livre suave" [9: 654]); and, finally, the exquisite, exotic bouquets that Pierre Graslin brings her during his courtship, bouquets whose perfumes pitch her into a kind of rapture, an intoxicated state of febrile, though unconscious, desire:

Quand le banquier montra ce monceau de fleurs exotiques dont les parfums envahirent la chambre et qu'il l'offrit à sa future, Véronique éprouva des émotions bien contraires à celles que lui avait causées le premier aspect de Graslin, elle fut comme plongée dans le monde idéal et fantastique de la nature tropicale. Elle n'avait jamais vu de camélias blancs, elle n'avait jamais senti le cytise des Alpes, la citronnelle, le jasmin des Açores, les volcamérias, les roses musquées, toutes ces odeurs divines qui sont comme l'excitant de la tendresse, et qui chantent au coeur des hymnes de parfums. Graslin laissa Véronique en proie à cette émotion. (9: 662)

Even before the "fall" that her reading of Paul et Virginie precipitates, the flowers that surround Véronique suggest,

by their crimson and purple colors, the taint of sin. And the flowers that Graslin nightly offers her--flowers gathered in Grossetête's hothouse--symbolize her unsatisfied sensuality.¹⁸ Small wonder, then, that the flowers Grossetête sent Véronique and to which she refers in her letter, suggest cruel and painful thoughts to the young woman.

The thoughts--death, futility, waste, and illness--have a tragic resonance that will be fully understood only when the narrative has unfolded. The association of death with flowers wilting on a young woman's corsage and in her hair ("Ces jolies créatures, cueillies par vous et destinées à mourir sur mon sein et dans mes cheveux en ornant une fête . . ." [9: 670]) is certainly within the natural order. However, the appearance of the word "fête" in this faintly morbid context oddly foreshadows Mme Graslin's own death, some fifteen years later, upon the red damask bed amidst a display of candelabras and churchly magnificence: "Il est dit, s'écria la mourante en souriant, que ma mort sera ce qu'elle doit être pour une âme chrétienne: une fête!" (9: 857).

The futility suggested by the image of flowers blooming and dying in the woods "sans avoir été vues, et dont les parfums n'ont été respirés par personne" [9: 670]) is a

¹⁸ André Lorant, notes et variantes, Le Curé de village, by Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) 9: 1579.

literary commonplace; a verse that was later to inspire Baudelaire comes to mind: "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air."¹⁹ Rather than springing from a philosophical quest, the futility Véronique senses in her own existence seems rooted in the emotional and physiological turmoil that is the result of her unavowed prurience. This motif, associated with exotic flowers throughout the novel, will be reintroduced and expanded later in the letter.

But the theme of futility applies not only to Véronique's destiny; it is a central theme in Le Curé de village, closely linked to the material and spiritual transformation of Montégnac. Prior to the undertaking to reclaim the land of this village (a project conceived by the curé Bonnet, supported and advanced by Véronique, and executed by the engineer Gérard), the surrounding terrain is the very image of futility. A vast, uncultivated wasteland, empty of even the most primitive signs of life, its soil is depleted, ravaged, and barren:

de vastes plaines incultes, des steppes sans herbe
ni chevaux . . . (9: 705)

Ces espaces oubliées par la génération botanique,
et que couvrent d'infertiles débris minéraux, des
cailloux roulés, des terres mortes, sont des défis
portés à la Civilisation (9: 706).

¹⁹ Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," A Concise Treasury of Great Poems (New York: Permabooks, 1953) 170. The final tercet of Baudelaire's "Le Guignon" reads: "Mainte fleur épanche à regret / Son parfum doux comme un secret / Dans les solitudes profondes."

Owing to the difficulty of existence in these places, the inhabitants are subject to a pervasive moral desolation. They lead wasted lives and many, unable to satisfy their most basic economic needs, are forced to turn to crime. The theme of energy unable to find a healthy outlet and channelled to destructive ends is a variant of the theme of futility and waste; it will reappear, in relation to Véronique's own moral struggles, later in the letter.

The third "'cruelle réflexion'" suggested by the flowers is that of illness. For the sick and suffering, even the loveliest gifts of life constitute a reminder of illness and death, from which there is no escape: "'tout est piège pour le malheureux, les plus mièvres choses ramènent les malades à leur mal'" (9: 670-71). But linked with malady is the notion of redemption, a divine transformation through which material suffering somehow acquires spiritual reality: "'le plus grand tort de certains maux est la persistance qui les fait devenir une idée. Une douleur constante ne serait-elle pas une pensée divine?'" (9: 671). The spiritual malady that will plague the heroine and move her to the act of redemption that will restore Montégnac to physical health is here announced. Later we read that the curé Bonnet takes to frequenting Mme Graslin "dès qu'on lui eut indiqué chez elle une maladie de l'âme" (9: 753). References to the spiritual affliction that is ravaging Véronique punctuate the text long before she is known to be suffering from the physical illness that leads to her death.

Indeed, emotional turmoil and spiritual suffering are the essence of her existence.

The image of the flowers, constantly present in Véronique's mind's eye as she writes, leads her to reflect on their source, Grossetête's flourishing greenhouse. In an elaborate metaphor, she compares this nursery of exotic plants and flowers to her own greenhouse of suffering souls ("Ma serre à moi ne contient que des âmes souffrantes" [9: 671]). Véronique wants to visit Grossetête's hothouse to gaze on the flowers, contemplate their growth, and absorb, by some mysterious process, Grossetête's skill and art in cultivation:

"A votre retour en ville, communiquez-moi votre goût, faites que j'aïlle à ma serre, d'un pied agile comme vous allez à la vôtre, contempler les développements des plantes, vous épanouir et fleurir avec elles, admirer ce que vous avez créé, voir des couleurs nouvelles, inespérées qui s'évalent et croissent sous vos yeux par la vertu de vos soins." (9: 671)

The osmotic quality of this process is conveyed by the fluid line of this long sentence, and especially, by the confusion that occurs between Grossetête's hothouse and Véronique's, between Véronique and the flowers themselves ("vous épanouir et fleurir avec elles").

Now Véronique's thoughts shift painfully from Grossetête's thriving garden to her own foundering one. Hers is a spiritual garden, and the "plants" she cultivates are "des âmes souffrantes." Unhappy in marriage and unable, as yet, to conceive a child, Véronique has thrown

herself into charitable works, helping the poor and comforting the suffering. This "bienfaisance active" (9: 673), by providing employment for her ardent temperament and sublimating her need to love, procures her some degree of relief from an inner turmoil that saps her strength and mines her emotions. Unfortunately, this involvement brings Véronique as much suffering as it does joy, for just as she imagines herself understanding the flowers' unfolding by mystically blossoming with them, so she embraces the suffering and wants of the people to whom she ministers, a process that entails, by communication, her own suffering:

"Les misères que je m'efforce de soulager
m'attristent l'âme, et quand je les épouse, quand
après avoir vu quelque jeune femme sans linge pour
son nouveau-né, quelque vieillard sans pain, j'ai
pourvu à leurs besoins, les émotions que m'a
causées leur détresse calmée ne suffisent pas à
mon âme." (9: 671)

This long metaphor is accompanied by a rather distinct alteration of tone. The "'cruelles reflexions,'" while painful to contemplate, were somewhat philosophical in nature, and the letter writer seemed almost detached from them: the blooming and wilting of flowers in dark, remote woods, far from human eyes; the sad thoughts that even the sweetest of life's treasures suggest to the sick and dying. Now there is a shift to a more personal register and the tone becomes sharper and more noticeably distressed: "'Je sens un ennui navrant'" (9: 671), Véronique reveals, and the words with which she evokes her "garden" depict her own

inner affliction: "'souffrantes,'" "'misères,'" "
 "'m'attristent,'" "'détresse.'"

We note, too, the extended meaning that the process of horticulture acquires in this passage. Throughout the novel, an intricate interplay between the organic and material domains, on the one hand, and the spiritual and moral domains, on the other, will allow this complex story of redemption achieved through cultivation to unfold. "Sur plusieurs points semblables," the narrator proclaims, "planter, ce serait évangéliser" (9: 707). It is Bonnet, the priest, who conceives the notion of reclaiming the land by building a dam to irrigate the arid plain and restore its productive function. The priest is the first to understand that this material regeneration will bring with it spiritual rebirth, not only for the region of Montégnac--but for Véronique as well. Véronique's prophetic summary, at the close of her troubled letter, of her own spiritual adventure ("'mon âme à la fois déserte et fleurie'" [9: 672]) can be also be said to recapitulate that of Montégnac. Much later, in her public confession of her crime, Véronique will extract the full meaning of the link between cultivation--social as well as agricultural--and redemption:

"j'ai marqué mon repentir en traits ineffaçables sur cette terre, il subsistera presque éternellement. Il est écrit dans les champs fertilisés, dans le bourg agrandi, dans les ruisseaux dirigés de la montagne dans cette plaine, autrefois inculte et sauvage, maintenant verte et productive. Il ne se coupera pas un arbre d'ici à cent ans, que les gens de ce pays ne se disent à quel remords on en aura l'ombrage. . .

. Tout a été réparé de ce qui revient à la société
 . . ." (9: 868-69)

The theme of cultivation is central to this story of redemption, a slow, painfully-sought, hard-won redemption akin to the arduous and very gradual transformation of a desert into a flowering garden. It is in Véronique's letter that the spiritual significance of this material event is first suggested.

The final part of the letter is dominated by another theme central to the novel, that of uncontrollable and ultimately destructive energy. The development of this theme coincides with an intensification of the letter's tone of distress and is accompanied by subtle but unmistakable portents of tragic future events. Véronique senses within herself a wellspring of malevolent energy ("des forces superbes, et malfaisantes peut-être" [9: 671]) that is out of proportion with her existence and over which she has no control. In its material aspect, this energy seems equivalent to her unsatisfied desire, symbolised by the bouquets of exotic flowers culled in Grossetête's hothouse. This correspondence is confirmed by her impatience with the tranquil rhythm of her existence, an impatience that she herself is at a loss to explain: "Pourquoi désiré-je une souffrance qui romprait la paix énervante de ma vie?" (9: 671). In its spiritual aspect, the ominous energy corresponds to the pride ("des forces superbes . . . que rien ne peut humilier, que les plus durs commandements de la

religion n'abattent point'" [9: 671]) that will lead to her fall. During the public confession that precedes her death, Véronique condemns this pride as perhaps her gravest transgression:

"Hélas! et ceci sans doute est l'une de mes plus grandes fautes, j'ai caché ma passion à l'ombre des autels. Les plus vertueuses actions, l'amour que j'ai pour ma mère, les actes d'une dévotion véritable et sincère au milieu de tant d'égarements, j'ai tout fait servir au misérable triomphe d'une passion insensée." (9: 866).

Véronique's struggle with powerful inner forces that mine her being and bring her to the brink of destruction is a variant of one of La Comédie humaine's key themes, that of destructive thought. Like so many Balzacian protagonists, Véronique is dominated by "la pensée," in her case, a need for love, both passionate and tender, "'quelque manie à cultiver'" (9: 671) which the conditions of her existence cruelly refuse to satisfy. She is married to a man for whom her physical aversion is intense and whose incapacity to understand love is suggested by his heartless neglect of the birds--symbolic of tender, idyllic love--which he willfully lets die to be rid of the expense of feeding them (9: 676). She fails to conceive the child for which she desperately longs, in her hopes that motherhood might provide an outlet for her pernicious emotional energies. Circumstances conspire to bring her into dangerous proximity with the sensitive young man who will eventually become her lover, by whom she will have a child, and for whose death by execution she will spend her life in penitence. Unlike other

Balzacian protagonists, the material devastation that la pensée wreaks in Véronique, expressed in fifteen years of self-imposed denial and physical punishment and culminating in the cancer that hastens her demise, is not accompanied by spiritual destruction. Her salvation seems assured at the end of the novel through the same process that achieved the material redemption of the plain of Montégnaç and the social redemption of its inhabitants. In fact, it is because Véronique has devoted herself to this vast project that she has won her own, spiritual, redemption. Grossetête intuitively grasps the fact that this project offers Véronique personal salvation: it provides her with an object for the emotional energy, that "pensée," which would otherwise devour her. Responding to a letter in which Véronique requests his assistance in her project to save Montégnaç, Grossetête writes: "'j'approuve en tout point votre entreprise, mon enfant: vous y emploierez cette dévorante activité de votre âme qui se tournait contre vous et vous faisait dépérir'" (9: 792).

Véronique foresees, with the fatal inner vision that accompanies tragic awareness, the calamitous events toward which her life is irresistibly headed, as well as the miraculous forces that will transform and redeem it: "'Il semble que mon corps est la prison où quelque mauvais génie retient une créature gémissant et attendant les paroles mystérieuses qui doivent briser une forme importune'" (9: 671). Indeed, she will be imprisoned by an overwhelming

sense of guilt for her failure to reveal her role in Tascheron's crime, by self-condemnation for his death, by grief over his loss, and by despair over her seemingly irredeemable state. It is only the "paroles mystérieuses" of Bonnet that allow her to understand the significance of her role in transforming Montégnac, and to see, for the first time, the possibility of her own salvation. Thus Véronique's letter not only introduces key themes of the novel; it prophetically announces the configuration of spiritual events that will shape the narrative: her struggle, fall, suffering, and redemption. This spiritual drama will be mirrored in the material domain by the ravaging destructiveness of the Gabou river (whose annual torrents, stripping away soil and carrying off all signs of life, leave the region a wasteland) and by the ultimate conquest of this river and the channelling of its violent forces to productive ends.

The tone of distress, noted earlier in connection with the development of the motif of cultivation, reaches a paroxysm emblematic of the theme of violent destructiveness that dominates the closing part of this letter: "'En allant voir ma mère, et me trouvant seule dans la campagne, il me prend des envies de crier, et je crie'" (9: 671). The severity of Véronique's suffering, the unbearable tensions to which she is subject, are translated by the intensity of her language, an intensity expressive of physical violence: "'une créature gémissant,'" "'briser une forme importune,'" "

"une souffrance qui romprait la paix énervante de ma vie (9: 671). Enigmatic and disturbing images in the latter part of Véronique's letter are also expressive of her inner anguish. The dreadful image of falling into a bottomless pit signifies her loss of control and her fear of complete spiritual and physical disintegration:

"je me sens aller dans un gouffre où toutes les idées s'émoussent, où le caractère s'amoindrit, où les ressorts se détendent, où les qualités s'assouplissent, où toutes les forces de l'âme s'éparpillent, et où je ne serai plus l'être que la nature a voulu que je sois." (9: 671)

The repetitive, circular syntax of the sentence ("où . . . où . . . où . . . où . . . où . . . où . . ."), with its succession of clauses uncontrollably heaped one atop the other, evokes the terrifying tumble into oblivion. Thoughts of Grossetête's friendship and watchful benevolence restore a measure of calm to Véronique's closing words: "Votre amitié si douce et si bienveillante m'a, depuis quelques mois, réconciliée avec moi-même"; "je me trouve heureuse"; "une parole douce" (9: 672). But the final image, haunting, mysterious, and starkly isolated from everything that precedes it ("pour accueillir à son retour la fugitive à demi brisée qui a monté le cheval fougueux du Rêve" [9: 672]), leaves no doubt as to Véronique's deeply troubled state and foreshadows the terrible physical trial she will endure.

Thus Véronique's letter to Grossetête serves to introduce key themes that will be expanded in the narrative.

Inseparable from the images and motifs constituting these themes is the way in which their epistolary elaboration expresses the novel's emotional orientation of restrained anguish and suffering, of tensions buried beneath a smooth, untroubled surface.

Two of the four letters in Honorine, those written by its heroine, display its themes and concomitant motifs in a particularly vivid manner. The resonance with which the development of theme in these letters endow the narrative bears some similarity to the poetic effects achieved by the thematic elaboration in Véronique Graslin's letter: a tone of lamentation and remorse, a sense of profound emotional distress, a troubling, prophetic quality. But Véronique's letter, coming at the earliest stage of the narrative, introduces and sketches the outlines of its principal themes and motifs. Honorine's letters, following the narrative's crisis and comprising, as we have seen in chapter 1, its dénouement, fully deploy thematic elements slowly accumulated and subtly augured in the preceding episodes of the story. These elements are related to the failure of love, a central theme of this novel, which Pierre Citron characterizes as "un constat de l'impossibilité de l'amour dans la plupart des cas, et la description des mécanismes multiples de son échec."²⁰ As Citron observes, not only has

²⁰ Citron, introduction 522.

Octave's love for Honorine failed when Maurice brings his narrative to a close, but so has Maurice's love for Honorine and Onorina, Honorine's love for Octave, her lover, and Maurice and, because she has overheard her husband's story, Onorina's love for Maurice.²¹

Maurice begins his story by depicting the effects of failed love in the person of Octave. The tension in the early part of this narrative derives from Maurice's awareness of some terrible secret that the magistrate's brooding conceals: "les symptômes d'un mystère" (2: 538), "de vastes profondeurs" (2: 539), "bien des obscurités" (2: 540), "ce secret" (2: 541), "ces immenses souterrains" (2: 544). The presence of this theme, felt initially as a mystery that provokes the young man's curiosity, drives the narrative forward. After he learns that Honorine is at the center of the mystery surrounding Octave, Maurice seeks to uncover the motives for her estrangement, and not simply to be in a position better to persuade her to return to her husband. More profoundly, he is compelled to understand the reasons for the disintegration of love between these two noble individuals. Maurice alludes to the causes of this failure, especially as he depicts Octave's obsessive passion for his wife, the violent fantasies with which it fills him, and the lengths to which it drives him. However, it is only with Honorine's first letter that the reasons are set forth

²¹ Citron, introduction 522-23.

with unmistakable clarity and its ramifications fully explored. This is because the failure of love that occurs in Honorine cannot be unilaterally explained; it derives from incompatibility, which is most effectively portrayed when both partners appear in their own right and speak in their own voices. If the essence of this irreconcilability is to be captured, the narrator must step back and allow the burden of narration to be transferred directly to the couple in conflict.

This is precisely what happens in the latter part of Maurice's narrative: as the characters move headlong toward disaster, the gradual exposure of the effects of failed love gives way to the exploration of its causes. With this deepening of the theme from the portrayal of effects to the revelation of causes, the narrative perspective shifts; Maurice's voice fades into the background and the voices of the other protagonists, through the letters they compose, are heard.

The relatively late appearance of Honorine in the narrative; the intensity of her evocation by Octave (via Maurice); the sadness, natural reticence, and nervousity that make her reluctant to speak freely in direct conversation: these aspects of the narration surround this character with an extraordinary aura of suspense. Not until reading the text of Honorine's first letter do we begin to gain insight into her heart. Now the tension engendered by the narrative mystery begins to subside--but only as the tension arising

from the narrative drama swells, reaching a tragic crescendo in the text of Honorine's final letter, the last in the novel. The theme of failed love appears as a constellation of themes in these two letters: the physical disaffinity of one partner for the other; the impossibility of maintaining the conjugal bond in the absence of mutual desire; the price of the deception required in a marriage in which there are irreconcilable sexual differences. These themes are elaborated through a series of motifs and figures: legal, floral, and theatrical motifs; recurrent images of sacrifice; patterns of rootlessness and dispossession, of loss and suffering, of violence and death.

The first part (roughly, the first page) of Honorine's letter to Maurice focuses on the problem around which the narrative is built: Why does a woman abandon her husband and, in the face of social, legal, religious, and humane sanctions, refuse to return to him? Legal imagery is introduced early on in the story, through the magistrate Octave, who speaks despairingly of having broken the "*lois du code féminin*" [2: 553], of "absolving" his wife and "condemning" himself before the tribunal of his own heart (2: 553). It provides the dominant motif of this section, as Honorine opens her letter by stating the injunction of all established authorities ("*la loi religieuse,*" "*la loi civile,*" "*la Société*" [2: 580]) to return to her husband. After conjuring up a picture of the personal benefits she would reap by resuming her wifely role ("*J'aurai des gens,*

un hôtel, une maison, je serai la reine d'autant de fêtes qu'il y a de semaines dans l'année'" [2: 580]), Honorine imagines that she is defending herself before a tribunal comprised of the three great arbiters of human existence: God, Law, Society. These "magistrates" voice the question to which the entire narrative, through the curiosity of Maurice, seeks a response:

"Ainsi Dieu, la Loi, la Société, tout est d'accord. Contre quoi vous mutinez-vous? me dit-on du haut du Ciel, de la Chaire, du Tribunal et du Trône dont l'auguste intervention serait au besoin invoquée par le comte." (2: 580)

The rest of Honorine's letter is an attempt to respond to this question; coming from so aloof and guarded a woman, it is a markedly expansive, explicit explanation of the life she has chosen.

Against religion, law, society, and the obligations of human kindness ("à ne nous en tenir qu'à la question humaine'" [2: 580]), Honorine opposes another kind of authority, one whose dominion she is powerless to escape, that of personal instinct, feelings, and conscience: "mes douleurs, mes répugnances, mes sentiments'" (2: 580). The ultimate authority here, of course, is fate, whose influence Honorine invokes, implicitly or explicitly, with increasing frequency as events move forward. She presents herself to her correspondent as caught in a struggle between the three personified authorities (on whose panel she envisions Octave seated) and the fatal forces of temperament and instinct.

She foresees the consequences of this terrible struggle with stunning, if morbid, clarity:

"Dieu, la Loi, le Monde, Octave veulent que je vive, n'est-ce pas? Eh bien, s'il n'y a pas d'autre difficulté, ma réponse tranche tout: Je ne vivrai pas! Je redeviendrai bien blanche, bien innocente, car je serai dans mon linceul, parée de la pâleur irréprochable de la mort." (2: 581)

Death, a recurrent motif in the narrative, emerges for the first time in this epistolary text, where its lyric potential is boldly exploited. Occasionally Honorine articulates her sense of doom in direct conversation with Maurice: "'N'est-ce pas que la vie est sans issue pour moi?'" (2: 585), she observes sadly when he returns to see her after receiving her first letter. But it is in her letters that her fatal vision takes on a rich poetic dimension. In the above passage, the motif of death is associated with that of sacrifice, which also recurs frequently in the narrative. Whiteness and pallor here suggest the innocence and purity of the sacrificial victim. White is associated with Honorine from the time of Maurice's initial encounter with her ("Sa blancheur me frappa tout d'abord par son blanc particulier" [2: 563]); she is dressed in white when he comes to tell her he has given her letter to Octave (2: 585); and it is in white that she receives Octave when she announces her decision to return to him (2: 591)--a sacrificial offering if ever there was one.

At the heart of Honorine's refusal of herself to Octave is a simple, incontrovertible truth, that of her profound

sexual aversion for her husband: "'je ne puis pas aimer le comte. Tout est là, voyez-vous?'" (2: 581). Although her attitude is direct and honest, Honorine's language is reserved, oblique, subtle. The reader surmises her physical abhorrence for Octave from her description of the passion she experienced with her lover: "'Jamais le mariage n'éveillera dans mon être les cruelles délices, le délire mortel de la passion'" (2: 581). The memory of the dark and irresistible rapture is engraved in her senses ("des voluptés gravées en traits de feu" [2: 581]); its haunting, indelible quality is the reason she cannot accept Octave's love: "'J'aurai dans le coeur des souvenirs confus qui se combattront'" (2: 581). Here too, the role of fate is central, since the act of forgetting is not within our power to control. This point is emphasized by the repetition of the word "'oublier,'" and by Honorine's ironic juxtaposition of Octave's forgetting, an act of forgiveness he is compelled to make, with her own forgetting, impossible for her to effect, since it would require obliterating her memory of passion: "'Si mon mari, par amour, a la sublime générosité de tout oublier, je n'oublierai point, moi! L'oubli dépend-il de nous?'" (2: 581; my italics).

The association of love and violence, desire and death is overtly suggested in Honorine's evocation of passion ("cruelles délices," "délire mortel"). These motifs, whose conjunction has a long tradition in the literature of love, undergo a boldly negative elaboration in Honorine's

text as she envisions the violent consequences of the absence of desire. Her inability to love her husband, her physical aversion to him, are tantamount to an act of murder, since Octave's death would be their direct consequence: "'je tuerai mon mari par ma froideur, par des comparaisons qui se devineront, quoique cachées au fond de ma conscience'" (2: 581). The striking feature of Honorine's forecast is its imbalanced juxtaposition of "'tuer,'" a verb indicating deliberate, violent intent, with the involuntary emotional and mental states ("'ma froideur,'" "'comparaisons . . . cachées au fond de ma conscience'") that are for her synonymous with murderous action. Octave will not be the only victim of her incapacity to love him. Honorine's evocation of the violence she will suffer as a consequence of her failure to desire her husband is even more shocking and explicit: "'je giserai la tête fracassée sur un pavé que je trouverai plus clément que mon mari'" (2: 581). Here too, there is disequilibrium in her pairing of an act of deliberate violence with the spontaneous reactions and fleeting, unwilled gestures that bring it about: "'Oh! le jour où, dans une ride du front, dans un regard attristé, dans un geste imperceptible, je saisirai quelque reproche involontaire, réprimé même, rien ne me retiendra: je giserai . . .'" (2: 581).

Thus in Honorine's letter, the theme of the fatal consequences of one partner's sexual antipathy for the other

is elaborated through the motifs of sacrifice, violence, and death. Both Octave and Honorine are the victims of desire, its murderous presence or its equally murderous absence. Octave does not appreciate the fatal link of death with desire until it is too late. Wracked with sorrow and remorse following Honorine's death, he pitifully tells Maurice as he sets sail for Italy: "'Je mourais, rue Payenne, des plaisirs que je n'avais pas; je mourrai en Italie des plaisirs que j'ai goûtés!'" (2: 595). On the other hand, Honorine's acute awareness of this association, manifested by the violent and morbid motifs in her letter, constitute hers as a tragic consciousness. These motifs announce an outcome that was cast outside of temporal measures, existing in the inevitability of temperament and instinct that make husband and wife incompatible. Honorine's flights from her husband, desperate attempts to evade her fate, are as futile as those of Oedipus to elude his awful destiny.

The theme of Honorine's letter now shifts subtly from the tyranny of desire to her own fragility, as she finds herself caught up in a situation beyond her control. Floral imagery seems, momentarily at least, to relieve the harsh tonality that the imagery of excessive and unrequited passion engenders. This floral imagery must be viewed in the context of the entire novel, in which flowers constitute

an ever-present motif.²² From the fondness for flowers that Octave acquired from Honorine, to Maurice's imposture as a florist to cultivate her trust; from Honorine's enchanting garden, to her petal-strewn interior; from her manufacture of artificial bouquets, to her poetic speech on the language of flowers (2: 568); from the blue dahlia, symbol of ethereal, idealized love that Maurice claims to be seeking, to the tender companionship based on flowers ("Vous aimez les fleurs, vous verrez les miennes, je verrai les vôtres." [2: 565]) that he proposes to his lovely neighbor, herself "une fleur pour le toucher, une fleur pour le regard, une fleur pour l'odorat, une fleur céleste pour l'âme" (2: 564), flowers decorate the moral, spiritual, and emotional landscape of Honorine. The floral imagery that makes its way into the text of Honorine's letter is colored by that text's dark tonality. Honorine compares the irredeemability of her fallen state to the impossibility of reviving a trampled flower, or of making a dead one rebloom. Superimposed on the floral motif, images suggesting injury and mutilation ("une fleur sur laquelle on a marché," "couleurs flétries," "tunique froissée" [2: 581-82]) infuse this passage with Octave's presence, even though his name is never mentioned. The intensity of the magistrate's passion for his wife, the turbulence--albeit contained--of

²² Citron (516) likens the constant presence of flowers in Honorine to the same phenomenon in Le Lys dans la vallée; he examines the lyric and symbolic exploitation of this motif in both novels.

the desire that fills him with darkly brutal fantasies ("J'ai médité sérieusement . . . le dénouement atroce de Lovelace avec Clarisse'" [2: 558]) constitute, in the moral sphere, the instruments of this frail flower's death.

Just as it would take an act of God to revive a trampled flower, so a miracle would be needed to regenerate a marriage as profoundly damaged as that of Octave and Honorine. Marriage must be based on mutual esteem, which cannot take root in the soil polluted by Honorine's fall, nor blossom following her acceptance of a courtesan's role ("ni Octave ni moi nous ne pouvons nous estimer le lendemain de notre réunion: il m'aura déshonorée par quelque amour de vieillard pour une courtisane; et moi, j'aurai la honte perpétuelle d'être une chose au lieu d'être une Dame'" [2: 582]). Honorine nobly accepts the punishment for her role in the destruction of this sacred bond.

The legal motif, introduced initially through the somewhat abstract notions of law ("la loi religieuse," "la loi civile," "la Société ratifie le pardon du mari'" [2: 580]) and justice (the image of a tribunal before which the fallen wife defends herself) was subsequently developed through the related concepts of crime and punishment ("La grandeur de sa générosité m'attestera la grandeur de mon crime. Mes regards . . . liront toujours une sentence invisible.'" [2: 581; my italics]), from whose moral domain Honorine cannot, and does not seek, escape. Now the motif of punishment is linked to that of retribution, as Honorine

portrays herself atoning for her crime: "'Je bois la coupe amère des expiations'" (2: 582). The bold and basic images of imprisonment, isolation, bread and water, and tears that Honorine conjures give the expiation depicted in her text an almost biblical resonance: "'Dans mon pavillon, seule, je mange un pain trempé de mes pleurs; mais personne ne me voit le mangeant, ne me voit pleurant'" (2: 582). The powerful imagery conveys Honorine's awareness and acceptance of her inability ever fully to make amends for her crime; all efforts to reinstate the collapsed marriage are doomed to failure, nor can they forestall the spiritual suffering to which she seems destined: "'Je me suis fait un lit conjugal où je ne puis que me retourner sur des charbons, un lit sans sommeil'" [2: 582]. The legal motif thus presents itself in a cycle consistent with the processes of the legal system: it begins with laws broken and continues with judgment before a tribunal, condemnation and sentencing, imprisonment and punishment. Closing with an interminable expiation, the legal cycle opens onto a realm whose religious and moral dimensions are revealed by the infernal suffering endured within its boundaries: the burning coals suggest the fires of Hell, an image to which Honorine's letter will return ("'l'enfer où Dieu ne m'empêchera pas de le bénir'" [2: 583]).

Now Honorine reveals a still more profound dimension of suffering to which she is condemned. Not only must she atone for her conjugal crime in a prison of isolation and

sorrow, but the memory of her dead infant torments her soul. Honorine experiences maternal loss on a visceral level ("`Je me sens toujours le sein mordu par un enfant conçu dans l'ivresse et la joie'" [2: 583]), a level on which the motifs of suffering and violence ("`sein mordu'") intersect. Within the sphere of deprivation endured by the mother of a dead child, the images of suffering take on an expanded meaning. The tears that soak the prisoner's bread ("`un pain trempé de mes pleurs'" [2: 582]) will mingle with the mother's milk, poisoning it for future babies ("`ils boiront des larmes qui, mêlées à mon lait, le feront aigrir.'" [2: 583]); that embittered milk had its source in the bitter sentence of atonement ("`la coupe amère des expiations'" [2: 582]). And if the fallen wife is condemned to "`un lit sans sommeil'" (2: 582), the aggrieved mother must suffer the loss of "`un enfant . . . de qui je serai grosse toute ma vie'" (2: 583). The assimilation of loss and pregnancy, images having opposite values, gives powerful expression to the torment that Honorine experiences.

The motifs of suffering and loss are joined by the parallel motifs of rootlessness and displacement in the closing section of this epistolary text. Rootlessness is an especially insistent motif in Maurice's narrative. Honorine flees the conjugal roof with no more than the clothes on her back; the mere receipt of a letter from her husband impels her once again to take flight, the lonely streets being preferable to his presence; the realization that he has, a

second time, discovered her whereabouts moves Honorine to contemplate, with dread, the possibility of picking up roots once again: "'Où aller? dit-elle. Que devenir?... Faudra-t-il quitter cette douce retraite . . .?'" (2: 574). Octave's unsettled nature is exacerbated by his wife's abandonment; his rootlessness is reflected in the nocturnal prowling to which his obsessive curiosity about her drives him.

Maurice, too, seems afflicted by an emotional rootlessness that sends him wandering far from home. Without parents, he lives first with his uncle, l'abbé Loraux, and then with Octave, whose protection he brusquely relinquishes when Honorine's return appears imminent, to become vice-consul in Spain, and later consul in Genoa; there the story finds him, still emotionally unsettled, despite his marriage to a lovely and wealthy wife.

The motif of rootlessness provides a subtle but overarching structure for the close of Honorine's letter. Her feelings and arguments are organized around the contrasting spatial poles of "'ici'" and "'chez lui,'" and quite naturally so, since her letter, we will recall, is an effort to explain why she will not return to her husband. The conjugal roof ("dans mon hôtel," "'chez lui,'") holds the twin punishments of memory (of her crime) and guilt (for her husband's forgiveness). In contrast, her isolated abode ("ici") offers peace, a certain oblivion, and the welcomed suffering of expiation:

"Ici, j'ai des heures de tranquillité, des heures pendant lesquelles j'oublie; mais dans mon hôtel,

tout me rappellera la tache qui déshonore ma robe d'épousée. Quand je souffre ici, je bénis mes souffrances . . . Mais chez lui, je serai pleine d'effroi, goûtant des joies qui ne me seront pas dues." (2: 582; *my italics*)

For Honorine there is sanctuary nowhere, and certainly not in society, where her fallen status--even if known to no one other than her husband and herself--puts her in a false situation in relation to that world ("il n'est pas une situation dans cette belle vie . . . qui ne soit fausse, qui ne me cache des pièges, qui ne m'ouvre des précipices où je roule déchirée par des arêtes impitoyables'" [2: 583]). The spiritual itinerary that she charts is one of endless wandering and fundamental dispossession. There is nowhere she can take emotional refuge, because there is no place where her soul can find rest; as long as she must atone for her crimes, so long must she search ("Voici cinq ans que je voyage dans les landes de mon avenir, sans y trouver une place commode à mon repentir'" [2: 583]). Now the places on the map that Honorine traces take on a religious dimension as she indicates her preference if made to choose between "l'enfer où Dieu ne m'empêchera pas de le bénir et l'enfer qui m'attend chez le comte Octave'" [2: 583]). The letter closes on an aching note of spiritual dispossession as Honorine challenges her correspondent to tell her "où je puis trouver cette solitude, cette paix, ce silence amis des malheurs irréparables'" (2: 583). The unspoken assertion here is that there is no such place on earth; and the unmentioned place, beyond life, is death.

In Honorine's last letter, the one with which Maurice ends the story he is telling to the guests assembled before him, another key theme in the thematic constellation pertaining to blighted love comes to the fore: the price exacted in a marriage in which constant deception is needed to conceal the absence of love. Several years have elapsed since Honorine agreed, with a sense of resignation and foreboding, to resume her place as Octave's wife. Octave has managed to conceal the true circumstances of her departure, allowing her to be fully reinstated in the social world. They have had a child, and, externally at least, all appears to be well between husband and wife. Maurice, now French consul in Genoa, had been alerted, by a desperate letter that Octave had written him, to signs of serious trouble in the marriage soon after the reconciliation had taken place. Far from bringing her peace and security, Honorine's socially ordained role as Octave's wife has, as she had anticipated, instilled in her a constant, gnawing sense of anguish. Now she is on the verge of death, a death brought on by the falseness of her new life.

The theme of feigned love's deadly corrosiveness, which is elaborated through the mask motif, gives expression to Honorine's spiritual turmoil and dramatizes the grievous consequences of a reconciliation of appearances. The mask motif plays an important role in orchestrating the relations between the trio whose misadventures Maurice's narrative relates. For several years Octave manages to conceal the

secret of his tormented inner life from Maurice, despite the daily proximity that the latter's function of personal secretary affords him. Indeed, Octave leads a double life, barely fulfilling his judicial responsibilities by day, furtively spying on his wife's darkened windows by night. Maurice, only half reluctantly, dons a mask in order to insinuate himself in the home and heart of Honorine. Many times his nascent love nearly causes him to give himself away, and, in the end, he longs to "*résigner ce rôle d'oiseleur, si imprudemment accepté*" [2: 572]). And Honorine wears a disguise for all the world, going by the name of her housekeeper and masquerading as a humble artisan instead of the noble countess she really is.

But only in Honorine's letter is the nefarious significance of this motif fully fathomed. The mask provides a trenchant image of the nature of Honorine's suffering as Octave's wife, and an explanation for the otherwise inexplicable illness that is wasting her body and spirit. "*J'ai bien joué mon rôle de femme,*" she asserts to Maurice, "*j'ai trompé mon mari, j'ai eu des joies aussi vraies que les larmes répandues au théâtre par les actrices*" [2: 593]). She has played her wifely role with consummate skill, convincing her husband that she has truly felt pleasures and emotions she has only acted out, and even experiencing, at times, moments of genuine happiness. But the happiness whose authenticity is compared to the tears of actresses seems very hollow indeed; such hollowness is

fundamental to the tragic duality that the image of the mask highlights.

The wife-actress metaphor is developed with all the pathos suggested by the misery concealed behind a mask of gaiety. The actress is feted, showered with bouquets, but her exaggerated smile hides an inner torment and a terrible struggle:

"A ce jeu terrible je prodigue mes forces, la comédienne est applaudie, fêtée, accablée de fleurs; mais le rival invisible vient chercher tous les jours sa proie, un lambeau de ma vie. Déchirée, je souris! Je souris à deux enfants, mais l'aîné, le mort triomphe . . . l'enfant mort m'appellera, et je vais à lui." (2: 593)

The link between the motifs of death and mask is most apparent in this passage. The comedy in which Honorine is engaged ("ce jeu terrible") and which constrains her always to conceal her emotions behind the mask of wifely decorum, exacts a very dear price; Honorine pays with her own substance, her flesh, which Death ("le rival invisible") comes to claim in small pieces each day. Death beckons her as well in the spirit of her dead child, whom she is unable to forget, even in the joy of mothering her second child, and whose call her hidden sorrow draws her irresistibly to heed. If Honorine is dying, it is because the sorrow she is forced to conceal is consuming her spirit, because the mask that covers her face has appropriated her soul:

"Je suis comédienne avec mon âme, et voilà peut-être pourquoi je meurs! J'enferme le chagrin avec tant de soin qu'il n'en paraît rien au-dehors, il

faut bien qu'il ronge quelque chose, il s'attaque à ma vie." (2: 594)

The motif of death, present throughout the narrative and strongly prevalent in Honorine's first letter, utterly pervades her final one. Her awareness of the inevitability of death in the situation she faces makes Honorine a tragic heroine. Her angst and sense of doom reach a paroxysm in her final missive, as the fate she had foreseen now appears imminent. So piercing is the emotion that the heroine expresses, so heightened is the emphasis on death, that her letter exudes the tonality of an operatic aria.

The words "'je meurs'" open her letter, tragically echoing her doubtful question, "'peut-être ne mourrai-je pas?'" (2: 592), which Octave had quoted toward the end of his letter to Maurice. If at that time her death was a future probability, it is now a present certainty, occurring even as she writes, much as the operatic heroine's death overtakes her as she sings; in both cases, letter and aria, the medium permits an expressiveness that we would not find in real life. Five times in the opening section of her letter, the simple but eloquently stirring refrain, "'je meurs'" is repeated:

"Monsieur Maurice, je meurs, quoique mère, et peut-être parce que je suis mère. . . . Je meurs pour la Société, pour la Famille, pour le Mariage, comme les premiers chrétiens mouraient pour Dieu. Je ne sais pas de quoi je meurs . . . Eh bien, je meurs. Je meurs en déployant un courage inouï." (2: 593; my italics)

Death is also evoked in the comparison of her fate to that of the early Christians, an image that recalls her self-

offering to Octave, the bride as sacrificial victim. As her letter continues, so does the relentless refrain. Either it is directly reiterated ("je meurs" is twice more repeated in her text); or it is indirectly conjured--in the plaintive summons of her dead child, in the "chagrin . . . [qui] s'attaque à ma vie" (2: 594), and in the efforts of the learned doctors to affix a name to her illness, in order to conceal its true cause from the person who would suffer most from that knowledge ("Faites-moi mourir d'une maladie plausible, autrement j'entraînerais mon mari." [2: 594]). The deathknell that reverberates through this text softly closes it. From future to present, the event is now a past occurrence: "il y a longtemps que je suis morte" (2: 594). The spiritual death pronounced in that final line, which prefigured the heroine's actual demise, is gently confirmed by Maurice to his audience as he closes his narrative: "Et, dit le consul en serrant les lettres et refermant à clef le portefeuille, la comtesse est morte" (2: 595).

Thus Honorine's letters manifest her acute, tragic awareness of her destiny. The mask and death motifs dramatically express her doleful acceptance of the role meted out to her, her noble resignation to it. But Honorine is not the only one to endure her fate; its consequences are, inevitably, visited upon her husband. The development of the theme reveals that the failure of love within marriage is a shared experience. The mask and death motifs impinge upon Octave as well, in ways that Honorine could not

fully foresee. Several times in her letter Honorine asserts that she has deceived her husband into believing that she loves him:

"j'ai trompé mon mari . . ." (2: 593)

"Mon pauvre Octave est heureux, je laisse son amour se repaître des mirages de mon coeur." (2: 593)

"Octave se croit adoré!" (2: 594)

The first assertion is especially ironic, since "'tromper'" suggests adultery, a breach of which Honorine, we sense, could not be guilty in her present circumstances, whatever her past misdeeds. But her conjugal deception is of a more serious nature, for it is her heart that is adulterous. Honorine has not loved her husband, does not love him, cannot love him; this truth has not changed since she first divulged it to Maurice: "'je ne puis pas aimer le comte'" (2: 581). Thus "'tromper'" has two meanings in this epistolary text, the one implying adulterous behavior or feeling, the other suggesting protective motivation.

Has Honorine succeeded in shielding her husband from the truth she knows would destroy him? Has the mask to which she sacrificed, with a kind of fierce selflessness, her own substance, fulfilled its mission of protective deception? It appears not, if we contrast Honorine's epistolary certainties with Maurice's narrative revelations. "'Il soupçonne la vérité,'" Maurice says of Octave, "'et c'est là ce qui le tue.'" (2: 595); he quotes Octave's

confessed awareness of Honorine's suffering even as he possessed her: "'J'ai, dans ma conscience, entendu des cris. . . . Et j'ai voulu!... Je suis dévoré de remords!'" (2: 595). And, in spite of Honorine's noble efforts to protect her husband from the fatal pull she knows her demise will exert on him, Maurice shows Octave to be as certain of his own moribundity as Honorine had been of hers. These revelations, functioning like a postscript appearing below Honorine's signature, but written in another hand, undermine her assertions that her deception has convinced Octave of her love and compound the tragedy that the correspondence reveals.

The elaboration of theme through letters introduces a marked lyric element to the narratives in which Balzac avails himself of this device. Lyric potential is inherent to the epistolary form, which, by definition, allows the writer to transmit his or her own view of events, with no pretense of objective narration. The intrinsic subjectivity of the epistolary text favors a thematic development that resorts to rich and suggestive imagery, expressive of the letter writer's most intimate concerns. The epistolary elaboration of theme is distinguished as well by its strong emotional flavor, which serves to reinforce (or, at times, counterpoise) the dominant chords of the narrative. As we

have seen, the epistolary frame readily accommodates the staccato movements and irrational swells of powerful emotions. The lyric richness of epistolary language is displayed with particular intensity in the expression of thwarted passion, a favored theme of correspondences, both real and fictional. In letters, "la passion . . . s'étale avec tous ses illogismes; flux et reflux de reminiscences et de rêves, de jugements et d'émotions, de questions et de réponses, de décisions et d'irrésolutions, de remords et de désespoirs."²³

Letters that lend themselves to the development of theme may also exhibit varying degrees of musicality, a quality strongly associated with lyricism: originally, lyric poems were those that were meant to be accompanied by the lyre. A dominant thematic configuration in the correspondence exchanged by Pierrette Lorrain and Jacques Brigaut--lost home, happiness, and childhood--is evoked (if somewhat ironically) by the Breton melody with which the young man serenades his childhood sweetheart. The thematic elements that Véronique Graslin's letter proposes give it the quality of a musical prelude, for neither her correspondent nor we, its other readers, can comprehend the full significance of its troubling allusions and disturbing images. But its subtle melodic lines subsequently receive an intricate development in the vast (relative to its own

²³ Jost 145-46.

restricted dimensions) narrative space in which they are elaborated. More plangent, Honorine's letters resemble a musical crescendo, in which hitherto restrained tensions, passions, and violent impulses are deployed in sweeping measure and amplified in their full emotional and poetic range.

Lyricism and musicality, hallmarks of the epistolary elaboration of theme, are responsible for the rich poetic dimension that the letters written by Balzac's suffering protagonists introduce to the novels of La Comédie humaine.

Chapter 3. Characterization through Letters:

Modeste Mignon, Le Lys dans la vallée, Le Père Goriot,
Le Curé de village, Eugénie Grandet

Whether drawn with bold and exaggerated strokes or with scrupulous attention to the logic of temperament and behavior, Balzac's characters seem to have all the quickness and unpredictability of people in real life. We believe they exist even when we are not reading about them, an illusion nurtured by their creator's skill in moving them onstage or into the wings of his Comédie, to the foreground or the background of its action. Balzac's genius for breathing life into his fictional creations has always been a source of fascination for his readers, and even his detractors paid him unwitting homage: if Balzac's fallen women had been hollow or unidimensional figures rather than the complex, compelling creatures they are, perhaps their tainted morals would have excited less chagrin!¹

This remarkable art of characterization, viewed within the context of the novelist's ability to create whole

¹ In his preface to Le Père Goriot, Balzac, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, addressed the criticisms of those offended by the "pécheresses" in his novels. See "Préface de la première édition Werdet" (1835) in La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 3: 37-45.

environments that pulsate with reality and energy, has long been a theme of Balzac criticism. In the years following the author's death, critics debated the source of the vitality that Balzac conferred on his fictional universe, people and places alike. Some, following the lead of Sainte-Beuve, argued that the author's talent for observation and his truthful description of external reality and everyday manners were the cornerstones of La Comédie humaine's indisputably solid construction of reality. Others, foremost among them Taine and Baudelaire, felt that the animating genius of La Comédie humaine lay in its author's prodigious imagination and in his dynamic inner vision of society and humanity, rather than in the mimetic capacity of his art.²

In the modern perspective, observation and imagination are viewed as equal partners in endowing characters with the thrilling power to escape the outlines drawn by their creator. Critics of La Comédie humaine have veered away from this debate, focusing, instead, on Balzac's artistry itself. As Maurice Bardèche has shown, the author relied on a richly varied repertoire of techniques for creating his characters. These include, among others, rendering their physical traits with precision and color, evoking uncannily

² The preceding remarks on the critical polemics that pitted Balzac's talent for observation against his gift of imagination are based on David Bellos, Balzac Criticism in France. 1850-1900. The Making of a Reputation (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 45-61.

revealing details of their dress, manner, and presence, typing them by their gestures and speech, and varying the lighting in which they are viewed by projecting onto them, from time to time, the perceptions and judgments of other characters.³ Moreover, the strategy of reintroducing characters from one novel to another, an invention that enabled Balzac to tie his individual novels together into one vast universe, also served to invest these characters with the provocative mystery of real life. The use of letters to develop characters is, then, only one of the store of devices to which Balzac had recourse in bringing his fictional world to life. But it is a significant one, for not only does it contribute richly to the psychological depth of his characters, it facilitates their participation in the narrative at moral and philosophical levels.

The epistolary form was a ready servant of nineteenth century fiction's requisite for strong characterization. Correspondents quite naturally describe themselves or a third party to their distant interlocutors, who may also become the subject of epistolary portrayal. Balzac often resorts to this device to superimpose upon the narratorial--"official"--portrait the perspective of characters within the novel. The love letters that Calyste and Béatrix write each other both contain portraits of Camille Maupin, which

³ Balzac, Romancier: La Formation de l'art du roman chez Balzac jusqu'à la publication du Père Goriot (1940; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1967), 311-17 and 555-62.

complicate the reader's view of that much-described woman. But the strategic value of fictional correspondences with regard to character portrayal is hardly limited to the letter writer's ability to mimic the narrator's talent for painting portraits with words. The potential of the letter to develop character is a function, more broadly, of its status as a document within the file of information the narrative supplies about each personage--his "dossier."⁴ Comprised of authentic pieces, the dossier is submitted to an interested party--in the case of narrative, a reader. The notion, suggested by Bardèche, views the stuff of Balzac's fiction as supported by the form of reality.

Within this framework, the use of letters elevates the portrayal of character to a verifiable status. As documents, letters may substantiate a characterization or contradict it; they may offer concrete proof of its validity, or evidence that prompts us to refute it. The acceptance or challenge of a narrator's portrait that a letter instigates in the reader of the novel is tied to its quality as a written document. Here it is the writer's self-portrait--not in physical or even moral terms, but through the linguistic markers that his or her text inevitably contains--that is of interest. For just as surely as speakers identify themselves through the timbre of

⁴ On documents and dossiers within the context of Balzac's art of characterization, see Bardèche, Balzac, Romancier 562.

their voices, the idiosyncrasies of their speech, and the patterns of their conversation, so correspondents reveal themselves through their manner of putting words on paper.

Balzac's artistry in using his characters' language to pinpoint their social status and suggest their psychological situation, to poke fun at them or win the reader's sympathy for their plight has been the focus of considerable critical attention in recent years.⁵ Letters afford him yet another opportunity to elaborate the portrayal of his characters through their idiom. We have already observed Balzac's exploitation of epistolary language to type his characters in Jacques Brigaut's letters in Pierrette. In this chapter we shall examine his invention of language in letters written by Modeste Mignon (in Modeste Mignon), Félix de Vandenesse (in Le Lys dans la vallée), and Rastignac (in Le Père Goriot) to enhance their portrayals. But letters serve not only to expand or deepen characterizations the novelist develops through other strategies. Sometimes they constitute one of a limited number of traces a character leaves in the narrative, and they may occasionally provide

⁵ See: Maurice Bardèche's observations regarding Balzac's deliberate lapses into indirect style (Balzac, Romancier 557); Martin Kane's discussion of Balzac's use of language to type social groups and distinguish individuals (Balzac's Comedy of Words 142-52); Diana Festa-McCormick's analysis of how the accents of Balzac's foreign characters or their mastery of spoken French influences the reader's perceptions of and reactions to them ("Balzac's Partiality and Linguistic Manipulations," in Jesse Levitt, Leonard R.N. Ashley, and Kenneth H. Rogers, eds., Geolinguistic Perspectives, [Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1987] 335-49).

the sole direct evidence of his existence--the only documents in his dossier! Grossetête (in Le Curé de village) and Guillaume Grandet (in Eugénie Grandet) are examples of characters whose existence is rendered palpable to the reader almost exclusively through the letters they write. In these instances, as we shall see, epistolary characterization is a device that advances the broader philosophical purposes of the novel.

The narrator does a masterful job of imparting to the reader all essential information about the heroine of Modeste Mignon. Hardly a detail of her character or temperament escapes him. The critical influence of her older sister's tragic love affair, the powerful effect of literature in shaping her intellect and emotions, the force of her own imagination and desires: these multiple facets of her past and present existence are all captured in an intimate and detailed portrait. Modeste is viewed from the outside ("la vie vulgaire au Chalet" [1: 509]), but also from within ("le poème de sa vie idéale" [1: 509]). What, if anything, do her letters add to the reader's perception and understanding of her character?

Modeste's fifth letter to La Brière-Canalis (Letter IX, 1: 543-46) is a telling document with regard to this question, for it holds no surprises for the reader. In terms of information about herself, Modeste offers little

more than an extension and refinement of what the narrator has already conveyed. Modeste's belief in an ideal of romantic love realized in conjugal happiness and devotion? The narrator had earlier described how this youthful illusion had taken root in the impressionable girl as she observed close-hand the ravages of the failed romance sustained by her older sister, Bettina. The intense worship of genius to which her letter gives vent? The progress of this febrile adulation was carefully traced in the narrator's biography of the intellectual and emotional development of his heroine. Modeste's conviction, set forth with adolescent fervor, that she is no common being meant for a base and petty existence, but an extraordinary woman destined to share her life with a man of genius? The narrator's insight had alerted the reader to his heroine's secret, extravagant ambitions ("elle se voyait l'auteur du bien-être matériel de ces artistes, martyrs de leurs facultés." [1: 509]). And what of the scorn and repugnance for the vulgar charade of courtship that Modeste expresses in her letter? Her assertion of her right to establish her own rules of courting, to choose for herself her husband, to determine her own future? Modeste's rejection by a wealthy suitor following the news of her father's ruin and her subsequent proud recovery: these events, included in the narrator's history, had established her fundamental attitude toward courtship. Her decision to take matters into her own hands, also reported by the narrator, followed naturally

from her proud character and experiences: "Modeste voulut être la compagne d'un poète, d'un artiste . . . elle voulut le choisir, ne lui donner son coeur, sa vie, son immense tendresse dégagee des ennuis de la passion, qu'après l'avoir soumis à une étude approfondie." (1: 509).

Despite its apparent duplication of this information, Modeste's letter is not superfluous with regard to her characterization. Narratorial omniscience affords the reader an extremely complete view of Modeste Mignon's heart and psyche. But for all its detail and insight, that view is an external one. A character's own spoken or written words reveal a dimension too intimate for an outside observer to convey. Modeste's letters enable the reader to feel her pulse, to hear her voice, to enter into her thought processes.

Although Modeste's fifth letter to her would-be suitor maintains the strict incognito established at the beginning of the correspondence, its manner of expression is quite transparent, allowing its writer's youthful stubbornness and absolutism, her charmingly distorted view of the world, and her adolescent passion--a blend of innocent ardor and poetic idealism--to come across vividly in her text. Modeste thus reveals essential aspects of her character and temperament, even while withholding her name. This self-disclosure is effected through her writing style, a style as expressive, to the careful reader, of her temperament and spirit as

might be a youthful gait to the astute observer.

Characterized by its adolescent expansiveness and emphatic tone, that style finds linguistic expression in hyperbolic and absolute phrases: "'à vous à jamais,'" "'à vous toutes mes pensées, même les plus secrètes, les plus folles,'" "'à vous un coeur de jeune fille sans réserves, à vous une affection infinie,'" "'jamais je ne serai vieille fille'" (all, 1: 544). "'Jamais'" and "'toujours'" are the adverbs with which Modeste typically qualifies future actions, and absolute expressions ("'les plus,'" "'infini'") punctuate her epistolary texts.

Modeste's exalted temperament is revealed far more sharply by her fondness for high-flown metaphysical imagery than by the narrator's description: "'Dieu a mis dans mon âme la racine de cette plante hybride née au sommet de ces Alpes dont je viens de parler, et que je ne veux pas mettre dans un pot de fleurs, sur ma croisée, pour l'y voir mourir.'" (1: 543-44). Her recourse to extended, inflated images to describe her soul manifests her extravagant sensibility and inclination to lose herself in her own precious meanderings. At one point Modeste creates a rather elaborate--and awkward--metaphor of a girl locked up in a tower, longing to run freely in a surrounding park, to depict the situation of her soul, prevented by social strictures from associating with genius: "'cette jeune fille est mon âme, le parc du voisin est votre génie'" (1: 545).

Related to this fondness for elaborate images and metaphors, and in keeping with her adolescent delight in abstractions, Modeste allegorizes feelings and situations:

"Si ma mère fut séduite par la Beauté qui peut-être est le génie de la Forme . . ." (1: 546)

"Cette fille dévouée, si précieuse à vos existences, est l'Amitié pure et désintéressée, à qui l'on dit tout, qui écoute quelquefois en hochant la tête, et qui veille en filant à la lueur de la lampe, afin d'être là quand le poète revient ou trempé de pluie ou maugréant. Voilà ma destinée . . ." (1: 544)

As the latter sentence shows, Modeste's extravagant language goes hand in hand with the melodramatic poses she readily assumes.

Finally, one of the most distinctive features of Modeste's mode of expression is the obvious pleasure she takes in showing off her considerable erudition. The literary references that sprinkle this letter are typical of those that can be found throughout her correspondence: multiple, extended allusions to Molière's characters (1: 545, 546), to Shakespeare (1: 546), to intimate details of the lives of great men (Montaigne, Goethe, Byron, 1: 543). Certainly, the roots of this pedantry had been exposed by the narrator, as he lingered over his heroine's avid and eclectic readings. His portrait amply described the role of these readings in shaping the young girl's intellect and temperament, providing the stuff of the fantasy world that she elaborated for herself. Modeste's letters add another dimension to her erudition, which appears in a not entirely

unfavorable light. Put to the service of her flirtation, it becomes a charming "coquetterie pédante."⁶

But Modeste's fondness for book learning and her lack of experience in practical affairs prepare the sharp disappointments that await her as the epistolary episode of the narrative draws to a close. Her letters highlight a critical turning point in her life, the moment of adolescence.⁷ The contrast they establish between the impetuous girl of this period and the more cautious and reserved young woman who appears in the non-epistolary portion of the narrative implicitly present character as an evolving, rather than static, phenomenon. How fitting that letters should constitute the narrative medium for depicting this transition. For even when cultivated to yield truths--the goal, after all, of Modeste's "étude approfondie" is to plumb the heart of her future husband--they provide, as we shall see in chapter 5, fertile ground for illusions, half-truths, and falsehood.

⁶ Maurice Bardèche, notice, Modeste Mignon, Oeuvres complètes de Balzac, 24 vols. (Paris: Club de l'Honnête Homme, 1968-71) 1: 448.

⁷ In his "Introduction" to the Etudes de Moeurs au XIXe siècle, Félix Davin defines the period in which the Scènes de la vie privée take place as the moment when "la vie est prise entre les derniers développements de la puberté qui finit, et les premiers calculs d'une virilité qui commence. . . . là, pour les femmes, le malheur vient de leurs croyances dans la sincérité des sentiments, ou de leur attachement à leurs rêves que les enseignements de la vie dissiperont." (La Comédie humaine, 12 vols. [Paris: Gallimard, 1976] 1: 1145-46.)

If Modeste Mignon's letters bear the stamp of her charming--if a bit tiresome--adolescent nature, those of Félix de Vandenesse are inscribed by his moral weakness, a characteristic that is essential and permanent rather than transient--a fatal flaw. In fact, the flawed character of Félix de Vandenesse has been a theme of critics of Le Lys dans la vallée from the time of its earliest publication in the Revue de Paris.⁸ Balzac, acknowledging that "le caractère de Félix est sacrifié dans cette oeuvre,"⁹ responded to this and other criticisms by making numerous substantive revisions in the novel, both before the time of its 1836 publication in book form and after. In fact, Balzac's late addition of Natalie's coolly ironic response, by taking Félix to task within the novel itself, served to balance the weakness that its central character displayed.¹⁰ It is not our intention here to analyze the characterization of Félix in terms of its success or failure vis-à-vis the narrative endeavor. Our focus is more limited: to study how Félix's intrinsic weakness is manifested in two letters that he writes: the brief one (9: 969-70) that he encloses with his long confessional letter to Natalie and, within that

⁸ The following remarks are based on the discussion of the novel's evolution in Moïse Le Yaouanc, introduction and critical appendix, Le Lys dans la vallée (Paris: Garnier, 1966) ix-c and 433-46.

⁹ January 15, 1837, Lettres à l'Etrangère, 2 vols. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1899-1906) 1: 377. Qtd. in Le Yaouanc, xxxiv, note 3.

¹⁰ Le Yaouanc, introduction lxx.

confession, his declaration of love to Mme de Mortsauf (9: 1074-76). Both letters constitute overtures of the heart, what we shall call sentimental initiatives; both are rejected. Félix's proposal to Natalie is rebuffed in the latter's delayed response, which appears after his confession. His impassioned declaration to Mme de Mortsauf, overstepping the bounds of the platonic bond to which he had agreed, meets with her desperate injunction, "'Ne m'écrivez plus ainsi!'" (9: 1076).¹¹

A pattern of failed initiative appears central to the weakness that constitutes Félix's basic character. It is not that Félix has a passive disposition, nor that he lacks ambition. Unlike Amaury, the hero of Sainte-Beuve's Volupté (which Balzac admired greatly and set himself the task of rivaling),¹² Félix has an ardent, active temperament. On his first encounter with Mme de Mortsauf at the duc d'Angoulême's ball, the impetuous young man buries his face in her lovely shoulders. Driven by a "courage d'enfant" (9:

¹¹ Julia Przyboś 63. As Przyboś has shown (66), Mme de Mortsauf's posthumous confession--thanks to the same "mécanisme épistolaire à retardement" that postpones Natalie's response to Félix's opening letter--constitutes a delayed response (narratively speaking) to Félix's love letter. However, this passionate admission comes too late to reverse Félix's sentimental defeat, so in practical terms, his love letter remains a failed initiative.

¹² Balzac, in a fit of peevishness over Sainte-Beuve's negative review of La Recherche de l'absolu, is said to have declared: "je referai Volupté." Le Yaouanc (ix-c), while not disputing the truth of this anecdote, demonstrates that Balzac's inspiration was too extensive and his motivation too profound to be accounted for exclusively by it.

986), he sets out in search of the unknown beauty who captivated him, and, like some prince in a fairy tale, miraculously finds her. Later he takes the measure of M. de Mortsauf's faults and bends to suit his needs, manipulating the husband in order to become a welcome guest in the home of the woman he adores. Félix's intuition impels him to venture the measured initiative that elicits Mme de Mortsauf's first confidence, her confession of an unhappy childhood. And the success with which Félix meets in the world of courtly politics and diplomacy would not have been possible for a man unwilling or unable to act, all of Mme de Mortsauf's support and guidance notwithstanding.

But the evidence pointing to an active and assertive nature in Félix is intermittent and purely external. Moreover, his worldly and political triumphs are not matched by similar successes in the domain of personal and sentimental experience. On a psychological level, the narrative offers substantive evidence of Félix's numerous, and often crushing, sentimental disappointments. His childhood was unhappy and solitary: longing to be loved, he was constantly rejected by those whose acceptance meant most to him. At boarding school he poured out his despair in plaintive letters home, which his mother criticized for their style. Indeed, it is his mother's coldly critical attitude that discourages the free and expansive expression of emotion, nurturing in Félix a certain fearfulness with regard to sentimental initiative. The exchange between

Félix and his mother as they hurriedly flee Paris on the eve of Napoleon's return epitomizes the emotional strictures that, from his earliest age, have inhibited Félix. Her icy manner "réprima l'essor de mes tendresses"; a glance from her was enough to cut off "les phrases prudemment méditées pour mon exorde" (both, 9: 980); and when, after the mother reproaches her son for his silence, he throws himself on his knees and launches into an exuberant expression of filial affection, she accuses him of histrionics.

The long, platonic love shared by Félix and Mme de Mortsauf depends not only on the repression of sexual desire, but on the control of all sentimental expression, lest the floodgates of emotion become unhinged. As a result, Félix's overtures to Mme de Mortsauf are almost invariably interrupted or overtly rejected, thwarted, ultimately failed. Mme de Mortsauf's typical response when Félix initiates a discussion likely to lead to the subject of their love (which word, Mme de Mortsauf astutely observes, Félix carefully avoids [9: 1034]) is a sharp "'Taisez-vous'" (9: 1027; 1076), or a pleading "'Ne parlons plus de ces choses'" (9: 1027), or some other rebuke delivered "d'une voix sévère" (9: 1034).¹³ And it is not only with his beloved Henriette that Félix knows romantic

¹³ Brombert 181. As Brombert perceptively observes, Mme de Mortsauf "rêve de cette chose impossible: imposer un langage à sens unique."

defeat, but with Lady Dudley, Madeleine, and, in the end, Natalie.

Félix's two letters, documents of sentimental failure, offer a unique opportunity to observe, at close range, the flaws in his character. By examining the emotional and moral postures he assumes in these letters and the intellectual weakness he evidences at the level of language, we may gain insight into the pattern of failure from which Félix de Vandenesse appears unable to escape. No doubt, similar and more extensive evidence of Félix's characterological weakness can be found in the corpus of his long confession. But there the incursion of narrative into the territory of discourse¹⁴ tends to diffuse the revelation of character. Moreover, depth may be more significant to an understanding of character than mere accumulation of evidence.

The underlying affective stance of Félix in these two letters, revealing a marked pessimism and sense of powerlessness, is in sharp contrast with their overt optimism and mission of courtship. Two features determine the negative orientation of this stance: Félix's

¹⁴ Genette observes that narrative and discourse exist only very rarely in their pure state (65). However, the brief letters Félix writes are certainly closer to pure discourse than his novel-length confession, which inevitably embraces extensive passages of narrative. Defined as text in which "se marque, explicitement ou non, la présence de (ou la référence à) *je*" (63), discourse, it follows, permits a more concentrated revelation of the character of that *I* than does narrative. (See Genette's discussion on narrative and discourse, 61-69.)

characterization of his interlocutor and his attitude toward the past.

The portraits of his female interlocutors that emerge from the letters Félix pens are typical of his worshipful attitude toward women: the "*terreur respectueuse*" (9: 1075) that Henriette inspires and from which Félix claims to have freed himself recalls the "*religieuse terreur*" (9: 981) with which his mother, a colder idol, filled him. Félix's evocation of Henriette in his letter to her (9: 1074-76) amounts to an idolization of her person. In her presence, Félix tells her, he is "*trop ébloui pour voir,*" (9: 1075) and the images with which he portrays her face as she recovers from her fainting spell similarly evoke the dazzling radiance of light: "*lueurs,*" "*l'aurore,*" "*brillant de toutes les splendeurs humaines,*" "*des lumières plus étincelantes que ne l'est la lumière de tes yeux*" (all, 9: 1075). Indeed, this saintly beauty seems to wear a halo, the luminescence of which fills Félix with a sense of moral inferiority that renders him speechless ("*dès que je vous vois, chère Henriette, je ne trouve plus mes paroles en harmonie avec les reflets de votre âme qui grandissent votre beauté*" [9: 1074]). Not only in this letter, but throughout his confession, Félix has frequent recourse to solar imagery to depict the woman around whom he revolves and who is for him the source of all light, warmth, and life. On his first visit to Clochegourde, Félix immediately recognizes her "*voix d'or,*" which pierces his

soul "comme un rayon de soleil remplit et dore le cachot d'un prisonnier" (9: 992). He describes the quality radiating from her soul as "cette essence nourrissante épandue à flots comme le soleil émet sa lumière" (9: 998), and of Clochegourde he writes: "là brillait la chaleur solaire qui développa mes bonnes et dessécha mes mauvaises qualités" (9: 998).

The figure of Natalie as interlocutor is somewhat less awesome, but no less imposing. Natalie looms over Félix as he writes, a petulant ("boudeuse expression" [9: 969]), unreasonable, impossible-to-please child-woman ("que le moindre refus attriste" [9: 969]), given to capricious whims, a demi-goddess whose impulsive outbursts of anger ("ta jolie colère de femme aimée" [9: 969]) must be placated at all costs.

Such idolization of the female "other" invests her with supreme power, confers upon her ultimate authority. It has been observed that the first words in the novel--the words with which Félix opens his letter--evoke his characteristic attitude: "Je cède . . ." (9: 969).¹⁵ Throughout his letter, Félix's language reiterates this submissive posture. "Obéir" is the verb he uses to define his position vis-à-vis his interlocutor; he repeats it three times, always in conjunction with the second-person pronoun: "en t'obéissant" (9: 969), "si je ne t'obéissais pas" (9:

¹⁵ Brombert 178

970), "*de t'avoir obéi*" (9: 970). In contrast, the verbs with which Félix describes the attitude and behavior of Natalie suggest a position of dominance: Natalie suspects ("*pourquoi suspecter les soudaines et longues rêveries . . . ?*"); she surmises ("*tu l'as deviné*"); she will know everything ("*peut-être vaut-il mieux que tu saches tout*"); she threatens ("*tu m'as menacé*"); she wields the power of punishment ("*ne me punis donc point*" [all quotes: 9: 969-70]). And while Félix's will is conditional ("*Je voudrais que ma confiance redoublât ta tendresse*" [9: 970; my italics], Natalie's is absolute, as signaled not only by the verbal mode, but by the immediate acquiescence with which her request is met ("*Aujourd'hui tu veux mon passé, le voici*" [9: 969; my italics]).

Félix's inclination to divest himself of power in favor of his interlocutor is not his only dangerous tendency. He willingly submits to another very potent creature, the past: "*ma vie est dominée par un fantôme, il se dessine vaguement au moindre mot qui le provoque, il s'agite souvent de lui-même au-dessus de moi*" (9: 970). Like some mythical monster easily moved to rage, the past demands constant tribute. Small wonder that Félix is characteristically overwhelmed by memories, engulfed in melancholy reverie.

Although this submissive attitude toward the past is significantly more apparent in his letter to Natalie, it pierces through the ecstatic tone of his love letter to Mme de Mortsauf and exerts its insistent, hypnotic pull.

Recalling his fear that Henriette would not recover from her death-like swoon, Félix predicts that that terrible emotion will serve as a measure for all his future sorrows and suffering: "les craintes dont mon âme fut agitée hier seront un terme de comparaison pour toutes mes douleurs à venir" (9: 1076). In other words, Félix already views the present as past and invests it with more importance than the future. His prediction is virtually borne out by a doubly haunting epistolary assonance: The "souvenirs ensevelis dans mon âme" (9: 1075-76)--memories of the terror with which Henriette's fainting spell filled him, or of the joy that overtook him on her recovery?--both announce (within the temporal framework of Félix's experience) and recall (within the temporal framework of the narrative as it is read) the "imposants souvenirs ensevelis au fond de mon âme" (9: 970), which his opening letter promised to reveal to Natalie. The repetition of this image within the two epistolary texts serves to reinforce an essential aspect of Félix's melancholy posture: his awareness that his current experience will be carried forward into the future, where it will dwell beneath the surface like an enormous reservoir of sadness.

Félix's moral insufficiency is also more apparent in the letter to Natalie than in the youthful one he writes to Mme de Mortsauf. The former letter exposes Félix's lack of moral autonomy: the ability to evaluate a situation independently and determine the most appropriate course of

action. Félix does what is asked and expected of him; he does not understand that it is at times more expedient--and certainly wiser--to disobey. The text of his letter, with its triple reiteration of his intention to "obéir," amply illustrates this moral rigidity; the text of Natalie's refusal demonstrates the consequences of a too strict adherence to the moral code. There Félix learns--too late--that he would have done better to turn down Natalie's "imprudente demande" (9: 1228), that he should have fabricated some story to satisfy her request to reveal the truth about his past: "Il fallait me tromper; plus tard, je vous aurais remercié" (9: 1228), she tardily counsels him. Natalie thus repudiates the very code on whose infallibility Félix based his unquestioning accession to her desires.

That code, which dictates chivalrous obedience in all matters to "la femme que nous aimons plus qu'elle ne nous aime" (9: 969), is signaled in Félix's letter by his recourse to the first-person plural. He begins his appeal to Natalie in the singular ("Je cède") and on an intimate note ("ton désir"), but immediately expands his voice and his audience to the plural ("nous aimons," "vos fronts," "vos lèvres," etc.). This larger group with which Félix identifies himself (men in love) permits him to justify his personal conduct (in this case, confession of his past romances to the woman he is courting) by appeal to the code (unfailing obedience to "la femme que nous aimons plus qu'elle ne nous aime") to which that group is subject.

Félix gives evidence of this uncritical adherence to a code of behavior elsewhere in his confession: "*le Code-Homme nous fait en galanterie un devoir du mensonge*" (9: 1179) he explains as, having surrendered to Arabelle's crocodile tears, he allows ardent, if insincere pledges of love to be extracted from him. But the completeness with which Félix relinquishes personal judgment and surrenders to the rules of the code is more marked in his letter to Natalie, in which, invoking "nous" no less than six times within a scant six lines of text ("*nous aimons . . . plus qu'elle ne nous aime . . . nous faire oublier . . . nous franchissons . . . nous donnons . . . nous dépensons . . .*" [9: 969]), Félix creates a sturdy bulwark before venturing to resume his own personal voice ("*tu veux mon passé*" [9: 969]).

Félix's dependence on stated rules in matters of the heart contrasts with his greater autonomy in social and political matters. Under Mme de Mortsauf's tutelage, he becomes adept at fathoming and juggling the intricate and often conflicting hidden codes that regulate courtly life and diplomatic affairs. But his inability to carry over that capacity for independent moral judgment into his personal and sentimental life is, in large measure, responsible for his most crushing amorous failures.

The lack of moral autonomy fosters a related moral defect: bad judgment. Here it is not merely a question of a deficiency, of an incapacity, but of a blatant negative capacity. In invoking the code that he has, presumably,

applied many times in the past, Félix gives ample evidence of his shocking lack of prudence and his fundamentally unsound judgment in matters ranging from good taste to social conduct to self preservation. Félix is clearly prepared to disregard the rules of common sense ("`oublier à tout propos les règles du bon sens'"), to waste his vital being ("`nous donnons notre sang'"), to squander the future ("`nous dépensons l'avenir'"), to trample the laws of basic social decency ("`fouler aux pieds des répugnances inviolées'" [all quotes, 9: 969]). And, despite his awareness that his confession will wound his interlocutor ("`s'il y avait dans cette confession des éclats qui te blessassent'" [9: 970]), he proceeds anyway. Félix's lack of moral discernment and resolve, his moral impotence and blindness, are his most serious character flaws.

In his declaration of love to Mme de Mortsauf, Félix reveals an entirely different order of weakness, a feebleness and negativity that exist at the level of thought and apprehension of reality. If the vocabulary in his letter to Natalie manifests Félix's submissiveness on a psychological level, his choice of words as he writes his letter of love to Henriette betrays a profound tendency to yield on an intellectual level. Félix describes his oscillation between two mental states, hinging upon his proximity to Mme de Mortsauf. When not in her presence ("`loin de vous'" [9: 1074-75]), he is in full possession of his faculties of thinking, reasoning, expression, and

recall. But in her presence ("`dès que je vous vois,'" "`près de vous'" [9: 1074], "`En votre présence'" [9: 1075]), he experiences a kind of diminished consciousness in which he appears completely stripped of those mental capacities. This stupor-like state ("`cette constante ivresse'" [9: 1075]) that overtakes Félix when he is with Henriette begins with a feeling of severance from past modes of thinking ("`je ne trouve plus mes paroles en harmonie avec les reflets de votre âme'" [9: 1074]) and feeling ("`le sentiment actuel efface les sentiments de la vie antérieure'" [9: 1074]), and diminishes his conscious awareness to the point where he experiences a loss of self ("`trop plein de vous pour être moi'" [9: 1075]), a loss of speech ("`trop éloquent par vous pour parler'" [9: 1075]), and a loss of memory ("`trop ardent à saisir le moment présent pour me souvenir du passé'" [9: 1075]). Indeed, Félix's inability to articulate his thoughts and feelings in Henriette's presence motivates his recourse to letter writing in order to express his love to her ("`Je ne puis donc vous parler de vous que loin de vous.'" [9: 1074-75]); only safe distance makes communication possible. Félix's reduction, when in the company of his idol, from a state of normal cognitive alertness and functioning to one of pure sensate awareness and reaction appears complete: "`Près de vous, je ne puis que sentir.'" (9: 1075).

The consequences of this irresistible, hypnotized state of consciousness, this "encens spirituel" (9: 1049), are

alluded to elsewhere in Félix's confession, as he attempts to make Natalie understand how he was able to tolerate the protracted repression of desire that his romance with Mme de Mortsauf imposed on him: "vous le dirai-je . . . cette situation comportait des langueurs enchanteresses, des moments de suavité divine et les contentements qui suivent de tacites immolations" (9: 1049). The voluntary relinquishment of volition that Félix describes here appears to be a deeply ingrained pattern of character. As the above passage suggests, submitting--"giving in"--is a mode of response that he experiences as an almost tantalizing seduction, which may explain the power this virtually trance-like state exerts over him. (It is interesting to note that the stimulation and seduction of being deprived of pleasure with Henriette are nearly as intense as being sated with it with Arabelle [see 9: 1178-79]).

Félix's susceptibility to a regressive pull of consciousness is registered in the first sentence of his letter to Mme de Mortsauf, in which the reverse progression "'dire . . . penser . . . oublier'" occurs: "'Combien de choses n'avais-je pas à vous dire en arrivant, auxquelles je pensais pendant le chemin et que j'oublie en vous voyant!'" (9: 1074; my italics). In the normal succession of conscious events, awareness (countering the enveloping pull of forgetting) is followed by reflection ("penser"), which prepares the manifestation of speech ("dire"). Moreover, it is Mme de Mortsauf's "défaillance," and his

identification with that state--as well as his fears for her well-being--that incite Félix to write his letter: "'cette défaillance ne nous avait-elle pas rapprochés?'" (9: 1075). The surrender of conscious thought and the renunciation of will that inevitably accompanies this movement, clearly manifested in Félix's two letters, account, on a profound, almost involuntary, level for the sentimental defeats that Félix experiences . . . or perhaps brings upon himself.

Finally, certain aspects of Félix's epistolary style reveal a generalized negativity and softness that nurture the varied aspects of his characterological weakness--his propensity to failure as well as his moral and intellectual slackness. The preponderance of negative statements (no fewer than twelve fill the page and a half missive to Mme de Mortsauf) bespeaks a pessimistic way of seeing and acting in the world; even Félix's affirmations are occasionally followed by negative formulations: "'Oui, dès que je vous vois . . . je ne trouve plus mes paroles en harmonie avec les reflets de votre âme'" (9: 1074). Félix's recourse to exclamatory statements is another distinctive characteristic of his style: four exclamations beginning with "'Combien'" or "'Combien de'" punctuate the letter to Mme de Mortsauf. They reinforce the worshipful stance that so often accompanies a state of powerlessness, and bespeak, as well, a fundamental lack of critical, distancing abilities on the part of the letter writer.

Félix's two letters thus provide concentrated, first-hand proof, at the level of subconscious thought processes--linguistic fingerprints, as it were--of his innate weakness. His submissiveness, lack of autonomy and discernment, and feeble intellectual fibre comprise the subtext of these two epistolary initiatives, with whose overt purpose--winning the heart of his interlocutor--they are thus at odds. It might be argued that Félix disseminates similarly linguistic, and thus conclusive, evidence of his weak character and questionable motivation throughout the long confession he writes to Natalie. But these letters are briefer and more focused in purpose, and the intensity of the pleas they voice is undiminished by the exigencies of narration. They thus stand as denser manifestations of his intrinsically flawed nature.

The correspondence exchanged between Eugène de Rastignac and his family at the beginning of Le Père Goriot functions similarly to provide the reader with an intimate and direct understanding of his character. But this packet of letters is even more precious to the reader eager to fathom the heart of this protagonist than are the love letters Félix de Vandenesse writes in Le Lys. The abundance of biographical detail Félix supplies in his confession provides a fairly complete picture of the critical influences that shaped him during his childhood and youth. This is not the case for Rastignac, about whose early

development the narrator provides only sketchy information, of a summary nature. Indeed, Mary McCarthy argues that Balzac supplies relatively scant information about Rastignac throughout the twenty-odd novels in which he appears, creating, instead of a complete biography, "the outline of a character whom we complete through our reading."¹⁶ If we are able to trace Rastignac's career with this limited and at times ambiguous information, it is because we are manipulated to fill in the gaps, that is, to supply the missing bits of information with our own imaginations. (The relevance of this device to the epistolary form will be examined in chapter 6.) But this process is only possible, McCarthy points out, because the portrayal Balzac provided of Rastignac in Le Père Goriot "laid the groundwork for our conception of him at later stages of development."¹⁷

One essential portion of that groundwork is comprised of information about Rastignac's family and upbringing, information that reaches the reader through epistolary channels. The natural distinction and nobility of heart that set this character apart have their source in the familial crucible in which he was formed. And the ambition that drives Rastignac is fuelled, initially at least, by his desire to build dowries for his sisters and repay his mother and aunt for their many sacrifices. But these

¹⁶ Balzac and His Reader (Columbia & London: U of Missouri P, 1982) 129.

¹⁷ McCarthy 131.

relatives, whose interactions with Rastignac reveal a critical dimension of his character, are absent from the action of the narrative. They appear only indirectly, through their correspondence with their beloved son and brother. Two questions are relevant to Balzac's use of letters in developing this character: What does the correspondence reveal about Rastignac? What narrative functions are served by this epistolary development of character?

Numerous characters attest to Rastignac's innate nobility and virtue, a kind of moral distinction he wears as prominently as his physical beauty. Père Goriot, who lays claim to an intuitive ability to judge a man's integrity, assures Rastignac that there are "*bien peu d'hommes qui vous ressemblent*" (3: 177). Mme de Beauséant, who turns to the young man, the only person she feels she can trust, on the eve of her exile, finds him "*bon et noble, jeune et candide au milieu de ce monde où ces qualités sont si rares*" (3: 265). Vautrin calls him--if a bit ironically--"*le meilleur d'entre vous . . .*" (3: 219). And, at the end of the novel, the narrator speaks of "*les saintes émotions d'un coeur pur*" (3: 290) in an almost wistful tone, since Rastignac has just buried that purity along with the poor old man for whom he weeps. However, it is the familial correspondence that provides substantive insight into Rastignac's temperament and character. The style in which his mother and sisters write to him, and he to them, brings

the reader beyond the description that the narrator or other characters offer of Rastignac's noble heart and moral purity; the correspondence sheds light on how he got to be that way.

The deep emotional bond between mother and son is apparent in Mme de Rastignac's troubled response to her son's request for an inordinate sum of money. Although she opens her letter on a note of immediate compliance ("Mon cher enfant, je t'envoie ce que tu m'as demandé" [3: 126]), she quickly expresses bewilderment and dismay at Eugène's failure to explain the reason for his request. It is clear that the customary communication between mother and son is more complete and uninhibited than the one exhibited in his letter to her, or she would not find it so truncated and remote. The sadness ("l'impression douloureuse" [3: 126]) with which her son's letter fills her, the sense of fear that it inspires, spring from this lack: "Mon cher fils, quel est donc le sentiment qui t'a contraint à jeter un tel effroi dans mon coeur? tu as dû bien souffrir en m'écrivant, car j'ai bien souffert en te lisant" (3: 126). This expression of mutual suffering reveals Rastignac's capacity for empathy, a character trait that is central to his involvement with Goriot. Moreover, by giving expression to her own acute sensitivity, Mme de Rastignac's letter points to the source of her son's empathic nature.

The tone and content of his mother's letter demonstrates the depth and quality of the familial love that

characterized Rastignac's upbringing. Despite the anguish her son's appeal elicits, Mme de Rastignac's response is accepting and expansive, heavily punctuated with terms of endearment: "'Mon cher enfant,'" "'Mon cher fils,'" "'Mon bon Eugène,'" "'mon bien-aimé,'" "'cher enfant,'" "'Mon Eugène'" (3: 126-27). The warmth of her tone communicates, in a direct and concentrated manner, an affection and devotion that would take longer to establish in third-person narration, where it would probably not be conveyed with the same intensity. And although Rastignac's Aunt Marcillac neither appears in the narrative nor writes her own letter, the epistolary narration of her generous response to his request conveys the doting love with which she surely surrounded her nephew as he grew up.

Laure's letter to her brother highlights yet another dimension of the familial affection that shaped the temperament and character of Rastignac. This charming domestic vignette, bubbling with family anecdotes and gossip, recounts the sisters' playful quarrels and joyous plotting to help their brother. The letter's sweet chattering tone and mundane details suggest the tender closeness that Eugène shared with his sisters before his departure for Paris.¹⁸ This expression of sibling intimacy

¹⁸ Balzac's identification with Rastignac is especially relevant to our subject here. As Pierre-Georges Castex has observed, Balzac lifted some of the playful language and epithets found in *Le Père Goriot* from his own correspondence with his sisters. For example, the kingdom metaphor used by Laure to characterize the Rastignac family occupations ("De grandes conjectures occupent les esprits dans l'Etat de Rastignac. . . sa majesté la reine . . . les princesses

is enhanced by the epistolary evidence of the love the two sisters have for each other. Although the letter is from Laure, it is written almost entirely in the first-person plural, so that Agathe's presence is felt behind her sister's signature:

"Agathe et moi nous voulions employer notre argent de tant de manières différentes, que nous ne savions plus à quel achat nous résoudre. . . . tu nous a mises d'accord. . . . nous étions constamment en querelle pour celui de nos désirs auquel nous donnerions la préférence . . . (etc.)" (3: 128; my italics)

Thus are heard in unison the voices of both sisters through the written words of only one. This device is highly expressive of the bond between them, and of the general atmosphere of affection and generosity in which Eugène was raised. How different from the rivalry that sets Goriot's daughters at each others' throats! And how different from the delight with which Laure and Agathe find ways to sacrifice for their brother is the meanness that a similarly loving upbringing spawned in Anastasie and Delphine.

If the Rastignac family correspondence provides evidence of the deeply affectionate attachment in which Eugène's sensitive, empathic temperament was formed, it also contains clues of the family values that shaped his character. Mme de Rastignac gives unstintingly to her son what for her family is a vast sum of money. But she raises

Agathe et Laure . . . (etc.)'" [3: 129]) appears in a letter Balzac's sister Laurence wrote him in 1819. (Introduction, Le Père Goriot [Paris: Garnier, 1963] xxii-xxiii.)

serious questions in her letter about the uses to which she fears he may put her gift, and she appears troubled by the empty life toward which she sees him turning:

"Dans quelle carrière t'engages-tu donc? Ta vie, ton bonheur seraient attachés à paraître ce que tu n'es pas, à voir un monde où tu ne saurais aller sans faire des dépenses d'argent que tu ne peux soutenir . . . Mon bon Eugène, crois-en le coeur de ta mère, les voies tortueuses ne mènent à rien de grand" (3: 126)

She counsels fidelity to the old ways: prudence, patience, and resignation. Her letter implicitly opposes an age-old morality, rooted in virtue and wisdom, to the superficial and materialistic ethos of the dazzling Parisian world that beckens her impressionable son. Finally, she expresses an unshakeable confidence in his uprightness and purity, a faith that Eugène will be reluctant to disappoint: "'Mes paroles sont celles d'une mère aussi confiante que prévoyante. Si tu sais quelles sont tes obligations, je sais, moi, combien ton coeur est pur, combien tes intentions sont excellentes. Aussi puis-je te dire sans crainte: "Va, mon bien-aimé, marche!"'" (3: 127).

Rastignac's own letters are as central to the portrayal of his character as the ones he receives from his mother and sisters. His letters to Laure and Agathe are described, not quoted, a strategy that permits the narrator to focus directly on the character's feelings as he writes. It is not without a sense of disquietude and even shame that Rastignac asks his sisters to save their pennies for him. The stirrings of conscience he experiences as he finishes

writing stem from his certainty that they will not fail to make the requested sacrifices; he has grave compunctions about appealing to such pure hearts:

Quand il eut écrit ces lettres, il éprouva néanmoins une trépidation involontaire: il palpitait, il tressaillit. Ce jeune ambitieux connaissait la noblesse immaculée de ces âmes ensevelies dans la solitude, il savait quelles peines il causerait à ces deux soeurs, et aussi quelles seraient leurs joies; avec quel plaisir elles s'entretiendraient en secret de ce frère bien-aimé, au fond du clos. (3: 121)

Thus Rastignac imagines his sisters' suffering at the very thought of his need, and their delight at the opportunity to help him. He envisages their playful scheming to keep their gift secret ("il les vit, déployant le génie malicieux des jeunes filles pour lui envoyer incognito cet argent" [3: 121]), charming maneuvers that, as Laure's response later shows, he predicted with an acuity that years of domestic proximity permit. Rastignac's projection of his sisters' reaction to his epistolary request reinforces the depiction of familial affection so central to his character. His understanding of their hearts reveals the extent of his emotional bond with them, and the depth of his love. His capacity to imagine the pain that will afflict his mother if she is unable fully to comply with his request ("De quelle douleur serait atteinte sa mère, si elle ne pouvait envoyer toute la somme!" [3: 121]) is similarly revealing of his sensitive and compassionate disposition. Here the lapse into the indirect style brings us especially close to the young man; it is as if we are looking over his shoulder--or

into his heart--as he contemplates the effect of his written words on those dear to him. The narrative depiction of Rastignac's thoughts and emotions as he composes his letters to his family thus provides essential clues to his empathic nature and to the portrayal of the noble heart that Goriot, Mme de Beauséant, and even Vautrin all perceive in him.

The epistolary development of Rastignac's character also serves to emphasize the importance of Le Père Goriot as a turning point in his career. If he is to realize his ambitions, Rastignac must forsake his roots and make his way, either in society (represented by Mme de Beauséant) or against it, in the criminal world represented by Vautrin. The pull of "la voie mondaine"¹⁹ is very sharply, if only schematically, felt in Rastignac's letter to his mother. He expresses his impatience to "'faire promptement fortune'" and his view that unless he can "'faire mon chemin,'" the only alternative is to "'rester dans la boue'" (all quotes, 3: 120). He describes "'cette vie de Paris'" as "'un combat perpétuel'" (3: 121) for which he must be properly outfitted if he is to emerge successful. His request for subsidies from his family is prompted by his awareness, during an encounter with Maxime de Trailles, of sartorial inferiority to the dandy. Rastignac understands, very quickly, that he will need all the trappings of the aristocratic gentleman if

¹⁹ Rose Fortassier, introduction, Le Père Goriot by Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 3: 22.

he is to enter this world--the finest boots, always shined, elegantly-cut suits, impeccably clean gloves--accoutrements that will take money. The requisite gloves evoked in Rastignac's letter ("Je dois aller dans le monde, et n'ai pas un sou pour avoir des gants propres'" [3: 120]) serve as an icon for the luxury and elegance of Mme de Beauséant's world. This is underscored much later, when, on the eve of her exile, Mme de Beauséant bequeathes to Rastignac the coffer in which she kept her evening gloves (3: 265-66).

The correspondence offers only a glimpse of the dazzling Parisian society that is depicted more fully and vividly elsewhere in the narrative. But, as we have seen, it provides a rich and vigorous depiction--the only one found in the novel--of the other pole that exerts its influence on Rastignac, his family. The Rastignac family's epistolary presence is significant, despite the limited amount of text it occupies. Throughout the narrative, Eugène's family remains a point of reference for him, a compelling, almost transcendent image of love, devotion, and serenity that never entirely disappears from his consciousness, despite its frequent eclipse during his social and moral apprenticeship:

comme beaucoup de gens qui agissent en requins dans leur profession et à Paris, Rastignac gardera de ces deux patries morales que sont la famille et la jeunesse un coin d'innocence, une tendresse et une amitié qui ne se démentiront pas pour les siens ni pour Bianchon.²⁰

²⁰ Fortassier, introduction 25.

More than any other character, Goriot touches a chord in Rastignac that revives those sentiments of familial devotion: "je suis encore fils et frère comme vous êtes père" (3: 121), he tells Goriot, who observes him lost in troubled reverie after composing his urgent missives. And when Rastignac helps the dying old man take a sip of tea, his tender solicitousness prompts Goriot to exclaim: "Vous devez aimer votre père et votre mère, vous!" (3: 278). Significantly, as he keeps vigil by Goriot's bed during his agony, Rastignac occupies himself by writing letters to his mother and sisters (3: 260). And as he dresses to accompany his mistress to the grand ball where Mme de Beauséant will make her noble exit from society, Rastignac's thoughts are with his distant family, rather than on the dramatic event:

Sa pensée le reporta au sein de sa famille. Il se souvint des pures émotions de cette vie calme, il se rappela les jours passés au milieu des êtres dont il était chéri. En se conformant aux lois naturelles du foyer domestique, ces chères créatures y trouvaient un bonheur plein, continu, sans angoisses. (3: 262)

Thus the Family, with its promise of unreserved love and unbroken tranquillity, never disappears entirely from the horizon of this novel, even though it is utterly negated by Goriot's tragic experience and rejected in the end by Rastignac himself, whose ambition leads him to choose the more dangerous path of Society.

If the letters in Le Père Goriot establish the family as a point of reference that provides a central character with spiritual bearings throughout the narrative, they also

serve to give credibility to characters who are wholly absent from the action. The letters they write and receive endow Rastignac's mother and sisters with narrative substance. They are more than a thought in Rastignac's mind; they have more than a third-person dimension in the story. If their correspondence renders the influence of family on Rastignac palpable and real, it is because it functions as a surrogate for their presence.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the letters in this novel expose the source of the emotional bond that unites its two central characters. The sensitivity and compassion that familial attachments have nurtured in Rastignac permit him to be touched by Goriot. This point is dramatized by the tears the young man freely sheds as he hears the duchesse de Langeais recount how Goriot's daughters have repudiated him: "Quelques larmes roulèrent dans les yeux d'Eugène, récemment rafraîchi par les pures et saintes émotions de la famille . . ." (3: 113). Later, when reading his mother's generous but distressed response to his request, tears of shame and remorse spring to his eyes, and it is of Goriot's thankless sacrifices that he is reminded. He judges himself to be no better than the old man's daughters, whose selfish demands drive their father to his ruin:

Quand Eugène eut achevé cette lettre, il était en pleurs, il pensait au père Goriot tordant son vermeil et le vendant pour aller payer la lettre de change de sa fille. "Ta mère a tordu ses bijoux! se disait-il. Ta tante a pleuré sans

doute en vendant quelques-unes de ses reliques!
De quel droit maudirais-tu Anastasie? tu viens
d'imiter pour l'égoïsme de ton avenir ce qu'elle a
fait pour son amant! Qui, d'elle ou de toi, vaut
mieux?" (3: 127-28)

Thus in Rastignac's contrite reaction to his mother's letter we see how his guilty conscience alerts him to the ugly similarity between Goriot's children and himself. The text of the letters exchanged by Rastignac and his mother highlights this parallel even more directly. Despite his awareness of the enormous sacrifices his family is already making to support his studies in Paris, Rastignac asks his mother to sell the family jewels and his aunt to sell her heirloom lace, in order to scrape together the needed funds. The excessiveness of his petition is underscored by the rather startling image with which the letter opens: "'Ma chère mère, vois si tu n'as pas une troisième mamelle à ouvrir pour moi'" (3: 120). A desperate urgency is felt in Rastignac's letter: "'si je n'avais pas cet argent je serais en proie à un désespoir qui me conduirait à me brûler la cervelle'" ; "'Ne vois dans ma prière que le cri d'une impérieuse nécessité'" (3: 120). This extreme appeal, so distressing to his mother, announces the Goriot daughters' desperate harassment of their father. Goriot's tragedy is his inability to say "no" to his daughters; for him, no filial appeal can be refused. Mme de Rastignac, on the other hand, while acceding to her son's request, tells him, reluctantly but firmly, that she could not do so a second time without troubling the family peace and incurring

portentous debts. The refusal with which her letter opens is reiterated in its closing words: "'tu m'as fait connaître une douleur trop vive pour que je puisse la supporter une seconde fois'" (3: 127). The note of anguish that it sounds will be heard again, much later, as Goriot lies on his deathbed. Thus the son's inordinate request of his mother foreshadows the exorbitant demands that Goriot's daughters make of him as he lies dying. In this way, the epistolary development of Rastignac's character permits a replication and deepening of the novel's central theme, that of paternal sacrifice and passion.

The epistolary presence of Grossetête (in Le Curé de village) and Guillaume Grandet (in Eugénie Grandet) is very different from that of the protagonists thus far discussed. The letters written by Modeste Mignon, Félix de Vandenesse, and Eugène de Rastignac support characterizations broadly developed through a variety of techniques. Their "dossiers" are stuffed with "evidence" that comes in diverse forms, from several sources, not the least of which is the narrator, whose eye and ear provide the reader with a sense--however biased--of their persons and physical presence. This is not the case for Grossetête and Guillaume Grandet, whose mannerisms and dress are concealed from us, whose faces we do not see, and whose voices we do not hear--at least not in the telling give-and-take of conversational discourse. They are, in the Balzacian

universe, rather disembodied creatures, and their letters play an almost unilateral role in establishing their characterizations.

Grossetête is a character who is only intermittently, if consistently, present in Le Curé de village. Unlike Tascheron, who disappears after the first third of the narrative, or Grégoire Gérard, who does not appear until two-thirds of it have unfolded, Grossetête is always present, though in a remote and shadowy fashion. We hear a good deal about Grossetête. We know that he is a very wealthy man and a pillar of the community. It is as Pierre Graslin's employer that he first comes to our attention, and, significantly, his first connection with Véronique is through the exotic flowers, grown in his greenhouse, which Graslin brings the young woman during their courtship. We learn that the kindly older man has become a devoted friend of Véronique. A rare, spiritual intimacy, fostered by Grossetête's sensitive, fatherly interest, unites them. Nonetheless, he rarely appears in the foreground of the drama that is centered on his dear friend. Except for the dinner party that Véronique gives in honor of Gérard's arrival at Montégnac, at which Grossetête, like the other characters present, expresses his views on the political and social events of those turbulent times, the reader never directly sees or hears him. Yet, strikingly, all the correspondence in this novel is either addressed to Grossetête or written by him, and it is through this

correspondence that the portrait of this background character emerges. Moreover, even if Grossetête's presence in the narrative is only peripheral, the intensity of the letters addressed to him is indicative of its significance.

Véronique's letter to Grossetête, written in the early stages of her unhappy marriage to Graslin, is a message of acute emotional distress. The dominant motifs are provided by Grossetête himself: the heartbreakingly beautiful flowers he has sent Véronique and his passion and talent for horticulture. That creative talent, which Véronique so envies, places Grossetête in a positive camp, composed, in this novel, of cultivators, builders, and engineers, who are the saviors of society. They are also identified as saviors of souls, and the priest's mission of saving Véronique's soul will accomplish, through the building and cultivation that is the condition of that redemption, the monumental endeavor of reclaiming the region of Montégnac. As we saw in chapter 2, in Véronique's letter the act of cultivating flowers is confused, on a poetic and emotional level, with the act of cultivating souls. Gérard's letter to Grossetête, which we shall examine in greater depth in chapter 4, is equally fervid and desperate. Grossetête's support is more profound than mere financial protection would suggest, or else Gérard would not reveal his spiritual crisis to his benefactor:

"Je viens, monsieur, vous faire de tristes confidences; mais vous avez été pour moi comme un père, quand vous pouviez n'être qu'un protecteur.

C'est donc à vous seul, à vous qui m'avez fait tout ce que je suis, que je puis les dire." (9: 794)

For Gérard, Grossetête has been more than a benefactor, more than a mentor: the cultivator of his soul.

Grossetête's own letters reveal other, less lofty, though equally positive aspects of his character. The livestock imagery that dominates his letter to Véronique arises naturally from its subject and purpose. Grossetête is responding to a letter (whose text is not given in the novel) from Véronique in which she describes the vast enterprise she is championing to build a dam that will irrigate the wasted plain of Montégnac. She has requested Grossetête's assistance in finding the man capable of realizing so ambitious a venture and in securing the needed supplies and beasts of burden, sorely lacking in the destitute region. Grossetête has no difficulty locating the horses, and his generous gift is accompanied by considerations on the advantages of cattle over work-horses for agricultural work. But satisfying Véronique's other request is a more difficult matter: people who combine unusual skill and talent with energy and imagination are scarce, their presence in the countryside rare, their willingness to settle there, naught:

"Mais ce que vous m'avez demandé de trouver outre les chevaux, cet homme capable de vous seconder et qui surtout puisse vous comprendre, est une de ces raretés que nous n'élevons pas en province ou que nous n'y gardons point. L'éducation de ce haut bétail est une spéculation à trop longue date et

trop chanceuse pour que nous la fassions." (9: 792)

Grossetête's familiarity with the routines and processes of agriculture accounts for his tendency to borrow its imagery. It may also account for his down-to-earth, commonsense attitude toward life. "'Je suis l'ami du terre à terre,'" (9: 793) he confesses. Not surprisingly, his concerns for Gérard focus on the latter's soaring dreams and ambitions. Despite Grossetête's wealth and success in business, his general approach to life and expectations are modest, almost humble; in his view, great ambitions doom a man to failure: "'Mon pauvre protégé demande des choses impossibles. Aucun pouvoir ne tiendrait devant des ambitions si violentes, si impérieuses, absolues'" (9: 793). Grossetête extols the simple life, lived close to the soil and in harmony with the rhythms of nature. For him, men and women of virtue benefit from the earth's bounty and contribute, through their labors, to the well-being of the community. This is the life he hopes Gérard will discover in Montégnac; it is also the life he himself lives, as his passionate devotion to and success in cultivating flowers clearly shows.

But it is not merely that work, especially agricultural or horticultural labor, assures happiness. Work has social value, and for this reason is, in Grossetête's view, superior to supposedly loftier, more philosophical endeavors:

"Je n'ignore point que les grandes idées engendrent de grandes actions; mais comme ces sortes d'idées sont fort rares, je trouve qu'à l'ordinaire, les choses valent mieux que les idées. Celui qui fertilise un coin de terre, qui perfectionne un arbre à fruit, qui applique une herbe à un terrain ingrat est bien au-dessus de ceux qui cherchent des formules pour l'Humanité." (9: 793)

Grossetête's approach to life links him with a moral attitude that permeates this novel, an attitude that celebrates the spiritual virtues and values of active--that is, material and social--endeavor. It is summed up first by the narrator, whose sorrowful contemplation of the wasteland that surrounds Montégnac leads him to assimilate the act of planting with that of propagating the word of God (9: 707). Later the priest Bonnet, the chief proponent of this philosophy, tells Véronique that the key to her salvation lies in the work that will redeem the land:

"Les monastères pleuraient et agissaient, ils priaient et civilisaient, ils ont été les moyens actifs de notre divine religion. Ils ont bâti, planté, cultivé l'Europe . . . Soyez à vous seule le monastère . . . Vos prières doivent être des travaux." (9: 757)

Grossetête recognizes the salutary value this project holds for the troubled young woman. Hence, his enthusiasm for it and his eagerness to involve Gérard, whose moral crisis is similarly rooted in overactive and underutilized spiritual energies.

Grossetête's letters are also a vehicle for conveying his political and social views. The old man freely expresses his political conservatism and reactionary social

attitudes to his trusted friend: "'Je vous confie mes principes de vieillard monarchique et encroûté parce que vous êtes discrète!'" (9: 793). There is a distinct note of sadness and regret in his observation of the adverse changes that "progress" has brought: "'je souffre en voyant les maux irréparables déjà faits à notre cher pays'" (9: 793). But, in truth, the epistolary form is not the only vehicle that Grossetête finds to express his beliefs. He does so quite openly, and much more fully, at the dinner that Véronique gives in honor of Gérard's arrival. All the notables of Montégnac--the mayor, the judge, the doctor, and, of course, the priest--are present, and a lengthy, intense discussion on the political and moral climate in France in the days following the July Revolution, quite naturally ensues.

More significantly, Grossetête's correspondence reveals his talent as a judge of men's abilities, and of their hearts and souls. We see this when Véronique solicits his patronage in her search for the exceptional individual capable of realizing Bonnet's great vision. That individual must combine extraordinary engineering knowledge and skill with unusual strength of character. She intuitively realizes that Grossetête, with his understanding of human nature and benevolent interest in others, will find just the right man. Grossetête may attribute his success to "'le hasard'" (9: 792), but it was his own earnest interest in the young man, not chance, that made him Gérard's benefactor in the first place. Nor was it chance that made Gérard turn

to him, rather than to someone else, in his moment of crisis; Gérard recognized that Grossetête, by the very fatherly concern he had shown and support he had provided was, more than anyone else, responsible for his turmoil. Grossetête tersely describes the qualities that make Gérard suitable for Véronique's project: "'Gérard me semble avoir une tête froide et le coeur ardent, voilà bien l'homme qui vous est nécessaire'" (9: 792). In recommending the project to Gérard, his enthusiasm allows him to pinpoint the qualities that make the young man truly extraordinary:

"Pour mettre ce projet à exécution, elle a besoin d'un homme de votre science et de votre ardeur, qui ait à la fois votre dévouement désintéressé et vos idées d'utilité pratique. Peu d'argent et beaucoup de travaux à faire! un résultat immense par de petits moyens! un pays à changer en entier! Faire jaillir l'abondance du milieu le plus dénué, n'est-ce pas ce que vous souhaitez, vous qui voulez construire un poème?" (9: 807-08).

It is Grossetête who first recognizes in Gérard the blend of technical knowledge and passion, the practical bent and dedication needed to envision and execute the arduous, extraordinary project conceived by Bonnet and promoted by Véronique. It is Grossetête who identifies Gérard as a poet in the material domain of planning and building; and it is in his letter that he defines the vast enterprise of the priest and the penitent as a poem.

The correspondence in Le Curé de village supplies the moral shading of Grossetête's portrait, a portrait that conveys the essence of his character even though obscuring the physical outlines of the man. This partial

characterization is appropriate to Grossetête's limited involvement in the narrative. At first glance, he appears to be a mere facilitator, and his role a rather artificial and awkwardly contrived one. But the concerns expressed in the letters he writes and receives situate his participation on the highest moral and spiritual planes of the narrative. Moreover, this epistolary characterization complicates the representation of human relationships in La Comédie humaine. For all people do not enter equally into the orbit of our daily existence; Grossetête's correspondence mirrors the powerful influence certain individuals may exert on our lives, even though they may be distant or remote from us.

Nowhere is the dichotomy between the letter's influence and its writer's remoteness more sharply felt than in the missive written by Guillaume Grandet, who is no longer alive when it falls, like a bombshell, into his brother's hands. Our awareness of this character is established through a subtle accumulation of narrative data. Without sketching a full-blown portrait, the narrator of Eugénie Grandet offers bits of information, here and there, that allow us to reconstruct, in its barest outlines, the existence of this pathetic figure. Through the conversation of the townspeople of Saumur we learn, indirectly, of Guillaume Grandet's great social and financial success, of the high positions he has held in Paris government, of his social ambitions and scorn for the Saumurian branch of the family.

Further revelations are also indirectly provided through the narrator's portrait of Charles Grandet. A pampered, spoiled child whose every whim was satisfied by adoring parents, Charles's love for his father is a product of that fatherly love: "si Charles aimait tant son père et le pleurait si véritablement, cette tendresse venait moins de la bonté de son coeur que des bontés paternelles" (3: 1124). Whatever its causes, the love of this son for his father is genuine, his grief sincere: "'J'ai perdu mon père, mon pauvre père! S'il m'avait confié le secret de son malheur, nous aurions travaillé tous deux à le réparer. Mon Dieu, mon bon père!'" (3: 1097). Distinctive features of Guillaume Grandet's character are thus provided by a process of reflection, whereby the feelings and behavior of one character mirror and guarantee a reality about another that we cannot directly apprehend: The depth of Charles Grandet's grief at the loss of his father conveys vividly, if indirectly, the latter's affection for and generosity toward his son.

And yet, we are permitted to apprehend directly all these critical aspects of Guillaume Grandet's character, and this by means of the lengthy letter he writes his brother. That letter, the first contact the Parisian Grandet has had with his provincial brother in twenty-three years, is read posthumously: Guillaume Grandet has committed suicide following his financial failure and bankruptcy proceedings. The necessary delay between the composition and delivery of a letter heightens the pathos of the announcement: "'Quand

tu tiendras cette lettre en tes mains, je n'existerai plus'" (3: 1063). We must ask why Balzac accorded a character who plays a subordinate role in the narrative direct access to the reader's ear; why he allows this absent character to write a letter that, by virtue of its dramatic impact, is so prominent in the narrative.

The answer is that although Guillaume Grandet plays only a limited role in the dramatic action of this narrative, his role in its philosophical structure is considerably more extensive. Rooted in the natural antagonism between Paris and the provinces, that structure polarizes the moral undercurrent of the novel. Nicole Mozet has analyzed this dialectic: "il y a un duel entre la province et Paris, une sorte de combat toujours recommencé dont on ne sait pas toujours très bien qui est le vrai gagnant, et dont on peut finalement considérer que la province sort plutôt à son avantage."²¹ As Mozet shows, the first victory in this philosophical duel goes to the provincials, as the once wealthy Guillaume Grandet is forced to humble himself by imploring his brother to give financial protection to his son. This victory is overturned when Charles succeeds in morally seducing Eugénie and turning her against her father. But the Parisians are, in the end, defeated by Eugénie's final coup of repaying her uncle's

²¹ Introduction, Eugénie Grandet, by Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 3: 1009.

debts, an ambiguous gesture which simultaneously assures Charles's future and reveals to him, in the most humiliating fashion, that he has let an enormous fortune slip through his fingers.²²

If, however, the ultimate victory goes to the provincials, and if the Parisian Grandet's personal defeat, on a pragmatic level, is sealed in this novel, his moral status might be evaluated quite differently. Indeed, Guillaume Grandet is the moral antithesis of père Grandet, whose portrait emphasizes his stinginess, avarice, and coldly calculating nature: "Cette figure annonçait une finesse dangereuse, une probité sans chaleur, l'égoïsme d'un homme habitué à concentrer ses sentiments dans la jouissance de l'avarice . . ." (3: 1036). Quite different is the portrait that emerges of Guillaume Grandet, a portrait whose colors are mixed with the palette provided by his own words. This is not the cool, reasoned testament of a man who has come to terms with his life; it is not a document conceived in serenity nor written in a calm, reflective mood. Impassioned and touching, bold and pathetic is this "testament de douleur" (3: 1073). It is full of exclamations, interjections, baleful repetitions ("Mon frère, mon frère . . ." [3: 1063]; "'O mon malheureux fils! mon fils! . . ." [3: 1064]), and rhetorical questions through which the intensity of the writer's suffering is all

²² Mozet 1010.

too apparent. At one point, he infuses the hackneyed image of blood and tears with all the pain that each moment of existence holds for him:

"Mon frère, si je t'écrivais avec mon sang et mes larmes, il n'y aurait pas autant de douleurs que j'en mets dans cette lettre; car je pleurerais, je saignerais, je serais mort, je ne souffrirais plus; mais je souffre et vois la mort d'un oeil sec." (3: 1064)

Other images marshalled by this letter writer are no less stunning in their depiction of his despair ("Je me suis tenu sur le bord du gouffre jusqu'au dernier moment . . . Il faut y tomber'" [3: 1063]); of his sense of shame ("Je me coucherai, moi probe, dans un linceul d'infamie'" [3: 1063]); of his humiliation before his brother ("Sache-le bien, mon frère, mes mains suppliantes se sont jointes en pensant à toi'" [3: 1064]). Thus this epistolary self-portrait reveals, in sharp contrast to his brother's essentially hardhearted nature and contained demeanor, a passionate, effusive man, given to displaying his sentiments quite openly, even boldly.

The narrator's mild disapproval of Guillaume Grandet's "prodigalité" (3: 1124) underscores the polarizing intent of his characterization in a novel that presents so complete and masterful a portrait of his brother's stinginess. In the context of paternal affection, generosity and stinginess take on meanings which, while not unrelated to the brothers' differing attitudes toward money, extend beyond it. Père Grandet's love for his daughter is sincere but, like

everything else in his life, dominated by his obsessive need to accumulate and safeguard his wealth. He loves Eugénie because he sees in her the person who will inherit and preserve his capital: "le seul être qui lui fût réellement de quelque chose, sa fille Eugénie, sa seule héritière" (3: 1036). Occasionally, genuine feelings of paternal sentiment flicker across his heart, as when Eugénie tells him that Charles has spent the morning weeping for his dead father (3: 1099). But his love for his daughter remains just below the level of awareness, and never, through word or through gesture, does he express it to her. He does not hesitate to use her as a pawn, playing off his two greedy neighbors--each one eager to marry their son to the shy young heiress--one against the other for his own financial benefit. In fact, père Grandet has deprived his daughter of all but the barest essentials during her upbringing and has exploited both her and his wife by compelling them to perform tasks that would, in a bourgeois household such as theirs, ordinarily be consigned to servants (3: 1041).

How different is the quality of Guillaume Grandet's paternal affection! It is an unstinting, uncompromising love for his son that compels him to sacrifice his pride and humble himself before a brother he had long scorned. Guillaume Grandet's letter is a testament, written not to bequeath worldly goods (of which, at the moment of composition, he is utterly destitute), but to entreat his brother--the only family Charles has--to offer the poor

young man a modicum of financial protection and, most of all, to give him the moral protection of a father:

"Grandet, je te confie Charles en mourant. . . . Sois un père pour lui, mais un bon père" (3: 1064). Knowing his son will have to face harsh realities, he beseeches his brother to go gently and expose him gradually to hardship, as a kind and understanding parent would: "Ne l'arrache pas tout à coup à sa vie oisive, tu le tuerais" (3: 1064). He has, by his own admission, spoiled his child, regretting only, in this regard, that Charles must face a rude, demanding existence for which his life of ease and luxury has ill prepared him. The phrases with which he refers to his son translate in unmistakable terms the deep affection he feels for him, an affection he undoubtedly manifested freely and often: "Nous nous sommes dit adieu tendrement" (3: 1063); "O mon malheureux fils! mon fils!" (3: 1064); "Pauvre enfant!" (3: 1064). The upbringing Guillaume Grandet has provided his son contrasts markedly with the deprivations, material, moral, and emotional, that père Grandet has imposed on his daughter.

The unselfish nature of Guillaume Grandet's love for his son is apparent as well in the retrospective glance he casts over his life. Grandet had defied social convention to marry a noblewoman of illegitimate birth. He had married out of love, and now his son must pay the consequences: Charles has no relatives on his mother's side, none, at least, who would acknowledge him as family: "Pourquoi n'ai-

je pas obéi aux préjugés sociaux?," the father laments, "Pourquoi ai-je cédé à l'amour? Pourquoi ai-je épousé la fille naturelle d'un grand seigneur? Charles n'a plus de famille'" (3: 1064). It is clear, then, that his regrets spring from loving concern for his child and the painful recognition that the decisions he made as a youth will adversely affect his son's life; they do not represent a fundamental repudiation of the life he chose. It is also clear that this paternal love saves Guillaume Grandet from morosity and self-flagellation. Despite the regrets, self-recriminations and brooding which mark these pages (and which we are not surprised to find in the testament of a man about to take his life under such grim circumstances), it is tenderness, concern, and exertions on behalf of his son that constitute the letter's dominant strain: "Je tâche de prouver par la bonne foi qui préside à mes affaires qu'il n'y a dans mes désastres ni faute ni improbité. N'est-ce pas m'occuper de Charles?" (3: 1065).

In contrast to the active and generous affection manifested in this final epistolary gesture is the selfish mania that compels père Grandet's dying gesture: an atrocious grasp for the gold-encrusted crucifix that the priest holds to his lips for a final kiss. The convulsive movement expresses, on a purely physiological level, the wretched miser's worship of Money, "le seul dieu moderne auquel on ait foi" (3: 1052), and his complete spiritual destitution. Although he tolerates his wife's religious

beliefs, he certainly does not share them; as the narrator explains, "Les avarés ne croient point à une vie à venir, le présent est tout pour eux" (3: 1101).

The spiritual dichotomy between the brothers could not be greater. For all his worldly success and material achievements, Guillaume Grandet remains, to the end, a deeply religious, God-fearing man, as his letter clearly shows. He is fearful that his son might curse his memory, a curse from which there is no recourse, since it is spoken after one's death: "'la malédiction de nos enfants est épouvantable; ils peuvent appeler de la nôtre, mais la leur est irrévocable'" (3: 1063-64). He himself makes maledictory threats to his brother, to pressure him to heed his plea to aid--and love--his child: "'Ah! si mon enfant ne trouvait ni secours ni tendresse en toi, je demanderais éternellement vengeance à Dieu de ta dureté'" (3: 1065). Finally, he promises his brother spiritual remuneration for carrying out the obligation with which he is charging him:

"Que toutes les bénédictions de Dieu te soient acquises pour la généreuse tutelle que je confie, et que tu acceptes, je n'en doute pas. Il y aura sans cesse une voix qui priera pour toi dans le monde où nous devons aller tous un jour, et où je suis déjà." (3: 1065)

Guillaume Grandet's offer of a spiritual reward to a man as avaricious and bereft of spiritual feeling as père Grandet highlights his own spiritual integrity and his ironic ignorance of his brother's spiritual void.

That irony can be said to extend to the larger philosophical framework of the novel. For in the struggle between the provinces and Paris, pragmatic victory may go to the provincials, but one Parisian, at least, exhibits clear moral superiority to his provincial counterpart. This paradoxical situation of moral ascendancy on the side of Paris--the center of corruption and vice--would be very difficult to render without giving that Parisian "la parole." It is the force of language--the letter writer's choice of words, the tenor and disposition of his written utterances--that lend credence to his portrayal as a decent, generous, God-fearing man who loves his son beyond all else on earth. This character stands in dramatic counterpoint to père Grandet, a stingy, avaricious man who worships only gold and who loves his daughter because she will inherit the riches whose accumulation has been his life's devotion. Guillaume Grandet, absent from the action of this narrative, present in its moral fabric by virtue of a letter he has written before his death, hovers above this drama, the moral antithesis of its primary protagonist.

Fictional correspondences afforded Balzac an important device for characterization. Their value in portraying characters is related to the change in viewpoint they permit. As the guillemets that enclose letters remind us, within them characters put forth their own perspective on

events. The letter writer seizes the word, and in so doing, usurps the narrator's position. Like all narrators, letter writers, through what they choose to tell and what they choose to withhold, divulge important clues about themselves. More profoundly, it is through their language that they reveal themselves. The linguistic choices they make as they speak their minds and pour out their feelings provide essential clues to their character and temperament. Their letters are critical documents, which must be given special consideration when weighed in the narrative balance with other information available about them. For while it is possible for speakers and writers to lie about themselves, the words with which they do so betray the truth. Modeste Mignon may conceal the identity of her person throughout her long correspondence; the tone and syntax of her letters pronounce the identity of her heart. The futility of Félix de Vandenesse's romantic proposals might be predicted from the rather damning linguistic revelations with which these letters of courtship are seeded. As written documents, letters concentrate an extraordinary depth of information. The intensity they exhibit may be explained by their status as personal documents rather than official ones. They are affidavits of the heart, depositions of the soul.

The documents in a person's dossier shed light not only on his or her current condition and state of mind; they may

explain how it was reached. Correspondence between parents and siblings may be as effective as their direct interaction in revealing family dynamics. Balzac's use of the Rastignac family correspondence in Le Père Goriot permits him to suggest critical early influences on Rastignac's character without depicting involved family scenes that might draw the reader's attention away from the narrative field.

The economy that an epistolary development of character fosters made this technique understandably attractive to Balzac, who had so vast a fictional population to manage. Not all of these individuals merited the same degree of narrative attention, and the letter is an effective and efficient device for allowing them an active role, even when it is a limited one. Their letters give us the opportunity to hear their voices and follow their train of thought, even though we may never see their faces or come to know them as intimately as their more fully portrayed compatriots in La Comédie humaine. The scope of Grossetête's influence is far reaching in Le Curé de village--a novel whose title highlights the central role of another spiritual counselor--even though it is limited to epistolary channels. And Guillaume Grandet manages, from beyond the grave, to deliver a powerful indictment of his brother's moral stinginess and spiritual poverty. This epistolary condemnation is closely tied to the unfolding narrative, since it is rendered not in the letter's explicit text, but in the old miser's failure to respond to its compelling plea.

Letters such as those of Guillaume Grandet provide a concrete manifestation of Balzac's belief in the energy attached to thought and its potential for material transmission. But we are abandoning the concept of character and approaching that of influence, which is the subject of chapter 4. As we shall see, the capacity of letters to exert influence from afar was one that Balzac exploited to rich effect in his narratives.

Chapter 4. Didactic Elements in Letters:

Le Curé de village, Le Contrat de mariage, Béatrix,

Le Lys dans la vallée

In his "Avant-propos" to La Comédie humaine, Balzac charges the novelist with an unequivocally didactic mission. The novelist's role is that of teacher and leader--a rival of the statesman. It is not enough for his work to follow aesthetic principles, to represent faithfully reality, to bring hidden dramas to the fore; it must have moral and political content:

La loi de l'écrivain, ce qui le fait tel, ce qui, je ne crains pas de le dire, le rend égal et peut-être supérieur à l'homme d'Etat, est une décision quelconque sur les choses humaines, un dévouement absolu à des principes. . . . "Un écrivain doit avoir en morale et en politique des opinions arrêtées, il doit se regarder comme un instituteur des hommes; car les hommes n'ont pas besoin de maîtres pour douter", a dit Bonald.¹

By extension, this didactic function may be said to underlie the entire structure of La Comédie humaine. For the political opinions and moral judgments expressed by its

¹ Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 1: 12. As Madeleine Fargeaud explains in her notes (1: 1128, note 5), Balzac misquoted Bonald, who actually wrote: "Un écrivain doit avoir en morale et en politique des opinions décidées, parce qu'il doit se regarder comme un instituteur des hommes; et certes, pour apprendre à douter, les hommes n'ont pas besoin de maître."

characters are related to the philosophical structure that underpins it. This expostulatory orientation of Balzac's fictional universe is supported by the prevalence of didactic elements at the level of language. We shall define didactic discourse to include acts of speaking or writing that seek to demonstrate a principle; teach a rule of action; expound a thesis with the goal of gaining its acceptance on an intellectual level; transmit an instruction or inculcate a teaching that will affect behavior. This definition encompasses discourse that is relatively passive vis-à-vis its interlocutor, such as making generalizations or rendering judgments, as well as discourse whose didactic function is more pointed, active, even aggressive, such as giving advice and counsel or seeking to convert an interlocutor to a set of beliefs or way of life.

Didactic discourse is extremely common in La Comédie humaine. Many Balzacian characters enjoy a sturdy constitution, are immensely voluble, and possess vast social knowledge and awareness, traits that suit them eminently well for this purpose. Like the author who created them and the narrator with whom they often share the stage, these characters hold forth with astonishing vigor, not hesitating to present, in great detail, their views on human nature, on social and economic realities, on politics and morals. They descant, at length and with gusto, most frequently to the uninitiated, on the foibles and vices, follies and ambitions, of their compatriots, exposing the intricacies

and perils, stumbling blocks and surprises of social life. They may be cynically self serving or sadly disillusioned (Vautrin/Mme de Beauséant to Rastignac in Le Père Goriot), bitter or egotistical (Claude Vignon/Gennaro Conti to Calyste in Béatrix), boldly manipulative (Mme Evangelista to Natalie in Le Contrat de mariage). Along with unpleasant realities--"la vie telle qu'elle est" (3: 141)--they expose hidden opportunities and offer a code of behavior purported to guarantee survival and victory on the fearsome battlefields of social life. Their diatribes are thus usually motivated by an effort to influence, directly or deviously, and are linked to the theme of power. Such attempts to give counsel and guidance are only infrequently undertaken with gentleness or in a liberal spirit of teaching by example: not "maîtres pour douter" these teachers! Unabashedly polemical or dogmatic, they inculcate their lessons insistently, even vehemently.

The letter proves to be an excellent vehicle for these didactic intentions. People--even Balzacian characters--do not usually lecture to each other for a duration equivalent to fifteen pages of printed text (although Vautrin, in Le Père Goriot, comes very close). Their interlocutor might interrupt, become restless, or at the very least, suppress a few yawns! To be sure, the same problems of attentiveness can and do plague the reader of the letter, a matter we shall examine in chapter 6. But that does not stop the letter writer, who is not forced to contend with the

reader's degree of attention to his or her message, at least, not in the way a speaker must. A reader may well put a letter aside, leaving it temporarily unfinished, or may never read the letter at all; but if a listener interrupts or walks away, the speaker really has no reason to continue.

The tradition of using letters, both real and fictional, to promulgate a teaching or moral extends back to ancient Roman times, with such works as Seneca's Letters to Lucullus; it can be traced through biblical and early Christian literature, in St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians and St. Jerome's Correspondence.² In seventeenth and eighteenth century France, letters frequently served as a thinly-disguised fictional format for philosophical and moral treatises: Pascal's Les Provinciales and Diderot's Lettre sur les aveugles are two examples.³ And although Spanish writers resorted rarely to the epistolary form for their novels, they favored it for works of erudition and criticism, genres having a strongly philosophical and didactic orientation.⁴ It was, of course, in eighteenth century England and France that writers of epistolary novels exploited the didactic letter to its fullest effect, making it the central structure of a fictional universe suffused with sentimentality and

² See Michel, "roman par lettres" 81-82 and Jost 117.

³ Jost 121.

⁴ Jost 121.

moralism. Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe was the foremost model of a genre in which "la lettre a tendance à s'y détacher de l'action pour traiter dans leur généralité des problèmes moraux";⁵ this epistolary moralizing serves the larger didactic purposes of the novel, whose heroine's errors, struggles, and fate are meant to serve as lessons for the reader. The blend of sensibility and moralizing that distinguished Richardson's fiction and guaranteed its success was irresistible to Rousseau. In his Nouvelle Héloïse, letters exude a tone of virtuous sentimentality and establish a level of discourse ideally suited to convey, with poetic gentility, a plethora of philosophical lessons and didactic messages.

Although the epistolary novel had declined in popularity by the early nineteenth century, the utility of the didactic letter did not escape Balzac, who envisioned La Comédie humaine as a vast structure supported by a scaffolding of principles and ideas: the description of the effects of social life (Etudes de mœurs) were to be buttressed by explanations of causes and laws (Etudes philosophiques), the entire structure resting on an analysis of fundamental, underlying principles (Etudes analytiques):

le propre de la création balzacienne, c'est d'intégrer à la peinture des faits et des effets, la réflexion sur les causes, et les lois et les principes. . . . La lettre, dans ce cas, sert de tribune au spécialiste de philosophie et de pathologie sociales, pour expliciter les

⁵ Versini 69.

significations d'un récit, en tirer les conséquences générales, remonter à son propos aux lois et aux principes du développement de l'organisme social.⁶

The formal appropriateness of the letter to these purposes, the ease with which it lends itself to didactic ends, are immediately apparent. Abstract considerations, lengthy developments, a philosophical approach: these are all characteristics of causal analyses and examinations of laws and principles, more readily and naturally handled in writing than in conversation.

Balzac, consequently, resorts to the didactic letter with great frequency, and his characters fill reams of paper with lessons designed to persuade or teach, guide or save their would-be disciples. Grégoire Gérard's desperate adjuration to Grossetête in a moment of crisis (Le Curé de village); Henri de Marsay's urgent missive to Paul de Manerville as he sets sail for India (Le Contrat de mariage); the epistolary "testament" in which Camille Maupin, about to take monastic vows, entreates Calyste du Guénic to return to the family fold and follow the path of tradition (Béatrix); Henriette de Mortsauf's letter of counsel to Félix de Vandenesse as he departs for Paris (Le Lys dans la vallée): these are the texts whose epistolary lessons we shall examine in this chapter.

⁶ Michel, "roman par lettres" 86.

Although it solicits rather than offers advice and counsel, the lengthy letter that introduces the character of the engineer, Grégoire Gérard, some two-thirds of the way into Le Curé de village, manifests, through the social and political disquisitions of its writer, distinct elements of didactic discourse. It is the plea of a young man caught in a grave spiritual crisis. The son of a poor carpenter, Gérard's intelligence and talent were recognized early by Grossetête, a prominent and wealthy businessman who provided encouragement as well as financial backing for his education. Gérard recounts the intense intellectual efforts, the sacrifices and successes of his career: his precocious achievements as an adolescent, his brilliant studies at the Ecole polytechnique, his rapid apprenticeship at the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées. Gérard's was clearly a rising star, with a glorious future assured. Yet the picture he now paints is of a frustrated, despondent, and restless man, trapped in the provinces in mundane, often senseless projects and boring, empty routine.

Gérard's crisis is of a more serious nature than one of simple career dissatisfaction or frustrated ambition. He expresses a vague but gnawing aversion for the very role for which his education has so thoroughly prepared him--a role to which he now feels ill-adapted. He is suffering from a profound moral and social alienation: "Je suis atteint d'une cruelle maladie, maladie morale d'ailleurs: j'ai dans l'âme des sentiments et dans l'esprit des dispositions qui

me rendent complètement impropre à ce que l'Etat ou la Société veulent de moi'" (9: 794). The "'maladie morale'" of which Gérard is so acutely aware reflects, on a different scale, the tragedy of waste that afflicts the entire region of Montégnac. It is his sense of social alienation and spiritual exhaustion--his personal sense of waste--that compels Gérard to compose the anguished appeal to his benefactor. By bringing him to the attention of the curé Bonnet and Véronique Graslin, his appeal sets in motion forces that will reverse that negative situation, within himself and in Montégnac as well. For the application of Gérard's engineering talents and the employment of his moral energies will transform the waste and infecundity of Montégnac into productiveness and abundance.

Despite its length, rational structure, and discursive quality, there is a clear note of desperation in Gérard's appeal to his mentor. In this respect, the letter resembles the troubled missive of Véronique, who also appealed to Grossetête in a moment of crisis, in a manner no less desperate, though considerably more oblique. The letters are, however, very different in mood as well as in the function they serve in the narrative.

One of the most curious aspects of this letter is its tone, both with respect to the character to whom it is addressed and in relation to the overall tone of the novel, from which it stands distinctly apart. The dichotomy of tones provides the key to the letter's didactic function.

It is understandable, even natural, for Gérard, in a quandary, to turn to his devoted benefactor for assistance. But we may find it somewhat odd that the troubled young man feels compelled to give a lengthy personal history to Grossetête, his surrogate father who has, presumably, followed his career with unflagging interest and involvement. One senses that the biographical detail serves some function other than that of informing the recipient of the letter, that it emanates from a source not wholly woven into the texture of the character, Gérard.

A clue to that source may be found in the preface of the novel, where Balzac states his didactic intentions in writing Le Curé de village and calls attention to an earlier vision of this novel, a vision in which moral concerns outweighed dramatic ones (9: 637-39). In that more didactic work, the central focus was to have been on the priest, Bonnet, and his transformation of a backward, largely criminal population, almost completely lacking in religious beliefs, into a progressive, upright, pious community: "Par quels moyens le curé Bonnet a-t-il fait d'une population mauvaise, arriérée, sans croyances, vouée aux méfaits et même au crime, une population animée du meilleur esprit, religieuse, progressive, excellente? Là, certes était le livre" (9: 638). Balzac sought not only to depict the means employed by this extraordinary individual, but, of equal importance, the other individuals who second his efforts. As Bernard Guyon points out, the moral leader, as portrayed

in Le Médecin de campagne and Le Curé de village, is one who knows how to select persons of exceptional character, intelligence, and abilities, and taps their resources on behalf of his own, often monumental, goals.⁷ Balzac explains the importance of the constellation of exceptional individuals in the moral structure of his novel: "Expliquer les hommes qui le [Bonnet] secondèrent, les peindre, donner surtout leur intime pensée et la leur laisser développer, tel était le sens de cette composition" (9: 638).

The preface also reveals that the novel, as published, is a very truncated version of that more broadly conceived work. Owing largely to the publisher's fears that the reading public would simply ignore a three-volume work dominated by moral, political, and philosophical concerns, Balzac was dissuaded from including many scenes he considered essential to the moral structure of the novel. Those scenes, of an edifying nature, included "la conversion au catholicisme de l'ingénieur protestant, l'exposition des doctrines de la monarchie pure . . . divers épisodes où . . . le curé Bonnet se voit à l'oeuvre, qui servent à expliquer les moyens employés par lui pour réaliser son projet évangélique . . ." (9: 638-39). This glimpse of Balzac's original intentions allows us to view Gérard's long letter in a different light: separated from the moralistic context

⁷ "Les Conditions d'une renaissance de la vie rurale d'après Balzac: Le Médecin de campagne et Le Curé de village," L'Année balzacienne (Paris: Garnier, 1964) 247.

in which it was to have appeared, the document, itself heavy with didactic overtones, appears, not surprisingly, out of place. Moreover, the importance accorded by Balzac to Gérard's religious conversion would justify the length and intensity of this letter, in which the young man spares no detail of his spiritual turmoil and moral crisis. But that scene was not included in the novel, either. Finally, the reader's only preparation for this letter is the one immediately preceding it, in which Grossetête recommends Gérard to Véronique. This abrupt introduction, so late in the novel, of this new character, who is suddenly given direct access to the reader's ear, accounts, in large measure, for the awkward but arresting impression that character makes.

Among those "hommes qui le secondèrent" (9: 638), the engineer Gérard makes a unique claim to our attention. His role in the narrative is complex. He is at once Bonnet's instrument--his "lieutenant"⁸--and spiritual ward. As such, Gérard is responsible for designing and building the dam and irrigation system that will transform the desolate plain into a thriving garden. The agent of Montégnac's material regeneration, Gérard is also Bonnet's spiritual ward, because the priest assumes the mission of ministering to his spiritual suffering and converting him from Protestantism to Catholicism. Moreover, Gérard is Véronique's "lieutenant,"

⁸ Guyon, "Conditions" 247.

for he serves her as well: he is an instrument in her spiritual redemption, which is assured by his execution of the material project that is the dam. Finally, Grégoire Gérard is heir to the social and moral obligations that Véronique's death make her unable to fulfill. For he becomes the guardian of the son of Véronique and Tascheron and, by marrying Denise, completes, on a social level, the reinstatement of the Tascheron family. The qualities that identify Gérard as the man suited to carry out these important missions--material, social, moral, spiritual--appear and are instantly recognized by Véronique and Bonnet in the letter in which Gérard bares his soul to Grossetête.

Yet despite the importance of Gérard's role within the moral structure of the narrative, his character does not have the convincing force of reality. Speaking of Gérard and Rabourdin (in La Femme supérieure), Anne-Marie Meininger notes: "Si leurs 'idées' vivent avec force, eux-mêmes sont ternes, parfaits et un peu désincarnés."⁹ Gérard's letter to Grossetête is impassioned, but peculiarly lacking in a characteristic style or voice. We sense the author's presence behind Gérard's words, and this obliterates our sense of Gérard's personal voice. In fact, Balzac's brother-in-law, Eugène Surville, an engineer, served as the model for the character of Gérard, as Mme Meininger has shown in an article that exhaustively documents Eugène

⁹ "Eugène Surville, modèle reparaissant de La Comédie humaine," L'Année balzacienne (Paris: Garnier, 1963), 235.

Surville's difficult and disappointing career.¹⁰

Paralleling the course of his fictional counterpart, the early promise of Surville's academic successes at the Ecole polytechnique and the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées was not realized. Expected promotions were not granted, or they were achieved in pitifully small increments and with maddening slowness. The young engineer was assigned to trivial, unchallenging projects. Bureaucratic ineptitude and stifling routine frustrated his talents and ambitions, and this stagnation made him impatient, dissatisfied, and bitter. He eventually left the civil service to become independently involved with the design and construction of several canals in the vicinity of Paris. There too, his efforts ran into the brick walls of administrative opposition and bureaucratic inertia. After years of struggling to get official approval for his project to build a canal on the Loire in Nantes, Surville was unable to muster the necessary financial backing, and the project foundered and died. Balzac himself drafted several versions of the prospectus for the project, and not simply as a favor to his brother-in-law; his own involvement with the idea of the canal was a deep, personal one and his commitment to getting it built was long standing: "Balzac partage ses espoirs et ses angoisses [de Surville] et si étroitement

¹⁰ Meininger 195-250. Meininger's article is the source of the details of the life and career of Eugène Surville, as discussed in this chapter.

que, pour lui aussi, l'idée que Surville s'est faite de son entreprise est devenue partie de sa vie et même de ses projets."¹¹ Significantly, Balzac's commitment extended beyond Surville's project for a canal in Nantes, generalizing to a passionate political conviction that favored a program of government construction, in particular, of canals: "De ses premiers écrits politiques, il est remarquable que, pour Balzac, un bon gouvernement, une bonne administration, cela signifie un gouvernement, une administration qui votent un canal."¹²

Gérard's letter is very much a product of Balzac's personal, emotional involvement with Surville's project and the opinions and proselytizing attitude that involvement engendered. Addressed more to the reader of the novel than to the characters within it, these didactic elements nearly overpower the letter's function as a vehicle to introduce a new and important character. Gérard's catalogue of criticisms of his profession and the institutions that support it constitute an agenda for sweeping reforms: opportunities for trained engineers are woefully limited; the administrative hierarchy subordinates talent and energy to incompetence and mediocrity; the controlling body of Ponts et Chaussées squelches bold new ideas rather than nurturing them; the central administration, rife with

¹¹ Meininger 215.

¹² Meininger 216.

corruption and intrigue, stands in the way of progress in the provinces. Gérard/Surville/Balzac upbraids the government for supporting policies that promote mediocrity rather than superiority, and he chastises the educational institutions for their role in fostering intellectual and moral weakness among the citizenry. This brilliant graduate of the Ecole polytechnique challenges the very existence of that institution, saying that the great builders, engineers, and architects of history were not formed by the écoles; their own personal sense of vocation drove them forward. It appears, then, that Gérard's impassioned appeal and lengthy presentation of his intellectual and moral crisis are fueled by the author's own passionately-held political and social beliefs and his imperious desire to communicate them directly to the reader.

Other elements of Gérard's letter are related to aspects of Balzac's philosophical views that can be traced neither to his involvement with Surville nor his commitment to the canal; they are rooted in his view of the human condition. Of all the criticisms that fill the pages of his letter, Gérard's condemnation of the intellectual rigors to which the écoles subject young minds is delivered with special vehemence:

"Je frémis aujourd'hui quand je pense à
l'effroyable conscription de cerveaux livrés
chaque année à l'Etat par l'ambition des familles
qui, plaçant de si cruelles études au temps où
l'adulte achève ses diverses croissances, doit
produire des malheurs inconnus, en tuant à la
lueur des lampes certaines facultés précieuses qui

plus tard se développeraient grandes et fortes."
(9: 795)

Gérard relates how, in order to be admitted to the Ecole polytechnique on a scholarship and thereby spare his benefactor the expense of tuition, he studied with such unrelenting zeal that he fell gravely ill: "'Dans ce temps, mes travaux ont démesurément cultivé mon cerveau, j'ai failli mourir, j'étudiais nuit et jour, je me faisais plus fort que la nature de mes organes ne le permettait peut-être'" (9: 794). In Gérard's view, excessive intellectual efforts imperil young, tender minds, which should not be made to develop prematurely. Lurking behind this opinion is the rather curious notion that the human organism is endowed with a finite mental capacity that will be used up or spoiled if tapped at too early a stage. For Gérard, the strenuous mental regimen to which young polytechnic students are subjected threatens their intellect, their emotional and spiritual well-being, their very existence. Just as the narrator expresses moral and spiritual meanings through the imagery of horticulture, the letter writer compares the abuse of young minds to the force-growing of trees in hothouses: "'Dans l'ordre moral comme dans l'ordre naturel, tout abus se paie. Les fruits demandés avant le temps en serre chaude à un arbre, viennent aux dépens de l'arbre même ou de la qualité de ses produits'" (9: 795). He concludes that the recruitment of brilliant young men for the écoles constitutes a mutilation of the human species in the manner

of La Quintinie's sacrifice of orange trees to provide a daily bouquet for Louis XIV. He excoriates the state for callously supporting an institution responsible for the spiritual decimation of an entire generation, and he indignantly catalogues the toll in human suffering:

"L'Etat . . . est sans entrailles . . . il fait ses expériences in anima vili. Jamais il n'a demandé l'horrible statistique des souffrances qu'il a causées; il ne s'est pas enquis depuis trente-six ans du nombre de fièvres cérébrales qui se déclarent, ni des désespoirs qui éclatent au milieu de cette jeunesse, ni des destructions morales qui la déciment." (9: 796)

The accusation is a grave one: the regimen of the écoles is tantamount to experimentation on and sacrifice of human subjects.

Gérard's diagnosis of the dangers and evils of early, excessive mental efforts is related to the Balzacian concept of destructive thought. Thought itself, "la pensée," including all the mental processes--thinking, feeling, desiring, wishing, willing--constitutes a gradual, cumulative impairment of our essential being that leads, eventually, to death. This fundamental Balzacian theme here takes the form of an attack on an educational institution. However, certain key phrases in Gérard's letter point to an anguish, metaphysical in nature, concealed beneath the critique of social abuses:

"La force demandée à des cerveaux adultes est un escompte de leur avenir."

"A-t-on recherché les moyens par lesquels ils ont pu soutenir la perpétuelle étreinte de la pensée?"

"Combien . . . sont morts prématurément, usés par la science?"

"Savait-on . . . les dispositions intérieures des cerveaux qui peuvent supporter l'assaut prématuré des connaissances humaines?"

(All preceding quotes: 9: 795; my italics.)

"l'homme de génie qui résiste à un précoce exercice de ses facultés doit être une exception dans l'exception . . ." (9: 796; my italics.)

Gérard's denunciation of institutional abuses thus conceals a condemnation of the very processes which that institution is charged with fostering. Instead of strengthening young minds, the rigors of thought, study, and learning--indeed, the entire process, so fundamental to civilized society, of acquiring knowledge--weaken and destroy them. Gérard himself has escaped this ruinous fate. He has succeeded and thrived where others have foundered and collapsed: "'Mais enfin, moi j'ai triomphé!'" (9: 797), he proclaims.

Yet Gérard now faces a crisis. It is a crisis unrelated to this terrible destruction of mental capacities by the mental processes themselves, but it is no less severe and no less damaging to his spiritual well-being. For his abilities and energies are woefully underutilized, and the tension created by this imbalance is unbearable: "'J'appris alors à quoi tendaient ces terribles déploiements d'intelligence, ces efforts gigantesques demandés par l'Etat. L'Etat m'a fait compter et mesurer des pavés ou des tas de cailloux sur les routes'" (9: 797-98). It is not merely that he suffers from an excess of ambition, which is, according to Grossetête, the cause of the turmoil within

him. His crisis, like that of the region for which he will be, in large measure, the savior, is that of squandered resources, of unproductiveness, of spiritual as well as material exhaustion. It is, in short, the tragedy of waste, which is a fundamental motif of Le Curé de village. Gérard's role in this novel, his letter reveals, is linked to its thematic, as well as moral, structure.

Thus this long and curious letter, appearing abruptly and unexpectedly in the narrative, serves several functions, all related to the novel's didactic purpose. It alerts Bonnet and Véronique to Gérard's potential, and the reader to his complicated role in the moral structure of the novel. It is a vehicle for the author's own passionate political and social convictions. Its tone of anguish vis-à-vis the rigorous mental regimen to which the intellectually élite are subjected conveys the author's philosophical views about human existence and destiny: Balzac's obsession with "la pensée qui tue" is here expressed as a social concern. Finally, Gérard's moral crisis links him to the fundamental thematic structure of the novel, itself a manifestation of the author's didactic intent: to demonstrate that the reclamation of wasted resources and the transformation of blighted existences into healthy, productive ones bring about spiritual, as well as material, redemption.

Grégoire Gérard's letter is a "lesson" within Balzac's larger philosophical agenda. Despite the strident note it

hits at certain moments and the personal turmoil to which it gives expression, its discourse remains on an intellectual level: it seeks to enlighten its reader--a character himself somewhat removed from the central action of the novel--about institutional abuses and gain support for social and political reforms. The sincerity and high tone of Gérard's didactic epistle contrasts sharply with the cynicism and harshly ironic tone of the letter that Henri de Marsay writes Paul de Manerville in Le Contrat de mariage. De Marsay attempts not merely to induce his reader to view events differently, but change the course of his life. The endeavor, more radical than that of Gérard, inspires a form of didactic discourse that cannot long remain on the level of dispassionate generalization. It seeks to transform through shock effect; yet its tactics are strangely appropriate to the direness of the situation.

De Marsay's thirteen-page missive is the final letter in a packet of correspondence with which Le Contrat de mariage ends. Paul de Manerville, financially and emotionally ruined after five years of marriage to Natalie Evangelista, is on a ship bound for India, where he intends to spend the next six years rebuilding his fortune before returning to his still-beloved wife and resuming conjugal life. Following a long estrangement, Paul had written his friend to inform him of the twin débâcles of his broken marriage and financial catastrophe. He asked de Marsay to loan him a large sum of money, which he promised to secure

with interest from the majorat (the money set aside for his son's inheritance), an arrangement he instructed Natalie to approve with her signature. He also entrusted de Marsay with a difficult and delicate mission, asking him to become his wife's protector during his long absence to ensure that she remain faithful to him.

De Marsay's letter is built on a series of revelations followed by words of advice and counsel. It offers a severe judgment of marriage and conjugal life, in general as well as in Paul's specific case, "à la fois l'explication d'une catastrophe individuelle et 'l'envers de l'histoire contemporaine.'"13 This dual perspective commonly characterizes the didactic letter, for the essence of a lesson is to extrapolate broader social and moral implications from personal experience; de Marsay hopes that the contents of his letter will disabuse Paul not only about his wife and mother-in-law, but also about marriage as a way of life. In his farewell letter to his friend, Paul had extolled Natalie's virtue and her affection for him with a strangely obsessive insistence, as if he were trying to chase away his own doubts about her fidelity. Paul believes, rather pathetically, that both Natalie and her mother are devoted to him, as he revealed in his sad tête-à-tête with Mathias immediately preceding his departure: "'Je suis aimé, certes, autant qu'un homme peut l'être en ce bas-

13 Gauthier, introduction 510.

monde, aimé par deux femmes qui luttèrent ensemble de dévouement'" (3: 624). De Marsay's revelations about the past and present behavior of Natalie and her mother must surely demolish the fragile foundations on which Paul's convictions rest.

"'Puisse ce seul mot te dessiller les yeux!'" (3: 639) is the call to arms with which de Marsay opens his letter, as he discloses the first of many unpleasant facts to Paul. The fortune of Natalie and her mother has grown in inverse proportion to Paul's diminishing one, indeed, at its expense. Mme Evangelista has been busily acquiring Paul's properties just as quickly as his financial decline has caused him to lose them. De Marsay reveals that the long series of seemingly random events and innocent arrangements precipitating and sealing Paul's ruin were the direct result of Mme Evangelista's surreptitious machinations: the usurers who loaned Paul ever-increasing amounts of money at gouging interest rates were actually working for her! This "'conspiration domestique ourdie contre toi'" (3: 640) was deliberately planned and ingeniously executed by "'ces deux excellentes créatures'" (3: 640), as de Marsay sarcastically designates Natalie and her mother. In his estimation, the avarice and financial acumen shown by Mme Evangelista in profiting from Paul's losses place her above Gobseck himself: "'Comparé à Mme Evangelista, le papa Gobseck est une flanelle, un velours, une potion calmante, une meringue à la vanille, un oncle à dévouement'" (3: 640). The

comparison is the ploy of a skilled teacher, who brings his point to life by referring to the world with which his interlocutor is familiar.

The plot of Mme Evangelista and her daughter to steal, quite legally, Paul's fortune, made it almost inevitable that they would destroy the friendship between Paul and de Marsay, and this is the second fact about which the letter seeks to enlighten its reader. The two women, de Marsay relates, quickly sized him up and, realizing that the influence of this savvy, unscrupulous dandy might threaten their plans, deliberately undermined his relationship with Paul: "'Ta femme a bien aidé à notre refroidissement; elle était serinée par sa mère, à qui elle écrivait deux lettres dans la semaine, et tu n'y as jamais pris garde'" (3: 641). Questions of influence and power are at the heart of the catastrophe that has befallen Paul: the clandestine influence of Mme Evangelista, whose secret correspondence with Natalie assured her destructive control of Paul; the aborted influence of de Marsay, whose exclusion guaranteed Paul's fatal ignorance: "'Si tu m'avais dit un seul mot, mon pauvre bonhomme, je t'aurais éclairé sur ta position'" (3: 639). Paul, de Marsay's letter makes clear, was the willing victim, for he offered no moral resistance to the insidious net of control that the Evangelistas cast about him. Potent as that control was, difficult as it might have been to counteract its effects, a note of blame creeps into de Marsay's words as he chastises his friend for his weakness:

"Si tu ne m'avais pas bêtement fait la moue, elles ne t'auraient pas dévoré" (3: 641).

But it is Paul's love for his wife, even more than his weakness of character, that sealed his doom: "j'aime éperdument Natalie, basement, sans vergogne" (3: 638), he had confessed in his letter to de Marsay. The latter's efforts to dispel Paul's illusions about Natalie constitute the last, and surely most devastating, of his disclosures. Natalie has neither love nor affection nor even the sense of devoted friendship that Paul had so pathetically described to de Marsay ("Natalie a pour moi cette amitié véritable indépendante de l'amour, mais qui conserve l'amour" [3: 638]). She merely endures him, as the price she must pay to enjoy the social and economic advantages of marriage. De Marsay's revelations force Paul to acknowledge the truth about his wife's relationship with Félix de Vandenesse. Hopelessly enamored of Vandenesse, Natalie is immune to any sacrifices Paul would make on her behalf, and all his extravagant efforts to win her back are doomed to failure. Moreover, all that the lovesick Paul had longed for and was denied in his marriage to Natalie, Vandenesse had enjoyed, fully and freely, outside the bonds of matrimony, without even having to ask--such is the prerogative of the passionate ardor he has awakened in her: "Il a eu, lui Félix, toutes les beautés, tous les dévouements, gratis peut-être, mais en amour la croyance équivaut à la réalité" (3: 643). Although we do not witness Paul's reaction, it is

not difficult to imagine his pain as his belief in Natalie's fidelity crumbles under the pressure of these revelations; indeed, de Marsay portrays his friend "'bondissant et hurlant'" (3: 641) at the news, a demeanor that stands in cruel counterpoint to Paul's pitifully expressed certainty that his wife had long ago dismissed the would-be intruder: "'Quand Félix de Vandenesse, épris de belle passion pour elle, s'est permis quelques assiduités,'" Paul had written de Marsay,

"je n'ai eu qu'à faire apercevoir le danger à Natalie, elle m'a tout aussitôt remercié si affectueusement que j'en étais ému aux larmes. Elle m'a dit qu'il ne convenait pas à sa réputation qu'un homme quittât brusquement sa maison, mais qu'elle saurait le congédier: elle l'a en effet reçu très froidement et tout s'est terminé pour le mieux." (3: 639)

Paul's recollection of Natalie's charming acquiescence to him must turn sharply bitter when juxtaposed with de Marsay's divulgence of her perfidious behavior. Not surprisingly, de Marsay declares himself released from the charge of acting as her protector: "'De tout ceci, tu concluras, mon bon ami, que le mandat dont tu me chargeais . . . se trouve comme nul et non avenu. Le mal à prévenir est accompli, consummatus est'" (3: 644).

Thus de Marsay reveals, somewhat brutally, the true causes of Paul's personal catastrophe. This tragedy, long in the making, was very deliberately and maliciously brought about. It left Paul the victim of a triple robbery, stripped of his fortune, deprived of the support of his

closest friend, denied the love of his wife--in a word, completely bereft.

But Paul's personal tragedy did not occur in a vacuum. It is, to be sure, the product of one woman's enraged determination to bring about and profit from her son-in-law's downfall, but it is also inextricably bound to the social structure and moral climate of the times. Mme Evangelista's vendetta against her son-in-law is sanctioned by the laws governing the signing of the marriage contract, and her enlistment of her daughter in that battle is supported by the mores and attitudes of the world in which they live. De Marsay explains Natalie's aversion for and behavior toward Paul by categorizing her as a "*femme à la mode*" (3: 641) concerned only with her beauty and wardrobe, her amusement and social conquests. The life such a creature must endure is no less harsh and brutal, on an emotional level, than are the rigors and perils of full-scale war. To survive the existence of the salons one must be thick-skinned, coarse-natured, insensitive: "*Les belles âmes restent dans la solitude, les natures faibles et tendres succombent . . .*" (3: 641). Such an iron constitution is incompatible with the sensitivity of a woman capable of love; the fact that Natalie thrived in these conditions is, for de Marsay, an unmistakable sign of the true state of this marriage, characterized by its opposite--profound physical and psychological divorce: "*Ta femme résistait admirablement à cette vie, elle y semblait*

habituelle, elle apparaissait toujours fraîche et belle; pour moi, la conclusion était facile à tirer: elle ne t'aimait pas, et tu l'aimais comme un fou" (3: 642).

The emptiness of Paul and Natalie's union points to another aspect of "l'envers de l'histoire contemporaine," of which Paul's personal catastrophe is emblematic: the experience of love in modern Paris. Not only is Paul blind to Natalie's true character--her shallowness, insensitivity, and callousness; he subscribes unquestioningly to a host of notions about romantic attachment that prevent him from penetrating the falseness of the feelings she professes for him. These illusions have him convinced that he will win her back through an act of bold sacrifice--by going off to labor in some godforsaken corner of the globe--and a gesture of courtly extravagance--by laying a fortune at her feet. Paul's ignorance of the psychology of love is particularly shocking for a man who has lived in Paris, which offers abundant occasions to observe "'les premiers principes qui meuvent le mécanisme féminin, l'alphabet de leur coeur'" (3: 643). De Marsay attacks Paul's illusions with a lyrically merciless sweep of irony: "'Exterminez-vous; allez pour une femme à Sainte-Pélagie, tuez vingt-deux hommes, abandonnez sept filles . . .'" he begins, enumerating a catalogue of chivalrous sacrifices and extreme acts, both real ("refusez comme Nelson de livrer bataille pour aller baiser l'épaule de lady Hamilton") and vaguely imagined ("traversez le désert, côtoyez le bagne, couvrez-vous de gloire, couvrez-

vous de honte . . .'" [all, 3: 643]), all actions undertaken to win the love of a woman. In the rapid succession of images and mocking tone of his delivery, we sense de Marsay's scornful disapproval of the code of behavior underlying such actions--really more appropriate to the mores of a long-extinct era than to the realities of modern Paris. No sooner has he sketched this colorful fresco of glorious deeds for Paul to contemplate, then he proceeds to demolish it in one deft, harsh stroke: "'Mon cher, qu'est-ce que ces choses ont à faire avec l'amour?'" (3: 643). Love, in de Marsay's view, is unrelated to, or at the very least, unaffected by, sacrifice or devotion, which are associated with will and conscious effort. It is ruled by the forces of pleasure and desire, which are outside the province of our control. Autonomous and imperious, love acts according to its own selfish laws: "'L'amour, Paul! est la conscience du plaisir donné et reçu, la certitude de le donner et de le recevoir; l'amour est un désir incessamment mouvant, incessamment satisfait et insatiable'" (3: 643). De Marsay then evokes the abyss separating Paul's illusions from reality through a series of images that juxtapose stark opposites ("'roses, fumée'; "'trésors de passion . . . de la vieille feraille'" [3: 643]), expose the vanity of his efforts to win the love of a woman who is drawn to another man ("'tes fanfaronnades amoureuses, tes torrents de cervelle et d'argent n'ont pas même été des souvenirs'" [3: 643]), and reveal the vulnerability to which his longing

subjects him ("ta personne, une victime à égorger sur l'autel" [3: 643]). These images are surprising and a bit cruel, the better, perhaps, to shock Paul out of his state of less-than-blissful ignorance. There is provocation in the tone, too, which becomes sharply emphatic as a succession of four brusque exclamations are successively fired off, like so many detonations, overturning, one by one, Paul's precious, pathetic illusions:

"Le jour où Vandenesse a remué dans le coeur de ta femme la corde du désir que tu y laissais vierge, tes fanfaronnades amoureuses, tes torrents de cervelle et d'argent n'ont pas même été des souvenirs. Tes nuits conjugales semées de roses, fumée! ton dévouement, un remords à offrir! ta personne, une victime à égorger sur l'autel! ta vie antérieure, ténèbres! une émotion d'amour effaçait tes trésors de passion, qui n'étaient plus que de la vieille ferraille." (3: 643)

By tying Natalie's lack of love for her husband, indeed, her aversion to him, to the larger picture--the psychology of attraction and love and the realities of romance and passion as they occur in the specific Parisian world in which the Manervilles move--de Marsay points to the social and universal implications of his friend's individual tragedy.

A third aspect of de Marsay's "lesson" that underscores the broader dimensions of Paul's private misfortune concerns public opinion. Although it is Paul who has been deceived, stripped of both fortune and family, Paul who is the injured party, all of society heaps blame and injury on him, rather than on his wife. De Marsay names the influential people who do not hesitate to cover his friend with the most

scurrilous accusations (3: 645); he evokes the swell of public sympathy that excuses his faithless wife, "'un ange de vertu! . . . victime de son dévouement conjugal'" (3: 645); he catalogues the inordinate, often vicious stories that circulate freely about Paul:

"tu ne saurais imaginer combien le monde te prête de péchés à la Don Juan. Tu jouais à la Bourse, tu avais des goûts licencieux dont la satisfaction te coûtait des sommes énormes et dont l'explication exige des commentaires et des plaisanteries qui font rêver les femmes. Tu payais des intérêts horribles aux usuriers. . . . Enfin je ne puis te dire tout, car tu fournis une encyclopédie de cancons que les femmes ont intérêt à grossir." (3: 645)

The fabrications go on and on as de Marsay repeats the wild exaggerations being promulgated concerning Paul's dark past--embezzlements, robberies, even murders!, his long history of dealings with the criminal underworld, and the suggestions of his involvement in unspeakable acts ("'il est capable de tout'" [3: 646]). This grossly distorted view that society holds of Paul's marital problems and the outrageous fictions it publishes about his life cannot be accounted for merely by Mme Evangelista's maliciousness and the slanderous behavior of which she has demonstrated herself capable. De Marsay makes it clear that something more profound is at work here: the inexorable dynamic of public opinion that showers praise and glory upon the powerful and heaps blame and scorn upon those fallen out of favor: "'Quand un homme arrive au pouvoir, il a toutes les vertus d'une épitaphe; qu'il tombe dans la misère, il a plus

de vices que n'en avait l'enfant prodigue . . ." (3: 645).

There are, fortunately, some nobler souls who are able to resist the pull of calumny, who "prénnent le parti de la nature humaine et de ses beaux sentiments'" (3: 646).

However, the contagious energy of mass sentiment, and the ignorant, unquestioning attitude that allows it to prevail, are shown to be destructive forces indeed, as de Marsay discloses the damage they have done to Paul's reputation.

Thus de Marsay not only uncovers the facts of Paul's personal situation, he also explains its causes, in the hope that this knowledge will change his friend's attitudes. The immediate purpose of this harsh, but, in the letter writer's view, salutary enlightenment is to break the spell that holds his correspondent in its sway, the spell cast by the myth of the happy marriage: "le mariage te possédait, tu possèdes maintenant le mariage'" (3: 644). It is evident here that de Marsay seeks not only to release Paul from the domination of his own illusions, but also to reverse the process: to show him how to benefit from the very condition that has brought about his ruin, to guide him to turn the situation around and emerge the victor rather than the victim. But before giving specific words of advice, de Marsay calls attention to himself, describing his newly-found political ambitions and how they will be furthered by his imminent marriage.

This must surely be a surprising bit of news for Paul, who will recall, with the reader, the roué's scornful

diatribe against matrimony when he had announced, five years earlier, his own intention to marry. In scathing words de Marsay had attacked the state of marriage and warned his feckless friend about the specific dangers it held for him. De Marsay knew that since Paul was weak, matrimonial ties would bring about his certain subjugation; he had foreseen the financial difficulties; had pointed out the intricacies and pitfalls of the Civil Code; had understood that marriage by no means guarantees a wife's love--a vital piece of information that Paul had, tragically, ignored. If he must marry, de Marsay had counseled his friend, he should make a marriage of convenience. In this way, he would retain both freedom and fortune, guarantee the wealth of his heirs, and advance his own ambitions: "'Ainsi posé, le comte de Manerville conseille son époque, se met au-dessus de tout et ne peut plus être que ministre ou ambassadeur. . . . il a conquis les avantages sociaux du mariage et garde les privilèges du garçon'" (3: 532-33).

Now de Marsay, revealing that he is about to make just such a marriage, pats himself on the back for practicing what he has preached: "'je ne donne à mes amis que les conseils dont je fais usage pour moi-même'" (3: 649). He has found the perfect wife, "'une délicieuse vieille fille anglaise, riche de deux cent quarante mille livres de rente . . . seule et unique héritière . . .'" (3: 648). There is no question about who will be the lord and master in this household: "'Jamais cette fille . . . ne me jugera; jamais

.

elle ne me contrariera; je serai sa chambre haute, son lord, ses communes'" (3: 649). Even the financial arrangements are ideal, the bride-to-be having established a generous majorat that will secure the de Marsay fortune and social standing for many generations (3: 649). In addition to these obvious moral and financial advantages, de Marsay's clear emotional dominance--he does not love his wife, indeed, he would not have a wife whom he did love--makes him immune to the grave dangers marriage posed for Paul: emotional dependence, unsatisfied desire, and the ultimate deception of being the cuckolded husband. De Marsay's lack of romantic sentiment for his bride-to-be permits him to draw a rather cruel portrait of the poor woman; she is "'une poupée mal coloriée'" whose rigid bearing gives the impression that "'elle a été empalée et que le pal s'est brisé dans son corps'" (3: 648). Here too, de Marsay is not simply mocking the pathetic creature; he is satirizing an entire class, the "perfect wife"--whom he would, it is clear, have no other way--by reducing her to a puppet manufactured in one of England's impressive factories, guaranteed to perform all the wifely functions in perfect working order and not to "break down" as did Paul's "model":

"elle offre un produit de la mécanique anglaise arrivé à son dernier degré de perfectionnement; elle a certainement été fabriquée à Manchester entre l'atelier des plumes Perry et celui des machines à vapeur. Ça mange, ça marche, ça boit, ça pourra faire des enfants, les soigner, les élever admirablement, et ça joue la femme à croire que c'en est une." (3: 649)

De Marsay's determination to use others in order to avoid being used--and abused--by them, his cynical manipulation of the institution of marriage, are the psychological elements behind the second purpose of his long missive: to give his friend specific advice for rectifying the disastrous state of his affairs. Sending his letter by special courier in the hope of reaching Paul before his ship leaves the harbor, de Marsay entreats him to disembark. He disparages his friend's futile effort to seek fortune in a remote and dangerous land and enjoins him to return to Paris where the real fortunes of the modern world--earned through political intrigue and subterfuge--are to be made:

"Crois-moi! Paris est encore le pays d'où s'ourd le plus abondamment la fortune. Le Potose est situé rue Vivienne, ou rue de la Paix, à la place Vendôme, ou rue de Rivoli. En toute autre contrée, des oeuvres matérielles, des sueurs de commissionnaire, des marches et des contremarches sont nécessaires à l'édification d'une fortune; mais ici les pensées suffisent." (3: 650).

But Paul's first order of business is to deal directly with the situation that brought about his downfall, the crumbling marriage in which he assented to lose his fortune, his independence, and his honor. De Marsay urges Paul to fight Vandenesse in a duel--the outcome of which will be arranged--and thereby win the deference and complete submission of his wife and mother-in-law and, ultimately, regain public favor:

"En France, le mari insulté qui tue son rival devient un homme respectable et respecté. Personne ne s'en moque. . . . Tue Vandenesse, et ta femme tremble, et ta belle-mère tremble, et le

public tremble, et tu te réhabilites, et tu publies ta passion insensée pour ta femme, et l'on te croit, et tu deviens un héros. Telle est la France." (3: 650-51)

Since de Marsay hopes to enlist Paul in support of his own political endeavors, the appearance of a courageous encounter and heroic outcome supersede the reality of the cowardly and ignominious arrangement he is proposing.

As de Marsay expands his lesson from revealing information to giving advice he retains the moralizing orientation with which he began. His counsel, like his disclosures, is grounded in a particular view of society and human psychology. In exhorting Paul to seek his fortune in Paris rather than in far-off lands, de Marsay reveals his understanding of modern commerce and of the enormous opportunities offered by devious political maneuvering and clever, perhaps dishonest, business practices. In urging Paul to win back public favor by killing his rival in an arranged duel, he proposes an ethos of domination by intimidation, of subjugation through bravado. This Nietzschean ethos is based on the exploitation of the socially meek by the bold, unscrupulous individual: Fear offers an opportunity to the individual who would scheme and dare to achieve power. The road to power, and even respectability, consists in turning the fear of others against them, using it--rather than one's own courage--as a moral weapon:

"La peur, mon cher, est un élément social, un moyen de succès pour ceux qui ne baissent les yeux

sous le regard de personne. Moi . . . j'ai remarqué, mon cher, les étranges effets produits par ce sentiment dans nos moeurs modernes. . . . Les moeurs aventureuses d'autrefois, où l'on jetait la vie comme un chausson, n'existent plus! La bravoure de beaucoup de gens est un calcul habilement fait sur la peur qui saisit leur adversaire." (3: 650-51)

Such is the cynical counsel that de Marsay's understanding of modern life moves him to formulate.

In the end, de Marsay offers Paul a good deal more than information and advice. He promises to help him regain control of his finances, his wife, and his mother-in-law. He pledges his full support and assistance--"une poignée de main, un mot, une signature'" (3: 650)--in building Paul's career after he has arrived "'en haut de l'échelle'" (3: 650). But the friendship under the guise of which this help is offered is ambiguous and troubling. De Marsay may well be described as "le plus délicat et le plus généreux des amis dans Le Contrat de mariage";¹⁴ under close examination his motives appear less than pure. It has been pointed out that the secret brotherhood whose affiliation and backing de Marsay promises Paul includes nearly all the criminals in the association of the Treize.¹⁵ Like Vautrin with Rastignac, de Marsay sees in Paul a figure he can easily influence and shape to his own dark ends:

La collaboration qu'il propose à Paul consiste à faire d'un ami un complice, d'un homme d'honneur

¹⁴ Bardèche, Balzac, Romancier 526.

¹⁵ Bardèche, notice, Le Contrat de mariage 429 and Gauthier, introduction 498-99.

un homme de paille qui se compromet et se dévoue pour son "général": autre version de l'alliance que Vautrin propose à Rastignac, celui-ci paradant, celui-là agissant dans l'ombre et se réservant la boue.¹⁶

Paul, of course, is in no position to follow any of de Marsay's advice, in no position to accept or refuse the offer to become associated with his powerful, and perhaps criminal, allies: as he finishes de Marsay's letter his ship is already beyond the Azores, far out to sea.

The failure of de Marsay to achieve the desired influence over his friend demands closer scrutiny. De Marsay's letter, which closes the novel, provides a response to the conversation that opened it¹⁷--a conversation we have examined earlier. The warning that de Marsay had then voiced has proved itself founded, and his baneful predictions for Paul in marriage have been realized. The letter also stands in symmetry to Mme Evangelista's instructions to her daughter ("cette haute politique de femme" [3: 613]) pertaining to the achievement of a successful marriage: both are lessons in power and domination, both are built on a cynical view of human nature, both propose an opportunistic code of behavior based either on deviousness and manipulation (Mme Evangelista) or crass exploitation (de Marsay). Why do de Marsay's efforts fail while Mme Evangelista's succeed? Why does Natalie heed

¹⁶ Gauthier, introduction 499.

¹⁷ Gauthier, introduction 510.

her mother's counsel, while Paul neglects that of his friend? The question is a complex one, pointing to the psychology of the strategies employed by these two masters. De Marsay is rather straightforward in the initial advice he gives his friend, while the deception and wily tactics to which Mme Evangelista resorts in gaining her daughter's adherence give her a decided advantage.

But the psychology of those receiving counsel must also be taken into account. Natalie submits unquestioningly to her mother, a compliance that is no doubt conditioned by the upbringing this shrewd and domineering woman provided. The influence of a friend, however trusted, is no match for the control exercised by such a mother. Moreover, Paul, blinded by passion, willfully shuts de Marsay out. If he disregards his own friend's advice, it is because the truthful message on which it is based is less pleasing to his ear than the half-truths and outright lies with which his wife and mother-in-law bewitch him. The lesson cannot be learned if the student will not be taught!

Equally pertinent to our examination of the role of the didactic letter in shaping the narrative is the position of de Marsay's counsel within the narrative structure. De Marsay's influence is relegated to the outer boundaries of the novel. His initial warnings occur both too late--after Paul has fallen in love--and too early, for he is not consulted with regard to any of the conditions of the marriage contract. Locked out of his friendship with Paul

through the deliberate intervention of Natalie and her mother, he is prevented even from knowing the numerous difficulties, both financial and emotional, with which Paul is beset, and is consequently barred from helping his friend find a solution to those problems. His final vehicle of influence, his letter, with its devastating revelations, urgent injunctions, and powerfully-argued words of advice, is aborted by the simple fact of Paul's delayed reading, which occurs when his ship is far out to sea, and it is too late to heed its contents. From a dramatic point of view, then, the letter is powerless to achieve the effect desired by its author, de Marsay. But from a philosophical perspective its stature is significant, for it is to that text that the author of the novel has accorded the privilege of drawing the moral.

As a result, Mme Evangelista's dramatic ascendancy in the narrative is matched by de Marsay's position of moral dominance, an authority that is surprising given his limited role in the action:

Une conversation au début de l'ouvrage, une lettre à la fin suffisent pour que plane sur ce roman le regard d'aigle de l'observateur des êtres, des événements et des institutions. Il connaît les secrets ressorts qui meuvent le dandy ou la femme à la mode, il est instruit de la stratégie conjugale qu'il faut déployer dans le cadre institutionnel du mariage, tel qu'il est moralement et légalement codifié, il domine la société en haut politique pour qui les lois sont des instruments de puissance personnelle.¹⁸

¹⁸ Gauthier, introduction 510.

More than all the other characters in the novel, Henri de Marsay views, understands, and interprets the social world in which they move. He observes events and behavior, discerns their underlying causes and motives, and teaches the practical rules and tactics that guarantee survival and success. This ascendancy is demonstrated and secured, in large measure, by his masterful lettre de direction, a text whose lexicon connotes its writer's role as observer of the web of events from which he has been excluded.

From the very beginning of his letter, de Marsay bemoans the fact that Paul has avoided--hidden himself from--his friend ("Pourquoi, Paul, t'es-tu caché de moi?" [3: 639]). Paul's withdrawal, both real and emotional, has prevented de Marsay from revealing the truth to him ("je t'aurais éclairé sur ta position" [3: 639]). Still, he tries to open Paul's eyes to his wife's true feelings and behavior ("Puisse ce seul mot te dessiller les yeux!" [3: 639]). De Marsay now divulges the machinations of Mme Evangelista, of whom the usurer who stripped Paul of a large portion of his fortune was actually "le prête-nom" (3: 640), and he discloses the identities of the other "hommes de paille" (3: 640) behind whom she managed to conceal her malicious dealings. "Si tu m'avais appelé près de toi lors de ton mariage," he laments, "je t'aurais aidé à connaître, analyser les deux femmes avec lesquelles tu t'engageais; et, de ces observations faites en commun, il

serait sorti quelques conseils utiles'" (3: 640-41). When de Marsay explains how he managed to grasp the true state of affairs in Paul's marriage despite having been excluded from their friendship, he alludes to Natalie's failure to have a child: "'Ce mot n'explique-t-il pas bien des choses à un observateur?'" (3: 642). In refusing to be surprised by Mme Evangelista's support of her daughter's lover over her son-in-law, de Marsay calls upon his own observations to emphasize the consistency of this behavior with that of other mothers in their social circle: "'Depuis quinze ans que j'observe la société, je ne connais pas une mère qui, dans cette circonstance, ait abandonné sa fille'" (3: 643-44). Finally, when recounting his efforts to penetrate the truth hidden beneath the carefully constructed dramas played out daily in society, de Marsay has recourse to the imagery of optics: "'ces magnifiques drames se jouent si naturellement, avec un vernis de si bon goût, que souvent j'ai besoin d'éclaircir le verre de ma lorgnette pour voir le fond des choses'" (3: 646). Throughout his letter, de Marsay's language bespeaks the observer and reporter; he resorts incessantly to the imagery of concealment, scrutiny, and revelation. To penetrate, grasp, and disclose the truth are moral functions, the basis for all didactic endeavors. De Marsay's epistolary didacticism may well be ironic (owing to its tardy expression in the narrative) and impure (because it is prompted by selfish motivations). It marks

this character--flagrantly amoral in his own behavior--as a moralist whose interpretation the reader of the novel takes to be the valid one

The didactic intent of Camille Maupin's final letter to Calyste du Guénic in Béatrix could not be more different from the one that guides the pen of Henri de Marsay. Inspired by a pure, if moralizing, love for its recipient and secured by a series of material and spiritual bequests, Camille Maupin's letter manifests a didacticism that is unsullied by ulterior motivations. Its tone is noble to the point of preciousness, and it is informed by a view of marriage that is at the antipodes of the one expressed by Henri de Marsay. The matrimonial ideal set forth by the famous writer, however, is no less inimical to passion and romance: she extols marriage and family for their role in maintaining the social order and protecting the individual against the dangers of "'la fantaisie'" (2: 841). The bohemian artist whose writings and manners had shocked her Breton neighbors now expresses the Bonaldian views held by the staunchly bourgeois Renée de l'Estorade in Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées! And if Camille Maupin's epistolary lesson appears more successful than de Marsay's, by winning its heartsick young reader's acquiescence to her well-intentioned, elegantly-argued words of counsel, it is only superficially so; for the subsequent course of the narrative demonstrates her failure to inculcate the lesson on a deeper

level, her inability to inoculate Calyste against the dangers of passionate love.

Equally significant, from the point of view of the narrative structure, the didactic message of Camille's letter seeks to cancel out the "lesson" that preceded it: Calyste's éducation sentimentale at des Touches in the glittering spheres of Paris and women, music and literature, passion and desire. This lesson, whose precepts Camille had, with the unwitting complicity of her friend and rival, Béatrix, so deftly instilled in her young protégé, comprises a central conflict of the narrative: "Deux femmes, deux Parisiennes qui sont rivales, révèlent à un jeune homme noble de province que la plus enviable des vies ne consiste pas à dégager ses terres et à faire des enfants."¹⁹

The advice and guidance contained in Camille's letter thus represents a complete reversal in narrative direction as well as in character development. Her epistolary effort to influence is marked by the quasi-religious conversion she experienced during an excursion to Le Croisic, the event motivating this dual turnaround. Camille's letter is preceded by a series of maneuvers designed to prepare the unwilling Calyste, smitten with desire for an unsuitable and inaccessible woman, to accept its sage counsel of marriage to a charming young girl who adores him. About to enter a convent, Camille had sold her house in Paris and used the

¹⁹ Maurice Regard, introduction, Béatrix, by Honoré de Balzac (Paris: Garnier, 1962) xxx-xxxi.

money to buy back the mortgaged properties of the du Guénic family; she had bequeathed her fortune to Sabine de Grandlieu, the girl she hopes to persuade Calyste to marry. On the day the marriage contract is to be signed, Calyste is still pining for Béatrix. He flatly refuses Camille's generous gifts and, nursing an obsessive longing for the woman who spurned him, seems on the verge of bolting. Sabine, at Camille's instigation dressed to resemble Béatrix, delivers the letter to the lovesick young man.

Like other writers of didactic letters, Camille Maupin is removed from the center of action at the moment of composition: "ces auteurs . . . de lettres de direction occupent dans les romans où ils figurent des positions marginales au moment où ils les écrivent."²⁰ About to take religious vows, she writes from a perspective that is both spiritually exalted and geographically remote. She is aware of the distance separating her from her correspondent, and of its inverse relationship to the power her missive will exert. From the postulant's cell where she writes, Camille Maupin evokes the trajectory of her voice traveling to the grand room in the hôtel de Grandlieu where the ceremony of the marriage contract signing is taking place: "'Ma voix arrivera . . . au milieu d'une cérémonie à laquelle il m'était impossible d'assister'" (2: 840). She seeks, through her letter, to achieve a continuing influence,

²⁰ Michel, "roman par lettres" 87.

improbably secured by a kind of dematerialization in which the auditory vehicle of influence (voice) is transposed into the more subtle--but more pervasive--olfactory vehicle (scent): "'Laissez-moi, cher, être quelque chose comme un parfum dans les fleurs de votre vie, m'y mêler à jamais sans vous être importune'" (2: 840).

In comparison to other didactic letters we have seen, Camille's two-page missive is brief. It is also relatively free of lengthy, abstract developments and weighty philosophical considerations. Its language and tone, however, betray the writer's preceptive intentions in an unmistakable manner. In keeping with the advice-giving that characterizes didactic texts, Camille's letter is largely written in the imperative mood: no fewer than thirteen imperative verbs, concentrated in the opening and closing appeals, fill its scant pages. The prevalence of the verb devoir (and synonyms thereof) translates an appeal to social, moral, and personal obligations, another essential feature of didactic discourse:

"les seuls plaisirs que j'aie goûtés dans ma vie, je vous les dois . . ." (2: 840)

"Je vous devrai sans doute le bonheur de la vie éternelle . . ." (2: 840)

"ne voulez-vous pas que je m'acquitte envers vous par le don de quelques biens fragiles et passagers?" (2: 840-41)

"Je suis aujourd'hui ce que j'aurais dû être . . ." (2: 841)

"combien est douce la pensée d'avoir fait son devoir . . ." (2: 841)

"la société dans laquelle vous devez vivre ne saurait exister sans la religion du devoir . . ." (2: 841)

"immolez votre fantaisie à vos devoirs de chef, d'époux et de père!" (2: 841; my italics in all quotations)

Camille's letter takes the form of a testament in which the writer declares her wishes for the disposition of her property and, more generally, for the future of those she loves. Inasmuch as testaments are documents concerned with spiritual as well as material bequests, they are, by definition, didactic. A testament, however, normally takes effect upon the demise of its writer and, admittedly, Camille is still very much alive at the moment hers is read. Nonetheless, her distance from the world of which her correspondent is a part is sufficiently vast to qualify her letter as a testament. She is, in a sense, dead to the social world, from which she has totally withdrawn; she writes of her former self in the third person, as a creature who no longer exists: "'Permettez au pauvre Camille, qui n'est plus . . .'" (2: 840); "'l'adorable Fanny ne sera plus jalouse d'une fille morte au monde . . .'" (2: 841).

The text of Camille's letter is as marked by the language of bequest as it is by that of duty and obligation. It is scored by "gift" words and phrases:

"vous prier de n'entraver par aucune fausse délicatesse le bien que j'ai voulu vous faire dès que je vous vis." (2: 840)

"Récompensez-moi donc de toutes ces douleurs passées en me donnant une joie éternelle." (2: 840)

"ne voulez-vous pas que je m'acquitte envers vous par le don de quelques biens fragiles et passagers?" (2: 840-41)

"Avec quelle douceur je vous donne ce nom que ma résolution a sanctifié!" (2: 841)

"La femme n'est égale à l'homme qu'en faisant de sa vie une continuelle offrande . . ." (2: 841)

"Ce n'est pas un don, mais un fidéicommis." (2: 842)

"J'ai pensé plus à vos enfants et à votre vieille maison bretonne qu'à vous-même en vous offrant les gains que le temps m'a procurés . . ." (2: 842; my italics in all quotes)

The mutuality of duty and giving is also apparent on a linguistic level: both the letter writer and the recipient have an obligation to each other, and both have a gift to offer. Camille's gift, more frequently mentioned in her text, is palpable and worldly; Calyste's spiritual gift is so rich that it need be evoked only once: "'une joie éternelle'" (2: 840).

Camille begins by attempting to persuade Calyste to accept the bequest of her worldly goods. Her means of persuasion is an artful conceit, well suited to her correspondent, who is still very much a part of "le monde." Camille appeals to worldly categories of obligation and recompense rather than divine ones. In what is perhaps her first direct avowal to the young man of her love for him (and she is referring to the passionate love she had attempted to repudiate, not the maternal love she still bears), Camille asks Calyste to make amends for the suffering this emotion has caused her. His acceptance of

her gift will bring her great happiness, thereby correcting the imbalance created by that amorous distress:

"Si l'amour est une souffrance, ah! je vous ai bien aimé, Calyste; mais n'ayez aucun remords: les seuls plaisirs que j'aie goûtés dans ma vie, je vous les dois, et les douleurs sont venues de moi-même. Récompensez-moi donc de toutes ces douleurs passées en me donnant une joie éternelle. Permettez au pauvre Camille, qui n'est plus, d'être pour un peu dans le bonheur matériel dont vous jouirez tous les jours." (2: 840)

If Calyste was the agent of Camille's suffering by virtue of being the object of her passionate love, he is also the agent of her redemption, a role that she explains to him a bit farther along in the letter. As such, it is she who is indebted to him, and she seeks to repay this spiritual obligation by offering him her material fortune: "'Je vous devrai sans doute le bonheur de la vie éternelle, ne voulez-vous pas que je m'acquitte envers vous par le don de quelques biens fragiles et passagers?'" (2: 840-41). The conceit is underscored by Camille's appeal to Calyste to accept a gift that is the final illusion of a form of love from which she has now turned away: "'Manquerez-vous de générosité? Ne voyez-vous pas en ceci le dernier mensonge d'un amour dédaigné?'" (2: 841).

Camille's allusion to her obligation to Calyste leads her to evoke his role in the transformation she has undergone: "'vous avez amené l'incrédule Camille Maupin, l'auteur de livres et de pièces que je vais solennellement désavouer, vous avez jeté cette fille audacieuse et perverse, pieds et poings liés, devant Dieu'" (2: 841).

Camille thus views Calyste as the engineer of her conversion and looks upon him as a kind of divine messenger, sent to bring her to God: "'je puis arriver aux autels présentée par un ange, par mon bien-aimé Calyste!'" (2: 841). Since Calyste is responsible for her religious conversion and accession to a new life, Camille wishes to play a reciprocal role for him. She expresses this in concrete terms at the outset of her letter by means of a mirror image:

"Le jour où vous serez devant un autel, donnant votre main à une jeune et charmante fille qui pourra vous aimer à la face du ciel et de la terre, moi je serai dans une maison religieuse à Nantes, devant un autel aussi, mais fiancée pour toujours à celui qui ne trompe et ne trahit personne." (2: 840)

She envisions them simultaneously before altars, about to partake in ceremonies that mark a beginning--she of religious life, he of conjugal life--and she pronounces her will that he fully embrace his new existence.

The spiritual bequest is now apparent, as Camille holds up her adherence to her own new life as a model for Calyste. At the same time, the letter's didactic overtones become more pronounced. Camille lectures Calyste about his familial obligations. She invokes his family motto (Fac!) to describe the serenity that comes from fulfilling one's obligations, rather than evading them in favor of an existence of egotistical caprice and pleasure. Such is the lesson of her new life, with its repudiation of old ways ("petits intérêts mondains"; "la passion"; "la fantaisie" [2: 841]) and embrace of superior ones ("être

fidèle à vous-même et aux vôtres'"; "la religion du devoir'"; "le vrai chemin'" [2: 841]); such is the lesson she endeavors to transmit to Calyste:

"Si vous connaissiez la tranquillité sublime dans laquelle je vis, après m'être élevée par la pensée au-dessus des petits intérêts mondains, et combien est douce la pensée d'avoir fait son devoir, selon votre noble devise, vous entreriez d'un pas ferme et sans regarder en arrière, ni autour de vous, dans votre belle vie!" (2: 841)

Finally, Camille's exhortation that Calyste dedicate his life to his family and name transforms the material testament into a fidéicommiss, a gift held in trust for his children and descendants--for the future of the du Guénic lineage: "'Ce n'est pas un don, mais un fidéicommiss. J'ai pensé plus à vos enfants et à votre vieille maison bretonne qu'à vous-même en vous offrant les gains que le temps m'a procurés . . .'" (2: 842). The didactic intent of Camille's letter is thus inseparable from the material and spiritual bequests its mission it is to deliver. This is seen as she summons Calyste to assume his role as husband and father, as standard-bearer of an ancient and noble dynasty:

"Soyez grand, imsolez votre fantaisie à vos devoirs de chef, d'époux et de père! Relevez la bannière abattue des vieux du Guénic, montrez dans ce siècle sans religion ni principe le gentilhomme dans toute sa gloire et dans toute sa splendeur." (2: 841)

And so Camille Maupin, whose books and life had scandalized her provincial compatriots, reaffirms ancient values and the place they must have in the life of Calyste du Guénic, the scion of a noble Breton family. This

extraordinary woman, whose influence at the beginning of the narrative imperilled the values and ascendancy of that family (in that she drew away its male heir) now uses that influence to return the wandering son to the fold. The didactic mission of her letter thus establishes Camille Maupin as the savior of the very way of life she had originally threatened to destroy.

Didactic letters, we have seen, reveal the effectiveness of the epistolary form for giving counsel and wielding influence. But the positioning of Camille Maupin's letter at the end of the second part of the narrative, without the benefit of subsequent explanation, analysis, or discussion, points to the inherent weaknesses of the epistolary mode for providing substantive guidance: absence of follow-through and lack of dialogue, the give-and-take through which persuasion is most firmly accomplished. Calyste obeys the summons in Camille's letter. He marries Sabine and embarks upon the life to which he was destined, fulfilling his obligations as heir to the du Guénic name and fortune. But his turnaround is troubling, for it is too sudden to be profound. We are given no insight into his thoughts or reactions as he reads Camille's letter. How well does he understand Camille's explanation of his role in her life? Indeed, given the labyrinth of confused passions and unsatisfied desire that constitutes his emotional state at the moment he reads the letter, how well can he follow her

elegant reasoning? Not very well at all, as his reversion into Béatrix's seductive sphere of influence in the final part of the narrative proves.

One of the most interesting aspects of epistolary didacticism in La Comédie humaine is the disparity that sometimes exists between a text's structure and apparent purpose, and its writer's emotional and psychological state. Didactic letters are dominated by the features of logical discourse; they present systematic views of society supported by tightly-argued theories, well-reasoned principles, carefully-chosen examples. Yet in Balzac's world, the characters who pen such epistles, for all their theorizing and pedantry, are far from bloodless doctrinaires or single-minded ideologues: the emotional turmoil of both Grégoire Gérard and Camille Maupin lead to the central crises in their lives, the experience of which is still very fresh as they compose their letters. Balzac's artful exploitation of this dichotomy between writer and text yielded some of his subtlest narrative effects. These effects can be observed in La Comédie humaine's most famous epistolary lesson, the one set forth in the lengthy missive that Henriette de Mortsauf writes Félix de Vandenesse on the eve of his departure from Clochegourde. A propaedeutic for achieving success in the highest social and political circles of Paris, Mme de Mortsauf's letter is in many ways a model of didactic discourse. But underneath the prolix

instructions and precepts, the solemn philosophizing and sermonizing, another kind of discourse is softly pronounced. Beneath Mme de Mortsauf's ponderous phrasing we can discern the amorous sentiments of Henriette.

In terms of content, the letter's exhaustive compendium of rules of conduct is one of its most salient didactic features. If Félix would win rich and powerful friends, curry influence, and reap the benefits of political favor, he must, Mme de Mortsauf counsels: avoid fatuous self-involvement ("s'oublier pour les autres'" [9: 1088]); refrain from making promises he cannot keep or postponing fulfillment of those he has made ("l'abus des promesses'" [9: 1088]); be circumspect about the persons he takes into his confidence, and cautious in all social relations ("ne soyez ni confiant . . ." [9: 1088]); shun the approbation of fools ("ni banal . . ." [9: 1088]); eschew the display of zeal in social and political endeavors ("ni empressé'" [9: 1088]); abstain from talking about himself in society, making conversations revolve instead around others ("entretenez-les d'eux-mêmes, cherchez un moyen de les mettre en scène'" [9: 1090]); be neither too quick to judgment, nor overly harsh ("Ne soyez sévère que pour vous-même'" [9: 1090]); be honest and straightforward in his political dealings ("toute finesse, toute tromperie est découverte et finit par nuire'" [9: 1092]); avoid giving so much to others that they find themselves beholden, a situation that nurtures a deep and dangerous resentment, for

"il y a le désespoir de l'obligation'" (9: 1093); accept as little as possible from others ("Ne soyez le vassal d'aucune âme, ne relevez que de vous-même'" [9: 1093])). And he must cultivate a manner that is "doux de ton, fier sans fatuité, respectueux près des vieillards, prévenant sans servilité, discret surtout'" (9: 1091).

Hardly a superficial etiquette of dos and don'ts, Mme de Mortsauf's social catechism is motivated by a view of society that is deeply moral and religious. The careful exposition of the theory and principles underlying her teachings is a second didactic feature of this letter's content. Three early pages are filled with a laborious disquisition of its writer's view that all social relations are governed by a contract to which men and women, by living in society, implicitly agree. The contract is a binding one, and no law, written or unwritten ("ces lois secrètes'" [9: 1085]), can be broken with impunity. Each person's obligations within society are in direct proportion to the benefits he or she derives from it: the responsibilities of the rich and powerful members of society are greater than those of the poor and weak ("le duc et pair se doit bien plus à l'artisan ou au pauvre, que le pauvre et l'artisan ne se doivent au duc et pair'" [9: 1086])). The road to fortune and power, then, is paved with nobility of conduct and generosity of behavior, a politeness that is genuine, rather than a mere "grimace sociale'" (9: 1088), and that proceeds from the soul: "la vraie politesse implique une pensée

chrétienne'" (9: 1088). Opportunistic and exploitative behavior can secure only transitory successes: "'plus tard vous apercevrez ces hommes accrochés à des épines qu'ils n'auront pas épointées, et manquant leur fortune pour un rien'" (9: 1087). In this "'théorie des devoirs'" (9: 1086)--a theory diametrically opposed to the cynical view of society and human nature expounded by Vautrin in Le Père Goriot--treating others with kindness and consideration, ever maintaining one's own integrity, is the essence of pragmatism; the only practical course of action is a moral one.

It is, of course, not merely by virtue of the counsel it offers and the ideas it expresses that Mme de Mortsauf's letter establishes itself as a prototype for didactic texts. The letter's preceptive function is apparent at the deepest level, that of discourse structure. Mme de Mortsauf's lexicon is that of a philosopher and pedagogue. She talks of theories and doctrines, precepts and rules, laws and practices: "'quelques préceptes'" (9: 1084); "'la société considérée dans son ensemble'" (9: 1085); "'la loi générale'" (9: 1085); "'ce principe'" (9: 1085); "'les mœurs aussi créent des lois'" (9: 1085); "'Faillir à ces lois secrètes'" (9:1085); "'la théorie du bonheur individuel'" (9: 1085); "'une doctrine fatale'" (9: 1085); "'les déductions sévères'" (9: 1085); "'cette charte'" (9: 1085); "'la question consiste . . .'" (9: 1086); "'cette théorie des criminels'" (9: 1086); "'la théorie des

devoirs'" (9: 1086); "'ce principe, vrai . . .'" (9: 1086);
 "'principe générateur'" (9: 1086); "'cette théorie des
 devoirs'" (9: 1087); "'l'application de cette doctrine'" (9:
 1087); "'la science des manières'" (9: 1087); "'ma
 jurisprudence'" (9: 1087); "'cette instruction'" (9: 1087);
 "'ce principe . . . est vrai'" (9: 1089); "'Une des règles
 les plus importantes de la science des manières'" (9: 1090);
 "'appliquez ces préceptes'" (9: 1091); "'ces principes'" (9:
 1092); "'ce système'" (9: 1092); "'Doctrines absurdes'" (9:
 1095); "'Votre instruction'" (9: 1096). In true
 professorial form, the primary actions to which this
 epistolary lecture alludes are related to the cognitive
 functions of thinking, considering, explaining, believing:
 "'réfléchir aux lois et aux mœurs'" (9: 1084); "'méditez
 l'expression concise de mon opinion'" (9: 1085); "'Expliquer
 la société'" (9: 1085); "'la société ne s'expliquera donc'"
 (9: 1086); "'En considérant ainsi la société'" (9: 1086);
 "'je vous supplie . . . de bien peser le sens de ces deux
 paroles'" (9: 1086); "'Croyez-en . . .'" (9: 1087);
 "'jugez'" (9: 1087); "'Vous devez croire'" (9: 1089).

The letter's construction has all the earmarks of a
 carefully delivered, if somewhat ponderous, oration, with
 its purpose of transmitting the wisdom and experience of
 those practised in the ways of society (the writer herself,
 as well as her aunt, husband, and father [9: 1084])
 explicitly stated at the outset and syntactically reinforced
 through the rhetorical locutions that regularly punctuate

it: "'Mais, et je veux que vous soyez ainsi, Félix, . . .'" (9: 1088); "'Surtout, mon ami, car ces petites choses sont bien dans mes attributions . . .'" (9: 1088); "'Et d'abord, cher enfant . . .'" (9: 1088); "'Quant à la banalité'" (9: 1089); "'Quant au zèle'" (9: 1089); "'mais n'y cédez pas un pouce de terrain'" (9: 1091); "'car sachez bien'" (9: 1091); "'ainsi vous inspirerez'" (9: 1091); "'Maintenant appliquez ces préceptes'" (9: 1091); "'En effet'" (9: 1092); "'Quant au premier'" (9: 1092); "'Si je pouvais citer mon exemple'" (9: 1093); "'Quant à vous'" (9: 1093).

Other linguistic features that signal the writer's didactic intent include her deliberate verbiage and repetition of the principal points of her demonstration: "'Quand même cette lettre ferait de fréquents pléonasmes avec vos pensées, laissez-moi donc vous confier . . . '" (9: 1085); "'Quoique mon insistance puisse vous sembler superflue . . . '" (9: 1086); "'Je puis insister sur un point . . . '" (9: 1092). Redundancy is the servant of didactic endeavor, as is summary. The pithy maxims with which Mme de Mortsauf sprinkles her lecture reinforce her lesson by recapitulating its main ideas in a compellingly laconic form: "'vous avez donc à poser . . . cette maxime: ne se rien permettre ni contre sa conscience ni contre la conscience publique'" (9: 1086); "'Tout ce que je viens de vous dire peut se résumer par un vieux mot: noblesse oblige!'" (9: 1091); "'Si ce mot, noblesse oblige, contient une grande partie de mes premières recommandations, mes avis

sur vos relations avec les femmes sont aussi dans ce mot de chevalerie: les servir toutes, n'en aimer qu'une'" (9: 1096).

In addition to its vocabulary and syntax, the tone of this letter declares its preceptive intentions in an unmistakable manner. We will not reiterate Mme de Mortsau's many injunctions, cited in our earlier discussion of her counsel regarding Félix's conduct in Parisian society. Suffice it to recall, in this text dominated by the imperative mood, that the list seems, at moments, unending!

What is most surprising, however, is that it does not seem so to Félix. Given the letter's length and onerous didactic apparatus, we might have expected some degree of impatience in his reaction. Who would have the forbearance to persevere through such an interminable treatise, we wonder, half wishing for an intrusive narrator who might interrupt and provide a snide summary in lieu of the tumid document. Not only does Félix read it through without faltering, he does so blissfully and with the most rapt attention. About to cite the letter in its entirety for Natalie (displaying not only his lack of wisdom in matters of the heart, but a complete absence of compassion by subjecting the poor girl to the lengthy discourse), he ecstatically anticipates the experience, as if Henriette were about to appear, miraculously, in his darkened room: "Voici, Natalie, l'adorable voix qui tout à coup retentit

dans le silence de la nuit, voici la sublime figure qui se dressa pour me montrer du doigt le vrai chemin dans le carrefour où j'étais arrivé" (9: 1084). The beloved writer's presence is as real, indeed as palpable, to this reader at the end of the letter as it was at the beginning: "Quand j'eus fini cette lettre, je sentais palpiter sous mes doigts un coeur maternel . . ." (9: 1097). The viscosity of these images--the resonant voice, the beating heart--bespeak a bond between writer and reader that is deeper and more emotional than the one between teacher and student. Despite its preceptive intentions and didactic language and structure, the letter is clearly rent by other currents.

The writer's language at the beginning of her letter ("désintéressement," "renoncer à vous," "sacrifier mes jouissances" [all quotes, 9: 1084]) supports her stated intention to accept an inevitable separation and send the young man off with a measure of detachment: the mother's dominion over her child is not permanent, and the student's adherence to his master must also come to an end. But the language at the letter's close countermands these initial assertions: "secrète coopération" suggests union rather than separation; "J'attendrai" and "Je ne vous dis pas adieu" (all quotes, 9: 1097) cancel out the noble offer of renunciation. Although the letter is dominated by the writer's effort to relinquish her hold on her young protégé and guide him toward an ideal of wordly behavior, it manifests, as well, her will to ensure his eventual return

and tie him to her through bonds of love. And although the language of argumentation, demonstration, and injunction is the most conspicuous in this missive, another kind of discourse is evident as well, in the terms of endearment that, here and there, lighten the heavy discourse ("mon ami," "Cher Félix" [9: 1084], "Cher enfant de mon coeur," "cher" [9: 1086], "cher enfant" [9: 1087], etc.) and in the sensuous recollections of maternity with which the writer, even as she embarks on her didactic mission, is nearly engulfed ("les plaisirs permis de l'affection maternelle," "Sensations charmantes," "les premiers bonheurs de ma vie" [all quotes, 9: 1084]). While not as pronounced as the linguistic features that betoken the text's prescriptive and preceptive orientation, this non-didactic discourse, and the intention to which it points, cannot be overlooked.

The reader does not have to probe very far below the surface to uncover the letter's unavowed purpose. It is perhaps most apparent in the writer's final set of injunctions, on which she lingers with an attention that is acute and personal. A young man's conduct with regard to women and love can, Henriette warns her correspondent, make or break his fortune. She exhorts him to seek out the friendship of older women, whose influence and power will advance his career, and shun the love of young women--petty, egotistical sorceresses. The dangerous fascination they inspire will make him forget his "belles destinées" (9:

1094). She paints the many faces of the young, beautiful society woman, and her endless ruses. These "*femmes mondaines*" (9: 1095) would be his downfall: those who would seduce him immediately with their submissive devotion to his career and those whose suffering would establish, slowly but inexorably, a dominion over him that would destroy it:

"*Toute jeune femme qui va dans le monde, qui vit de plaisirs et de vaniteuses satisfactions, est une femme à demi corrompue qui vous corrompra*" (9: 1095).

But Henriette's entreaty to steer clear of young women and the perfidious love they hold out is vaguely suspect. Why, we wonder, does she depict these women in such insistent detail? Would not a general admonition against the perils of coquetry be more in keeping with the gentle, somewhat aloof, tone of argumentation that characterizes the rest of her letter? We note with interest that the succession of brief sketches of the worldly women who would ruin Félix is complemented by a rather full portrait of the woman who will be his true love, whose affection will nurture him, whose devotion, selfless and pure, will carry him to great heights. Gradually we realize, as the lines of this epistolary canvas are drawn and its shading filled in, that it is the moral likeness of Henriette de Mortsau:

"la créature chaste et recueillie dans l'âme de laquelle vous régnerez toujours." (9: 1095)

"elle sera solitaire celle qui vous aimera: ses plus belles fêtes seront vos regards, elle vivra de vos paroles." (9: 1095)

"Cette femme ne sera jamais elle, elle ne devra jamais penser à elle, mais à vous; elle ne vous disputera rien, elle n'entendra jamais ses propres intérêts et saura flairer pour vous un danger là où vous n'en verrez point, là où elle oubliera le sien propre . . ." (9: 1095-96)

"si elle souffre, elle souffrira sans se plaindre, elle n'aura point de coquetterie personnelle, mais elle aura comme un respect de ce que vous aimerez en elle." (9: 1096)

As she closes her letter, Henriette exhorts her correspondent to remain true to her alone. By its demurral to name the angelic creature capable of the pure love she has described, her plea remains indirect; an overt statement of her sentiments would be unthinkable. But her reiteration of the theme of maternal love, with which the letter had opened, reinforces its identity with the ideal affection for which she entreats Félix to save himself: "'songez, quelle que soit la perfection de cet amour, que dans une vallée vivra pour vous une mère de qui le coeur est si creusé par le sentiment dont vous l'avez rempli, que vous n'en pourrez jamais trouver le fond'" (9: 1096). The silken cords with which the writer of this letter of farewell seeks to bind her departing correspondent to her are now laid bare. More than a protégé, Félix is her beloved. She may send him off into the world with words of disinterested advice, but she must nurture his need of her interest and counsel, that their union may withstand the impending separation. Hence Henriette's final injunctions to Félix--eschew the love of Parisian women, obey me, continue to confide in me--in contrast to those with which her letter began, are personal,

partial, and as critical to her own emotional well-being as they are to Félix's future success. The letter, without any deviousness on its writer's part, is one of those "lettres-pièges" that permits the narrative to continue by maintaining the fiction of a steadfast maternal affection but contributes, by virtue of the ambiguous and contradictory signs it disseminates, to the revelations that ultimately bring it to a halt.²¹

The preponderance of didactic elements in La Comédie humaine's epistolary texts is, we have seen, related to the general vision and structure of that work. Letters exhibiting a didactic orientation have agendas that are philosophical, political, or moral in nature. They seek to demonstrate or teach; to convince or persuade; to enlist or convert. Their language is directive and partisan, their tone insistent and emphatic. Didactic letters characteristically display the sense of purpose of a well-constructed lesson; they have, at times, the ring of an oration or sermon.

Sometimes a letter may embody the novel's broader philosophical and moral purposes to such an extent that it nearly oversteps the bounds of fictional discourse. The didactic content of Grégoire Gérard's letter to Grossetête seems intended as much for the reader of the novel as it is

²¹ Przyboś 64.

for the character to whom it is addressed. The author's presence fortifies the lesson--at the expense, perhaps, of the aesthetic unity of the narrative. Even when the efforts of letter writers are more deftly woven into the narrative fabric, their epistolary lessons often reach beyond a strictly personal application. The explanation of Paul de Manerville's individual catastrophe, which Henri de Marsay's letter offers, has distinct social and moral dimensions. Paul's personal tragedy is, according to de Marsay, a sign of the times: the fatal consequence of marriage to a "femme à la mode," the inevitable end of love in the treacherous moral climate of Parisian society. De Marsay's epistolary didacticism is shaped by his cynical view of society and the exploitative psychology it engenders: subjugate others if you would not yourself be subjugated, is his message to his much-victimized friend. It is a lesson in power and domination. The didactic orientation of Camille Maupin's testament letter also reflects a broader social and moral context. The staunchly conservative view of society and family toward which she seeks to guide her correspondent was no doubt held by a broad segment of Balzac's audience. The rules of conduct outlined in Mme de Mortsauf's missive are similarly representative of a Weltanschauung that extends beyond the scope of the narrative.

Epistolary lessons, we have seen, are not always successful. The advantages of the written word over speech

as a vehicle for instruction and persuasion are limited. Epistolary teachers may not have to put up with their disciples' restiveness or interruptions, but neither do they have the opportunity to wrestle directly with their doubts, to counter their objections, to overcome their resistance. A correspondent may slip outside a writer's circle of influence without displaying the signs of escape that face-to-face encounter would reveal. This is precisely what happens to Calyste du Guénic, who, immediately after reading Camille Maupin's forcefully-argued letter upholding traditional marriage and familial obligations, signs the marriage contract and, not long after, marches down the aisle with the bride of his family's choice. But the initial success of Camille Maupin's epistolary lesson is superseded by the effect of other influences. It soon becomes apparent that such far-reaching lessons are not so easily learned, particularly when they follow more compelling teachings; in Calyste's case, the earlier lessons of passion and desire were viscerally learned and cannot be supplanted by arguments of reason.

Sometimes a writer's didacticism is alloyed with other motivations. De Marsay's ulterior motive vis-à-vis his correspondent is a darkly selfish one. More subtle are the feelings and intention behind Mme de Mortsauf's letter of sage counsel to Félix de Vandenesse. The teacherly, philosophical farewell masks a passionate woman's adhesion

to her beloved, her will to overcome the impending separation and ensure an eventual reunion. But if Mme de Mortsauf's epistolary lesson conceals motivations that are clearly non-didactic, it does so rather guilelessly, without deception or deviousness of any kind. The letter writers whose texts we shall examine in chapter 5 do not always display such innocence.

Chapter 5. Concealed Messages in Letters:

La Femme abandonnée, Honorine, Béatrix,

Le Contrat de mariage, Modeste Mignon

The disparity in Mme de Mortsauf's letter between the words she addresses to her correspondent and the feelings she bears him is scarcely perceptible. But this chink in the facade of the text leads to a wellspring of meaning--the simultaneous expression and suppression of desire--at the narrative core. The hidden meanings revealed by such gaps are central to the resonance of Balzac's narratives and the richness of his characterizations. Perhaps his fondness for the letter as a narrative device is related to the ease with which it serves as a reservoir for concealed meaning. Written words that represent the written word, epistolary texts often provide a visible model of linguistic manipulation, a primary mechanism of concealment and deception in human affairs. The overt messages of these texts may be subverted by the means that serve to transmit them, language itself; in form as well as substance, letters demonstrate the dynamics of concealment.

Underlying Balzac's fascination with this important linguistic theme is the question of how language--the instrument of communication--can lend itself to deceptive

ends. It is a philosophical problem with which the foremost thinkers of the day grappled, and one to which, Balzac, through his schooling and voracious youthful reading, was certainly exposed.¹ In Cartesian and classical sensualist thinking, language is a projection of thought. It cannot carry or generate meaning independent of the ideas it reflects; like a mirror, its essential capacity is derivative. Such linguistic mimeticism has important implications for the role of language in narrative: within this perspective, a character's speech can have no meaning other than the one he or she expressly intends. Similarly, a writer's words manifest the totality of his or her thoughts, feelings, desires, and motives. The explicit text cannot betray the writer's intentions, nor can it be the purveyor of meanings of which he or she is unaware.

Although the Cartesian-sensualist view of language prevailed through much of the nineteenth century, its hold began to diminish under the assault of modern thinkers, who exhibited a growing distrust of language.² Their skepticism challenged the purported fidelity of language to thought and

¹ This paragraph and the next one draw on Kanes 15-40.

² The distrust of language is by no means a strictly modern phenomenon. In "La pharmacie de Platon" (La dissémination [Paris: Seuil, 1972] 69-197), Jacques Derrida, tracing the suspicion of written language back to Plato's Phaedrus, shows this attitude to be deeply ingrained in the Western philosophical tradition. As characterized by Derrida's Socrates, writing, "ce charme, cette vertu de fascination, cette puissance d'envoûtement" (78), is both a remedy and a poison, its fundamental nature ambiguous and magical, its power at once beneficent and harmful.

consciousness, and undermined the faith in linguistic neutrality. Rousseau's belief that the passions, not ideas, are the source of language implicitly postulated the irrational capacity of words.³ The mechanistic conception of the structure of language, which relegated it to the static role of mirror of thought, was replaced by a vision of language's dynamic power. The notion, implicit in Condillac's work, that "language both reflects thought and creates it"⁴ negated the view that language functions mimetically; it revealed the potential autonomy of the text, its power to behave independently of the expressed motives or desires of the speaker or writer who conceived it. Within this perspective, a character's words may generate meanings very different from those of which he or she is consciously aware. They may also serve to mislead or mystify rather than to inform or clarify, since the creative capacity of language endows it with the potential for deception.⁵

³ Kanes 24.

⁴ Kanes 21. See also Etienne Gilson, Linguistics and Philosophy: An Essay on the Philosophical Constants of Language, Trans. John Lyon (Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1988) 1-10. Gilson's discussion of Condillac emphasizes, within the philosopher's ties to Cartesian and sensualist traditions, the hesitations and ambiguity of his thought, an ambiguity that lies not in the limitations of his method, but rather in the object of his analysis, language. The duality of language, a phenomenon with which Gilson shows Condillac wrestling, is incompatible with a strictly mimetic function, as is Condillac's view of the active nature of language.

⁵ Kanes 22.

Disjunctures between thought and language are thus an ever-present possibility in the view of language that emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Balzac's awareness of the dramatic and psychological potential of these fissures frequently led him to construct narrative by exploiting the linguistic underground of the text. The characters and narrator of La Comédie humaine use language to distort meaning, to disseminate confusion and doubt, to conceal the truth. Masters of linguistic manipulation, they wield their words like masks, to induce their compatriots to accept a faulty view of events and misapprehend reality, or like weapons, to harm each other.⁶ Even the most modern view of language as a hostile force, inimical to the act of communication itself, is latent in the undercurrents of epistolary discourse in La Comédie humaine. There is perhaps no better place than correspondence to observe the power of written language as a silent, coiled threat: "toujours enracinée dans un au-delà du langage, [l'écriture] se développe comme un germe et non comme une ligne, elle manifeste une essence et menace d'un secret, elle est une contre-communication, elle intimide."⁷

In this chapter, we shall see how the language in epistolary texts functions to achieve hidden, often nefarious, ends; we shall examine Balzac's use of the letter

⁶ On the word as weapon, see Kanes 177-83.

⁷ Roland Barthes, Le Degré zéro de l'écriture (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 18.

to build narrative upon the meanings latent in the disjuncture between thought and language. Sometimes the messages camouflaged by epistolary language are invisible to the writer but apparent to his or her correspondent. The amorous invitation in Claire de Beauséant's letter of rupture to Gaston de Neuil (La Femme abandonnée); the obsessive desire in Octave de Bauvan's epistolary plea for a platonic reunion with his wife (Honorine); Béatrix de Rochefide's epistolary assertions of blissful romance (Béatrix) illustrate language's power to transform the writer's veil of words, diaphanous for the correspondent, into an opaque curtain that blocks his or her own lucid grasp of reality. In these instances, disjuncture leads to self-deception; such letter writers are, in modern terms, "out of touch" with their feelings.

Frequently the concealed messages of epistolary discourse manifest, via the writer's mastery of language, his or her control over the correspondent. Such letters are models of the Machiavellian potential of language: its capacity to trick others by obfuscating events, to harm them by dissembling motivations. The seductive intentions buried in Béatrix's letter of dismissal to Calyste du Guénic (Béatrix) and the bogus sentiments that mask an absence of sentiment in Natalie de Manerville's letter to her departing husband (Le Contrat de mariage) attest to the ease with which epistolary language may be pressed into delusive, even treacherous, service. But occasionally, under the auspices

of mystification and in the guise of deception, language takes up the cause of genuineness in human relations. Though bathed in the discourse of concealment, the correspondence between Modeste Mignon and Ernest de La Brière, communicates authentic sentiments and manages, somehow, to facilitate true love (Modeste Mignon).

Toward the end of her response to Gaston de Neuil's ardent letter of courtship, Claire de Beauséant writes: "'Je vous ordonne, au nom de cet amour passager, au nom de votre vie, au nom de ma tranquillité, de rester dans votre pays, de ne pas y manquer une vie honorable et belle pour une illusion qui s'éteindra nécessairement'" (2: 490). Her rejection of her suitor's attentions could not be stated in more explicit, unambiguous terms. Yet, he disregards her refusal: Gaston de Neuil abandons country, family, and future, to follow the woman of his desire to a foreign land, where she has taken refuge from his advances. Moreover, his pursuit is rewarded. His arrival at her new abode is met with expressions of welcome and pleasure. Gaston de Neuil and Claire de Beauséant become lovers, and their romance, as idyllic as the remote mountainous setting that witnesses its inception, will last for nine blissful years.

Clearly, Gaston's actions violate the wishes that are overtly stated in Mme de Beauséant's letter. Yet, just as clearly, his behavior satisfies more profound wishes, those concealed beneath the words that appear on the page. For

just as surely as the words declare, in explicit terms, rejection, rupture, and finality, their manner of expression communicates acceptance, continuity, and invitation.

Interchanges that reveal this dichotomy occur twice in the narrative. Claire's dismissal of the proposal in Gaston's letter and his disregard of her express command recall her dismissal of him when he visited her in Normandy, and his insistent return. In both situations, the young man's refusal to obey the ostensible wishes of his would-be mistress and his awareness of her true desires, which propriety and perhaps her own reservations, compel her to conceal, meet with happy results. The initial interview is extended, during which time Claire's feelings are engaged. And despite the injunction in her letter, Gaston follows her to Switzerland, where their long idyll begins. The dynamics surrounding their correspondence reiterate a pattern first seen in their initial encounter: proposal--rejection--resubmission of proposal--acceptance.

An examination of the linguistic and poetic features of Claire de Beauséant's letter confirms the existence of a rupture between her words and her feelings, between the fact of her commands and the substance of her desires. The writer's voice and posture, the rhythm of her phrasing and the nature of the motifs and imagery that she marshalls to express her concerns: all provide clues to the silent but unequivocal meaning buried within her explicit text, its true message, which her words would nullify.

We may first observe the extreme gentleness and kindness of the writer's voice. This soft tone, along with the melancholic self-portrait her words evoke, elicits understandable sympathy in the susceptible young man. Despite Gaston's double intrusion--by his visit and then with his letter--into her serene existence, Mme de Beauséant displays a remarkable lack of harshness or severity toward him. Even the admonishment with which her letter opens has the flavor of a mild scolding rather than an angry censure: "'Vous me punissez bien sévèrement, monsieur, et de la bonne grâce que j'ai mise à vous sauver la rudesse d'un refus, et de la séduction que l'esprit exerce toujours sur moi'" (2: 489). Long, flowing sentences such as this one characterize the first paragraph of the letter and contribute to its tone of acceptance and discreet message of invitation.

Another aspect of the writer's manner that directly contradicts her patent message is its refusal of closure. The letter ends with a mysteriously resonant invitation to memory, achieved through a subtle blending of nasal and sibillant sounds, which intimates, on an emotional level, refusal of banishment: "'Adieu, monsieur . . . et ne songez à moi que comme on songe aux absents'" (2: 490). We may contrast the relaxed, suggestive expansiveness of these closing lines with the terse finality of Claire's last missive to Gaston, in which she releases him from their bond: "Monsieur, vous êtes libre" (2: 499). The brusque, cutting monosyllables are harshly forbidding; there is no

disparity here between the writer's words and the emotions that provide the tonality of the document they form.

The receptivity that marks the letter's poetic close is characteristic of the text from the beginning, though in a less readily identifiable fashion. Two long and convoluted sentences betray a posture of argumentation on the part of the letter writer:

"Cependant je vous ai parlé sinon à coeur ouvert, ce qui eût été parfaitement ridicule, du moins avec franchise, et vous ai dit ma situation, afin de faire concevoir ma froideur à une âme jeune."

"Mes raisonnements vous prouveront que, si je ne suis pas insensible à l'expression d'un sentiment que j'ai fait naître, même involontairement, je suis loin de le partager, et ma conduite vous démontrera bien mieux encore la sincérité de mon âme." (both quotes, 2: 489)

The tone of argumentative reasoning is conveyed in the heavy articulation of these sentences ("Cependant," "sinon," "ce qui," "du moins," "afin de," "que, si," "même") and the somewhat legalistic choice of words ("parfaitement," "raisonnements," "prouveront," "involontairement," "démontrera"). At first glance, Claire's contentious posture suggests opposition and rupture. The posture of argumentation, however, whether extreme or mild, signifies a certain acquiescence and may even indicate a bond between the disputing parties. This is because argumentation entails a willingness to engage in dialogue, signals the acceptance of discourse, and, ultimately, favors continued interaction. An argument, by definition, either calls for rebuttal or comprises one. Its

very nature, then, implies mutuality and reciprocity.⁸

Thus Claire's disputatiousness itself contributes to her letter's underlying message of acceptance and welcome.

A more overt signal of invitation is conveyed by the rhythm of Mme de Beauséant's language, especially in the first paragraph of her letter. The harmoniousness of this initial development is apparent not only in the two periods discussed above, which, despite their convolutions (or, perhaps because of their pleasingly logical meanderings) contribute to its graceful, undulatory measure. In almost all the sentences, a balanced, two-part rhythm creates a subtle rocking effect between the clauses. The propositions either reinforce each other:

"Vous me punissez bien sévèrement . . . et de la bonne grâce . . . et de la séduction que l'esprit exerce toujours sur moi."

"Je vous ai parlé sinon à coeur ouvert . . . du moins avec franchise . . ."

"Plus vous m'avez intéressée, plus vive a été la peine . . ." (all, 2: 489)

or cancel each other out:

"J'ai eu confiance en la noblesse du jeune âge, et vous m'avez trompée."

"Je suis naturellement tendre et bonne; mais les circonstances me rendent mauvaise."

⁸ Balzac's own experience countering the objections raised by the lady of his desire was not negligible and, no doubt, contributed to his appreciation of the courtship value of the discourse of argument. The letters written to Mme de Berny in the early spring of 1822 provide numerous examples of just such a dialogue. See letter 53 in Correspondance, 1: 164-65 for a particularly fine instance of this tone of gentle argumentation between would-be lovers.

"Une autre femme eût brûlé votre lettre sans lire; moi je l'ai lue, et j'y réponds." (all, 2: 489)

but in a manner of poised, studied equilibrium. This gentle cadence, with its elegant va-et-vient, mirrors the seesaw course of the romance of Gaston and Claire and contributes, in no small measure, to the letter's implicit message of reciprocity and receptivity.

The motifs and images that convey Mme de Beauséant's deepest concerns in rejecting her young suitor's overtures also shape the letter's guarded invitation. Malaise concerning time's passage provides the dominant motif of the final two-thirds of this letter, and the expressions of resistance this motif occasions are full of ambiguity. Claire's sensitivity to time is apparent from the first sentence of the second paragraph, in which she calls attention to the age disparity that will, in her view, cause insurmountable future problems: "'J'ai bientôt trente ans, monsieur, et vous en avez vingt-deux à peine'" (2: 489). Not only does this opening sentence advance the fundamental argument of Claire's overt message; it manifests its primary linguistic characteristics. Two opposing adverbs of time ("bientôt" and "à peine") comprise the poles on which the statement is constructed. The passage it introduces is similarly articulated by a sequence of antithetical temporal adverbs and adverbial phrases:

"Les serments que vous jurez si facilement aujourd'hui pourront alors vous paraître bien lourds."

"Aujourd'hui . . . vous me donneriez sans regret
votre vie entière . . . mais à trente ans,
l'expérience vous ôterait la force . . ."

"l'expérience vous ôterait la force de me faire
chaque jour des sacrifices. . . . Un jour . . . la
nature elle-même vous ordonnera de me quitter . .
." (all, 2: 489; my italics)

"cette ruse d'enfant, vous n'en êtes pas encore
complice. . . . Plus tard . . . vous apprécierez
ma réponse . . ." (2: 490; my italics)

The adverbial constructions in these statements serve as linguistic hinges that support and express their deeper meaning. But the antithetical vision is Claire's, and the second adverbial proposition of each sentence, linked with a future or conditional moment ("pourront," "ôterait," "ordonnera," "appréciez") is open to challenge. Might not Gaston assert a different vision of the future? Indeed, perhaps Claire's negative vision is less an overt rejection of Gaston for the reason of his extreme youth than a covert solicitation of a statement or gesture--some sign--that would proclaim his intention to withstand time's threatened ravage of his affections. The antithetical stance contained in these subtly delivered challenges is consistent with Claire's argumentative posture and enunciates a similar reciprocity: an argument demands a rebuttal, and a challenge asks to be met.

The temporal awareness that informs Claire's letter contributes to its gentle tonality and infuses it with a mournful lyricism. We feel her sad realization of her own lost youth and the privileges that accompany it ("J'ai

passé le moment de la vie où les femmes cèdent à des mouvements de coeur irréfléchis . . .'" '[2: 489-90]) and we share her wistful sorrow as she imagines Gaston's future loss of interest and the inevitable diminution of his passion ("un plaisir éphémère" [2:489], "cet amour passager," "vicissitudes de la passion" [2: 490]). The tragic dimension of Claire de Beauséant's sensitivity to time is evident as she evokes its two greatest penalties: "je préfère la mort à l'abandon" (2: 489). The one is a biological imperative, the other, a foreordainment of passion (which can never retain its original intensity and subsides as a matter of course); both represent the submission to time that nature itself imposes. This melancholic awareness of time's inexorable passage constitutes a powerful, if subdued, solicitation of sympathy, to which, not surprisingly, the amorous young man responds.

But another awareness is evident, though in the most understated manner, in Claire's words. Faint notes of seductiveness, apparent from the very beginning, create a compelling, if restrained, aura of erotic invitation. The attitude of gentle scolding ("Vous me punissez bien sévèrement, monsieur . . .") cannot fail to hold a certain provocation for the impressionable, aroused young man that Gaston has shown himself to be. And the provocative image with which this paragraph culminates may be expressive of the letter writer's desire; her intention to "faire tomber

le voile qui vous couvre les yeux'" (2: 489) may possibly be interpreted as an amorous overture. The explicit reference of Claire's image is, of course, to her efforts, through her letter, to disabuse Gaston of any romantic illusions he might be nurturing. Still, the inherent suggestiveness of the gesture evoked is such that we may at least consider the possibility of a double meaning here.

Mme de Beauséant's reference to "'la séduction que l'esprit exerce toujours sur moi'" (2: 489) shifts the focus from Gaston's obvious susceptibility to her own vulnerability to romantic seduction. The question of what will seduce Claire de Beauséant is one that receives Balzac's most delicate attention, and, in connection with his aristocratic heroine, he uses the word with great restraint. Early on we learn that Mme de Beauséant is one of those persons of noble character and intellect who can "'se laisser séduire par les choses originales ou fines'" (2: 471). Her spiritual superiority renders her immune to external graces and superficial charms, attributes that seduce most other women; but she is vulnerable to qualities of intellectual and moral superiority, which have an altogether different sort of appeal:

les femmes de choix qui ressemblent à Mme de Beauséant ne se laissent séduire que par les grâces de l'esprit et par la supériorité du caractère. Un grand caractère flatte leur vanité, leur promet une grande passion et paraît devoir admettre les exigences de leur coeur. (2: 474)

Claire's reticently seductive behavior--even the narrator hesitates to use the word "coquettish" (but does so anyway)--is apparent during her initial meeting with Gaston:

En ce moment, Mme de Beauséant était éloquente et belle; il faudrait dire coquette, si ce mot n'était pas trop fort. En se rendant justice, en mettant, entre elle et l'amour, les plus hautes barrières, elle aiguillonnait tous les sentiments de l'homme: et, plus elle élevait le but, mieux elle l'offrait aux regards. (2: 484)

We must, of course, take care not to overstate an aspect of her character that the text does no more than adumbrate. The greatest seduction, for Claire de Beauséant, is the promise of understanding and spiritual union, moral imperatives which are a condition of her acceptance of any amorous advances. Still, it is striking to observe the ambiguous use of language in the text itself. In particular, echoes found in the passage immediately following her letter cause certain key words to resonate with double meaning: "'J'ai passé le moment de la vie où les femmes cèdent à des mouvements de coeur irréfléchis'" (2: 489-90) insists Claire, and further along in her letter, "'Adieu, monsieur, obéissez-moi'" (2: 490). But when the young man, after being banished from her presence, follows her and offers her his love, we read: "Etre si bien obéie dans ses vœux secrets! Où est la femme qui n'eût pas cédé à un tel bonheur?" (2: 491). The words Claire uses in her letter are thus contaminated by the meanings they acquire as they reappear on the narrator's lips. The repetition of the word "'céder'" reinforces its suggestion of sexual

surrender, a meaning already latent in Claire's text. And the word "'obéir,'" which, in the immediate context of the letter, expressed Claire's explicit message to Gaston (the command to desist in his pursuit of her), now signals, in the expanded context that the surrounding text provides, her implicit message (the invitation to prove himself to her, to follow her and become her lover); it is a message of unspoken desire, expressive of her heart's most intimate wishes ("ses vœux secrets").

The ambiguity that marks Claire de Beauséant's epistolary language makes it difficult to measure with precision the extent of her self-deception. She seems to hover between a vague apprehension of her true feelings and the kind of cognitive blockage that emotional control would necessitate. This is not the case with Octave de Bauvan, whose letter to his estranged wife Honorine manifests, in no uncertain terms, its writer's pathetic deafness to the emotions that his own words so eloquently pronounce.

The letter is a response to one Honorine addressed to her husband's secretary, Maurice de l'Hostal, who, at Octave's instigation, befriended the young woman and attempted to induce her to return to him. Octave now seeks to persuade his wife that their reconciliation would be based on feelings of tenderness rather than passion, and that their married life would resume in an atmosphere of serenity rather than storminess. Blatantly contradicting

everything we know about the nature and extent of the writer's feelings for his correspondent, this overt message suggests, by contrast, its concealed counterpart: namely, that his fervid, physical passion cannot be sublimated into the cool affection his missive so exquisitely evokes. The letter stands out in flagrant relief from the preceding narrative, in which Octave had told Maurice of his failed marriage, as well as from the letter immediately following, in which he will divulge his reluctant acceptance of irreconcilable differences with his wife.

The early part of Octave's appeal to his wife arouses skepticism about his proposal because its assertions appear excessive and its tone overly confident. His certainty is expressed in the repetition of an adjective that brooks no exception ("Je vous y proposais un pacte dont les stipulations détruisent toutes vos craintes"; "j'ai deviné toutes mes fautes en sept années de mariage" [2: 587; my italics]). The writer's dangerous overconfidence is also evident in his summary dismissal of the doubts that drove his wife to spurn his earlier attempts at reconciliation, doubts whose justification he unwittingly provides. The hollowness of Octave's assertions becomes apparent when they are compared to the possessive desire he voices as he reads Honorine's letter: "--Elle est à moi!..." s'écria le comte dont la figure exprimait le bonheur à mesure qu'il avançait dans sa lecture" (2: 584). The note of blinding passion is

very much at odds with the tender affection he would have his wife believe dictated his own letter to her.

Amidst these vivid clues of a message that is hardly innocuous, Octave proposes a rather extraordinary pact: he will accord his fugitive wife the legitimate protection of marriage if she will agree to resume its mere appearance. Painfully aware of her repugnance for the physical side of marriage, Octave attempts to win her back with promises of a nuptial bond based on "*'l'amour sans le désir'*" (2: 588). While Octave's sincerity appears genuine, the arrangement he advances is highly suspect, the pathetic concoction of a man whose lucidity is obscured by his passion.

The dubious nature of the pact Octave offers Honorine arises from the discrepancy between the relationship it proposes as the basis of their future union and the one that characterized their shattered marriage. The bond that will unite them, Octave asserts, will be fraternal and filial rather than conjugal; it will draw upon the sweet nostalgia of their youthful friendship rather than the disappointed desire of their failed marriage: "*'Ma femme pouvait avoir à redouter tout ce qui vous effraie; mais non l'amie et la soeur envers qui je suis tenu de déployer les façons et les recherches de la politesse'*" (2: 588; my italics). This displacement of the ties of marriage and desire by those of kinship and innocent affection occurs throughout the letter. A touching confusion of familial roles--sister, daughter, childhood companion--characterizes Octave's attempt to evoke

the protection he offers his wife as he pleads with her to return to him:

"une soeur qui me permettra de déposer sur son front le baiser qu'un père donne à une fille bénie tous les jours."

"comment n'avez-vous pas deviné que j'avais pour vous et le coeur de ma mère et celui de la vôtre!"

"Pour qui prenez-vous le compagnon de votre enfance . . .?"

"vous pourrez assister à la vie d'un frère ou d'un père sans souffrance et sans joie si vous le voulez . . ."

"La tendresse d'une mère n'a ni dédain ni pitié."

"Chez vous, la bienveillance d'une soeur, l'esprit caressant d'une amie peuvent satisfaire l'ambition de celui qui veut être votre compagnon . . ."

(all quotes, 2: 587-88; my italics)

Certainly Octave's loving, silent vigilance over his wife during her seven-year estrangement from him attests to the depth and sincerity of his feelings; his adoration of Honorine is as exquisitely spiritual as his longing for her is intensely physical. But his attempt to suppress the evidence of the latter creates a subtle yet insistent message "between the lines" of the tender missive. When the overt message of Octave's letter is juxtaposed with that evidence, the letter's covert message is exposed and the viability of the arrangement its writer is proposing is placed in serious question.

Octave's own narrative is the source of significant evidence contradicting his assertions of purely fraternal feelings toward Honorine. The obsessiveness of his

attachment to his wife is manifested by his nightly espionage of her darkened windows and his fetishistic caress of the shawl ("dans lequel, moi, ce grave magistrat que vous savez, je m'étais couché pendant une nuit.'" [2: 557] that he managed secretly to purchase for her. For seven years, Octave's acutely sensuous passion has fed upon its own erotic fantasies: "'Depuis le jour de l'abandon, je vis de mes souvenirs, je reprends un à un les plaisirs pour lesquels sans doute Honorine fut sans goût'" (2: 552). His shocking fantasy of ravishing his beloved wife in her sleep ("J'ai médité sérieusement, il y a quelques jours, le dénouement atroce de Lovelace avec Clarisse'" [2: 558]) reveals the darker, violent side of his love. The fantasized crime bespeaks feelings in sharp contrast with the paternal protectiveness and maternal affection so tenderly voiced in his letter; the paroxysm of longing to which his fixation on his absent wife has brought him ("J'ai des énervements comparables à ceux des gens en consomption, des hilarités de fou'" [2: 554]) is an expression of aggravated desire and belies his epistolary assertions of fraternal and filial attachment.

Thus the message of desire in Octave's letter to Honorine lies hidden beneath its denial. Only when it is too late does he concede his true feelings toward his wife. The dolorous lucidity manifested in his letter to Maurice--written only days before the fateful, formal reconciliation is to take place--completes the exposure of the covert

message in his preceding letter to Honorine. In that sad and desperate missive to his former secretary, Octave recounts in minute detail the scene of his first meeting with his wife following their seven-year separation. His longing for her is blatant during that tense encounter, as he barrages her with pleas and promises he knows only too well he will not keep. "'Tremblant de bonheur,'" his eyes "'pleins de larmes,'" he asks her to excuse "'l'incohérence de mon langage'" (all, 2: 590), and she instantly understands the cause of his agitation: "'--Il n'y a pas de crime à être amoureux de sa femme, me répondit-elle en souriant forcément.'" (2: 590). The insistence of Octave's desire is also apparent in their subsequent meetings:

"En venant de chez moi . . . je m'animais, les pensées d'amour me gonflaient le coeur, et je me disais, comme les jeunes gens: Elle cédera ce soir . . ."

"Devinait-elle ces orages qui m'agitaient aussi bien au retour que pendant l'aller?"
(both, 591; my italics)

Not only does Octave's letter to Maurice disclose his lucid acceptance of his own desire, it divulges a cruel realization: the absence of desire in his wife. Octave's awareness is a recognition of the reality his letter to Honorine had denied: that it is as a wife--not as a sister, daughter, or childhood companion--that he seeks her return. "L'amour sans le désir," the basis of his earlier appeal to her, here reveals itself as a hollow mockery, a derisive impossibility. Thus Octave's letter to Maurice contrasts

ironically with his letter to Honorine, highlighting the sham and illusion of its overt message and forcing its covert message into the open.

Like Octave de Bauvan, Béatrix de Rochefide is oblivious to the message buried beneath the words of one of her letters; yet to her correspondent, and to others permitted to read the dispatch, its disclosure, only barely concealed, seems to jump off the page. From Italy, Béatrix writes Félicité des Touches of her long exile with her lover and impending return to France. The letter provides our first glimpse of Béatrix's current situation. Up to this point, we have seen her portrait, listened to her story, understood the scandal of her flight to Italy with the singer Gennaro Conti. Now we hear, in her own words, the pass to which matters have come: a blissful state of affairs, she seeks to persuade her correspondent; anguish and loneliness, her letter, in spite of her, cries out. The letter is a model of self-deception; its writer denies what is obvious to everyone else. She asserts that she and Conti are still deeply in love, compensation enough for the great sacrifices she has made--her husband and child, her place in society--to run off with him. The letter's covert message is quite another matter. She no longer loves Conti, nor he her; they remain together out of pride and obligation, bound by an unwritten social law that irrevocably condemns a woman for leaving her lover after having abandoned her husband.

Béatrix's already diminished social status, a constant source of suffering, leaves her continually fretting and brooding--hardly the frame of mind of a woman enraptured.

The letter is written in two registers, the one discursive and analytical, the other lyrical. The happiness and satisfaction that Béatrix proclaims in the lyrical portion of her letter are suspect by virtue of being overstated, and they are negated, in the discursive portion, by her analysis of the social disadvantages she must endure and of the psychological handicaps she faces vis-à-vis her lover. The discursive development (from the beginning [2: 726]) to "J'ai vu l'Italie, enfin!" [2: 727]), the longer portion of the letter, is its backbone. It is constructed on a series of assertions, in the form of little maxims, that punctuate the opening portion of the letter:

"le bonheur tient de la place dans la vie."

"L'amour . . . est un maître plus exigeant que le mariage . . ."

"Nous ne vivons que par l'amour . . ."
(all, 2: 726)

As we shall see, each maxim constitutes an ironic commentary on, rather than a laconic expression of, her situation.

Béatrix begins her letter to her friend by apologizing for the lapse in their correspondence. She blames the emotional demands of her existence of amorous fulfillment for her failure to write: the excitement of her new life in Venice and Rome has absorbed her energies and she is tired, with the fatigue caused by pleasure. In a word, "le

bonheur tient de la place dans la vie" (2: 726). However, we soon learn of Conti's successes in Scala, Venice, and Saint-Charles, artistic triumphs that bespeak a man not entirely absorbed by all-consuming passion for his mistress. As Béatrix jokingly puts it, "'vous ne direz pas que l'amour le rend paresseux'" (2: 726). Beneath the lightness, a more troubling question--or realization--lurks: perhaps Conti does not have to struggle to overcome the creative lethargy that often accompanies passionate ardor; perhaps, her wry remark suggests, he is not really in love at all.

It is further apparent that Conti's success is responsible for a situation that is not altogether pleasurable for Béatrix. Wherever they go, they are welcomed warmly and received with acclaim, but Béatrix remarks, "'j'eusse préféré le silence et la solitude'" (2: 726). This inclination toward seclusion is hardly surprising, for Conti's artistic success and the social acceptance it brings only serve to emphasize her status as an outcast. The judgment is restrained, but unmistakable: Béatrix's presence is just barely tolerated, as she goes on to explain.

"'L'amour, ma chère, est un maître plus exigeant que le mariage; mais il est si doux de lui obéir!'" (2: 726). The servitude that Béatrix describes is hardly the bittersweet, pleasurable experience that comes of a passionate bond; indeed, it has little to do with love at all. Béatrix chafes at the subtle but hurtful way in which other women,

of whom she had once counted herself the social equal, impress her fallen position on her: "'Plus on me marquait d'égards, plus on étendait mon infériorité'" (2: 726). Perhaps the greatest disappointment--although Béatrix tries to shake it off--is Conti's insensitivity in this regard. She makes excuses for his lack of awareness and explains her reluctance to disturb the existence of so great an artist with these "'petites vanités'" (2: 726); but Gennaro's obliviousness to her distressing situation is yet more evidence of his lack of feeling for his mistress. Thus, the irony of Béatrix's next aphoristic assertion is particularly sharp: "'Nous ne vivons que par l'amour; tandis que les hommes vivent par l'amour et par l'action . . .'" (2: 726). If that were true, then it is a meager existence indeed that Béatrix is eking out. For there is little love to nourish her in this cooled romance: her lover is completely involved in his artistic triumphs--and their public rather than creative aspects; he is numb to her suffering, and unaware that the clamor and attention that surround them wherever they go create a climate inimical to passion and happiness ("'les soins dont on m'y a entourée étaient autant de blessures'" [2: 726]).

In the next portion of the letter ("'Cependant il existe pour nous autres femmes . . .'" [2: 726] to "'Aussi ne pouvez-vous douter que je pense souvent à vous'" [2: 727]), Béatrix measures, in sharp and painful detail, the extent of her disadvantages. She does this by comparing

herself to Félicité, and here the theme of their rivalry emerges, but in the key of admiration rather than hostility; her tone is wistful and sad, rather than malicious. Béatrix's handicap is, first, a social one: she must suffer the injuries of rejection and scorn, which accompany loss of status. But underlying that loss is a more profound forfeiture of freedom, the lot of any woman who commits the grave misdeed of abandoning her husband; society's unstated law does not permit her to do the same, with impunity, to her lover. The resulting psychological and moral constraints comprise perhaps the stiffest price of all that Béatrix must pay for her violation of social law: She is no longer free to fall in and out of love, to enjoy the delights of coquettish behavior, to act petulant, to quarrel teasingly, to be capricious. She has relinquished all these privileges--and weapons--of the woman who is loved, who knows she is loved, and who relishes the power she wields over her lover. As she laments: "'Je n'ai pas une menace à faire, je dois tirer tous mes attraits d'une obéissance et d'une douceur illimitées, je dois imposer par la grandeur de mon amour. . .'" (2: 727)

Here Béatrix's argument suddenly shifts, as if she had to convince herself, as well as her correspondent, of the depth of her love for Conti. No sooner has she depicted the full, sorry scope of the loveless, unfulfilling, and painful situation in which she finds herself, than she attempts to persuade her friend of exactly the opposite! She would

never dream of leaving Conti, she asserts, since her unconditional devotion sanctions the bond that society condemns. An immutable passion, she maintains, underlies their union, for only the view that love is predestined and eternal condones--indeed sanctifies--the behavior of a woman who abandons husband and child to run off with her lover: "mon pardon est dans la sainteté de ma passion" (2: 727).

It is difficult to take Béatrix's words at face value. She herself undermines the interpretation that she is struggling to foist upon her correspondent. For she does not say that she cannot imagine ever wanting to leave Conti--only that she would sooner die than do so, because her devotion and fidelity alone stand between her and complete social degradation. She does not say she has no doubts or sadness--only that she keeps them to herself, for fear they might be taken as regrets. Can it be, the reader wonders, with Félicité, that her suppressed emotions signify the opposite of her assertions? Thus when Béatrix attempts to shake off her discontent as trivial in balance with the great happiness in which she basks ("quelques mélancolies semblables à ces nuages qui passent sur les cieux les plus purs" [2: 727]), the reader flinches: the emotional state she has unwittingly evoked in her letter is not happiness at all, but sadness, emptiness, isolation, and sorrowful acceptance of a bond in which there is neither passion nor tenderness, nor even understanding.

In the next portion of her letter (from "'J'ai vu l'Italie, enfin!'" [2: 727] to "'Mais, hélas! nous sommes de pauvres artistes, et l'argent ramène à Paris les deux bohémiens'" [2: 728]), the writer carries the assertion of happiness into the lyrical mode. She writes ecstatically of seeing Italy as it should be seen, with one's lover at one's side. But she strikes a false note, one that Félicité and Claude Vignon (interpreters and lovers of music, both) readily discern. The sudden exuberance, the idealized, even trite images of villas, flowers, and charming landscapes, the shower of exclamations and rhetorical interrogations seem forced and phony, contrived to create an impression rather than truly experienced. And, as Félicité and Vignon both observe, a woman in love is too absorbed to notice her surroundings, much less describe them or analyze her situation with such keenness.

Mirrors and masks, writes Madeleine Ambrière-Fargeaud, are essential accessories in the intricately choreographed "comédie mondaine" that is played out in Béatrix: "le romancier, lui, avec ses lettres-masques et ses lettres-miroirs, ses portraits-masques et ses portraits-miroirs, montre bien qu'il n'ignore rien de cette comédie."⁹ Béatrix's letter is very much a "lettre-miroir," reflecting, for those who read it, an image strikingly different from

⁹ Introduction, Béatrix, by Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie humaine, Pléiade, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 2: 626.

the one its writer thinks her words cast. Subjugated to the hidden revelatory capacity of her text, Béatrix loses the power to control the meaning it holds for her readers. The image that shines out from her epistolary glass of words reflects, not surface meaning, but hidden depths.

If the concealed message in Béatrix's letter to Félicité takes the form of a subliminal disclosure and displays the writer's subservience to language's power, the letter she pens in response to Calyste's impassioned declaration of love shows her to be a very different sort of letter writer. Calculating, poised, and deliberate, this epistolary author is very much aware of the message enveloped within the apparently innocent words of her missive, a "lettre-masque" in the worldly game of manners that is the setting for this narrative. Designed by its writer to probe the feelings of her correspondent, the letter's covert message is a trap whose threatening presence is discerned only by a secondary character made privy to its contents.

The letter is, on the surface, a firm but kind rejection of Calyste's love, in which the writer plays to the hilt the role of noble, generous friend and woman in love. For Camille she has nothing but words of praise. To her correspondent she portrays herself as the self-sacrificing woman who will not destroy a young life by entangling it in the imperfect fabric of her own. However, although she claims to speak with "franchise et

simplicité'" (2: 786), her words betray deeper motives, as the chevalier du Halga, to whom Calyste's mother anxiously relates the letter's contents, immediately perceives.

Highly skilled in the worldly arts of probing feelings and directing behavior, Béatrix composes a letter whose clever, two-part structure is full of snares for Calyste's innocent mind, traps for his tender heart.

On one panel of this epistolary diptych she sketches a self-portrait, on the other, a portrait of her rival, Félicité des Touches/Camille Maupin. These two moral portraits look in opposite directions, to two contrasting visions of Calyste's future. In depicting herself side-by-side with Camille, Béatrix yields the advantage, on every point, to her friend. Or so it seems, as she proceeds, in the most gracious of tones, to praise Camille's intellectual and moral distinction ("Elle est spirituelle et bonne . . . généreuse et simple'" [2: 789]); her unselfish, inexhaustible devotion ("elle est sans égoïsme'" [2: 786]; "sa tendresse est inépuisable'" [2: 788]; "elle ne vit qu'en vous'" [2: 786]); her capacity to love ("elle a le coeur plein de trésors'" [2: 786]; "J'ai vu dans le fond de son coeur de sûrs trésors . . .'" [2: 789]). In contrast, Béatrix points to the moral and emotional void in her own heart ("vide'" [2: 786]) and character ("Vous ne trouveriez en moi ni les perfections qui la distinguent ni le bonheur qu'elle vous prodigue'" [2: 786]), and she sets

her own demanding, possessive nature against Camille's selflessness and generosity in love:

"je ne sais pas encore faire plier ma fierté sous l'autorité de l'expérience, je n'ai pas cet amour qui rend humble, enfin je suis une femme dont le caractère est encore trop jeune pour ne pas être détestable." (2: 788)

She paints her jealousy in particularly vivid terms, making it the least calculated, most intensely felt sentiment expressed in this letter:

"je suis jalouse, je vois des monstres dans une goutte d'eau, je suis au désespoir de misères dont beaucoup de femmes s'arrangent; il est même des pensées inexorables qui viendraient de moi, non de vous, et qui me blesseraient à mort." (2: 787-88)

And Béatrix points out, referring once again to the psychological restrictions of which she had complained in her earlier letter, that Camille is "'libre'" and she, "'esclave'" (2: 786).

It is the limitations that her past fault impose that move Béatrix to paint so bleak a future for Calyste with her. Her existence is so fully tainted by her scandalous elopement with Conti that anyone becoming her lover after him would, by contamination, become degraded: "'je vous entraînerais dans une vie ennuyée, sans noblesse, dans une vie gâtée par ma faute'" (2: 786). Béatrix heightens this evocation of her potential disgrace by contiguously depicting Calyste's contrasting innocence. She must render these possibilities for him, she writes, because "'vous êtes incapable, comme tous les gens dont la vie est pure, de faire les réflexions que suggère le malheur'" (2: 786).

And, in evoking her own "'malheur,'" Béatrix takes pains to point out that it could be considerably worse. For even though society condemns her for abandoning her family, it offers a modicum of acceptance--as long as she remains faithful to her lover. But a second lapse would put her beyond the social pale; she would be stigmatized, ostracized, irretrievably degraded: "'Le monde est encore indulgent pour celles dont la constance couvre de son manteau l'irrégularité du bonheur; mais il est impitoyable pour les habitudes vicieuses'" (2: 786).

Her own moral and social plunge would precipitate Calyste's: "'Si j'étais à vous, je vous ferais manquer votre vie'" (2: 787). In a development foreshadowing Calyste's behavior and emotional stance after his unfortunate marriage to Sabine de Grandlieu, Béatrix insists on the profound inner loss that he would suffer if bound to her. Nowhere in this letter is she more honest, or more lucid about their double fate than here:

"Il y aurait chez vous manque de foi, de constance, ou vous auriez alors l'intention de me vouer toute votre existence: je suis franche, je la prendrais, je vous emmènerais je ne sais où, loin du monde; je vous rendrais fort malheureux . . ." (2: 787)

Not surprisingly, Béatrix concludes that she is powerless to ensure any kind of happiness for Calyste, were he to choose a future with her: "'Hélas! que puis-je pour votre bonheur? rien.'" (2: 788).

In contrast, Camille, Béatrix tells Calyste, "'vous aplanira toutes les difficultés de votre avenir'" (2: 788).

She will secure his financial future and that of the du Guénic family by generously using her own fortune to repurchase their mortgaged lands and by making Calyste her heir. She will find him a bride, one who is not only suitable, but who corresponds to his fantasies, one whom he can love--who is like herself, but unfettered by the prison of past faults: "*elle saura vous choisir une Béatrix libre, si c'est Béatrix qui répond à vos idées sur la femme et à vos rêves . . .*" (2: 788). Thus, while the bleak gray light of isolation and degradation pervades the diptych panel in which Béatrix evokes Calyste's future with her, the future she envisions for him with Camille is materially secure and emotionally fulfilling, bathed in a rosy glow.

Despite the nobility of Béatrix's ostensible assertion that she is unsuitable for Calyste, her reply is actually designed to transmit a very different message to the impressionable young man. The letter with which Béatrix purports to push Calyste away is very deliberately constructed to pull him toward her.

The letter's elevated tone comprises the first of its traps. While the union of Béatrix and Calyste would be a certain misalliance, the posturing of noble self-sacrifice with which the writer delivers this statement subverts it by promoting her attractiveness to her correspondent. Béatrix's epistolary duplicity--the contradiction between the attitude she feigns in her letter and her true thoughts and emotions--is particularly apparent when she

characterizes Camille's love for Calyste as a barrier to their love. Béatrix asserts that she could not, knowing Camille's feelings for Calyste, wound her by stealing him away: "'Son amour pour vous est une de ces barrières trop hautes pour être franchies par aucune puissance, même par les ailes d'un ange . . .'" (2: 787). This vaunted defense of Camille's love is highly suspect. We know that, during her brief tête-à-tête with Calyste the preceding morning in the garden, the young man unwittingly revealed the innocent nature of his matinal trysts with the older woman; so Béatrix must surely be, if not doubtful about Camille's love for Calyste, at least confused about it. If Béatrix can have no certainty about the genuineness and depth of Camille's feelings for Calyste, why does she feign this great concern for her friend, this noble resolve not to harm her? Perhaps, in a deft application of reverse psychology, she hopes to draw Calyste to her by inciting him to react against Camille's goodness, and thus reject Camille for her. This, in fact, is the movement Calyste later displays in his response to Béatrix's letter.

Béatrix's glowing portrait of Camille constitutes another snare, for it is drawn in terms that undercut, rather than enhance, her appeal to Calyste. On the face of it, warm sentiments of friendship and admiration color the image Béatrix paints of Camille. But scratch a bit beneath the surface, and the tones of her portrait are somewhat less than complimentary; at least, they are not flattering in the

way that a young man in Calyste's emotional state might find. Béatrix portrays Camille as the long-suffering older woman, destined never to know true love, who will serve as Calyste's devoted mother and act as his benefactress in the important practical matters of his life. Emphasizing in this way Camille's age, power, and maternal qualities would certainly dampen any romantic ardor Calyste might still feel for her. Camille's moral superiority, a trait Béatrix paints in particularly vivid tones, might leave a young man of Calyste's fervid temperament unmoved. Béatrix comments, somewhat off-handedly, on Camille's lack of feminine appeal ("elle ignore peut-être les grâces de notre sexe, mais . . ." [2: 788]), as if to suggest that such a flaw can weigh little in the balance against so many virtues and qualities. But the net effect of her casual observation is to rivet Calyste's attention on her friend's masculine tendencies and stimulate his attraction to her own feminine charms, as his subsequent response clearly shows ("elle n'a rien de la femme, et vous en avez toutes les choses que j'en aime . . ." [2: 792]). Moreover, the slightly preachy tone in which Béatrix delivers her panegyric ("elle a pour vous un dévouement que vous n'appréciez pas assez'" [2: 786]), contributes to this subversion by provoking in Calyste a reaction bound to repel him from Camille and draw him to herself. This, of course, directly countermands the stated message of Béatrix's letter, which is her unsuitability for her correspondent.

The image Béatrix evokes of the future that Camille can secure for Calyste is another trap artfully crafted for his adolescent, hotly impatient sensibility, for it is an image that the writer must know, judging from his earlier letter, he will reject. Camille, Béatrix writes, "*vous trouvera, dût-elle en mourir, une créature avec laquelle vous puissiez être heureux en ménage*" (2: 789). Domestic contentment is surely the form of happiness most remote from what Calyste craves at this moment in his life. We have only to recall, as we ponder Béatrix's sly text, the extravagant fantasies of the young man to whom it is addressed to realize how completely it will achieve the effect opposite to the one it purports to seek. "*Serais-je donc sans belles et folles amours?*" Calyste had pined to his mother:

"Ne pourrais-je trembler, palpiter, craindre, respirer, me coucher sous d'implacables regards et les attendre? . . . Ne connaîtrai-je de la femme que la soumission conjugale, de l'amour que sa flamme de lampe égale?" (2: 730)

The ostensibly disparaging self-portrait Béatrix's letter paints serves actually to heighten the seduction she already exerts over Calyste, for its emphasis on her unsuitability for him does not preclude rendering herself in a highly appealing manner. First, Béatrix attempts to justify her past behavior as much as she condemns it; she presents herself in the most flattering light possible, under the circumstances: "*J'ai préféré l'éclat d'un malheur irréparable à la honte d'une constante tromperie, ma propre perte à celle de la probité*" (2: 786). Second,

Béatrix evokes her debased future in the conditional mood, which taints it with a certain lyricism, contributes to its vagueness, and endows it with a romantic aura: "'Je serais la femme du monde la plus humiliée, je cacherais d'épouvantables misères, je serais trahie, enfin je serais abandonnée . . .'" (2: 786-87). Thus she depicts herself, fallen and isolated, in terms that cannot fail to fire the imagination of a young man so recently steeped in romantic lore.

It is striking to note that the two potential futures (the one with Béatrix, the other with Camille) are not evoked in terms that reflect equal probability. Calyste's future with Béatrix, rendered in the conditional mood, is surrounded by a protective, poetic aura. Less possible, it is more seductive. The future tense with which the course of Calyste's life under Camille's tutelage is evoked, makes the very existence against which he is rebelling (tradition, family, marriage of convenience, staid conjugal life) more likely. This split between future tense and conditional mood--between Camille and Béatrix--can be traced from the beginning to the end of this letter. It creates a linguistic dichotomy that will catalyze Calyste's revolt against family and tradition (the inevitable) and intensify his love for Béatrix (the impossible).

Finally, we must observe that nowhere in her letter does Béatrix tell Calyste she does not or cannot love him. She invokes a host of reasons to explain her unsuitability

for him but never does she indicate that she would be incapable of responding to his passion. Indeed, she suggests the very opposite: "vous auriez alors l'intention de me vouer toute votre existence: je suis franche, je la prendrais, je vous emmènerais je ne sais où, loin du monde . . ." (2: 787). Significantly, the most dangerous trap in Béatrix's letter is not its stated message, but the one it deliberately suppresses; its most powerful snare is conspicuously absent from the text: A letter of rupture that does not convey a categorical message of emotional rejection cannot discourage a lover whose passions are raised to the intensity of Calyste's. A woman of Béatrix's experience cannot fail to know this.

Béatrix's text is a masterful piece of subterfuge, a "lettre-masque" in which language is used to disguise the writer's intentions and distort the correspondent's perception of reality. Designed to elicit a reaction opposite to the one she purports to inspire, her linguistic maneuvers exhibit the duplicitous potential of epistolary discourse. Nowhere, however, are the effects of linguistic dissimulation more treacherous than in the letter Natalie de Manerville writes her husband Paul as he sails off to India at the end of Le Contrat de mariage.

Such epistolary dissimulation poses a very different problem of interpretation than does conversational double-dealing. In a dialogue there are many indices to hidden

meaning. Tone of voice, rhythm and timing of speech, pauses and hesitations, glances, gestures, posture: all reveal something about the thoughts and feelings behind a character's words. But the reader of a letter does not have access to the behavioral clues of conversational interchange to use in interpreting a correspondent's words. The narrator may, on occasion, interrupt the text of the letter to tell the reader (of the novel) what the letter writer is actually feeling or planning while composing a text that covers or contradicts those emotions and intentions. For example, we are permitted a glimpse of Charles Grandet as he composes the letter informing Eugénie that he is about to marry another woman: we find him nonchalantly humming the melody of Non più andrai while protesting his undying devotion to her (3: 1188). But this is not a frequent occurrence, nor does it carry any benefit for the character reading the letter, who is not exposed to the narrator's knowledge, thoughts, or opinions.

Natalie de Manerville's letter poses this very problem of interpretation, for it is heavy with concealed meanings, but devoid of textual clues that would facilitate their disclosure. To uncover these hidden messages, in conflict with the letter's explicit words, we must look beyond it, to the novel's central scene, the signing of the marriage contract. That occasion initiated a deception which Natalie's letter perpetuates and reinforces; according to Henri Gauthier, the letter is a dramatically logical

extension of that fulcrum of the narrative, an episode in which:

Les démonstrations sont fausses, les paroles recouvrent des intentions contraires, les générosités sont feintes, les manières, habilement contrôlées, ne laissent que par éclair jaillir le feu des sentiments.¹⁰

In keeping with that scene, Natalie's letter is characterized by empty assertions; by language that twists and deforms, rather than conveys, the truth; by counterfeit expressions of regret, affection, and devotion. The intentions and feelings that Natalie expresses and the news that she reports look rather different when viewed in juxtaposition with other letters and scenes in the narrative. Such extratextual comparisons bring out the contradictions within her text and force the exposure of the ugly message its words would keep under pretty wraps.

Among the empty assertions that fill Natalie's letter is her self-reproach about being the cause of Paul's financial ruin: "'Ne suis-je pas pour quelque chose dans cette ruine? mes chiffons n'ont-ils pas bien pesé dans la balance? tu m'as fait maudire la vie heureuse, insouciante, que nous avons menée pendant quatre ans'" (3: 632). If we are to believe Natalie, she would gladly have renounced her life of pleasure and luxury, would have accepted, without hesitation, a quiet and simple existence in the country, if only this could have prevented Paul's catastrophe.

¹⁰ Gauthier, introduction 503.

But this implied assertion flies in the face of everything we know about Natalie's upbringing and character. She was raised with an utter disregard for financial realities, had no sense of the value of things, and was oblivious to the material difficulties of life (3: 540). Like her mother, whose ruinous extravagance horrifies Paul's notary, Mathias, Natalie seems to require money as one does food, for sustenance, as Mathias's baleful observation to Paul makes clear: "'Vous voulez absolument épouser une mère et une fille qui ont mangé environ deux millions en sept ans'" (3: 579). Natalie's regrets are also in flagrant contradiction with the portrait de Marsay paints of her in his letter to Paul. Natalie's fondest wish, by her own report, is to share the fate, good or bad, of her husband: "'Crois-tu que je ne puisse concevoir des pensées graves, servir à ta fortune aussi bien que je servais à tes plaisirs?'" (3: 635). But, as de Marsay tells Paul, Natalie "'aimait les bénéfices sociaux du mariage, elle en trouvait les charges un peu lourdes. La charge, l'impôt, c'était toi!'" (3: 642). A wife who endures her husband as one does a tax, paid in order to gain entitlement to the benefits--financial and social--of marriage, is hardly the kind of woman who would willingly, much less happily, share his misfortune. In de Marsay's view, Natalie is the quintessential "'femme à la mode'" (3: 641), concerned only with her jewels and clothes, her social successes, her appearances in all the right places on all the right

occasions--the sort of woman whose expressions of distress over her husband's misfortunes are immediately suspect.

"'Etre la cause de ta ruine! quel texte aux pensées d'une femme aimante!'" (3: 635): It is difficult to give credence to such protests of self-blame, which punctuate Natalie's letter.

It is also difficult to accept at face value the expressions of love, tenderness, and devotion that Natalie adoringly writes to her absent husband. She admires his strength of character, the sacrifice and courage of his undertaking, and she pledges complete submission to him:

"Mon cher Paul, jamais tu n'as été si grand à mes yeux que tu l'es en ce moment. Ne désespérer de rien, aller chercher une fortune?... il faut ton caractère et ta force pour se conduire ainsi. Je suis à tes pieds" (3: 632).

In response to Paul's distress over their separation, Natalie expresses a feeling of oneness with him. Efforts to bridge distances and guarantee conjugal bonds despite a lengthy separation, which dominated Paul's earlier letter to his wife, find their echo in Natalie's words:

"Va sans crainte, marche à travers les obstacles, sans douter de ta Natalie, car ce serait douter de toi-même. Pauvre cher, tu veux vivre en moi? Et moi, ne serai-je pas toujours en toi? Je ne serai pas ici, mais partout où tu seras, toi" (3: 632).

Feelings of tenderness and affection also fill the pages of Natalie's letter, as do concerns for her husband's well-being: "'Qui donc soignera ma fleur délicate? J'ai le coeur percé par d'horribles idées. Moi sa femme, sa Natalie, être ici, quand déjà peut-être il souffre'" (3: 634). Perhaps

most significantly, from Paul's point of view, these expressions of love and wifely attachment are linked to Natalie's promise of fidelity during her husband's absence: "Sois bien tranquille, mon adoré, relativement aux choses qui touchent à ton honneur'" (3: 634).

Evidence from several different sources within the novel exposes Natalie's expressions of love and tenderness as spurious and gives the lie to her assertions of wifely devotion. From the very earliest days of their romance, the shallowness of Natalie's feeling for Paul was apparent. Under the probing questions of Mme Evangelista, Natalie revealed much deeper feelings of attachment to her mother than to her adoring fiancé: "--Tu n'aimes pas, ma chère," (3: 557) affirms Mme Evangelista. Even if Natalie loved Paul, even if her natural response of pleasure and delight in his presence could possibly lead to love, Mme Evangelista acts deliberately and effectively to block the development of any serious attachment in the young woman to her future husband. In a pivotal scene preceding Natalie's wedding night, Mme Evangelista exposes her views on the deportment that will ensure a woman's happiness--synonymous with power--in marriage. This "haute politique de femme" (3: 613) is intended to place a barrier between Natalie and her husband, to prevent feelings of passion or tenderness from flowering, and ultimately, to keep the daughter from bearing the male child who would, by inheriting the majorat, seal the mother's financial ruin. Mme Evangelista warns the

young bride that excessive closeness ("une cohésion constante" [3: 609]) destroys the bond between husband and wife. Nothing is more crucial, she counsels her daughter, than a wife's gaining the upper hand in her marriage, and the key to that control lies in sexual manipulation: "Une femme ardemment désirée peut tout demander . . . Sers-toi de l'empire que te donnera la première passion de ton mari pour l'habituer à t'obéir" (3: 611). Natalie's promises of adherence to this code of conjugal deportment are, assuredly, deadly to the development of the feelings she so ardently professes in her letter to Paul. More deviously still, the code encourages the false expression of the very feelings whose existence it discourages, the better to deceive and control.

De Marsay's letter offers the strongest evidence that the overt expression of love in Natalie's letter masks her true message of indifference and disdain. According to de Marsay, the rigorous social life of a "femme à la mode" demands of a woman a sturdy emotional constitution, which is incompatible with a tender, loving nature: "Si les femmes délicates périssent à ce métier, celles qui résistent doivent avoir des organisations de fer, conséquemment peu de coeur, et des estomacs excellents" (3: 641). Natalie does not, could not, love her husband, for the very insensitivity that, by the laws of Balzacian typology, permits her to thrive in such a brutal social climate has banished love from her heart: "Ta femme résistait admirablement à cette

vie, elle y semblait habituée, elle apparaissait toujours fraîche et belle; pour moi, la conclusion était facile à tirer: elle ne t'aimait pas . . ." (3: 642). Moreover, even if Paul had been able to inspire some semblance of conjugal affection in his wife, that sentiment would have been no match for the passion awakened by her lover:

"Le jour où Vandenesse a remué dans le coeur de ta femme la corde du désir que tu y laissais vierge, tes fanfaronnades amoureuses, tes torrents de cervelle et d'argent n'ont pas même été des souvenirs. Tes nuits conjugales semées de roses, fumée!" (3: 643).

No evidence undermines the assertions of love and wifely devotion at the heart of Natalie's letter more profoundly than de Marsay's exposure of her long-standing disaffection from and betrayal of her husband.

Not only does de Marsay's letter provide substantive documentation of the falseness of Natalie's epistolary allegations; it is the only evidence to which Paul has access. He can have no inkling of the manipulative counsel through which Mme Evangelista controls her daughter, for, unlike the reader of the novel, he is not accorded a view of this woman's machinations in other settings. Moreover, Natalie's letter does not manifest internal contradictions or unconscious admissions that might expose the egregious lie it seeks to propagate. Taken alone, it might well be read, particularly by an adoring husband, for exactly what it purports to be, a love letter from an adoring wife. De Marsay's letter, however, arrives in tandem with Natalie's,

and its disclosures are simultaneous with her deception. The second epistolary text thus appears as an overscript to the first, the friend's revelatory tracings obscuring the wife's false assertions.

An aspect of Natalie's letter that is particularly fraught with ambiguity is the announcement of her pregnancy. She evokes her excitement and joy at this news, as well as her pleasure in fulfilling, at last, her husband's most cherished wish: "'Vos plus chers désirs sont comblés, monsieur. Je ne voulais pas te causer de ces fausses joies qui tuent, nous avons eu déjà trop de chagrin à ce sujet'" (3: 633). This event, she maintains, has dramatically transformed her from "'une femme frivole'" to a "'mère de famille'" (3: 634) and instilled in her the resolve to abandon the frantic whirl of Parisian social life for the peaceful solitude of their country domain. There she will await Paul's return, occupied only with her child:

"Ah! vivre à Lanstrac . . . avec ton enfant en t'attendant, en t'envoyant tous les soirs, tous les matins, la prière de la mère et de l'enfant, de la femme et de l'ange, ne sera-ce pas un demi-bonheur? Vois-tu ces petites mains jointes dans les miennes?" (3: 635).

Natalie's mawkish self-portrait as Madonna and Child is an effort to tap emotions of fatherly affection and pride that will nurture Paul's faith in his wife and in the solidity of their bond.

But Natalie's exclamations of joy about her pregnancy ring false, for they are inconsistent with the attitude

toward childbearing and mothering that Mme Evangelista has inculcated in her: "'Si tu as des enfants, j'espère qu'ils n'arriveront pas de manière à te gâter la taille le lendemain de ton mariage . . .'" (3: 610-11). To be sure, these words mask her determination to nullify the majorat. Nonetheless, so firmly has the attitude they encourage taken hold in Natalie, so surely has it influenced the course of her marriage, that five years later, Paul, who at the beginning of the novel had expressed to de Marsay his longing for a family, voices the following sentiments, which distantly echo Mme Evangelista's words to her daughter: "'N'y a-t-il pas quelque chose de brutal à sitôt priver une femme de ses avantages, à lui gâter sa beauté sans qu'elle en ait joui?'" (3: 625). The negative attitude toward maternity that we know to be Natalie's leaks through her declarations of happiness over her pregnancy. Her announced intention to lead a life of quiet isolation also arouses skepticism, given all that we know about her extravagant upbringing and de Marsay's revelations about the addiction of this "'femme à la mode'" to the endless kaleidoscope of Parisian social life.

Natalie's pregnancy hardly inspires joy in Paul, who is plunged by the news into a maelstrom of doubt and uncertainty. He has, apparently, as much cause to question the child's paternity as he has reason to believe it is his: "Paul, accroché par quelques faits irrécusables, croyait et doutait tout à la fois" (3: 636; *my italics*). De Marsay's

disclosure of Natalie's liaison with Félix de Vandenesse casts a long shadow on the happy news, bathing it in a troubling ambiguity: Is the child Paul's? Or is Félix de Vandenesse the father? Does it matter, since Paul's fortune has already been squandered? Or, as Henri Gauthier suggests,¹¹ can this news be nothing but a cruel hoax, a malicious invention of Natalie? Is she pregnant at all?

Finally, Natalie's assertions regarding her intentions to follow Paul, and her portrayal of Mme Evangelista's efforts to save him merit close scrutiny. If we are to believe Natalie, she had to be restrained from departing--on horseback, a trip that would have been disastrous in her physical condition--the very instant that she read Paul's letter. Only her mother's benevolent deception kept her from flying to her husband's side, ostensibly to prevent his departure, or to join her fate to his by accompanying him. Mme Evangelista, too, her daughter asserts, would have gone to any lengths to rescue her son-in-law from the calamity that has befallen him. Had she not hastily returned to Paris on hearing the news of Paul's financial losses to offer him the thirty thousand francs she had managed to save, in hopes of settling his affairs? Did she not regret her purchases of properties abutting Paul's domains, transactions that had, apparently, contributed to his ruin?

Once again, Natalie's epistolary assertions--here,

¹¹ Introduction 503.

regarding her own intentions as well as her mother's efforts on Paul's behalf--collapse when confronted with evidence from elsewhere in the narrative. De Marsay's letter to Paul is, as before, the primary text contradicting the picture that Natalie paints. According to de Marsay, Natalie and her mother repaid their debt to Paul with the proceeds of his wine harvest at Lanstrac, still rightfully Paul's, and they waited to do so until they were sure he was at sea:

"'Ainsi, ces deux femmes ont déjà calculé que tu devais être en mer . . .'" (3: 640). So it appears that Natalie and her mother not only did nothing to prevent Paul's departure, but secretly worked to bring it about and could barely wait until he was safely out of the way to strip him of his possessions. Their true efforts and intentions in Paul's regard have been neither innocent nor benign, but part of a long-standing, deviously-spun plot to bring about his ruin--a calamity from which they would clearly profit: "'la conspiration domestique ourdie contre toi'" (3: 640).

The examination of these elements external to the text of Natalie's letter casts a harshly revealing light on it. With its protests of distraught surprise, pledges of conjugal fidelity, and underpinning of loving concern stripped away, the letter now appears as a succession of melodramatic poses, loosely strung together for the express purpose of continuing a deception and plunder begun five years earlier. The exaggeration and posturing are apparent on the very first page, as Natalie depicts herself fraught

with anguish at her husband's calamity. This opening is marked by a series of interrogations--fifteen in the first section of the letter, interrupted by only five declarative statements--through which Natalie feigns her agitation and righteous indignation at not being permitted to come to her husband's aid or share his misfortune. The scenes of bogus passion and concern follow in quick succession: Natalie at the feet of her adored husband; Natalie retreating to Lanstrac to take up a life of isolation and familial devotion; Natalie drowned in tears, "'à demi morte'" (3: 633) on reading the news of Paul's departure; Natalie insisting on pursuing her husband herself, and being restrained from making the perilous journey; Natalie taking to her bed, succumbing to the depletion wrought by her violent emotions; Natalie, finally, "'mère de famille'" (3: 634), living only for her child and for Paul's return. Thus Natalie creates her text, carefully presenting herself to her husband as an adoring, loyal, devoted wife, understanding his deepest needs and feelings, longing only to be reunited with him. In reality, she feels nothing of what she purports to feel, and her letter, counterfeiting sentiments for the purpose of consolidating the power she wields over her husband, is a brilliant manifestation of Mme Evangelista's "haute politique de femme" (3: 613).

With Modeste Mignon, Balzac turned the problem of linguistic disjuncture from thought on its head. The

correspondents in this novel are genuine and sincere to a fault. Their words express faithfully their feelings and desires. Their language is not at odds with unavowed motivations, nor does it conceal malevolent intentions. Yet the dissemblance that regulates their epistolary interchange is so fundamental that it threatens the very enterprise of communication.

Modeste Mignon is the story of a provincial girl's courtship, subsequent disillusion, and final reconciliation with reality. The first portion of this chain of experiences is conducted, entirely at her instigation, through the vehicle of letters; the last two portions are inescapably influenced by the mutual mystification that the courtship's epistolarity fostered. Modeste appears at first to be a classic romantic heroine: her wide readings nourish a rich fantasy life and favor her absorption in a world modelled on the ideals of poetry and the excesses of fiction. This distancing from the real world seems to promise for her the tragic fate of all those who adhere stubbornly to a quixotic view of the world. But a fluke saves Modeste from the disaster of realizing her dreams.

Having glimpsed a lithograph--a deliberately falsified publicity portrait--of the poet Canalis in the window of a bookstore, Modeste writes an anonymous letter to her favorite writer. Canalis nonchalantly tosses aside the letter, one of a flood of missives he receives daily from an adoring female public. Touched by the genuine sentiments

expressed in it, the poet's secretary, Ernest de La Brière, responds--but under the signature of Melchior Canalis. And so begins the correspondence between Modeste Mignon and the "faux Canalis." Nearly fifty pages of the narrative are dominated by this "duel entre deux esprits croisant la plume, tandis que le plus sévère incognito met un masque sur les visages" (1: 553). The image of masked duellers graphically conveys two essential aspects of this courtship-by-correspondence: the battle of wits and the incognito, or mutual concealment of identities.

But the motif of masquerade is not unique to the epistolary portion of this narrative. In Modeste Mignon, concealment is a form of deception used to ferret out the truth. More than once, Modeste's father feigns poverty after recouping his fortune. By this dissemblance, he hopes to find sons-in-law whose hearts will be moved by love rather than greed. And Butscha, the hunchbacked creature in love with Modeste since childhood, deploys an array of cunning contrivances to penetrate the secrets of those around him.

In fact, camouflage, the central feature of the correspondence initiated by Modeste, is a strategy to which the characters in this narrative have frequent recourse. Through this tactic they come to grips with a major philosophical problem posed by this rather mundane novel: How does one distinguish the false from the true, the sham from the authentic, the sentimental impostor from the man of

heart and character? The problem is linked to the dangerous flexibility of language: How does one distinguish true words from lies, authentic messages from counterfeit ones? The question, central to Modeste's search for a husband, is, despite her far-fetched romantic fantasies, a very practical one. She grapples with it, first, through the correspondence she imposes on the suitor she has herself sought out, and later, through her father's scheme to "surprendre le vrai caractère de ces messieurs" (1: 608). In the correspondence, a dialectic of concealment and exposure organizes the motifs and dominates the unfolding action. The structures of falseness and sincerity provide a concomitant axis along which the narrative develops. This oscillation is apparent at the level of language, as the correspondents write of hiding from or revealing themselves to each other, of opening their hearts but keeping their identities masked, as, writing under assumed names, they insist on their probity and lack of hypocrisy while questioning or defending the role of mystery, falsehood, and disguise in courtship.

Both Modeste and Ernest resort to a basic form of deception, that of concealed identity. Yet the fraudulence of their letters appears to be more a matter of surface than of substance. In terms of character, motivation, and beliefs, these masked correspondents manifest a fundamental sincerity: they portray themselves honestly and openly, and they represent their feelings without reserve or guile.

Moreover, it is the freshness and candor of Modeste's first letter to Canalis that La Brière finds so appealing, not the flattery inherent in such a missive: "'Il n'y a pourtant pas là la moindre emphase, on ne te donne pas du génie, on s'adresse à ton coeur, dit-il à Canalis" (1: 521).

But if they are similar in what they conceal (their identities) and what they reveal (their feelings), Modeste and La Brière differ markedly in the reasons they seek out or consent to epistolary disguise. The thinly-veiled pseudonym, Mlle O. D'Este-M., is simply a cunning incognito that affords Modeste the anonymity she feels she needs to test the integrity of her would-be husband. The exchange of letters satisfies her romantic fantasies. Through it, she imagines that she influences, from afar, the life of a great artist; she fancies herself the object of his poetic ardor, perhaps even, his muse! The correspondence also serves a more practical end for Modeste, who had watched as her older sister was seduced and abandoned by an unworthy lover--a misfortune culminating in her death. Taken together, the letters constitute a trial her suitor-correspondent must pass to prove his worth. Hence Modeste's exuberance on discovering, beneath the poet's exterior (so she thinks), a noble and honest heart ("bonheur . . . d'avoir deviné que chez les hommes d'élite le coeur pouvait parfois être en harmonie avec le talent . . ." [1: 535]), of finding, within the artist, a man of sensitivity and character--in a word, the perfect husband:

"votre lettre . . . contient ce que je souhaitais, une expression de sentiments prosaïques aussi nécessaires à la famille que l'air du poumon, et sans lesquels il n'est pas de bonheur possible. Agir en homme, penser en poète, aimer comme aiment les femmes, voilà ce que je souhaitais à mon ami . . ." (1: 539)

Modeste's trial-by-correspondence proves ultimately to be a flawed test, but her reasons for resorting to the deception it requires are not at all ignoble and certainly understandable in light of her familial experience. In any case, she may leave her correspondent in the dark as to her identity, but she does not misrepresent herself or impersonate another.

La Brière's concealed identity, on the other hand, is a more serious matter, since his letters bear the signature of Canalis. If he falls with ease into the impostor's role, it must be remembered that he did not initiate the correspondence and is, in the beginning, unaware of the ramifications of taking up his pen under the name of another man. Moreover, he is moved to respond to the letter's invitation not out of ambition or calculation, but because he is touched by its writer's genuine, unadorned sentiment. Still, despite the naïveté and purity of motivation both correspondents exhibit, they are not on equal footing. La Brière's masquerade is more problematic than Modeste's incognito, since she has no reason to suspect that the man who is answering her letters is not Canalis, whereas he was never led astray by her anonymity, a condition openly set forth in her first letter. La Brière's epistolary disguise

thus involves more deception than Modeste's, and this imbalance accounts for the severity of the blow she sustains upon learning his true identity. Inevitably, this disparity drives a wedge between the couple that correspondence brought together, because it impels Modeste to impose even more stringent (and reliable) tests to measure his sincerity and integrity. (The irony is that Modeste benefits from the deception of which she is the victim, since a correspondence with the "vrai Canalis," whose character and temperament are very much at odds with the sensitivity and passion he manages to display in his verse, would have seriously compromised her happiness.)

The incognito to which Modeste so stubbornly adheres is no less threatening to the development of trust in this romance-by-correspondence. The problem is posed in Modeste's first letter to Canalis, a letter whose language establishes the dialectic of concealment and exposure that structures their epistolary dialogue: "'je veux rester inconnue et demande une confiance entière, comme si vous me connaissiez depuis longtemps'" (1: 514). The inherent paradox of Modeste's situation is linguistically expressed in the sharp tension between her asserted intention to remain concealed ("'rester inconnue'") in the first segment of the sentence, and her imperious demand, in the second segment, for the kind of complete trust ("'une confiance entière'") that is rooted in the familiarity of long-standing friendship ("'comme si vous me connaissiez depuis

longtemps'). Modeste's expectations, the syntax reveals, may be incompatible with her desire to remain cloaked in anonymity, which is a false position. La Brière's response articulates the fundamental problem of a courtship built upon concealed identities:

"L'échange des âmes ne peut s'établir qu'entre gens disposés à ne se rien cacher. Vous montrerez-vous telle que vous êtes à un inconnu? . . . Trouvez ici, mademoiselle, les hommages que nous devons à toutes les femmes, même à celles qui sont inconnues et masquées." (1: 524)

The oscillation between the language of exposure ("ne se rien cacher," "se montrer [telle qu'on est]") and concealment ("à un inconnu," "femmes inconnues et masquées") is again marked, as La Brière explains that a true marriage of minds ("l'échange des âmes")--the kind of idealized love Modeste is seeking--cannot take place without mutual self-disclosure, to which she refuses to accede.

The dialectic of concealment and exposure is an inherently dynamic structure that pulls away from concealment and drifts toward exposure. This forward movement is abetted by developing romance, since falling in love impels people to seek knowledge of and intimacy with each other. As Modeste and La Brière move in this direction, their experiences call attention to the importance of context and the role of incognito.

It is only when context is removed from language that we become aware of its crucial role in formulating meaning and evaluating situations. La Brière's early letters are

especially concerned with this issue, since the conditions Modeste establishes deprive him of the structure of context, on which we rely so heavily. "'Quel sens prêterai-je à votre lettre?'" (1: 523), he writes. Meaning derives from many sources. In the case of epistolary exchange, it cannot be restricted to the absolute text. To what other text was the letter writer responding, we must ask, and in what circumstances did the writer find herself at the moment of composition? More fundamentally, who is the writer? Ernest de La Brière does not have this latter information, and without it he is seriously handicapped, since identity is the basic context for relationships.

The issue becomes most pressing when Modeste scoffs at La Brière's stodgy counsel to cease her amorous pursuit of a poet and follow her family's wishes in selecting a husband. Would he have proffered such noble and sensible advice if he had known he was writing to a millionairess, Modeste writes, provocatively suggesting that she may indeed be one. La Brière responds question for question, challenging his inquisitor to reveal, if not her identity, at least the truth about her social status: Is she the scion of a noble and illustrious family, or the daughter of a bourgeois? Is she a wealthy heiress, or of more humble means? Her answer to these questions, asserts La Brière, will influence his response to hers. If her father is a mere merchant, her haughty conduct toward him would be considered ridiculous.

But if her lineage is aristocratic, her behavior would be judged fitting.

If absence of context creates uncertainties, false context opens up dangerous possibilities, which undercut the purest of motivations. La Brière's fundamental integrity and sincerity are never in doubt. He is seen wrestling with his conscience, struggling always to write "*une réponse, sincère, noble et franche*" (1: 527). And yet, because his signature is counterfeit, his words at times take on a double meaning, the one corresponding to his honorable intentions, the other undermining them. The false context created by La Brière's imposture gives him the opportunity to write about his rival as if about himself, a situation that adds a self-serving dimension to such well-meaning statements as "*un homme supérieur est, en tant qu'homme, semblable aux autres . . .*" (1: 524). And when he writes, "*Je n'ai ni le génie, ni la magnifique position de lord Byron*" or "*Moi, mille fois plus petit que lui [Lord Byron]*" (1: 541), he is certainly being truthful, but the fraudulent context that his letters have helped to manufacture put a misleading cast on his statements. La Brière's genuine humility will be mistaken by his correspondent for a poet's modest appraisal of his own abilities.

Without fixed context, telling the truth risks reduction to an empty exercise. The quiproquo that caused La Brière to mistake Modeste Mignon for Mlle Vilquin or Mlle

d'Hérouville enables Modeste to give, with rigorous honesty, a detailed account of her family lineage and history, while keeping her identity under tight wraps. A close examination of the text reveals the subtleties that foster this game of linguistic hide-and-seek. She tells her correspondent not who she is, but rather, who she is not ("je ne suis ni cette affreuse Mlle Vilquin, ni la très noble et très sèche Mlle d'Hérouville . . ." [1: 535]). The eminent cardinal who distinguished her family still goes unnamed ("Le cardinal d'Hérouville a fleuri dans l'histoire de l'Eglise avant le cardinal de qui nous vient notre seule grande illustration . . ." [1: 535]). She insists that she does not live in the Vilquin villa, where La Brière saw his letter being delivered, a half-truth, since her family is residing there until fortune puts a more sumptuous roof over their heads. She gives elaborate detail about her German and French forebears--but it is sufficiently vague ("Par ma mère, je tiens à toutes les pages de l'almanach de Gotha'" [1: 536]) to prevent association with any specific family names. A coy comparison of herself to the young woman to whom La Brière's espionage led him (actually, herself, but who she would have him believe is someone else) is a half-lie, since it implies a denial of identity ("je suis au moins aussi belle que la petite personne . . . sur qui vos regards se sont arrêtés . . ." [1: 536]). So, despite her bravado showing of openness ("Je veux vous parler avec la sincérité qui . . . a dicté les premières

lignes de votre lettre'" [1: 535]), Modeste's text is actually a fabric of pseudo-revelations that permits her to remain "'voilée, inconnue'" (1: 536).

Sometimes, without the structure of context to support it, the truth itself is taken for falsehood. When Modeste writes that her father is a count and that her family has a long and illustrious history (1: 528-29), she is telling the absolute truth. But La Brière doubts the veracity of her assertions, because he has no evidence with which to substantiate them: "'Comme elle abuse de ses avantages, la petite personne! . . . s'écria de La Brière. Mais est-elle franche?'" [1: 529]. To see with his own eyes if his correspondent is who she claims to be, he resorts to espionage, yet another furtive stratagem in a narrative pushed this way and that by ruses and wily maneuvers.

The role of incognito in this dialectic of concealment and exposure merits closer examination. Modeste's resolute insistence on keeping her identity secret is a tactic through which she hopes to plumb the heart of her suitor, to learn his true worth and thereby avoid her sister's tragic error. Relinquishment of her mask would, she feels, inhibit rather than foster the development of mutual knowledge and understanding: "'Une fois vue, adieu notre mutuelle connaissance'" (1: 549), she writes, in fearful anticipation of the setback that direct encounter would bring. Clearly, she prizes incognito for its extrinsic value: by remaining unknown, she will be in a position better to know her future

husband. But for Modeste, incognito has an intrinsic appeal as well: she derives pleasure in remaining remote and mysterious, in captivating her suitor by the very fact of her concealment. Mystification appears to be a necessary condition of the "'alliance purement morale et mystérieuse'" (1: 538) that she is seeking. And so, she takes delight in the epistolary game in and of itself, independent of the practical end she believes it so aptly designed to serve: "En tout cas, n'aurons-nous pas joui du plaisir de notre correspondance? . . ." (1: 546). For Modeste, correspondence, especially when conducted beneath the protective cloak of incognito, constitutes a "moyen privilégié de connaissance et de communion dans l'essentiel."¹²

Although La Brière does not share Modeste's enthusiasm for the restrictions that a courtship-by-correspondence imposes, he benefits along with her from the postponement of identification. But the tension created by that delay makes these two masked individuals eager for more intimate knowledge of each other, and it drives them simultaneously toward and away from self-disclosure. For La Brière, the attraction his unknown correspondent exerts, by her depth of feeling and boldly original expression--traits he apprehends not in her presence, but through her letters--heightens this tension: "Un homme peut très bien se passionner pour une

¹² Michel, "roman par lettres" 98.

inconnue qui sait allier tant de hardiesse à tant d'originalité, tant de fantaisie à tant de sentiment. Qui ne souhaiterait de vous connaître, après avoir lu cette première confidence?" (1: 540). Clearly, he wishes to move beyond the limitations of letter-writing, to end the charade he finds so distasteful ("dois-je continuer cette tromperie?" [1: 539]), and to raise their courtship to a more direct and satisfying level.

But even as he urges Modeste to step out from behind the protective veil that correspondence has provided, his understanding of the girl's youthful illusions, which, far from ridiculing, he recognizes as the stuff of poetry ("un bien suprême, le rêve des poètes, le rêve des jeunes filles, le poème qu'à l'entrée de la vie . . . chaque belle intelligence a caressé de ses regards . . ." [1: 547]), makes him loath to foist reality on her: "Aussi ne vous parlerai-je pas encore de moi, ni de mon passé, ni de mon caractère . . ." (1: 547). Thus La Brière, who opened this letter pressing for exposure, is now moved, by his aversion to harshness and sympathy for his correspondent's tender, idealistic nature, to withdraw behind his own incognito.

No sooner does he pull away from the prospect of disclosure than the pressure of his intense feelings causes La Brière to swing sharply back again in the opposite direction, and his petition for divulgence becomes even more urgent: "Oh! parlez, dites un mot, et je vous aimerai jusqu'à ce que mes yeux se ferment . . ." (1: 548). This

renewed insistence that his correspondent drop the veil concealing her identity is accompanied by a declaration of love filled with promises of the devotion and fidelity enjoyed by famous couples, both real and fictional, whose happy marriages Modeste so admired. La Brière closes his letter on the same imperious note of its opening, insisting that correspondence and concealment be superseded by direct encounter and revelation:

"je ne suis pas encore assez vieillard pour boire à une coupe tenue par les charmantes mains d'une femme voilée sans éprouver un féroce désir de déchirer le domino, le masque, et de voir le visage." (1: 548)

Modeste, too, is subject to the internal pressures caused by the instability of concealment. In her fifth letter to La Brière she begins to let her disguise fall away and risk exposure. The tension that moves her in this direction springs from her pride and her original, if adolescent, fantasy of herself as the ideal companion for a man of genius. When La Brière compares her to Bettina d'Arnim, who settled, after an impassioned correspondence with the poet Goethe, for bourgeois contentment in marriage, Modeste berates him for believing her capable of behavior so common. Not for her a marriage to a philistine d'Arnim, nor any life outside the convent, were she to survive the death of a lover such as Byron (1: 543)! The shift toward self-disclosure in Modeste's writing occurs at this precise moment. The emphatic denial seen in her previous letter ("vous ne me connaissez point" [1: 535]) is here reduced

to a simple negation ("`Vous ne me connaissez pas'" [1: 543]), which is itself immediately softened by the addition of a second articulation, in the form of a positive statement about their future intimacy ("`vous me connaîtrez'" [1: 543]). Modeste's stated intention is directly followed by a flood of revelations about her deepest longings and intimate fantasies.

Finally, the tension of concealment for both correspondents is too great, and they relinquish the disguises behind which they had composed their letters. Disclosure is straightforward for Modeste, for whom the simple removal of mask suffices to bare identity. The process of exposure is more complex for La Brière, who must first reveal the existence of a mask before he can remove it: "`si vous avez été mystérieuse, je vous ai rendu mystère pour mystère, et je dois enfin jeter le masque de l'incognito, vous dire le poète que je suis et abdiquer la gloire qui me fut prêtée'" (1: 585). The shock of this disclosure acts as a springboard for the rest of the narrative, whose action rebounds upon Modeste's distrust of the man whose letters had won her heart, and upon her renewed need to test his integrity. Significantly, disclosure also marks the termination of the epistolary portion of Modeste Mignon. The coincidence of concealment, a key structure of the narrative, with correspondence, is marked by the fact that the characters cease to write letters once they have discarded their incognitos.

The novel closes with Modeste's betrothal to La Brière, the man with whom she had fallen in love during the first half of the narrative only to consistently reject in the second. She overcomes the injury inflicted by his epistolary deception as she recognizes that his masquerade, though ill-advised, has no bearing on his fundamental character. Although her perception of his situation was seriously awry and her initial judgment dangerously naïve, Modeste's basic instincts about her correspondent proved correct. That Modeste's judgment is at once impeccable and flawed can be seen in her reaction to her father after he reveals the full truth about her correspondent-suitor: "-- J'aimais un homme vrai, sans mensonge au front, probe comme vous l'êtes, incapable de se déguiser comme un acteur, de se mettre à la joue le fard de la gloire d'un autre..." (1: 606). La Brière, though certainly not incapable of disguise or subterfuge, ultimately proves himself to be a man of integrity and moral distinction.

The significance of letters in achieving the narrative's happy resolution should not be overlooked. The mutual deception of the letter writers did not contaminate their sincerity, nor did it undermine the veracity of their messages. Despite the writers' false positions, their correspondence itself fostered an authentic courtship: through it their feelings for each other were established and communicated and a genuine affection took root. The

masquerade merely covered the profound event--the development of love--that took place beneath the masks; it did not invalidate it.

Language is the primary means of communication in human affairs, the very stuff out of which narrative is spun. Yet it may just as easily hinder or undermine communication as facilitate it; indeed, language's intrinsic flexibility and creativity, the qualities that open up these disturbing possibilities, comprise a reservoir of potential that the novelist must tap. Balzac used letters and dialogue in La Comédie humaine to make the subject of language a dramatic and psychological mechanism of narrative. Epistolary discourse afforded a particularly rich opportunity to explore the pitfalls and perils of language. Letters, by their status as written documents that "fix" language, serve as a repository for the hidden meanings that impede or subvert communication. Epistolary texts readily reveal the source of the multiple and concealed meanings they so frequently harbor: the disjuncture between thought and language.

In narrative, linguistic disjuncture, the evidence of disparity between a character's words and his or her thoughts, feelings, intentions, or desires, usually reflects a psychological rupture. Sometimes the scission is internal. Such writers seem unaware that their thoughts or desires diverge from the way they represent themselves to

the outside world. Gaston de Neuil understands the message of desire in Claire de Beauséant's letter of dismissal, for he flies to her side. But does Claire realize that her overt rejection masks a tacit invitation? The pathos of disjunction between thought and language is most apparent in Octave de Bauvan's letter to Honorine. The split between the writer's powerful emotions and his words, which, dumbly, disclaim their existence, is the mechanism that places two contradictory messages in his letter. The message of passion--consuming, blind, even violent, is buried beneath its denial, subverting from within his proposal of reunion based on fraternal affection. Béatrix de Rochefide suffers from a similar disengagement from reality, as evidenced by her lack of awareness that her letter to Camille Maupin is a tissue of false assertions that seeks to paint a strained and moribund romance as a thriving one. The cascade of rhapsodic declarations and exuberant interjections conceals a vast, empty region of loneliness and sorrow. Thus, the hidden messages in the epistolary texts of Claire de Beauséant, Octave de Bauvan, and Béatrix de Rochefide reveal the tyranny of language over writers in the thrall of their emotions, its power to communicate meanings of which they are unaware, and which they might prefer to suppress.

The psychological breach reflected by the disjuncture between thought and language is just as frequently external in nature: between characters as opposed to within them. In such instances, the flexibility of language is consciously

exploited by characters in their efforts to manipulate and control each other. Béatrix de Rochefide and Natalie de Manerville recognize the letter's potential as an instrument of trickery, treachery, and deceit. The words in Béatrix's letter to Calyste are contrived to disguise her intentions and lead her vulnerable correspondent astray. A web of cunning traps, Béatrix's letter maneuvers to draw the young man toward her by seeming to push him away. The successful communication of the writer's hidden message of seduction depends on her dangerous talent for linguistic duplicity, her ability to manipulate words to achieve an effect that countermands their stated purpose. Béatrix's pernicious epistolary talents are matched, and perhaps surpassed, by those of Natalie de Manerville, whose linguistic manipulations disseminate confusion, anxiety, and doubt--hardly the discourse of the concerned and loving wife her letter seeks to portray. The covert message of this greedy, heartless "femme à la mode" to her husband is one of indifference, disdain, and perhaps, since she cuckolds him even as she shamelessly asserts her fidelity, scorn. Natalie's epistolary representation of events--distorted, inflated, completely false--perpetuates and magnifies the deceitful manipulation that the signing of the marriage contract initiated.

The epistolary texts in Modeste Mignon do not exhibit a disjuncture between thought and language, for these correspondents communicate genuine feelings and emotions and

make no effort to conceal intimate thoughts or secret intentions. Since their letters do not exhibit rupture, we might expect them to lead in the direction of union, that is, marriage. But the masquerade under whose auspices this correspondence takes place comprises a dissemblance that, when uncovered, nearly wrecks the union that their epistolary courtship seemed to promise. The concealment of identity practiced by these two correspondents raises a linguistic issue as fundamental as that of the disjuncture between thought and language: the dependence of language on context for meaning. The significance of context will draw our attention, in chapter 6, to a third element in the epistolary equation of meaning, one no less important than the writer or the message: the reader.

Chapter 6. Reading and Interpreting Letters:

Eugénie Grandet, Béatrix, Albert Savarus,

Le Lys dans la vallée

The logic of the epistolary event has predetermined the focus of this study, causing us to linger at length and almost exclusively on letter writers and the messages they seek, through straightforward efforts or wily stratagems, to convey. Letter writers, after all, initiate the epistolary act of communication, and the documents they compose direct our attention, quite justifiably, back upon them. We have, therefore, emphasized their power to manipulate correspondents, to influence events, to determine not only the outcome, but the meaning of narrative. We will now follow the letter's own trajectory to the other end of the epistolary axis of communication, the reader. As soon as we shift our focus to the object of the letter, however, the object of our study doubles. For the term "reader," in discussions of epistolary narrative, may designate either a fictional creation, the character-reader within the narrative, or a pragmatic entity,¹ the audience-reader of

¹ The term "pragmatic," as used in this chapter, is derived from the approach of pragmatic theories of criticism, which consider the work of art in terms of its orientation to the audience, as opposed to the artist, the external universe, or its own internal requirements. See M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and

the narrative. The ambiguity introduced by the term is not entirely unwelcome, for as different as these two readers may be, their roles are analogous and even, at times, interdependent.²

Moreover this ambiguity serves to situate our examination of the interpretive activity of fictional readers within broader, theoretical considerations of the novel reader's role in generating literary meaning. The notion that the reader has anything other than a passive role in the act of literary communication is a relatively recent one. In classical aesthetics, the text is endowed with a set meaning or meanings, which the author--viewed as the center of literary creation--determines.³ During the last twenty years, an aesthetic theory that posits the reader as an active participant in the creation of literary meaning has been elaborated. Reception theory shifts the emphasis away from the author as the sole creator of literary meaning and the text as its fixed repository.⁴ For

the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford UP, 1953) 14-21.

² These two categories (the reader in the text and the reader of the text) represent a simplification of the taxonomy of readers described in current literary theory. For a summary of the categories and functions of readers, see Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 27-34.

³ For a discussion of how the norms of artistic interpretation have evolved in our century, see Iser, Act 10-19.

⁴ For a brief overview of the development of reception theory, see McCarthy 6-11.

reception theorists, the creation of meaning is a dynamic process that occurs in the interaction between the text and the reader. Within this view, the value of the text is enhanced rather than diminished, since its meaning is potential and as limitless as the number of readers who may pick it up and peruse it. Theorists such as Wolfgang Iser have emphasized the textual strategies that instigate the process of interpretation. Iser identified, within the text, prestructures of virtual meaning that the reader actualizes in the act of reading.⁵ Other theorists, such as Umberto Eco, focus directly on the reader's role in the process of interpretation and the complexity of the operations through which he decodes the text's latent meanings.⁶ Whether their studies take the text or the reader as the point of departure, reception theorists always move in the same direction, emphasizing the transaction between the two. We shall attempt to maintain this orientation as we take the reader's perspective in our examination of epistolary texts in La Comédie humaine.

Balzac's own orientation makes the reader's perspective a legitimate, indeed, vital one to take into account. His relation to the readers, both immediate and remote, who

⁵ Iser, Act 86-103. For a brief discussion of the reader's role in according actual existence to the literary work, which would otherwise have only a virtual existence, see Manfred Naumann, "Literary Production and Reception," New Literary History 8.1 (1976): 115-16.

⁶ The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979).

comprised his diverse audience was complex: it galvanized his creative energies, but raised troublesome questions about the autonomy of literary invention.⁷ As his correspondence reveals, he frequently solicited reactions to his literary creations from the readers (usually female) whom he personally knew and whose opinions he respected, an invitation these correspondents did not decline. Laure de Berny, Zulma Carraud, and Evelina Hanska freely proffered their praise (and criticism) of the plots, characters, and writing style of his novels, and he, in turn, took their sensibilities into account. Balzac was aware, as well, of that vaster, anonymous readership for his narratives, the public audience--also largely feminine. Numerous references in his prefaces and correspondence with his publishers attest to the novelist's acute sensitivity to his reading public. He exhibited an attitude of deep ambivalence toward it, longing, on the one hand, for the acclaim and financial reward that accompany literary success on a grand scale (such as his rivals, Eugène Sue and Alexandre Dumas, knew), but refusing, on the other, to compromise his art by yielding to the demands of popular taste.⁸

The point to retain for our discussion is that the relationship of the novelist with his reader-audience

⁷ The remarks in this paragraph draw on the discussion of this subject in chapter 2 of Christopher Prendergast, Balzac: Fiction and Melodrama (London: Edward Arnold, 1978) 17-38. See also McCarthy 4.

⁸ See Prendergast 26-38.

inevitably left its mark on his work. Any residual influence, however faint, permits us to assert the power of the entity that is its source, in this case, the reader. Indeed, as Mary McCarthy demonstrates, Balzac's respect for the reader's "power and imagination"⁹ is manifest throughout La Comédie humaine. Key narrative devices that he forged to construct his fictional universe (such as extended metaphor, lengthy description, and reappearing characters) acknowledge the central role of the reader by soliciting his "active participation in the production of literary meaning."¹⁰

In this chapter, we shall analyze the role of the reader vis-à-vis the meaning, functioning, and pragmatics of epistolary narrative in La Comédie humaine. We shall analyze, first, the influence wielded by fictional readers through their interpretation of the letters they receive (or otherwise acquire) and measure the force they exert on the engine of narrative. In Eugénie Grandet, the heroine's interpretation of two letters--actually, misinterpretation of one and intuitive decoding of the other--is responsible for directing and fueling the action at critical points of the narrative. Moreover, the narrator's intense concentration on the reader (to the detriment of the writer) of these two missives directs our attention, at the same

⁹ McCarthy 4.

¹⁰ McCarthy 5. This is the principal idea of McCarthy's study, which applies reception theory to La Comédie humaine.

time, to the act of reading itself and the complexity of its operations on both emotional and intellectual levels. If the process of reading is portrayed in depth in Eugénie Grandet, it is represented in breadth in Béatrix, a narrative whose complex web of action is disturbed at every turn by readers' acts of interpretation. By focusing on the processes within readers as they peruse, make sense of, and react to the letters they receive, we shall elucidate the nature of the mechanism on which so many of Balzac's narratives turn.

Finally, we shall study the pragmatic function of letter readers in La Comédie humaine, that is, the way they model the role and invite the participation of their extratextual counterpart, the reader of the narrative. Not only does the behavior of Rosalie de Watteville, the fictional reader in Albert Savarus, have a decisive, catastrophic effect on the course of narrative events; it channels the novel's reception by its readers. And in Le Lys dans la vallée, the characters' behavior as writers toward their readers, or as readers towards writers, profoundly influences their judgment by the reader of the novel and, as a result, plays a decisive role in the latter's creation of narrative meaning.

In Eugénie Grandet, the heroine's interpretation of two letters, the first of which is not addressed to her, the second of which is, has critical implications for the

unfolding and resolution of the narrative. Her misinterpretation of the first of these letters, addressed by Charles Grandet to his mistress, Annette, permits the narrative to rebound and continue on both sentimental and dramatic levels: it feeds Eugénie's illusion of love and moves her to an action (giving Charles her small fortune of gold pieces) that makes her her father's prisoner in her own house and ties her, emotionally, to Charles. Her all-too-lucid interpretation of the second letter, in which Charles simultaneously announces his break with Eugénie and his proposed marriage to Mlle d'Aubrion, brings the narrative to an abrupt halt.

Charles Grandet's letter to his mistress is more significant for the insights it provides about Eugénie, an unintended reader of its contents, than for what it reveals about the letter writer himself. No important new information about the writer is disclosed, although the portrait of the frivolous, self-centered young man and his stylishly dissolute life in Paris is certainly rounded out. The character of Annette, which had earlier, along with details of Charles's Parisian existence, been briefly sketched, is unimportant except as it serves to highlight aspects of Charles's attitudes and behavior. What interests us as readers of this novel more than anything else in the letter--more than the character who wrote it or the character to whom it is addressed, more, indeed, than the message it contains--is that other reader, within the novel,

Eugénie. How will she interpret this love letter addressed to another woman? How will she react?

Late at night the sound of her cousin's unconscious sobs brings Eugénie into his room. Her behavior, entirely innocent, seems motivated by an irresistible need to comfort the stricken young man, whom she already loves quite passionately, despite the provincial reticence that censors such feelings. Charles has fallen into a troubled sleep. A pile of just-completed correspondence lies on the table; two letters remain unsealed, one to his mistress, Annette, the other to his closest friend, Alphonse. The first letter, or rather, the three words of its affectionate salutation, nearly cause Eugénie to swoon. She is shaken to the core by this incontrovertible evidence of Charles's involvement with another woman:

Ces mots qui en commençaient une: "Ma chère Annette..." lui causèrent un éblouissement. Son coeur palpita, ses pieds se clouèrent sur le carreau. Sa chère Annette, il aime, il est aimé! Plus d'espoir! Que lui dit-il? Ces idées lui traversèrent la tête et le coeur. Elle lisait ces mots partout, même sur les carreaux, en traits de flammes. (3: 1121)

Perhaps, the reader speculates, the traumatic discovery will open her eyes and cause her to renounce this futile love. Eugénie herself faces the possibility that the knowledge imparted by the letter will destroy the cherished illusion; indeed, it seems for a moment as if that awareness, rather than the rules of privacy that proscribe

reading another person's correspondence, cause her to hesitate and nearly resist the temptation to read the beckoning missive:

"Déjà renoncer à lui! Non, je ne lirai pas cette lettre. Je dois m'en aller. Si je la lisais, cependant?". . . Chère Annette! Un démon lui criait ces deux mots aux oreilles. . . . La passion, la curiosité l'emportèrent. (3: 1121-22)

Conflict about reading a letter in which she has an acute personal interest but whose contents, she intuitively realizes, may deal her heart a cruel blow, effects a dramatic transformation in the heretofore timid young woman. She is emboldened, but her courage is sharply undercut by doubts; her infatuation brings her to the defense of the letter writer, but fears nurtured by the new-found evidence undermine these fragile certainties. In the end, the very passion that incites her to read the letter causes her to misinterpret, with grave consequences, its contents.

Charles tells his mistress of the tragedy that has befallen his family and of the necessity in which he finds himself to leave France, for years perhaps, to make his fortune in the Indies. Eugénie was certainly aware of Charles's situation, but his letter depicts his financial ruin in grim and, for her, heartrending colors. She is a naïve and vulnerable letter reader; these details affect her powerfully, intensifying her feelings for Charles and instigating her to come to his aid. Or perhaps it is that Eugénie's emotions affect the way she reads the letter, causing her to focus intently on certain messages--here, for

instance, the message of Charles's need--and pass over others--such as the suggestion, at the end, of a calculated, decidedly unemotional interest in Eugénie as a solution to his problems. Clearly, the latter message cannot coexist with her feelings: either one or the other must be discarded.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Balzac's character portrayals is the degree to which he elucidates not only the fixed aspects of identity and personality--his characters' physical traits, intellectual qualities, and moral attributes--but the fluid cognitive processes that take place within them as they deliberate upon their actions. How a person reacts, reasons, judges, makes decisions, plans and plots: Balzac's depiction of these complex mental and emotional operations breathes life into his representation of the human psyche. The silent spectacle of a character grappling with an epistolary text affords an excellent opportunity to expose these inner workings of the mind and heart. Eugénie Grandet's style of reading and interpretation--the processes through which she apprehends the letter's message, infuses it with personal meaning, incorporates it into her existence, and acts upon it--is central to the elaboration of her character.

Eugénie's intense reactions interrupt the text at key moments, allowing us to examine more closely the process that is taking place within her: "'Pauvre Charles,'" we suddenly read, as Charles launches into a lengthy litany of

the hardships he is facing, "'j'ai bien fait de lire! J'ai de l'or, je le lui donnerai', dit Eugénie. Elle reprit sa lecture après avoir essuyé ses pleurs" (3: 1122-23). Here we see that the details to which Eugénie responds are those that nurture her love. Indeed, to the degree that that emotion is awakened, nourished, and revitalized, reading the letter that at first threatened to destroy her happiness is a pleasurable experience for Eugénie, and pleasurable are the tears she sheds.

It is apparent that the meaning of Charles's letter is transformed as it passes through the filter of Eugénie's psyche and undergoes the process of interpretation. As a reader, Eugénie neglects the textual messages that would put her in a state of dissonance with her amorous feelings. Such selectivity corresponds, on an emotional level, to the intellectual processes through which readers "actualize" or "narcotize" the "virtual properties" of a text's surface structure in order to elaborate its deeper meaning.¹¹ Eugénie's unconscious discrimination is a basic protective mechanism that operates, as we shall see, to her ultimate detriment. The mechanism poses a potential danger in all acts of reading, for, without even recognizing the process of blind expulsion at work, uncritical readers may discard evidence that contradicts their view of events or that will be painful to acknowledge or damaging to accept.

¹¹ See the discussion on semantic disclosures in Eco 23.

Selectivity is not the only mechanism to which the process of interpretation in Eugénie is subject. So pervasively do her emotions color her interpretation that they cause her to misconstrue the letter's fundamental intention and meaning. Charles's letter of rupture--a mournful, elegant, flattering message of farewell to his mistress--is lacking in intensity and devoid of passion. Tastefully insincere compliments and assertions punctuate the text, sweetening the unpleasant message of a final and abrupt breakup: "'moi . . . qui, à mon début dans le monde, ai rencontré l'amour d'une Anna!'" (3: 1123) Charles writes, in fashionably, if not shrewdly, soothing terms. In a similar vein, he later refers to himself as "'un jeune homme habitué aux cajoleries de la plus délicieuse femme de Paris'" (3: 1123). It is clear that Charles, "un enfant de Paris, habitué par les mœurs de Paris, par Annette elle-même, à tout calculer . . ." (3: 1125) has learned his lesson well. But Eugénie, having had no such social education, reads the words at face value and cannot imagine that they could hold any meaning other than the one they overtly designate.

As the narrator explains it, such innocence is a form of intellectual egocentrism that exposes Eugénie to grave dangers: it leads her to evaluate the feelings of others in terms of her own affective state, to attribute to them her own pure motivations, to project her love upon an indifferent, insensitive, perhaps even ill-intentioned,

lover. The narrator can scarcely conceal his astonishment at Eugénie's failure to read between the lines and grasp the cold emptiness beneath Charles's solicitous, but basically not deeply-felt, explanations, the message of indifference barely concealed beneath the protestations of ardor.

Indeed, when the letter breaks off in mid-sentence (hardly an indication of passionate involvement with his mistress and a sign that the letter to her was the last of the ten or so business letters that lay sealed on the table), Eugénie is quick to come to Charles's defense: "'Il devait être bien fatigué, pour avoir cessé de lui écrire', se dit Eugénie en voyant la lettre arrêtée au milieu de la phrase" (3: 1124). Her interpretation impels the narrator to offer a rather detailed analysis of what he considers to be a grave error on the part of his heroine:

Elle le justifiait! N'était-il pas impossible alors que cette innocente fille s'aperçût de la froideur empreinte dans cette lettre? Aux jeunes filles religieusement élevées, ignorantes et pures, tout est amour dès qu'elles mettent le pied dans les régions enchantées de l'amour. Elles y marchent entourées de la céleste lumière que leur âme projette, et qui rejaillit en rayons sur leur amant; elles le colorent des feux de leur propre sentiment et lui prêtent leurs belles pensées. Les erreurs de la femme viennent presque toujours de sa croyance au bien, ou de sa confiance dans le vrai. Pour Eugénie, ces mots: "Ma chère Annette, ma bien-aimée", lui résonnaient au cœur comme le plus joli langage de l'amour, et lui caressaient l'âme . . . (3: 1124)

We are not surprised, then, to learn that as Eugénie tenderly contemplates her sleeping cousin, "les fraîches illusions de la vie jouaient encore pour elle sur ce visage

. . ." (3: 1126). They are her own illusions, projected outward. Eugénie's egocentricity constitutes a second danger to which, as a reader, she succumbs.

Unfortunately for Eugénie, appearances do not contradict her interpretation of Charles's feelings and motivation, but instead confirm her erroneous impressions. Nothing about the young man's face or demeanor--not his delicate features, nor his tear-stained cheeks, not his sensitive expression, nor his exquisite manners--gives the lie to Eugénie's misguided perception of him. These external signs are emblematic, in her mind, of an uncorrupted nature and noble character:

Charles n'avait encore que vingt et un ans. A cet âge, la fraîcheur de la vie semble inséparable de la candeur de l'âme. La voix, le regard, la figure paraissent en harmonie avec les sentiments. . . . Presque toutes les jeunes filles s'abandonnent aux douces promesses de ces dehors; mais Eugénie eût-elle été prudente et observatrice autant que le sont certaines filles en province, aurait-elle pu se défier de son cousin, quand, chez lui, les manières, les paroles et les actions s'accordaient encore avec les inspirations du coeur? (3: 1125-26)

Charles is at a turning point, about to lose, entirely, the last traces of sensitivity and innocence that still occasionally mark his words and actions. Eugénie falls victim to the classical illusion that outer, evanescent appearances reflect an inner, immutable reality and illustrates a third peril to which the process of reading is prone: the degree to which a reader's view of reality may influence the operations through which he or she attributes

meaning to a text. Had her cousin presented a more hardened countenance and displayed coarser manners, Eugénie might have inferred the dry sentiments beneath his honeyed words.

Indeed, the fixity with which the narrator focuses on Eugénie's reading of Charles's letters enables us to see not only how this conviction colors her interpretation of reality, but how it shapes the process of perception that underlies it. As she turns to the letter addressed to his friend Alphonse, Eugénie actively searches for evidence of Charles's noble heart and motives: "Puis elle jeta les yeux sur l'autre lettre . . . si elle commença de la lire, ce fut pour acquérir de nouvelles preuves des nobles qualités que, semblable à toutes les femmes, elle prêtait à celui qu'elle choisissait" (3: 1126). The infatuated reader does not fail to find what she is looking for, as Charles enumerates his obligations and instructs Alphonse to settle them honorably by selling his possessions.

Eugénie does not even bother to finish reading the letter to Alphonse. She breaks off in mid-sentence and, in a pitch of emotion, returns to her room where she pulls out a huge purse containing the collection of gold coins that comprises her small fortune, accumulated under her father's supervision: "ce ne fut pas sans une vive émotion de plaisir qu'elle ouvrit le tiroir d'un vieux meuble en chêne . . ." (3: 1127). The episode reveals yet another aspect of the critical role played by epistolary texts in this novel. We have observed a reciprocal influence between the letters, on

the one hand, and the emotional and cognitive processes within the heroine on the other; we now witness the effect of this complex interpretive process on her behavior. For it impels her to an action of momentous consequences for her future. When Eugénie gives her cousin her fortune of gold, she transgresses a fundamental law of her father's household: that, beneath his roof, gold is to be stocked, protected, examined, manipulated, enjoyed, and most of all, amassed--but never, under any circumstances, relinquished. The old man's discovery of her transgression causes a crisis of unequalled proportions in the family and a breach between father and daughter that is never fully repaired. It brings about Eugénie's virtual incarceration for the next seven years in her own home, and can be said to hasten Mme Grandet's death, by the anguish the terrible conflict causes her to suffer.

Moreover, this gift, which is directly inspired by Eugénie's reading--or rather, misreading--of Charles's two letters, has consequences that are no less significant for her on a psychological level. For it marks the start of her brief romance with the young man, an idyll that culminates, before his departure for the Indies, with an exchange of vows between the lovers: "--Ne sommes-nous pas mariés, répondit-il; j'ai ta parole, prends la mienne. --A toi, pour jamais!' fut dit deux fois de part et d'autre" (3: 1141). The vows are soon forgotten by Charles, as he is swept up in a tumultuous and exotic new life of hardship and

adventure. But they are never forgotten by Eugénie. She jealously guards the illusion they nurture--as jealously as her father guards his fortune. And she will be as much a prisoner of this illusion in the ensuing years as of her father's obsessive fury.

And so, Eugénie's emotions, abetted by an inauspicious discrepancy between Charles's character, on the one hand, and his appearance and epistolary language on the other, complicate the process through which she interprets the young man's letters. Her act of reading strengthens and perpetuates a chimerical belief that dominates the next seven years of her life, and can be said to determine the course of the narrative as well. For had Eugénie not read Charles's letters, she would not have been moved to make the fateful gift. The brief romance and exchange of vows, so treasured by the impressionable young girl and so critical in establishing her emotional bond to Charles, would probably not have taken place. Nor would the conflict between Eugénie and her father, with its terrible consequences for her and her mother, have transpired. The narrative advances under the impulsion of the heroine's reading of these letters and the engagement of emotions, thoughts, and behavior that her interpretation brings about.

Just as Eugénie's unfortunate misinterpretation of a letter drives the narrative forward, her painfully lucid interpretation of another letter brings it to an end.

Although separated by a lapse of seven years and written to very different women, the two letters, both composed by Charles, are actually quite similar. Both are letters of rupture, both reveal the letter writer's preoccupation with his own needs over those of his correspondent, and both are rather insincere, although the first one decidedly less so. The letter to Annette is less calculating than it is shallow, expressing emotions that simply are not as deeply felt as his language leads the unwary Eugénie to believe. The speciousness of Charles's language in his later letter to Eugénie, however, is not at all inadvertent, and Eugénie, this time, discerns each hint of indifference and falseness with an agonizing awareness.

The letter arrives as the young woman is in the garden, on a morning that is, not without a cruel irony, "la plus fraîche, la plus joyeuse matinée" (3: 1185). Seated on the decrepit little wooden bench where Charles had sworn eternal love, Eugénie is lost in the almost ritualistic reverie about her brief romance that has occupied so much of her thought, each day, for all these years. Her understanding of the letter, simultaneous with its delivery, is unqualified and searing. She grasps its message even before reading a single word. So sure is she of its terrible contents that she refuses, briefly, to read it--the letter for which she has been waiting for seven years! The rapidity of Eugénie's interpretation is not the result of prescience. Rather she decodes, with stunning acuity, the

signs that presage Charles's desertion even before his announcement of it: the Parisian postmark, the cold salutation, the formal "vous" address. As when she read the first words of Charles's letter to Annette, her immediate reactions are intense, physiological, uncontrollable: the blood drains from her face, her heart beats wildly, her hands tremble, her chest tightens, tears spring to her eyes.

Eugénie's intuitive aversion to the document proves justified. The letter is a blend of crass posturing and poorly-concealed lies, none of which is lost on the anguished girl, whose reactions we are permitted to follow during and after her reading. This time, however, our view of Eugénie as a reader remains somewhat external; the narrator depicts her reactions in sharp detail without revealing the mental processes beneath the emotional explosion. But the details supplied suffice to engage us in the act of interpretation and impel us to furnish, from our own intuition and store of experience as readers, the cognitive substance of Eugénie's response to the hard, cold epistolary text she holds in her hands. The blank, or gap, created by the narrator's failure to focus on Eugénie's interpretive processes as she reads the fateful missive thus externalizes the process of interpretation itself, transferring it from the reader in the novel to the reader of the novel.¹²

¹² According to Iser (Act 167-70), "indeterminacies" or "blanks" in literary texts function to involve the reader in the elaboration of literary meaning.

The polite small talk we would expect to find after a seven-year absence opens the letter: news of Charles's success and fortune, condolences for the death of Eugénie's parents. This conventional opening, appropriate, on a social level, to the time gap that the letter follows, must, we suspect, strike Eugénie as very inappropriate, on an emotional level, given the passion and commitment of Charles's words to her before his departure. A thread of banal philosophizing runs through the letter: "'La mort de nos parents est dans la nature . . .'" (3: 1186); "'Rien ne résiste au temps . . .'" (3: 1186); "'Nous nous devons à nos enfants'" (3: 1187). Each of these platitudes rings, we imagine, with a cruelly false note for Eugénie: the death of her mother was certainly not "dans la nature"; she has herself stubbornly resisted the erosion of time; she does not, and will never, have children to whom to devote her life--and it is this very letter that guarantees her barren destiny. The fact that Eugénie is not privileged as she reads the letter, as we, the other readers, are, by the knowledge that Charles has become a hardened adventurer makes her less ready to pardon his cynically empty words. In any case, Charles's real message and intent are scarcely concealed and Eugénie, we sense, can see exactly where he is leading.

The flat philosophizing is not long sustained. Charles's impatient, inelegant, "'Que voulez-vous!'" (3: 1186) strips away the polite veneer. He now comes to the

cruel point of his letter: He is seeking release from the solemn vows exchanged with Eugénie so many years earlier, a moral obligation that was, he knows, reinforced by her monetary gift. He awkwardly invokes stock reasons for the rupture--a break that for him occurred long ago: the changes that time, distance, and experience have wrought on him; the fact that they are both, in reality, "'libre'" (3: 1186); the childish insubstantiality of the feelings on which their promises were based. As readers we have no difficulty imagining Eugénie's reception of each of Charles's excuses and the suffering that his unfeeling words provoke. For Eugénie, we know, remains unchanged, by time as well as by experience. She does not consider herself free from the vows exchanged. Her cousin's constant easy denigrations of their early romance must constitute particularly painful blows: "'rien n'empêche, en apparence, la réalisation de nos petits projets . . .'" (3: 1186); "'Il est possible que de votre côté vous ayez oublié nos enfantillages après sept années d'absence . . .'" (3: 1187); "'je me souviens encore de nos amours d'enfant . . .'" (3: 1188). And his assertions of faithful attachment must also ring false, as he evokes details that have little meaning for him as he writes, but so much meaning for Eugénie as she reads that she responds with agonizing intensity:

"Je n'ai point oublié que je ne m'appartiens pas; je me suis toujours souvenu dans mes longues traversées du petit banc de bois... "

Eugénie se leva comme si elle eût été sur des charbons ardents, et alla s'asseoir sur une des marches de la cour. (3: 1186)

Charles makes no effort to conceal the practical reasons motivating the rupture he is seeking: he announces his intention to marry Mlle d'Aubrion. A good part of the letter is given over to justifying this marriage of convenience. The view of matrimony that Charles rather coldly puts forth constitutes a brutal attack on Eugénie's own sadly delusory views of love and marriage as well as an ironical foreshadowing of the emotionally vacant match to which she is fated: "L'amour, dans le mariage, est une chimère. Aujourd'hui mon expérience me dit qu'il faut obéir à toutes les lois sociales et réunir toutes les convenances voulues par le monde en se mariant'" (3: 1187). Crueller still are the reasons Charles gives for dismissing a possible match between them: Eugénie is too old for him, and her quiet provincial manners make her ill-suited for the brilliant social life he hopes to lead in Paris. Once again, as readers we easily reconstruct Eugénie's reaction to Charles's insensitive rejection of her; we are later permitted to apprehend it directly, as we read her politely contemptuous letter of response.

Amidst hollow protestations of sincerity, good faith, and noble intentions ("Vous voyez, ma cousine, avec quelle bonne foi je vous expose l'état de mon coeur, de mes espérances et de ma fortune" [3: 1187]; "un jeune homme moins consciencieux que je ne le suis, ayant un coeur moins jeune et moins probe . . ." [3: 1187]), Charles closes his letter with a spurious offer to renounce his brilliant

social marriage to Mlle d'Aubrion and wed Eugénie, should that still be her wish: "'s'il faut renoncer à mes ambitions sociales, je me contenterai volontiers de ce simple et pur bonheur duquel vous m'avez offert de si touchantes images . . .'" (3: 1188). The phoniness of this proposal is confirmed for Eugénie in a subsequent letter, written by M. des Grassins, in which she learns that Charles's marriage banns had long been published, making a retraction of the engagement a very serious matter, one that he would have been unlikely to undertake.

Eugénie's suffering as she reads the letter contrasts sharply with Charles's nonchalance as he composes it. There is a shocking dichotomy between, on the one hand, Charles's restive mood and indifferent thoughts as he writes and, on the other, the sentimental niceties with which he strives to fill the injurious text. We glimpse him humming a lighthearted melody ("Non più andrai") that reveals his real intentions as he proposes to return to Eugénie, and we overhear his expressions of impatience as he humors her in order to minimize the unpleasant consequences of the break: "'Tonnerre de Dieu! c'est y mettre des procédés'" (3: 1188), Charles restlessly exclaims as he signs his name and adds a final P.-S. to the bothersome missive.

In contrast, the letter that was merely an annoying chore for Charles to write is, as we have seen, an excruciating ordeal for Eugénie to read. The devastation she suffers is sweeping: "Epouvantable et complet désastre.

Le vaisseau semblait sans laisser ni un cordage, ni une planche sur le vaste océan des espérances" (3: 1188). She is careful to conceal her emotions from those around her, for she has learned from her father the art of maintaining, under all circumstances, an impassive expression and composed bearing. Moreover, as the narrator explains, Eugénie is of the breed of women who:

baissent la tête et souffrent en silence; elles vont mourantes et résignées, pleurant et pardonnant, priant et se souvenant jusqu'au dernier soupir. Ceci est de l'amour, l'amour vrai, l'amour des anges, l'amour fier qui vit de sa douleur et qui en meurt. (3: 1188)

Eugénie is indeed moribund as she finishes Charles's letter and drags herself away "à pas lents" (3: 1189) from the garden. Having relinquished all illusions and hopes, she is emotionally spent and, in some sense, dead, as she accepts, at last, the loveless union that is pressed upon her.

And so, two acts of reading play a significant role in the subtle action, relatively unaffected by external events, of this narrative. Eugénie's tragic misinterpretation of Charles's letter of farewell to his mistress propels the narrative forward, for it nurtures an illusion that brings the young woman into conflict with her father and incites her quiet rebellion against her provincial fate. Her painfully accurate interpretation of Charles's letter of rupture brings the narrative to a close, for her abandonment of her romantic illusion and acceptance of her sad destiny dissipate the tension that had sustained narrative interest.

Moreover, the focus on Eugénie as a reader, either directly (through the narrator's commentary on the interplay of mental and emotional processes that shape her interpretation) or indirectly (through gaps in narratorial commentary, which stimulate us, as readers, to supply the details missing from the description of her response) highlights the extent to which the critical mechanisms of the narrative are silent, hidden, and psychological.

The act of reading, as a complex mental process, occupies a privileged, if somewhat restricted, position in Eugénie Grandet. It is studied in depth, and its operations are closely aligned with the psychological springs of the character in which it is observed. In Béatrix, acts of reading impinge even more insistently on the narrative action. The focus, however, trained on many characters and the diverse reading styles they display, is less incisively analytical; it is less concerned with the process of interpretation as explored within a single character than with the diverse and often contradictory interpretations to which a single text may be subject. The elaboration of this theme is facilitated by the non-exclusive status of the letters in Béatrix: everyone, it seems, reads everyone else's mail! Félicité des Touches shares the letter Béatrix writes her from Italy with Calyste du Guénic and Claude Vignon. Calyste's mother, Fanny, reads both love letters her son writes to Béatrix, as well as Béatrix's reply, and

she shares the contents of the latter with the chevalier du Halga. And Béatrix shows Félicité Calyste's love letter, dealing her rival a sharp blow in the war of words in which they are engaged. Inasmuch as they are texts to be deciphered by these various readers, the letters in Béatrix posit and explore the topos of interpretation, a central theme in the drama that pits the world of the du Guénic against that of des Touches.

The baronne du Guénic and her son prove themselves to be innocent readers, as unpracticed in the art of decoding epistolary texts as they are in the ways of the world that has passed their staid Breton clan by. Calyste misreads Béatrix's letters, perceiving only the superficial messages the writer deliberately plants to conceal her intentions and missing the deeper meanings, which leak through the explicit text and are very obvious to other characters. Calyste's mother also lacks the combination of insight and experience that would help her decipher the letters' implicit contents. She is as taken in as her son by the virtuous posturing with which Béatrix replies to his ardent declaration of love. It is only the chevalier du Halga who correctly "reads" the message its writer so artfully buried in her response and enlightens Fanny about its true meaning.

The readers at des Touches--Félicité and her guests Béatrix de Rochefide and Claude Vignon--are, not surprisingly, very skilled textual interpreters. Parisians all, they are deft in the intricate maneuvers of

conversation, an art demanding interpretive skills as highly refined as those needed for elucidating the messages hidden in these epistolary texts. And their exposure to literature, music, and art has further perfected the exegetic talents of these connoisseurs.

Félicité displays her sophisticated understanding of the process of reading through her control of the conditions in which she guides Calyste to read the letter Béatrix wrote her from Italy. Her intentions here are complex. First, she wants to see how much Calyste knows, and how much he has yet to learn, about the ways of love: "'Voici la lettre de Béatrix, vous pourrez maintenant la comprendre, si à votre âge on peut analyser déjà les choses du coeur, dit-elle en lui tendant la lettre'" (2: 722). But her motives are sentimental as well as didactic, for she seeks to make Calyste fall in love with Béatrix. She has just described her friend to the young man in richly tantalizing detail, inflaming his imagination by showing him the Miéris portrait that is her likeness and relating the provocative details of her life. Calyste's emotional state as he reads Béatrix's letter is largely determined by these cunning efforts; the image evoked by Félicité dances before him: "En la dépliant, la vive imagination de Calyste lui montra la marquise vêtue comme la lui avait fantastiquement dépeinte Camille Maupin" (2: 725-26). Thus, by carefully establishing the emotional context in which the young man reads the letter, Félicité succeeds in manipulating his response.

But Félicité's maneuvers cannot fully account for the failure of Calyste's interpretation. The reverence with which he reads--or, we may be permitted to assert, fails, on a deeper level, to read--Béatrix's letter provides an unmistakable index of his naïveté, which can be described as a lack of interpretive acumen. When pressed for his interpretation of the letter--a matter that has become the focal point of a conversation between Félicité, Calyste, and Claude Vignon--Calyste blurts out: "--Mais... que les femmes de Paris sont bien heureuses, elles ont toutes des hommes de génie à adorer et qui les aiment" (2: 732). In his obtuse innocence, the young man discerns little more in the text than the words on the page and is readily taken in by the writer's efforts to paint her lackluster situation in rosy colors. Guilelessness and gullibility are here equated with an uncritical reading style.

Calyste's interpretive abilities evolve during the course of the narrative. His subsequent reading of this letter allows him to intuit, in the letter in which Béatrix ostensibly breaks with him, the unwritten message: that she may love him because she has not written that she does not love him, and that she is free to love him because there is no love between her and Conti--and perhaps there never was: "'Vous n'avez pas été aimée; je le sens en relisant votre lettre, et j'y crois deviner que, s'il n'existait aucune des raisons dont vous parlez, vous vous laisseriez aimer par moi'" (2: 793). Calyste thus presses his developing powers

of interpretation into the service of his love, as he seeks to influence the woman he is courting.

Very different is the wary caution with which Félicité examines every word in the epistolary texts that fall beneath her undeludable gaze. When she gives Béatrix's letter to Calyste, Félicité expresses her general reaction to her friend's correspondence. She tells him that Béatrix's letters spill over with friendship ("sont ravissantes d'amitié" [2: 722]) and manifest her deep attachment to the only woman she feels can understand her. Are we to believe Félicité's report? Does she accept the sincerity of the feelings Béatrix professes? Félicité does not state, simply and confidently of her friend, "Elle m'adore," but rather, "Elle m'adore, dit-elle" (2: 722). The "dit-elle" casts the preceding statement in doubt; if it does not entirely disown the assertion, neither does it fully adopt it. Thus Félicité des Touches reveals herself to be a skeptical reader. She is taken in not a whit by the idyllic scene her friend has painted and seems at least mildly surprised at Calyste's eagerness to believe what is to her so patently false: "--Eh bien, vous êtes encore de votre village, dit en riant Félicité. Comment? vous n'avez pas vu qu'elle l'aime déjà moins . . ." (2: 732).

The covert message in Béatrix's letter could not be more conspicuous to Claude Vignon, who picks it out at a glance, after scanning only the first page. The critic points out for Calyste the clues that make the void in

Béatrix's feelings for Conti so evident: A woman deeply in love is not so exquisitely aware of her situation as is Béatrix, does not observe it so closely or analyze it so keenly; she is, on the contrary, oblivious to external circumstances. Vignon perceives that Béatrix is bound to Conti not by love, but by pride, that is, by the heavy chain of the social fault she has committed in abandoning her husband. It is not surprising that Claude Vignon is given the role of teaching the unschooled Calyste how to "read" the letter. He is the literary critic, the interpreter of texts par excellence. His critical instincts are infallible, his analytical abilities, unrivalled: his interpretation of Béatrix's letter is the valid one.

The letters Béatrix and Calyste write each other also become the focus of an interpretive quest within the narrative. The baronne du Guénic "eavesdrops" on the entire correspondence between the seductive marquise and her son. This is partly because Calyste willingly shares the letters with her. But her overwhelming concern for him, her sense that she is losing him--not only to another woman, but to another world--also impels her to read the fatal missives. Following Béatrix's refusal to make the excursion to Le Croisic, Calyste had returned home from des Touches "en proie à un de ces chagrins d'amoureux dont la violence arrive à la folie" (2: 780) and, in brooding silence, had locked himself in his room. Later that night the worried mother finds him lost among a pile of scrawled and crumpled

pages, feverishly drafting an amorous declaration. Innocent and unschooled in the ways of wordly love though she is, Fanny has no trouble deciphering the ardent message of the letter, which Calyste himself reads to her: "Pour elle, cette vieille maison était comme en feu, l'amour de son fils y flambait comme la lumière d'un incendie" (2: 780). The poor woman is frightened; she has never been exposed to the intense emotions of passionate love, neither through direct experience nor through the mediation that the conventions of its epistolary expression provide: "Ce terrible poème de sentiments tombés comme un orage dans le coeur de Calyste, et qui devait aller en tourbillonnant dans une autre âme, effraya la baronne: elle lisait une lettre d'amour pour la première fois de sa vie" (2: 784).

If Fanny intuitively seizes the message contained in Calyste's letter, it is because, knowing her own son, she cannot mistake the boldness of his epistolary gesture. Béatrix, to whom the letter is addressed, is more tentative in her reading. She proceeds with caution as she pieces together the elements of her interpretation. This is not surprising, for she has partial and contradictory clues as to the text's possible meaning. The wariness of her interpretive style and the obliqueness of her reply proceed from the ambiguous circumstances in which, for her, the letter appears. If she interprets it within the context of Calyste's actions and demeanor during the preceding week, when he feigned passionate adoration of her rival, then it

could be seen as a mockery, a trick to make her the butt of a cruel joke. If, on the other hand, she believed his sincerity when, earlier that day in the garden, stepping out of the mute role imposed on him by Félicité, he blurted out his love for her, Béatrix, then the authenticity of the feelings he expresses in his letter is less dubious. But, given the divergent contexts within which the letter may be placed and the evidence supporting contradictory meanings, Béatrix must withhold final interpretation, as the circumspect, probing nature of her reply reveals.

Calyste and his mother are completely beguiled by Béatrix's epistolary posturing of noble self-sacrifice, and they are taken in by the concern she expresses for Calyste's future well-being and for her own honor:

Ces deux belles âmes, si simples, si naïves, ne virent dans cette astucieuse et perfide réponse aucune des malices et des pièges qu'y avait mis la marquise.

"C'est une noble et grande femme! dit la baronne dont les yeux étaient humides. Je prierai Dieu pour elle. Je ne croyais pas qu'une mère pût abandonner son mari, son enfant, et conserver tant de vertus! Elle est digne de pardon." (2: 789-90)

But almost immediately, the mother's caution takes over. Even if she does not see through Béatrix's shrewd tactics, Fanny does perceive the peril in the sentiments her letter declares. She may be duped by Béatrix's insincerity, but she intuitively grasps the dangerous appeal of the image that her text projects: "--Mais où cet amour te mènera-t-il? s'écria la baronne. Ah! mon enfant, combien les femmes à

sentiments nobles sont dangereuses! Les mauvaises sont moins à craindre'" (2: 790).

Later, the baronne's fears lead her to consult the chevalier du Halga, well-schooled in the ways and epistolary wiles of gallant love: "Mme du Guénic, sans rien dire de son fils ni de la marquise, expliqua la lettre d'amour en demandant quel pouvait être le sens d'une pareille réponse" (2: 790-91). The chevalier applies the rules of context to interpret the concealed message of Béatrix's letter. From the point of view of reception theory, we would say that for him Béatrix's epistolary gesture acquires meaning within a common frame with which he has a vast and presumably intimate experience: the manners and rituals that regulate the game of worldly courtship.¹³ Halga's familiarity with these mores and his awareness that they frame Béatrix's text make him an especially astute reader. He instantly sees through the cunning of the letter writer's words, apprehends her guise and posturing, understands the text's probing nature and, most importantly, fathoms its true intentions toward Calyste, which are neither noble nor selfless: "Quand les chevaux de race doivent franchir les barrières, ils viennent les reconnaître et les flairer, dit-il. Calyste sera le plus heureux coquin du monde'" (2: 791).

¹³ On common frames, see Eco 20-21. If Halga were to refer to other letters of seduction that coquettes in similar situations had written, then we would say that he uses an intertextual frame to interpret Béatrix's letter. On intertextual frames, see Eco 21-22.

For the chevalier du Halga, beneath the letter of rupture there beckons a coquettish invitation. Although he belongs to the du Guénic circle, the chevalier's skill in decoding amorous missives puts him on a par with the epistolary exegetes in the coterie at des Touches.

When Fanny reads her son's reply to Béatrix's treacherously seductive letter, her suspicions of the infatuation that has him in its thrall are confirmed. Her reaction shows just how hopeless Calyste's situation is:

La baronne laissa tomber la lettre sans l'achever, elle s'agenouilla sur une chaise et fit à Dieu une oraison mentale en lui demandant de conserver à son fils l'entendement, d'écarter de lui toute folie, toute erreur, et de le retirer de la voie où elle le voyait. (2: 793)

Thus it is the passionate, direct expression of Calyste's love in his letters that brings his mother finally to realize the extent of his feelings. The interpretive abilities of Fanny du Guénic, like those of her son, show a marked evolution during the course of the narrative.

It is as a letter reader that Félicité des Touches/Camille Maupin suffers her most devastating defeat in the battle she wages with Béatrix for Calyste's heart. Even before she has any direct evidence of the correspondence between Calyste and Béatrix, Camille guesses that some form of communication has occurred between them. The simple fact of their correspondence has, inevitably, changed their relationship: words of love have been proffered and rejected, sentiments have been probed and reaffirmed, and

this has altered the balance of power between them. The evidence of this epistolary contact need not be directly apprehended for a reader as discerning as Camille Maupin. Even without speaking a word, the couple's gestures, glances, and bearing announce, like a coded dispatch, the alliance their correspondence has established:

"Calyste a commis quelque sottise", pensa Camille
remarquant chez l'un et l'autre l'air
indéfinissable des gens qui s'entendent.

Il n'y avait plus ni raideur ni fausse
indifférence chez la marquise, elle regardait
Calyste comme une chose à elle. Calyste fut alors
explicite, il rougit en vrai coupable, en homme
heureux. (2: 795)

Thus the silent bond established between the couple by the language of letters announces itself to Camille through the language of gestures, which indiscreetly translate communications the lovers are unable to suppress.

Camille's interception of the glances that pass between Béatrix and Calyste and her painful deduction of their meaning are scant preparation for the wound she sustains when the piece of paper is thrust before her eyes. The blow is powerful, first, because Béatrix uses the letter to strike deliberately at her heart, at a critical moment of a heated argument in which the two women are engaged. This "duel de tromperies" is a pitched verbal battle over Calyste; but love is only a pretext for a fiercer war, a power struggle in which intelligence and wit, in the form of

words, are the weapons.¹⁴ It is not surprising, then, that a letter--a calculated arrangement of words written by one person to communicate something to another--should become a decisive weapon in this battle.

Up to the point that Béatrix shows her Calyste's letter, Camille has had the advantage both fundamentally (she is the superior intelligence) and tactically (she has contrived the situation). Béatrix, moreover, is the attacker, having all the strategic uncertainty of that dangerous position; Camille is the defender: she is on her own territory, both literally and figuratively. At a critical moment in the battle, Béatrix is nearly overwhelmed by her more powerful opponent, who then commits the fatal error of revealing her vulnerability. She confesses that she would not survive Calyste's desertion and asserts that, in any case, Calyste loves her. The provocation is too great. Béatrix, who has up to this point been beaten by Camille, cannot resist this incitement to use the one deadly weapon remaining in her arsenal: the evidence that Calyste loves her, and not Camille. She shoves the letter in Camille's face. This time, finally, she wounds her enemy, and badly:

--Voilà ce qu'il répondait à une lettre où je ne lui parlais que de vous", dit Béatrix en tendant la lettre de Calyste.

Camille la prit et la lut; mais, en la lisant, ses yeux s'emplirent de larmes; elle pleura comme

¹⁴ As we have noted in chapter 5, Kanes (177-83) explores the word as weapon in Balzac's novels.

pleurent toutes les femmes dans leurs vives douleurs.

"Mon Dieu! dit-elle, il l'aime. Je mourrai donc sans avoir été ni comprise ni aimée!"

Elle resta quelques moments la tête appuyée sur l'épaule de Béatrix: sa douleur était véritable, elle éprouvait dans ses entrailles le coup terrible qu'y avait reçu la baronne du Guénic à la lecture de cette lettre. (2: 801-802)

The stunning force of the blow dealt by Calyste's letter stems from its revelation of feelings that Camille had struggled to deny. It provides incontrovertible evidence not only of Calyste's love for Béatrix, but of Camille's love for him, a sentiment she had hitherto been unable to admit.

This confrontation, whose climax is marked by the reading of a letter, adds an interesting dimension to the theme of interpretation elaborated in Béatrix. The process through which Camille Maupin grasps the meaning of Calyste's love letter parallels the interpretive process seen in Fanny du Guénic (and recalls the emotional basis of the rapid exegesis through which Eugénie Grandet grasped the cold message in Charles's final letter to her): it is intuitive, it occurs instantaneously, and its effects are devastating. These women, so different in intellect, outlook, and experience, arrive at the same interpretation of the letter in the same manner, and they display similarly intense reactions. In this case, interpretation is facilitated not by intellect, but by emotion. Their love for the writer--Fanny's maternal affection and Camille's romantic passion--

reveals to these two readers, in a direct and searing manner, his letter's meaning.

The free circulation of the correspondence in Béatrix exposes a danger to which all letters are, disturbingly, vulnerable. A letter writer addresses a specific individual, and the act of communication in which he or she engages is guided by a distinctive, private intent. But once it leaves a writer's hands, the letter "has potentially a life of its own, being capable of reappearing in unintended contexts."¹⁵ The reader may, casually or maliciously, share its contents with other persons, without the writer's permission or even knowledge. Or, as occurs in Albert Savarus, letters may be intercepted or stolen, their secret contents violated, their original intent betrayed.

Letters are not the only texts whose fatal detour simultaneously supports and subverts the narrative framework of Albert Savarus. More than a third of the one hundred or so pages of this slender novel are taken up with letters and other texts composed by its characters. Primary among these embedded texts is Albert Savaron's thirty-page autobiographical story, "L'Ambitieux par l'amour," which he publishes in La Revue de l'Est, a literary journal under his direction. Two important letters also written by this character follow his short story: one to his friend and

¹⁵ Charles A. Porter, foreword, Men/Women of Letters, Yale French Studies, 71 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) 6.

confidant, Léopold Hannequin, the other, a letter-journal to his beloved, the duchesse d'Argaiolo. Two briefer missives, an exchange of correspondence between l'abbé de Grancey and Albert Savaron, provide the first in a series of bizarre dénouements with which the novel closes. The letters, occupying roughly ten pages, exert a pull on the flow of the narrative that is disproportionate to their length. The key to their magnified influence lies less in their substance than in their reception by one unintended reader, Rosalie de Watteville. The acts to which the pirated missives move this antiheroine upset the expected course of narrative events, and the unauthorized reading in which she engages channels the reception of the novel by its readers.

Critics have emphasized the biographical resonance of Albert Savarus: the lengthy letter-journals that Balzac wrote to his distant Polish mistress; the "Vous êtes libre" with which she cut off his long-nurtured hopes of marriage-- words that Balzac lifted directly from her real letter and inserted, with no loss of impact or break of tone, into his character's fictional one; Balzac's spiritual identity with the novel's passionate hero, particularly as reflected in the latter's correspondence and short story. But no less interesting than this psychological axis that ties the author to his text and reflects his emotional crisis is the aesthetic pole that links the text to the reader of the novel and reveals a crisis in the reader's role itself. Rosalie de Watteville is the pivot of this axis, for it is

as a reader that her behavior dynamically structures the narrative. It is also as a reader that the full extent of her malicious character emerges and corrupts the pragmatic function of that fictional role.

Rosalie intercepts all the texts written by Albert Savaron, but only his final letter does she read with the full knowledge of the person to whom it is addressed, l'abbé de Grancey; its writer, having withdrawn into a state of monastic abnegation, will raise no objections to her uninvited reading. Rosalie's strict mother had branded literary journals as dangerous and forbidden her access to the publication in which Albert Savaron's short story appeared. But the young girl's shrewd manipulation of her father enabled her to bypass maternal interdiction. In the case of Albert's private letters, Rosalie's maneuvering is more devious and its consequences more serious: her procurement and reading of these texts are tantamount to theft and espionage.

In fact, acts of surveillance and espionage permeate the narrative structure of Albert Savarus: from the domestic policing to which Mme de Watteville resorts to penetrate her daughter's cryptic behavior, to the sick, desperate watch through which the obsessed young girl tracks her would-be lover; from the surveillance to which Rodolphe (in "L'Ambitieux par l'amour") subjects the duchesse d'Argaiolo as he pursues this mysterious woman through the labyrinth of his desire, to the imbroglio of conspiracy, espionage, and

counterespionage in which the political refugees in this story-within-the-story become entangled.

The pervasiveness of acts of furtive observation, stealthy policing, and outright spying at all levels of Albert Savarus provides the structural and moral contexts for the event that has the greatest impact on its narrative flow: Rosalie's surreptitious appropriation and reading of Albert's private correspondence. Here the epistolary form intersects dramatically with the narrative's psychological undercurrent. For not only does Rosalie follow her victim's every move but, through the purloined texts, compulsively searches the recesses of his heart and mind: his thoughts, feelings, and motivations. The theft of correspondence thus signals the gravest form of espionage, that of a person's inner existence, his soul. The abbé de Grancey, on hearing Rosalie's confession of her astonishing theft, signals the utter reprehensibility of this act: "'De tous les crimes secrets ensevelis dans les mystères de la vie privée, un des plus déshonorants est celui de briser le cachet d'une lettre ou de la lire subrepticement. Toute personne, quelle qu'elle soit, poussée par quelque raison que ce soit, qui se permet cet acte, a fait une tache ineffaçable à sa probité'" (1: 1013). Grancey's scathing condemnation highlights the powerful negative significance of Rosalie's act of reading within the moral structure of this novel.

The narrative flow of Albert Savarus is severely disrupted by Rosalie's trespass. Her reading of Albert's

letters gives her privileged information, to which only his most intimate acquaintances have access. In this way, she learns of the political ambitions and carefully concealed plans of this man, for whom secrecy is crucial. The stolen letters are also the means through which Rosalie realizes the full extent of Albert's passionate commitment to the duchesse d'Argaiolo: "'Comme il aime! s'écria Rosalie en laissant tomber cette lettre qui lui sembla lourde à tenir. Après onze ans écrire ainsi?'" (1: 983). Apprehension of these intimate details leads the misguided girl, who somehow views herself as the lover scorned, to harm the man who is the object of her obsessive attention.

In a series of desperate acts of intervention that she could not have undertaken without the knowledge gleaned from her unsanctioned reading of his private correspondence, Rosalie deliberately destroys the private dreams as well as the public aspirations of the man whom, in her demented fashion, she loves. She sabotages his political ambitions and undermines his romance with the duchesse d'Argaiolo, a love affair that had withstood countless obstacles and twelve years of separation. Rosalie achieves these malevolent ends by deliberately corrupting the channel of communication established by the act of letter writing. Not only as a reader does Rosalie pervert the conventions of epistolary communication, but as a writer as well. From her illicit reading of texts not meant for her, Rosalie graduates to the fraudulent composition of texts for an evil

purpose. She writes an anonymous letter to Albert's political enemy in which her revelation of the attorney's hitherto secret ambitions seal their failure. She suppresses the real letters between Albert and his beloved and substitutes counterfeit ones in which she instigates a misunderstanding that is responsible for the dissolution of their love. Thus it is that the unauthorized reading by one character of the private correspondence of another is the mechanism through which the narrative begins its movement toward a tragic resolution. And the acts of intervention that bring about its hero's ultimate destruction are unauthorized acts of letter writing.

Rosalie de Watteville's behavior as a reader and writer of letters calls attention--in a disquieting manner--to the pragmatic function that fictional readers may serve vis-à-vis their extratextual counterparts, for it upsets the novel reader's comfortable, often unexamined, role. The experience of reading Albert Savarus elicits a vague but gnawing unease. The story's tragic outcome, the hero's immense suffering, the protagonist's bizarre and driven behavior, and her final, terrible punishment certainly suffice to account for the reader's discomfort. From a pragmatic perspective, however, this distress lies in the highly ambiguous role the reader is assigned within the narrative. Forced by the protocol of concealment that dominates this narrative to remain himself concealed, the reader is an uninvited guest and, at times, a voyeur. His

own vision of the novel's hero, rarely unobstructed, is tightly controlled by one or another of the characters in the novel. Sometimes it is the abbé de Grancey who determines the reader's perspective on Albert Savaron. Most frequently it is Rosalie de Watteville who exercises this power. Even the texts to which the reader is given direct access--Albert Savaron's letters and short story--are tainted by the clandestine and underhanded means through which their contents are divulged. Rosalie de Watteville's illicit reading of these texts inevitably corrupts the status of the reader, whose access to narrative is normally sanctioned by the conventions of novel reading. Peering over the shoulder of a spy--a rather sick, malicious one, at that--the reader too becomes a spy, whose behavior somehow breaches the basic rules of decency. The fictional reader's theft, espionage, and voyeurism with malicious intent thus represent the ultimate perversion of the act of reading.

Albert Savarus represents an extreme instance of the power--here, wrongfully acquired and perniciously exercised--of fictional readers to shape the narrative and influence its reception by the nonfictional readers whose role, for better or for worse, they model. The power that fictional readers wield is, however, usually legitimate, an intrinsic privilege of the position of judge into which they are so often cast. Nowhere is the significance and complexity of the reader's function more fully explored than

in Le Lys dans la vallée, a novel whose ultimate outcome is dependent on an act of reading which occurs within it and of which we, its extratextual readers remain only peripherally aware. This marginal attention to reading is, as we have seen in chapter 1, a device to postpone the reader's understanding of the narrative. Reinstated as a critical, probing act of interrogation and interpretation, the process of reading, as manifested in Natalie's response to Félix's long epistolary narrative, instigates a retrospective evaluation of it.

The central role of reading in this novel is further attested by its evolution. Letters were accorded a relatively insignificant role in Le Lys dans la vallée as initially conceived by Balzac.¹⁶ The pagination of the original manuscript reveals that Natalie's response was a very late addition; in uncorrected galleys, Mme de Mortsauf voices her concerns and advice directly to Félix rather than in writing; and a close study of the narrataire addressed in the early pages of Félix's confession in manuscript suggests that Balzac did not at first intend the lengthy confidence to be delivered as a letter. This evolution of the novel toward the epistolary form inevitably caused the reader's role to expand in importance. In fact, reading appears to be a fundamental structure of Le Lys dans la vallée. The unpredictability and autonomy of the reader; the importance

¹⁶ The remarks in this paragraph are based on Le Yaouanc, 434-35.

of being aware of and sensitive to one's reader; the consequences of being an inattentive reader: Balzac's exploration of these themes shows us what type of readers--and writers--we should strive to become. Both Natalie and Félix serve to highlight the reader's influence and responsibility, the power with which his role invests him and the pitfalls to which it exposes him.

Natalie's primary function in the novel is that of a reader, and her reactions have a critical impact on the narrative. As Victor Brombert has shown,¹⁷ Natalie's semi-visible presence in the narrative, as the "vous" to whom Félix's confession is addressed, implies the existence of two, diametrically opposed, readers. The one, sympathetic, understanding, and indulgent, does not question the writer's moral position nor criticize his behavior. This rather generalized reader, to whom Félix appeals as a fellow sufferer ("Génies éteints dans les larmes, coeurs méconnus, saintes Clarisse Harlowe ignorées, enfants désavoués" [9: 1038]; "vous qui aimez" [9: 1139]), possibly also a fellow sinner not ready to cast the first stone, is the one Félix believes he is addressing--or at the very least, the one with whom he hopes his interlocutor will identify. Félix's actual reader, the one who Natalie turns out to be, is far less sympathetic to him, and far less abstract. She is, it must be remembered, the woman he is courting, and her

¹⁷ This paragraph is based on Brombert 179.

jealous anger is stirred by her suitor's unending adoration of his former mistresses and tiresome regrets for his losses. This reader is also considerably more judgmental and less indulgent than the one Félix postulates: she holds him accountable both for his past behavior (his callow failure to remain faithful to Mme de Mortsauf--her sole demand of him) and his present conduct (his insensitive solicitation of her admiration for the virtues and charms of his former loves).

Thus, in addition to provoking Natalie's jealousy over his past romantic involvements (which continue to have what is for her an infuriating grip on him), Félix manages to stir other negative feelings in her. Natalie's ardor is dampened by her suitor's grave character flaws; she is repelled by "la faiblesse, la fatuité, l'égoïsme, la duplicité, et pour tout dire la mauvaise foi"¹⁸ he so willingly displays in the text of his letter. If Félix's morose tendencies as a lover raised serious questions in Natalie's mind about the depth of his affection for her, his indiscretion and lack of judgment as a letter writer have more damaging consequences. The anger and hostility his letter arouses moves her to rebuff his sentimental initiative, the acceptance of which it was his letter's mission to achieve. Natalie's unpredictability as a reader and her categorical rejection of Félix's overtures show just

¹⁸ Brombert 179.

how powerful the reader potentially is, no matter how silent or passive she may appear to be.

The duality of Natalie as a reader of Félix's narrative suggests, by extension, that no text--letter or novel--is guaranteed the luxury of having the reader its author posits, nor the safety of a single interpretation. No author can completely foresee how a reader will react or how a text will be interpreted. Félix, no doubt, could have been wiser and more politic in composing his letter, but interpretation always carries an element of uncertainty and even surprise. A reader may be sympathetic and indulgent, as Félix imagined and hoped his reader to be, or critical and judgmental, as she turned out. Moreover, these are only two responses, occurring along a moral continuum. As the shifting readings of the letters in Béatrix show, every text is subject to a multiplicity of interpretations, which may occur along many different axes of judgment. The epistolarity of Le Lys dans la vallée brings two such contradictory interpretations of the narrative within the structure of the novel itself. Moreover its epistolary construction dramatically illustrates the measure of autonomy that the reader enjoys vis-à-vis the writer.

The theoretical infinity of possible readers and interpretations to which every text is subject does not detract from the responsibilities of the writer toward the reader. As suggested above, the failure of Félix's romantic advances toward Natalie has less to do with his shortcomings

as a lover than with his inadequacy and insensitivity as a writer. All writers must try to imagine the feelings and reactions of the person they are addressing and select their words accordingly. This is especially true when the writer's purpose is to persuade--and Félix is, after all, trying to win Natalie's love. Yet he seems to lack the capacity to be guided by an empathic vision of his reader, for, fully aware of the dangers of his enterprise, he proceeds anyway:

Chère Natalie, en vous disant ma vie sans réserve et sans artifice, comme je me la dirais à moi-même, en vous racontant des sentiments où vous n'étiez pour rien, peut-être ai-je froissé quelque pli de votre coeur jaloux et délicat . . . (9: 1225; my italics)

Félix fails to recognize the critical difference between "moi-même" and "vous," the self and the other, the writer and the reader. With oneself, complete honesty is required; it is the only path to lucidity. But communication with another person implies a degree of selection, judgment, and inevitably, censorship; a text must be tailored to its reader's situation, interests, needs, desires, and sensibility. This Félix de Vandenesse the writer, fails to do. The roles of writer and reader are, the epistolary construction of Le Lys dans la vallée thus makes clear, interdependent. Not without impunity does the writer compose in a vacuum, unaware of his reader's presence, however remote. For the wise and astute writer, the maxim "Know thyself" is doubled by a pragmatic imperative, "Know thy reader."

Félix de Vandenesse's career as a reader underscores the equally weighty responsibilities of the reader toward the writer. In addition to Natalie's response to his long confessional narrative, three additional letters, all from Mme de Mortsauf, are addressed to Félix within the novel. He is, on the whole, somewhat discreet in describing his reactions to the correspondence he receives. Moreover, the bulk of this correspondence--the letters he exchanges with Mme de Mortsauf during his stay in Paris--is only alluded to in his narrative. Still, it is possible to observe in Félix a distinctive pattern of response.

The most obvious characteristic of Félix as a reader of Mme de Mortsauf's letters is his compliance. As we have shown in chapter 4, her letters do more than offer simple advice; they constitute an elaborate, reasoned plan of action buttressed by a philosophy of conduct, one that Félix embraces obediently, happily, and completely as he makes his way in Paris: "J'écrivais fidèlement à ma chère Henriette, qui me répondait une ou deux lettres par mois. Son esprit planait ainsi sur moi, ces pensées traversaient les distances et me faisaient une atmosphère pure" (9: 1109). Here Félix's acquiescence serves him well. He is cultivated by the most influential people and welcomed into the highest aristocratic circles. He becomes a valued diplomat, the right-hand man of the king, entrusted with important and dangerous missions. Félix attributes his success to Mme de Mortsauf's guidance and support:

Mme de Mortsauf avait vu juste, je lui devais donc tout: pouvoir et richesse, le bonheur et la science; elle me guidait et m'encourageait, purifiait mon coeur et donnait à mes vœux cette unité sans laquelle les forces de la jeunesse se dépensent inutilement. (9: 1108)

Félix's adult character is thus shaped by his willing submission to the moral influence Mme de Mortsauf exerts in her letters. His own obedient attitude is as crucial to his successful career as the social advantages his connection with her aristocratic family provides.

Félix's happy subservience as a reader is manifested at a physical level. Refusing to allow mundane concerns to interrupt the discourse of his beloved, Félix never reads Mme de Mortsauf's letters except in absolute silence. He seems to work himself into a semi-mesmerized state as he reads, excluding the outside world during these blissful moments and enveloping himself in the reality of her letter. Distance is annulled as her missives exude the commanding immediacy of her presence; it is as if, through her written words, she is speaking directly to him: "Voici, Natalie, l'adorable voix qui tout à coup retentit dans le silence de la nuit . . ." (9: 1083-84).

This acute sensitivity to Mme de Mortsauf's "voice" as it reaches him in her letters is matched by a certain obliviousness to the feelings that guide her pen. Heedful of her counsel, Félix submits to Mme de Mortsauf as a moral force; but inattentive to the emotions that impel her to write, he neglects Henriette on a psychological level.

Félix never questions the maternal posture she assumes:

"Quand j'eus fini cette lettre, je sentais palpiter sous mes doigts un coeur maternel . . ." (9: 1097). Despite her enjoinder to avoid involvement with younger women, he is taken in by her insistence that her advice is motivated by pure motherly interest.¹⁹ Félix's unwariness is more sharply manifested in his response to the letter she writes during her children's illness, of which his narrative conserves only a fragment. Filled with maternal anxieties and domestic unhappiness, Henriette's letter is silent with regard to her passionate feelings for Félix and the conflict that rends her. Félix fails to see that the turmoil in this "lettre désespérée" (9: 1140) proceeds as much from the writer's struggle against forbidden love as it does from the anguish caused by her son's life-threatening illness and her daughter's languishing health.

Félix's lack of attentiveness to Mme de Mortsauf's inner life is marked in the text in a striking way. There is a strange and troubling gap in Félix's narrative, which jumps from the fragmentary text of Mme de Mortsauf's letter to the episode of his romantic involvement with Lady Dudley. The abrupt change of tone, moving from the despair of the sickroom to the gaiety of salon life, occurs within the brief duration of an undulant phrase:

En ce moment, où jamais je ne me sentis plus
vivement atteint dans mes entrailles, et où je ne

¹⁹ Przyboś 63.

vivais que dans cette âme, sur laquelle je tâchais d'envoyer la brise lumineuse des matins et l'espérance des soirs empourprés, je rencontrai dans les salons de l'Elysée-Bourbon l'une de ces illustres ladies qui sont à demi souveraines. (9: 1141)

Thus Félix gives conflicting information about his reaction to Mme de Mortsauf's letter. He claims to be profoundly distraught by her suffering. Yet it is at this very moment that the ravishing Arabelle enters his life and obliterates--in a single sentence it seems (though only temporarily)--his thoughts of and concerns for Henriette.

Happily, Félix's career as a reader progresses beyond both docile compliance with his interlocutor's prudent direction and distracted insensitivity to her true feelings. After reading Henriette's testament letter, with its stunning revelation of the passion she had suppressed, Félix falls into "un abîme de réflexions en apercevant les profondeurs inconnues de cette vie alors éclairée par cette dernière flamme" (9: 1220). For the first time he focuses not on himself, but on the suffering that denial had caused her: "Elle avait donc souffert autant que moi, plus que moi, car elle était morte" (9: 1220). Félix's response represents a degree of emotional maturing, since it springs from directing his reflectiveness outward, toward another person, rather than inward. Still, Félix remains fatuously self-centered, as the failure of his efforts to win Madeleine and Natalie prove.

How, then, does Félix evolve as a reader, beyond the initial deepening seen in this response to Henriette's

posthumous confession? The text does not even allude to his reaction to Natalie's rejection of his sentimental overtures and ironic, rather harsh lack of indulgence for his weakness. Le Lys closes with Natalie's letter, and this, as Victor Brombert shows,²⁰ has the effect of opening up the narrative to a completely different interpretation from the one that Félix had hoped for and expected. Balzac's omission of Félix's response to the letter on which his sentimental future turns creates one of those blanks or gaps that invites the creative participation of the reader in the never-ending unfolding of the story.²¹ By keeping his future unresolved, Félix's lack of response sends the reader to other novels in La Comédie humaine, to find out how he fares. In Une fille d'Eve Félix reappears, several years later, striving to keep his marriage together, a role that suggests he has learned a hard lesson from Natalie's letter.²² The reader of these novels never sees Félix going through the painful states--rejection, hurt, confusion, anger, self-examination, introspection, growth; but the evidence--an older and wiser Félix--is certainly provided by the evolution his character manifests in the later novel. The states not shown constitute the blank that the reader of La Comédie humaine fills in, at the author's instigation

²⁰ "Natalie ou le lecteur caché de Balzac" 179.

²¹ On the way blanks function in literary texts, see Iser, Act 167-70.

²² Przyboś 67-68.

perhaps, but essentially, independently. In this way, the sentimental education of Félix de Vandenesse, begun in Le Lys dans la vallée, reveals itself to be the education of a reader.

Readers of letters, we have seen, are as autonomous and unpredictable as the writers who solicit (or unknowingly become the object of) their attention. They exhibit a broad range of responses to the texts with which they are confronted. Like Natalie de Manerville (Le Lys dans la vallée) or Gaston de Neuil (La Femme abandonnée), they may be more attentive than the writer to the latter's hidden motives or secret wishes, an awareness that confers unexpected power. For inattentive readers, the price is often dear: Félix de Vandenesse does not grasp the message of desire in Mme de Mortsauf's epistolary texts (as he had failed to "read" it, through word or gesture, in her presence) until it is too late. And Eugénie Grandet's obliviousness to the selfish motives that shape her cousin's sweetly insincere letters engages her in an act whose consequences reverberate tragically in her family. Letter readers may support or subvert a writer's objectives. Benevolent readers, like Grossetête (Le Curé de village), will help a letter writer realize his wishes and go to great lengths to advance his goals. Malevolent readers, such as Rosalie de Watteville (Albert Savarus) will strive darkly to undermine a writer's purpose, thwart his efforts, perhaps

even, destroy his life. Like Félicité des Touches or Claude Vignon (Béatrix), readers of letters may be critical and discerning, scrutinizing an epistolary text with a skeptical eye, searching "between the lines" and beyond the words on the page for its implicit meaning. They may, on the other hand, display the naïve and gullible awe of Calyste and Fanny du Guénic, who read the letters that fall into their hands like some divine text, the asserted meaning of which is not to be challenged. Or, totally escaping the writer's sphere of control, they may, like Honorine, who tosses her husband's unwelcome missives into the fire without even breaking their seals, consign to oblivion the messages so urgently addressed to them.

Like the letter writers in their role of composition, letter readers in La Comédie humaine, in their no less active and creative role of interpretation, influence the course of narrative. Their reactions and behavior affect what happens in narrative--at the deepest strata of psychological meaning as well as on the more superficial level of plot. For readers are not mere ciphers, inert entities on whose minds the provocative texts are merely recorded, as on stone: they think, feel, react, and plan as they read. The attention that Balzac focuses on their behavior as readers highlights their role in shaping the underlying meaning, as well as the external outcome, of narrative. Their interpretation--and even, as the intense deliberation of Eugénie Grandet over her cousin's missive

shows, misinterpretation--of letters demonstrates that reading is not a passive process, nor is the creation of meaning a unilateral activity, the sole privilege and responsibility of the author: Much goes on in the reader's mind and heart to challenge and alter the original sense and function of a message. Reading is thus an active cognitive process without whose multiple, highly complex operations a text's "meaning" would remain latent or concealed.²³

As readers in the novel, fictional letter readers bias the interpretive activity of readers of the novel, and may significantly influence their response. Balzac's narrator is not alone in setting an example for analyzing events and elucidating the signs of discourse.²⁴ Fictional readers, who model the attitude of the extratextual reader by their behavior, serve the same function. Rosalie de Watteville is, in moral terms, a negative role model, whose twisted existence poisons the atmosphere of this story that reaches us through her wicked machinations as a reader. Fictional readers may also demonstrate (as do the astute exegetes at des Touches) effective strategies for readers who, being led

²³ See Eco 3-43 for a summary of these operations and an analytical discussion of their functions.

²⁴ McCarthy (58-60) demonstrates how the intellectual activity of the narrator in La Recherche de l'Absolu provides a model for the reader of that novel. For Christopher Prendergast, Balzac's narrator appears (although this function is at deeper levels deliberately undermined) as "a 'broker' who will supply the reader with the requisite language and interpretive strategies for understanding the modern world." (The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986]) 103.

astray neither by a writer's unconscious obfuscations nor her deliberate efforts to confuse, would penetrate the superficial configuration of words on the page to a text's secret, unavowed messages. Such is the role that Natalie de Manerville, the reader in the novel, plays vis-à-vis the reader of Le Lys dans la vallée; so influential is her interpretation, that it compels the extratextual reader to reexamine Félix's entire narrative, whose graceful lyricism failed to seduce the only reader with which it was truly concerned.

The epistolarity of Balzac's narratives thus enhances the pragmatic dimension of La Comédie humaine. With its built-in focus on the cognitive activity of the recipient, the epistolary form presents the reader as an active, creative entity, whose partnership in the production of epistolary meaning (through the autonomous activity of interpretation in which he or she engages) serves as a model for our own involvement in the creation of narrative meaning.

Conclusion: Epistolary Discourse and the Art of
La Comédie humaine

The richly varied effects that Balzac achieved by exploiting the epistolary genre can best be appreciated if viewed within the context of the author's tendency to borrow techniques from many genres as he built his repertory of narrative strategies. As Ruthy Amossy observes: "le roman balzacien . . . s'élabore par l'absorption et la modification d'un très large éventail de modèles génériques. Ceux-ci sont principalement repris à des formes en vogue comme le conte fantastique, et à des sous-genres romanesques: romans historique, autobiographique, noir, gai, feuilleton, sentimental . . ."¹ Balzac's appropriation and importation of generic models into the heterogeneous narrative universe of La Comédie humaine should not be separated from the creative elaboration to which he invariably subjected them: reforging and adapting conventions and techniques to the psychological and aesthetic purposes of his narrative design, he reinvented the subgenres of the novel, and in so doing made them his

¹ "L'exploitation des contraintes génériques dans La Comédie humaine: l'exemple du récit licencieux," Balzac: L'Invention du roman (Paris: Belfond, 1982) 100.

own.² Our focus on the letter as a narrative device is not intended to diminish the importance of other techniques, which proceed from a variety of generic as well as non-literary sources, in Balzac's creation of a fictional universe. The epistolary genre, however, presented an extraordinary wealth of narrative opportunity, one that was, as we have seen, intrinsically compatible with the subtlest aspects of his aesthetic vision as well as with the broadest sweep of his philosophical enterprise.

Balzac exploited the potential of epistolary discourse in all the ways that it might serve the requirements of his fiction. He used letters to construct plot and manipulate action: prospectively, to impinge upon the course of events; retrospectively, to influence our interpretation of their meaning; or dispersed at key junctures, to highlight critical nodes of narrative structure. This master of prose fiction distilled the lyricism inherent in epistolary discourse: by using letters to elaborate thematic elements, he enhanced the poetic resonance of his narratives. He made letters serve the diverse needs of characterization in fiction. Correspondences in La Comédie humaine often complete the portraits sketched by the narrator, balancing the latter's less than omniscient perspective with biographical information from other sources. Epistolary exchanges may also comprise precious records about

² See Amossy 100-101.

personages whose marginal status in the action deprives them of narratorial portrayal. And, most propitiously for the equilibrium of narrative perspectives, these correspondences stand, like all personal documents, as powerful, irrefutable testimony in which characters exonerate or indict themselves, without the narrator's often biased support or accusations.

Letters, Balzac realized, firmly supported the didactic orientation of his fictional enterprise: to describe the social world in its myriad manifestations, to explain the causes and laws regulating its functioning, to analyze the principles underlying its existence. The moral, political, or philosophical disquisitions that advance such an endeavor--lengthy, abstract, and ponderous--are readily accommodated by the epistolary form. Most significantly, Balzac recognized that as a narrative instrument, the power of the letter is magnified by its linguistic status. In substance, letters are words, and as such, they deploy all of language's wily and duplicitous potential--a potential that can boomerang, betraying the unwary writer just as readily as it misleads and mystifies the hapless reader. In form, letters replicate the relationship of author to reader, and Balzac exploited this mirroring to benefit both parties, the one engaged in the process of inventing and shaping narrative, the other, in the equally creative process of interpreting it.

Letters presented a gold mine of opportunity in a broad, aesthetic sense as well as in a strictly narrative one, for from them Balzac fashioned some of the jewels--small-scale masterpieces of literary art--that stud his colossal work. As we have demonstrated, letters frequently embody, through their miniaturization of structure, concentration of effect, and unity of tone, a degree of intensity and perfection more typically found in succinct verses of poetry than in extended passages of narrative. Or, like operatic arias, these epistolary solos may display a heightened emotionalism and musicality that set them apart from the necessarily more prosaic fabric into which they are woven. This chromatic differentiation of the letter, as well as its structural integrity, endows it with the capacity to be appreciated on its own merits. Textual demarcations (the guillemets that cue epistolary passages) assert the letter's independence from the narrative framework; the distinctive personal voice of the writer demands it; the density of the message the epistolary document delivers confirms it.

Even when they do not display the concentrated brilliance of poetry or the emotional intensity of aria, epistolary passages enjoy a special status within narrative. More than simple messages, letters are compositions: deliberately selected, carefully arranged, artfully delivered constructs of words, they are texts within the text, creations within the creation that is the novel.

Correspondences thus add an unexpected dimension to the narrative world of La Comédie humaine, expanding its broad horizons to represent, in addition to material, social, psychological, and philosophical realities, the artistic event as well; in this capacity, letters qualify as art within art.

This privileged status confers a special grace upon the fictional creators of epistolary oeuvres. The letter writers of La Comédie humaine, whether victims or villains, achieve a measure of redemption through the beauty and force of the missives they compose. They transcend the suffering, disgrace, or failure to which, in the strictly narrative dimension, they are consigned. Those who twist epistolary language to serve their own treacherous, sometimes evil, ends--Béatrix de Rochefide, Natalie de Manerville, Henri de Marsay--win our not-so-grudging admiration, as do all those who spin spells out of words. Those whose own vision is obscured by the insidious shield of self-deception--Octave de Bauvan, Paul de Manerville, Félix de Vandenesse--blindly transmit, through epistolary channels, insights from which they themselves are, ironically, incapable of deriving benefit. And those who are vanquished in life--Pierrette Lorrain, Véronique Graslin, Honorine--live on through the insistent magic of their sorrowful words, which reverberate, like all profound pieces of literary art, in our hearts.

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