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The Political Unconscious

Narrative as a socially symbolic act



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authority figures (in this novella, indeed, authority is personified only by an older woman briefly glimpsed, the single villainous character being that secondary and grotesque Italian spy, who, galloping across the field in moonlight, "looked like a ghost riding on a three-legged horse"). We might also have shown this text's repression of other basic functions in the romance structure as well: most notably the omission of what we have called the transformation scene, and the substitution for the basic conflict between Eichendorff's two worlds—the humdrum workaday world of the village and the enchanted space of the chateau, with its music and candelabra, its gardens and eys twinkling through half-opened shutters—of compromise formations and mediatory combinations in which the two codes are playfully recombined (the flute-playing porter as a bourgeois with an aristocratic hobby, the old peasant with silver buckles, and so forth). On a narrative level, indeed, the two realms swap functions: that of work borrows its magic and its phantasmagorical elements from the aristocratic realm of leisure, while it proves to be in the latter that the various illusory plot complications—what in classic romance would be the force of evil and the malignant spell—originate. The resolution of the narrative thus cannot dramatize the triumph of either force over the other one, or enact any genuine ritual purification, but must produce a compromise in which everything finds its proper place again, in which the Taugenichts is reconciled through marriage to the world of work, while at the same time finding himself endowed with a miniature chateau of his own within the enchanted grounds of the aristocratic estate. It is because Eichendorff's opposition between good and evil threatens so closely to approximate the incompatibility between the older aristocratic traditions and the new middle-class life situation that the narrative must not be allowed to press on to any decisive conclusion. Its historical reality must rather be disguised and defused by the sense of moonlit revels dissolving into thin air, and conceal a perception of class realities behind the phantasmagoria of *Schein* and *Spiel*. But romance does its work well; under the spell of this wondrous text, the French Revolution proves to be an illusion, and the grisly class conflict of decades of Napoleonic world war fades into the mere stuff of bad dreams.

3

REALISM AND DESIRE

Balzac and the Problem of the Subject

The novel is the end of genre in the sense in which it has been defined in the previous chapter: a narrative ideologeme whose outer form, secreted like a shell or exoskeleton, continues to emit its ideological message long after the extinction of its host. For the novel, as it explores its mature and original possibilities in the nineteenth century, is not an outer, conventional form of that kind. Rather, such forms, and their remains—inherited narrative paradigms, conventional actantial or proairetic schemata¹—are the raw material on which the novel works, transforming their "telling" into its "showing," estranging commonplaces against the freshness of some unexpected "real,"

¹ On the term *actant* see above, Chapter 2, note 21. The "proairetic code" is Roland Barthes's designation for the terms or names of the conventional unities and actions of everyday life: "What is a series of actions? the unfolding of a name. To *enter*? I can unfold it into 'to appear' and 'to penetrate.' To *leave*? I can unfold it into 'to want to,' 'to stop,' 'to leave again.' To *give*? 'to incite,' 'to return,' 'to accept.' Inversely, to establish the sequence is to find the name." *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 82.

foregrounding convention itself as that through which readers have hitherto received their notions of events, psychology, experience, space, and time.

The "novel" as process rather than as form: such is the intuition to which apologists of this narrative structure have found themselves driven again and again, in an effort to characterize it as something that happens to its primary materials, as a specific but quite properly interminable set of operations and programming procedures, rather than a finished object whose "structure" one might model and contemplate. This process can be evaluated in a twofold way, as the transformation of the reader's subjective attitudes which is at one and the same time the production of a new kind of objectivity.

Indeed, as any number of "definitions" of realism assert, and as the totemic ancestor of the novel, *Don Quixote*, emblematically demonstrates, that processing operation variously called narrative mimesis or realistic representation has as its historic function the systematic undermining and demystification, the secular "decoding," of those preexisting inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms which are its initial givens.² In this sense, the novel plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution—that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism. The "objective" function of the novel is thereby also implied: to its subjective and critical, analytic, corrosive mission must now be added the task of producing as though for the first time that very life world, that very "referent"—the newly quantifiable space of extension and market equivalence, the new rhythms of measurable time, the new secular and "disenchanted" object world of the commodity system, with its post-traditional daily life and its bewilderingly empirical, "meaningless," and contingent *Umwelt*—of which this new narrative discourse will then claim to be the "realistic" reflection.

The problem of the subject is clearly a strategic one for both

² See in particular Roman Jakobson, "On Realism in Art," in K. Pomorska and L. Matejka, eds., *Readings in Russian Formalist Poetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 38–46. "Decoding" is a term of Deleuze and Guattari: see the *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 222–228.

dimensions of the novelistic process, particularly if one holds, as Marxists do, that the forms of human consciousness and the mechanisms of human psychology are not timeless and everywhere essentially the same, but rather situation-specific and historically produced. It follows, then, that neither the reader's reception of a particular narrative, nor the actantial representation of human figures or agents, can be taken to be constants of narrative analysis but must themselves ruthlessly be historicized. The Lacanian terminology and thematics in which much of the present chapter has been cast offer a tactical advantage here.³ Lacan's work, with its emphasis on the "constitution of the subject," displaces the problematic of orthodox Freudianism from models of unconscious processes or blockages toward an account of the formation of the subject and its constitutive illusions which, though still genetic in Lacan himself and couched in terms of the individual biological subject, is not incompatible with a broader historical framework. Furthermore, the polemic thrust of Lacanian theory, with its decentering of the ego, the conscious subject of activity, the personality, or the "subject" of the Cartesian cogito—all now grasped as something like an "effect" of subjectivity—and its repudiation of the various ideals of the unification of the personality or the mythic conquest of personal identity, poses useful new problems for any narrative analysis which still works with naive, common-sense categories of "character," "protagonist," or "hero," and with psychological "concepts" like those of identification, sympathy, or empathy.

We have already touched, in the first chapter, on the ways in which the Althusserian attack on "humanism"—on the categories of bourgeois individualism, and its anthropological myths of human nature—may be read as one powerful way of historicizing the Lacanian critique of the "centered subject." What becomes interesting in the present context is not the denunciation of the centered subject and its ideologies, but rather the study of its historical emergence, its constitution or virtual construction as a mirage which is also evidently in some fashion

³ For a fuller account of my own understanding and use, here and later on in this chapter, of Lacanian terminology, see my "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan," *Yale French Studies*, Nos. 55–56 (1977), pp. 338–395. The accredited exposition of the Lacanian "system" is Anika Rifflet-Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (Brussels: Dessart, 1970).

an objective reality. For the lived experience of individual consciousness as a monadic and autonomous center of activity is not some mere conceptual error, which can be dispelled by the taking of thought and by scientific rectification: it has a quasi-institutional status, performs ideological functions, and is susceptible to historical causation and produced and reinforced by other objective instances, determinants, and mechanisms. The concept of reification which has been developed in these pages conveys the historical situation in which the emergence of the ego or centered subject can be understood: the dissolution of the older organic or hierarchical social groups, the universal commodification of the labor-power of individuals and their confrontation as equivalent units within the framework of the market, the *anomie* of these now "free" and isolated individual subjects to which the protective development of a monadic armature alone comes as something of a compensation.

Cultural study allows us to isolate a certain number of specific instances and mechanisms which provide concrete mediations between the "superstructures" of psychological or lived experience and the "infrastructures" of juridical relations and production process. These may be termed *textual determinants* and constitute quasi-material transmission points which produce and institutionalize the new subjectivity of the bourgeois individual at the same time that they themselves replicate and reproduce purely infrastructural requirements. Among such textual determinants in high realism are surely to be numbered narrative categories such as Jamesian point of view or Flaubertian *style indirect libre*, which are thus strategic loci for the fully constituted or centered bourgeois subject or monadic ego.

This is the context in which a crucial feature of an earlier "realism"—what is often designated as the "omniscient narrator" in Balzac—may usefully be reexamined. Omniscience is, however, the least significant thing about such authorial intervention, and may be said to be the aftereffect of the closure of classical *récit*, in which the events are over and done with before their narrative begins. This closure itself projects something like an ideological mirage in the form of notions of fortune, destiny, and providence or predestination which these *récits* seem to

"illustrate," their reception amounting, in Walter Benjamin's words, to "warming our lives upon a death about which we read." Such *récits*—closed adventures, *unerhörte Begebenheiten*, the very idea of strokes of fortune and destinies touched off by chance—are among the raw materials upon which the Balzacian narrative process works, and with whose inherited forms it sometimes uneasily coexists. At the same time the gestures and signals of the storyteller (perpetuated in the English novel well beyond 1857, the year Flaubert abolishes them with a single stroke in France) symbolically attempt to restore the coordinates of a face-to-face storytelling institution which has been effectively disintegrated by the printed book and even more definitively by the commodification of literature and culture.

The constitutive feature of the Balzacian narrative apparatus, however, is something more fundamental than either authorial omniscience or authorial intervention, something that may be designated as libidinal investment or authorial wish-fulfillment, a form of symbolic satisfaction in which the working distinction between biographical subject, Implied Author, reader, and characters is virtually effaced. Description is one privileged moment in which such investments may be detected and studied, particularly when the object of the description, as in the following evocation of a provincial townhouse, is contested, and focuses antagonistic ambitions within the narrative itself:

On the balustrade of the terrace, imagine great blue and white pots filled with wallflowers; envision right and left, along the neighboring walls, two rows of square-trimmed lime-trees; you will form an idea of this landscape filled with demure good humor, with tranquil chastity, and with modest homely [bourgeois] vistas offered by the other bank and its quaint houses, the trickling waters of the Brillante, the garden, two rows of trees lining its walls, and the venerable edifice of the Cormon family. What peace! what calm! nothing pretentious, but nothing transitory: here everything seems eternal. The ground-floor, then, was given over to reception rooms for visitors. Here everything breathed the Provincial, ancient but unalterable.⁴

⁴ "Sur la balustrade de la terrasse imaginez de grands vases en faïence bleue et blanche d'où s'élèvent des giroflées; à droite et à gauche, le long des murs voisins, voyez deux

The familiar mechanisms and characteristic rhetoric of Balzacian description are here reappropriated by a less characteristic function, or, to use a term which will be further developed in this chapter, are projected through a rather different register than the metonymic and connotative one of normal Balzacian exposition. The Cormon town-house, along with its unwed heiress, is indeed the prize on which the narrative struggle or *agon* of *La Vieille Fille* turns. It is therefore quintessentially an object of desire; but we will not have begun to grasp its historical specificity until we sense the structural difference between this object and all those equally desirable goals, aims, or ends around which classical *récits* or quest narratives of the type studied by Propp are organized. The content, indifferently substitutable, of these last—gold, princess, crown or palace—suggests that the signifying value of such objects is determined by their narrative position: a narrative element becomes desirable whenever a character is observed to desire it.

In Balzac, as the heavily persuasive nature of the passage in question testifies, it has for whatever historical reason become necessary to secure the reader's consent, and to validate or accredit the object as desirable, before the narrative process can function properly. The priorities are therefore here reversed, and this narrative apparatus depends on the "desirability" of an object whose narrative function would have been a relatively automatic and unproblematical secondary effect of a more traditional narrative structure.

But the historical originality of the Balzacian object needs to be specified, not merely against the mechanisms of classical story-telling, but against the psychological and interpretive habits of our own period as well. For us, wishes and desires have become the traits or psychological properties of human monads; but more is at stake in this description than the simple "identification" with a plausible desire that

couverts de tilleuls carrément taillés; vous aurez une idée du paysage plein de bonhomie pudique, de chasteté tranquille, de vues modestes et bourgeoises qu'offraient la rive opposée et ses naïves maisons, les eaux rares de la Brillante, le jardin, ses deux couverts collés contre les murs voisins, et le vénérable édifice des Cormon. Quelle paix! quel calme! rien de pompeux, mais rien de transitoire: là, tout semble éternel. Le rez-de-chaussée appartenait donc à la réception. Là tout respirait la vieille, l'inaltérable province" (Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine* [Paris: La Pléiade, 1952], 11 vols., "La Vieille Fille," iv, 247).

we do not ourselves share, as when our films or bestsellers offer the proxy spectacles of a whole range of commodified passions. For one thing, we cannot attribute this particular desire (for the Cormon town-house) to any individual subject. Biographical Balzac, Implied Author, this or that desiring protagonist: none of these unities are (yet) present, and desire here comes before us in a peculiarly anonymous state which makes a strangely absolute claim on us.

Such an evocation—in which the desire for a particular object is at one and the same time allegorical of all desire in general and of Desire as such, in which the pretext or theme of such desire has not yet been relativized and privatized by the ego-barriers that jealously confirm the personal and purely subjective experience of the monadized subjects they thus separate—may be said to reenact the Utopian impulse in the sense in which Ernst Bloch has redefined this term.⁵ It solicits the reader not merely to reconstruct this building and grounds in some inner eye, but to reinvent it as Idea and as heart's desire. To juxtapose the depersonalized and retextualized provincial houses of Flaubert with this one is to become perhaps uncomfortably aware of the degree to which the Balzacian dwelling invites the awakening of a longing for possession, of the mild and warming fantasy of landed property as the tangible figure of a Utopian wish-fulfillment. A peace released from the competitive dynamism of Paris and of metropolitan business struggles, yet still imaginable in some existent backwater of concrete social history; a well-nigh Benjaminian preservation of the storehouse of the past, and of its quintessential experience, within the narrative present; a "chaste" diminution of the libidinal to its mildest and least afflictive murmur; a Utopia of the household, in whose courtyards, hallways, and garden paths the immemorial routines of daily life, of husbandry and domestic economy, are traced in advance, projecting the eternal cycle of meals and walks, marketing and high tea, the game of whist, the preparation of the daily menu and the commerce with faithful servants and with habitual visitors—this mesmerizing image is the "still point" around which the disorder and urgency of a properly novelistic time will turn. It is the modulation into Biedermeier of that

⁵ In *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959), 2 vols.; for a brief account, see *Marxism and Form*, pp. 116–158.

more properly "sublime" wish-fulfillment of the magnificent opening description of the chateau of Les Aigues in *Les Paysans*, where this milder longing for landed property is magnified into the fantasy of feudal lordship and of the return of the great estate. Nor are the ideological conflicts of the later, more openly historical and political, master novel alien to this relatively minor comic *fabliau*: indeed, Mademoiselle Cormon's townhouse—an architectural monument to the splendor of an ancient patrician *Bürgertum* or merchant aristocracy—already "resolves" in advance, and in the recollected vividness of a tangible image, by its combination of the twin "semes" of bourgeois commercial activity and aristocratic tradition, the social and ideological contradiction around which the novel will turn.

The peculiarity of a Utopian libidinal investment of this kind can be underscored by shifting from the landed manifestation of this desire to its actantial personification in the figure of Mademoiselle Cormon herself, the old maid of the title. What is significant here is that, as with the house itself, no reconstruction of this character in a properly ironic perspective is possible. Mademoiselle Cormon is comic, grotesque, and desirable all at once (or in succession): her big feet, the "beauty" of her "force and abundance," her "embonpoint," her massive hips, "which made her seem cast in a single mould," her triple chin, with its "folds" rather than "wrinkles"—none of these features is inconsistent with the Utopian desire that takes her person as its focus. Nor is anything to be gained by referring the bewildered reader back to the documented peculiarities of Balzac's own sexual tastes, here reinscribed in the narrative in the passion of the unhappy young poet Athanase Granson for this corpulent older woman ("this ample person offered attributes capable of seducing a young man full of desires and longing, such as Athanase"). To be sure, *La Vieille Fille* is a comic novel, heavily and insistently punctuated by sexual innuendo and by undertones of the type of gross physical farce Balzac himself rehearsed in his *Contes drolatiques*; this essentially comic register of the narrative, is, then, presumably enough to account for a perspective in which the vicissitudes of carnal desire are observed with sympathetic detachment and malicious empathy.

Yet to insist on the Utopian dimension of this particular desire is evidently to imply that this particular comic narrative is also an *allegorical*

structure, in which the sexual "letter" of the farce must itself be read as a figure for the longing for landed retreat and personal fulfillment as well as for the resolution of social and historical contradiction. The Silenus box—a grotesque and comical exterior which contains a wondrous balm—is, of course, the very emblem of the hermeneutic object;⁶ but the relationship between farce and the Utopian impulse is not particularly clarified by this image.

Paradoxically, however, it is this very tension or inconsistency between levels which will vanish from expressions of the Utopian impulse in a later age of high reification. A passage from the American writer whose commodity lust and authorial investments and attitudinizing are most reminiscent of Balzac may give some sense of the transformation:

At this time of the year the days are still comparatively short, and the shadows of the evening were beginning to settle down upon the great city. Lamps were beginning to burn with that mellow radiance which seems almost watery and translucent to the eye. There was a softness in the air which speaks with an infinite delicacy of feeling to the flesh as well as to the soul. Carrie felt that it was a lovely day. She was ripened by it in spirit for many suggestions. As they drove along the smooth pavement an occasional carriage passed. She saw one stop and the footman dismount, opening the door for a gentleman who seemed to be leisurely returning from some afternoon pleasure. Across the broad lawns, now first freshening into green, she saw lamps faintly glowing upon rich interiors. Now it was but a chair, now a table, now an ornate corner which met her eye, but it appealed to her as almost nothing else could. Such childish fancies as she had had of fairy palaces and kingly quarters now came back. She imagined that

⁶ "Sileni of old were little boxes, like those we now may see in the shops of apothecaries, painted on the outside with wanton toyish figures, as harpies, satyrs, bridled geese, horned hares, saddled ducks, flying goats, thiller harts, and other such counterfeited pictures, at pleasure, to excite people unto laughter, as Silenus himself, who was the foster-father of good Bacchus, was wont to do; but within those capricious caskets called Sileni were carefully preserved and kept many rich and fine drugs, such as balm, amber-greese, amomon, musk, civet, with several kinds of precious stones, and other things of great price" (Author's Prologue, *Gargantua* [the Urquhart-Mortteux translation]).

across these richly carved entrance-ways, where the globed and crystallized lamps shone upon panelled doors set with stained and designed panes of glass, was neither care nor unsatisfied desire. She was perfectly certain that here was happiness.⁷

Between the moment of Balzac and the moment of Dreiser, *bovarysme* has fallen, and the congealment of language, fantasy, and desire into Flaubertian *bêtise* and Flaubertian cliché transmutes Balzacian longing into the tawdriness of Carrie's hunger for trinkets, a tawdriness that Dreiser's language ambiguously represents and reflects all at once.⁸

Commodification is not the only "event" which separates Dreiser's text from Balzac's: the charges it has wrought in the object world of late capitalism have evidently been accompanied by a decisive development in the construction of the subject as well, by the constitution of the latter into a closed monad, henceforth governed by the laws of "psychology." Indeed, for all the caressing solicitations of this text, it clearly positions us outside Carrie's desire, which is represented as a private wish or longing to which we relate ourselves as readers by the mechanisms of identification and projection, and to which we may also adopt a moralizing stance, or what amounts to the same thing, an ironic one. What has happened is that "Carrie" has become a "point of view"; this is in effect, as we have already suggested, the textual institution or determinant that expresses and reproduces the newly centered subject of the age of reification. Not coincidentally, the emergence of such narrative centers is then at once accompanied by the verbal or narrative equivalents of techniques characteristic of film (the tracking shot, the panning of the camera from Carrie's position as observer to that telescopic or keyhole glimpse of the ultimate interior, with its enclosed warmth and light)—that medium which will shortly become the hegemonic formal expression of late capitalist society. With this virtually fullblown appearance of filmic point of view, however, the

⁷ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 86.

⁸ The axiological paradox about Dreiser—he is best at his worst—is peculiarly intensified by the problem of his style, which must be studied in terms of alienation and reification, rather than according to the usual positivist categories; see Sandy Petrey, "Language of Realism, Language of False Consciousness: A Reading of *Sister Carrie*," *Novel 10* (1977), 101–113.

Utopian overtones and intensities of desire are ever more faintly registered by the text; and the Utopian impulse itself, now reified, is driven back inside the monad, where it assumes the status of some merely psychological experience, private feeling, or relativized value.

It should not overhastily be concluded, however, that Dreiser's situation is only one of loss and constraint; as we will have occasion to observe in a later chapter, on Joseph Conrad, the effects of reification—the sealing off of the psyche, the division of labor of the mental faculties, the fragmentation of the bodily and perceptual sensorium—also determine the opening up of whole new zones of experience and the production of new types of linguistic content. In Dreiser, indeed, we witness the emergence of an incomparable sensory intensity, "that infinite delicacy of feeling to the flesh as well as to the soul," which marks the passage from Balzacian rhetoric to a more properly modern practice of style in Dreiser, a strange and alien bodily speech which, interwoven with the linguistic junk of commodified language, has perplexed readers of our greatest novelist down to the present day.⁹

Now it is time to examine the operation of a narrative apparatus about which we have implied that, antedating the emergence of the centered subject, it has not yet developed the latter's textual determinants, such as point of view or protagonists with whom the reader sympathizes in some more modern psychological sense. Yet it is evident that *La Vieille Fille* is by no stretch of the imagination a post-modern or "schizophrenic" text, in which traditional categories of character and narrative time are dissolved altogether. We will indeed want to suggest that the "decentering" of Balzacian narrative, if that is not an anachronistic term for it, is to be found in a rotation of character centers which deprives each of them in turn of any privileged status. This rotation is evidently a small-scale model of the decentered organization of the *Comédie humaine* itself. What interests us in the present

⁹ On the use of the distinction between rhetoric and style as a historical and periodizing concept, see Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. A. Lavers and C. Smith (London: Cape, 1967), pp. 10–13, 41–52. The distinction is that evoked by Genette, following Lubbock's differentiation of picture (or "report") from scene, as "the opposition between classical abstraction . . . and 'modern' expressivity" (Gérard Genette, *Figures III* [Paris: Seuil, 1972], p. 131); and see Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: Viking, 1957), esp. pp. 251–254.

context, however, is the glimpse this turning movement gives us into the semic production of characters, or in other words into what we will call a *character system*.

We have already mentioned the least important of the suitors for Mademoiselle Cormon's hand, the poet Athanase, who, unlike his more celebrated counterpart Lucien de Rubempré, finds no Vautrin to dissuade him from the suicide that removes him from this competition. Alongside this pitiable romantic, two more powerful but more grotesque figures emerge as the principal candidates for a prize that, as we have seen, is not merely matrimonial (or financial) but also Utopian: an elderly and penniless nobleman, who claims descent from the (extinct) House of Valois and worthily upholds the traditions of elegance of the *ancien régime*; and a bourgeois "Farnese Hercules," former profiteer of the Revolutionary armies and victim of Napoleon's animosity, who, as head of the liberal opposition to the Bourbon restoration, counts on the marriage with Mademoiselle Cormon not merely to reestablish his finances, but above all to carry him back to political power (he wants to be appointed Prefect of Alençon).

The reader does not need to wait for Lukács' theory of typification to grasp the social and historical figuration of these characters, since Balzac underscores it heavily and explicitly himself:

The one [the Liberal Du Bousquier], abrupt, energetic, with loud and demonstrative manners, and brusque and rude of speech, dark in complexion, hair and look, terrible in appearance, in reality as impotent as an insurrection, might quite adequately be said to represent the Republic. The other [the Chevalier de Valois], mild and polished, elegant, carefully dressed, reaching his ends by the slow but infallible methods of diplomacy, and upholding good taste to the end, offered the very image of the old court aristocracy.¹⁰

Lukács' theory of typification, while confirmed by such a passage, can nonetheless be said to be incomplete on two counts; on the one hand, it fails to identify the typifying of characters as an essentially allegorical phenomenon, and thus does not furnish any adequate account of the

¹⁰ *La Vieille Fille*, p. 228.

process whereby a narrative becomes endowed with allegorical meanings or levels. On the other, it implies an essentially one-to-one relationship between individual characters and their social or historical reference, so that the possibility of something like a *system* of characters remains unexplored.

In fact, the reader's initial attentions are less absorbed by matters of social status here taken for granted, or by the struggle for Mademoiselle Cormon's hand, which will set in only later on, than directed to the solution of a group of puzzles and enigmas. Du Bousquier's secret is indeed no secret for the reader, since it is quickly made apparent to us that he is sexually impotent. What this revelation does to our reading, however, is to generate a systematic movement back and forth between what we know (and what poor Mademoiselle Cormon has to marry him to find out) and that external appearance by which the other characters are deceived: not merely his physical strength and his powerful deportment, but also his association with new industrial wealth and with the Jacobin traditions of the bourgeois political system. The "secret" no doubt underscores Balzac's own opinion of these ideals and traditions in a crude but effective manner; yet, unlike Poe's story, "The Man That was Used Up," this "reality" never undermines the power and the objectivity of an "appearance" in which Du Bousquier has very real social and political importance, and which is indeed consecrated by his ultimate triumph over his rival.

As for the latter, the various enigmas that center on the Chevalier (those, in particular, of the legitimacy of his title and the true sources of his income) tend to be displaced in the direction of the sexual code. Thus, a series of gross allusions (the size of the Chevalier's nose, for instance) begin to make it clear that his "secret" is on the contrary one of unexpected potency and of a properly aristocratic capacity for gallant adventures.

The point to be made about this whole initial narrative movement—the operation of what Barthes somewhat improperly calls the "hermeneutic code" of a play of appearance and reality and a search for withheld secrets—is that, itself a preparation for the principal narrative, it is never fully resolved: the revelation of the sexual secret does not, in other words, spell a conclusion to the comedy, as it would in Boccaccio or in the *Contes drolatiques*, but is a means to a more

unexpected end.¹¹ The function of the sexual comedy is essentially to direct our reading attention toward the relationship between sexual potency and class affiliation. Our assumption that it is the former which is the object of this particular game of narrative hide-and-seek is in fact the blind or subterfuge behind which the otherwise banal and empirical facts of social status and political prehistory are transformed into the fundamental categories in terms of which the narrative is interpreted. Our reading "set" toward the social and historical interpretations which can be allegorically derived from the narrative is thus something like a lateral by-product of our initial attention to the sexual comedy; but this allegorical by-product, once established, reorients the narrative around its new interpretive center, retroactively returning upon the sexual farce to assign it a henceforth marginalized place in the narrative structure, where it comes to seem a relatively inessential or arbitrary "bonus of pleasure."

Thus established, the allegorical reading becomes the dominant one, and the struggle for Mademoiselle Cormon's hand becomes the unavoidable figure not merely for the struggle for power over France, but also the conquest of legitimation and the appropriation of everything in the post-revolutionary state which remains the most authentically and quintessentially "French" by tradition and by inheritance: the old patrician values of a provincial merchant aristocracy with the slow eternity of its custom, as embodied in the houses and gardens of Alençon. But if this were all that was at stake, then the conclusion of the drama—Du Bousquier's triumph over his rival, precipitated by his Napoleonic decisiveness and by the Chevalier's complacent confidence in his own preponderancies—would amount to little more than a punctual allusion to an empirical event, namely, the failure of the restoration with the overthrow of the Bourbons, in 1830, by liberal middle-class forces. This would certainly be a reflection of historical reality in Lukács' sense, even though scarcely a prophetic one (the novel, whose action takes place in 1816, was written in 1836). Lukács' general point about Balzac is, of course, that this novelist's

¹¹ See, for a more detailed reading of the opening section of the novel, the first version of the present chapter, "The Ideology of Form: Partial Systems in *La Vieille Fille*," *Sub-stance*, No. 15 (Winter, 1976).

sense of historical realities inflects his own personal wishes (presumably they accompany the Chevalier) in the direction of social and historical verisimilitude (it is after all Du Bousquier who wins out).

The novel is, however, more complicated than this, and if it inscribes the irrevocable brute facts of empirical history—the July Revolution, for Balzac a fall into the secular corruption of a middle-class age—it does so in order the more surely to "manage" those facts and to open up a space in which they are no longer quite so irreparable, no longer quite so definitive. *La Vieille Fille* is indeed not merely a matrimonial farce, nor even only a social commentary on provincial life; it is above all a didactic work and a political object-lesson that seeks to transform the events of empirical history into an optional trial run against which the strategies of the various social classes can be tested. This peculiar shift in registers, in which the events of the narrative remain the same but yet somehow are emptied of their finality, is perhaps best conveyed by way of Todorov's conception of a "modal" poetics, and of a variety of modal realizations of narrative content in the surface of a narrative text.¹² If, as Greimas suggests, we suppose that a narrative can be modeled like an individual sentence, then it might well follow that, as with sentences themselves, each deep narrative structure could be actualized according to a number of different modes, of which the indicative, governing conventional narrative realism, is only the most familiar. Yet other possible narrative modalizations—the subjunctive, the optative, the imperative, and the like—suggest a heterogeneous play of narrative registers which will gradually, as we shall see in our next chapter, be recontained and reunified under the massive homogenization of a later

¹² Tzvetan Todorov, "Poétique," in F. Wahl, ed., *Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme?* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 142–145. And see the special number of *Langages* devoted to "modalités" (No. 43, September 1976). The ultimate philosophical underpinnings are to be found in modal logic: see Georg Henrik von Wright, *An Essay in Modal Logic* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1951), and *An Essay in Deontic Logic* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1968). Properly formalized, the model of an ideological axiomatic proposed here may be described as a projection onto narrative and macrostructure of Oswald Ducros' account of presuppositions in individual propositions or sentences: Ducros expands the notion of the performative or speech act into what he calls "the juridical act" in which, as in Mauss's conception of the gift, the act of reception structurally entails the receiver's consent to the ideological content presupposed by a given utterance (Oswald Ducros, *Dire et ne pas dire* [Paris: Hermann, 1972], pp. 69–80).

high realism. On this view, the didactic status of *La Vieille Fille* can be accounted for by a modalization in terms of the *conditional* (if this . . . then this), whose content must now be determined.

Now the entire sequence of our reading frameworks must be reversed. The earlier frameworks—the initial sexual “hermeneutic code” and the subsequent reading of the primary *agon* (who will finally win out?)—are now retroactively restructured in terms of a new kind of reading interest, namely the effort to assign responsibilities, and to determine what as yet undetermined advantage Du Bousquier (= impotent) can have had over his aristocratic rival (= potent). The establishment of these causes and responsibilities will ultimately make up the content of what has now become a history lesson.

This restructuration, however, confronts us not with answers or immediate ideological solutions, but rather with a set of determinate contradictions. What began by being a simple judgment—that the Revolution and its bourgeois values are essentially sterile, that is to say, *impotent*, but also, in Edmund Burke’s sense artificial and non-organic—now turns into a problem or an antinomy. The *ancien régime*, coded as sexual gallantry through its stereotypical representations as Regency, Deer Park, Watteau, Fragonard, Louis XV, and the like, lends its positive sexual seme to the portrait of the Chevalier; yet even before the failure of his matrimonial attempt, the combination of semes which make up his portrait can be shown to be contradictory, and the reading mind must on some level worry the question: how is it possible for the graceful, effeminate, elderly Chevalier to be more “potent” than the rough-and-ready bourgeois speculator Du Bousquier? Meanwhile, the latter offers no less of a paradox, namely the relation to his sexual impotence of that principle of quasi-military initiative and decisiveness to which he owes his triumph and about whose historical reference the text leaves us in no doubt: it is the energy Balzac associates with Napoleon and with the whole history of the Revolutionary armies from Valmy to the anticlimax at Waterloo. Yet this seme is already historically ambiguous, for if such martial initiative is sharply dissociated from the culture, values, and practices of the *ancien régime*, neither can it be wholly identified with the business society that will come into its own after 1830.

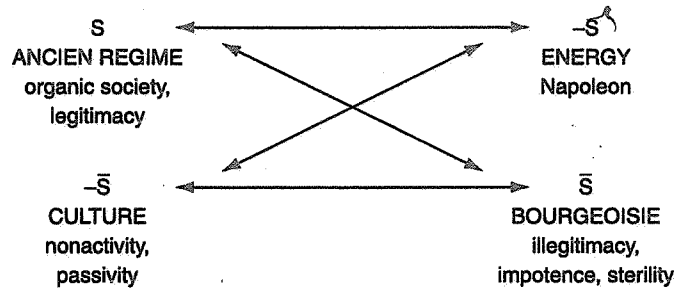
Following the program we outlined in our initial chapter, we will

wish to distinguish between the reconstruction of this particular inconsistency as a *contradiction* and its formulation in terms of an *antinomy* for the reading mind. We there suggested that whereas the former is governed by a properly dialectical thinking, the latter may be most appropriately mapped out by semiotic method, which is in this sense the privileged instrument of analysis of ideological closure. Greimas’ semiotic rectangle¹³ suggests an initial formulation of this antinomy or double bind as follows: sexual potency + languour versus energy + impotence. The underlying ideological contradiction here can evidently be expressed in the form of a meditation on history: Balzac as a royalist and an apologist for the essentially organic and decentered *ancien régime* must nonetheless confront the latter’s palpable military failures and administrative inefficiencies, which are underscored by the inevitable juxtaposition with the power of the Napoleonic period, although that period itself, a kind of hybridization of Jacobin values and monarchic trappings, proved to be a dead end.

Faced with a contradiction of this kind—which it cannot think except in terms of a stark antinomy, an insoluble logical paradox—the historical *pensée sauvage*, or what we have called the political unconscious, nonetheless seeks by logical permutations and combinations to find a way out of its intolerable closure and to produce a “solution,” something it can begin to do owing to the semic dissociations already implicit in the initial opposition formulated above. Thus, it would seem possible to disjoin the seme of “energy” from that of “impotence” or “sterility” (part of a larger ideogeme that denotes the world of bourgeois materialism and business generally); and, on the other side of this opposition, to disjoin the valorized seme of the “*ancien régime*” from its general debility which may perhaps be resumed under

¹³ Briefly, the semiotic rectangle or “elementary structure of signification” is the representation of a binary opposition or of two contraries (S and -S), along with the simple negations or contradictories of both terms (the so-called subcontraries -S and S): significant slots are constituted by the various possible combinations of these terms, most notably the “complex” term (or ideal synthesis of the two contraries) and the “neutral” term (or ideal synthesis of the two subcontraries). See A. J. Greimas and François Rastier, “The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints,” *Yale French Studies*, No. 41 (1968), pp. 86–105; and F. Nef, ed., *Structures élémentaires de la signification* (Brussels: Complexe, 1976). See also my *Prison-House*, pp. 162–168.

the theme of "culture" (manners, traditions, forms, aristocratic values, and the like). At this point, we can map these terms, and the possibilities of new combinations they suggest, as follows.



It now becomes clear that of the four chief logical combinations available here, we so far have only identified two. From this perspective, then, we can observe the way in which a semic system generates those anthropomorphic combinations that are narrative characters, and in particular, in the present instance, how the semes S and \bar{S} produce the representation of the "Chevalier," while the combination -S and \bar{S} gives anthropomorphic content to that other proper name, "Du Bousquier." What is so far missing are the two combinations designated by Greimas as the complex and the neutral term respectively: the ideal synthesis which would "resolve" the initial binary opposition by subsuming it under a single unity, and that union of purely negative or privative terms which would subsume the simple contradictories of the two terms of the initial binary opposition. Our methodological hypothesis would be validated, and our demonstration of a character system fulfilled, if it could be shown that these two additional logical possibilities have their equivalent in the Balzacian text.

But we have already mentioned a likely candidate for the neutral or neuter term. Its apparently inconsistent synthesis of bourgeois origins and cultural values is indeed realized in the sorry young would-be poet Athanase, and beyond him by Romanticism itself: a movement of which Balzac's work, like that of Hegel, stands as a thoroughgoing critique.¹⁴

¹⁴ On Balzac's antiromanticism, see Pierre Barb ris, *Balzac et le mal du si cle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), especially chap. 7.

As for the complex term or ideal synthesis, we have omitted to mention until now the retarding episode that precipitates the crisis of the novel and impels Du Bousquier on to his climactic decision. This is the arrival, at Mademoiselle Cormon's house, of an exiled aristocratic officer, the Comte de Troisville, who, returning from Russia to reestablish himself in the region, is for a fond moment imagined by Mademoiselle Cormon to be the "solution" to her problems and a more appropriate match than either of the other contenders. Unfortunately, the Count is already married; this "solution," which would satisfactorily combine undoubted aristocratic "legitimacy" with documented military prowess of the Napoleonic type, is thus explicitly marked by the narrative as a merely "ideal" one, as a Utopian resolution in the narrower and empirically unrealizable sense.

The "Count de Troisville" thus figures as what we will call a horizon-figure in this narrative. He blocks out a place which is not that of empirical history but of a possible alternate one: a history in which some genuine Restoration would still be possible, provided the aristocracy could learn this particular object-lesson, namely that it needs a strong man who combines aristocratic values with Napoleonic energy (at some wish-fulfilling or fantasy level, Balzac obviously has himself in mind). This is then the ultimate sense in which the novel's comic yet rueful ending—the ultimate fate of Mademoiselle Cormon, married, and an old maid all at once! the very caricature of a dialectical resolution—is not truly a definitive one, but merely a horrible object-lesson.

In this light, *Les Paysans*—which is something like a transposition of these materials into a more somber and tragic register—can also be reread, and its well-known interpretation by Luk cs shown to be a premature finalization.¹⁵ For the doomed hero of *Les Paysans*, Count Montcornet, is, like Valois here, only ambiguously aristocratic; his title is in reality a Napoleonic one, and the doubtful legitimacy of his "feudal" authority over the chateau is underscored by the existence at the margins of the narrative of two other great estates, Ronquerolles and Soulanges, still in the possession of authentic noblemen. The implication is that where Montcornet failed, owing to the imperfection of his

¹⁵ In his essay on "Balzac: The Peasants," in *Studies in European Realism*, pp. 21–46.

origins, these neighboring horizon-figures, the representatives of a more authentic nobility, have some chance of succeeding—provided they heed Balzac's narrative warning! The disaster of *Les Paysans* (like that of *La Vieille Fille*, a reflection of a certain empirical history) is thus emptied of its finality, its irreversibility, its historical inevitability, by a narrative register which offers it to us as merely conditional history, and transforms the indicative mode of historical "fact" into the less binding one of the cautionary tale and the didactic lesson.

II

The preceding demonstration posited a constitutive relationship between three distinct features of *La Vieille Fille*: a wish-fulfilling or fantasy investment that dissolved the biographical into the Utopian; a narrative without a hero (in the sense of a privileged "point of view" or centered subject), whose characters were seen to be generated by a deeper semic system; and finally, the possibility of a certain *dérive* or drift in narrative registers, such that a still apparently "realistic" representation is no longer binding in the fashion of empirical history. What was to have been shown was evidently the historical specificity of Balzac's "moment" and of a situation—before the full constitution of the bourgeois subject and the omnipresent effects of massive reification—in which desire, the decentering of the subject, and a kind of open history are still conjoined. It would seem sufficient response, however, to point to the many novels of Balzac which, prefiguring the *Bildungsroman*, "point of view" and irony, undoubtedly contain protagonists; nor does their equally undoubted autobiographical content imply a Utopian investment but rather precisely that later monadic bourgeois subjectivity whose absence from Balzac has been affirmed above. It will also be observed that it is on the face of it rather perverse to seek to deny the commodification of desire in a work such as Balzac's, which is so saturated with object-hunger of all kinds.

We therefore need to look at a second text whose narrative is more conventional than *La Vieille Fille* and more consonant with the received idea of Balzacian realism. *La Rabouilleuse* undoubtedly has a "hero"—indeed, it has two, the rival brothers Joseph and Philippe Bridau—and its quintessentially Balzacian *agon* turns on the struggle for that

quintessentially Balzacian object of desire, money—in this case a provincial inheritance. Yet in late Balzac, a prodigious expansion of the narrative frame, as well as a profound historicization of its raw materials, tends to displace the older static desires and manias of the conventional Balzacian protagonists and to shift the focus of the narrative to something like an etiology of desire, on the one hand (what is its origin and prehistory, into what can it be transformed or sublimated?), and on the other to a construction of the various means, strategies, and instruments which can lead to the desired end, itself now conventionally bracketed.

La Rabouilleuse is a prototypical embodiment of the Balzacian *agon*, in which little by little two primal enemies or adversaries are constructed, each with his network of allies and his own specific weapons and advantages, until at length a headlong collision brings the *dénouement* and leaves one of the rivals in a precarious and historically provisional possession of the object of the duel. In this novel, the twin protagonists come to represent and to champion the two rival branches of the Rouget family in their struggle for its inheritance. Yet a lengthy opening account of the misfortunes of the younger branch, in Paris—the death of the husband, a Napoleonic administrator, in his prime, a subsequent life of straitened circumstances and self-sacrifice—constructs an initial, anticipatory rivalry within this line itself, in the tension between its two brothers: the elder, a Napoleonic officer doted on by his mother, but adapting only with the greatest difficulty to peacetime life, while the younger, in all his unloved ugliness, shows promise of becoming a great painter. There thus emerges a secondary tension between this particular opposition and the major one which will absorb it when Philippe comes into collision with the challenger of the elder branch of the family in Issoudun—who is himself a former Napoleonic officer, and in background and ferocity virtually his enemy's mirror image.

Yet it is precisely this tension or inconsistency in narrative focus that gives *La Rabouilleuse* its unique power, since each of these axes or *agons* will stage its principal exhibit—the character of Philippe—in a different register and for quite different narrative ends. This figure, surely one of the most alarming in all Balzac, is anticipatory in a number of ways: one of the earliest literary representations of the "demi-solde" or

demobilized soldier down on his luck, Philippe in his physical deterioration also prefigures a Victorian fantasy-image of the lumpen-proletarian at his most threatening, and beyond that announces a whole renewal of melodrama as a narrative instrument for managing social tensions and conflicts. Philippe is not yet, however, a melodramatic figure in that sense: he is not a villain in the twin sense of reinforcing our essentially ideological conception of evil on the one hand, and of "explaining" the existence of social disorder on the other. He is obviously a principle of disorder and violence, but the narrative does not seek to hypostasize this dangerous energy into some ethical or mythic force. Rather it posits the emergence and perversion of that energy in such a way as to imply an essentially historical diagnosis of Philippe which is beyond mere ethical judgment.

Yet in fact *La Rabouilleuse* makes use of two distinct diagnoses, two independent and mutually exclusive explanatory systems or "psychologies," to account, in a curiously superimposed and overdetermined fashion, for one set of character traits; and with this curious reduplication—of an essentially objective or sociological diagnosis with an essentially subjective or protopschoanalytic one—we are at the heart of the novel and the place from which its twin registers can be distinguished.

As the designation of "demi-solde" suggests, the first diagnosis is a historical and indeed a dialectical one. Whatever the general ideological status of the myth of energy in Balzac, its function here is to foreground the primacy of its social situation: the quality of Philippe's energy is thus here directly proportionate to the historical praxis and social role available to him. Under Napoleon he becomes a colonel; during the Restoration he is a threat to those around him and to society as a whole; readapted to the struggle for the Rouget inheritance, harnessed to the value of the family and recontained by its discipline, he once again offers a model of intuitive action, of strategy and tactics alike. Yet as we have already observed, in the lengthening and well-nigh interminable historical perspective of late Balzac, the objects and prizes of such struggles are insensibly bracketed or devalorized by the ruses of History. As victor, Philippe, well qualified to handle adversaries cast in his own image, finds himself disarmed by the impersonal institutions of nascent capitalism and destituted by the events of July 1830 as

well as by the new banking forces of Louis-Philippe's bourgeois monarchy. He proves therefore to have been something of a "vanishing mediator" between an older provincial France and the market and financial dynamics of the metropolis, his "objective historical function" turning out to have been that of appropriating and transferring the accumulated wealth of the former into the speculative funds of the latter. Now thrown aside by History like an old shoe, his remaining qualities assign him to the very boundary of "civilized society," where, in the campaign to seize Algeria from the Bey, like Tête d'Or arriving at the limits of empire only to confront the faceless but absolute Otherness of an alien horde, he is overwhelmed by the earliest Third World guerrillas represented in modern literature.

Yet this representation of a historical dialectic is at one and the same time the locus of an essentially ideological reflection, or in our previous terminology, of the meditation on a conceptual antinomy. From this angle, the problem is one of the ideological category of "violence" and can perhaps best be conveyed in the following formulation: how is it conceivable for the family to generate a force explosive enough to wrest the fortune away from its other branch without itself being blown open and destroyed in the process? When we understand that the family is here, according to the canonical logic of Balzac's conservatism, the figure of society, it will become evident that the "political unconscious" of this text is thereby raising, in symbolic form, issues of social change and counterrevolution, and asking itself how the force necessary to bring about a return to the old order can be imagined as doing so without at the same time being so powerful and disruptive as to destroy that order itself in the process.

Turning to the other diagnostic or explanatory system implicit in *La Rabouilleuse*, we find that it is a psychological one, still familiar today, in which Philippe's "egotism" is denounced as a result of excessive maternal indulgence, to which the responsibility for social and familial "permissiveness" and the resultant lawlessness and disrespect for authority is imputed. What is significant for us is not this rather banal ideologue, but rather its structural consequences for a narrative which is at least in part conceived as an object-lesson to the

overindulgent mother herself. The patient devotion of the younger brother underscores Agathe's well-nigh criminal blindness and partiality, while his nascent glory as a painter tangibly reveals everything she is unwilling or unable to see. In conventional critical terminology, Agathe is little more than a background figure, and belongs to a secondary plot at that; perhaps we need a different type of narrative theory to identify the psychic center of gravity of a narration whose surface categories and representational tactics are not demonstrably or symptomatically distorted by it; and to register the peculiarity of a situation in which a moral blindness witnessed indulgently by a perceptive son (who is in fact its victim) is then offered as a spectacle to a presumably supportive readership. Meanwhile, this representation, in which the mother is, as it were, a theme or an object of mimetic contemplation, is then curiously redoubled by a reception situation in which the ostensible reader senses a more fundamental gaze over his shoulder, in which it becomes clear that the spectacle has already been seen, or was destined for the edification of that far more essential, yet absent, witness, who is the biographical mother herself. But this category, the absent reader, the absent witness, is no longer another individuality, but rather something like a pole of intersubjectivity, a space or term in the communicational circuit, such that not merely the character "Agathe," but Balzac's own mother is indistinctly included. This is indeed the point at which the obvious biographical references become relevant: the rivalry between Balzac and his younger brother (ages here strategically reversed), a good-for-nothing manifestly preferred by Madame Balzac, the eclipse of the (much older) father, the sense that he has been from childhood the object of an incomprehensible maternal hostility (which, according to the biographers, will receive its ultimate literary representation in the character of Cousine Bette).¹⁶ These details are less interesting as sources than they are as coordinates in which the present narrative is produced and positioned. The object-lesson over

¹⁶ On Balzac's parents and his relation to them, see Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle*, chap. 2. On his brother Henry and the motif of fraternal rivalry in the *Comédie humaine*, see M. Fargeaud and R. Pierrrot, "Henry le trop aimé," *Année balzacienne*, 1961, pp. 29-66; P. Citron, "Sur deux zones obscures de la psychologie de Balzac," *Année balzacienne*, 1967, pp. 4-10; and P. Citron, "Introduction," *La Rabouilleuse* (Paris: Garnier, 1966).

the reader's shoulder to some absent but crucial maternal witness is then yet a further stage in the didactic register we have identified in *La Vieille Fille*: the latter was also, but to a lesser degree, a lesson for its female protagonist—a figure for France itself, whose mistaken decision (Du Bousquier = 1830) is herein censured. At this point, then, it would seem that the subject is positioned outside the text as an Other, a kind of Absolute Reader with whom the real or empirical reader can never coincide. The latter is thus, to this representation, something like a bystander or a chance observer, and no structural position—no fourth wall—is opened for him or her in the narrative.

In effect, then, the section of the narrative that deals with the Agathe subplot and the rivalry between the two brothers, has the structure of a wish-fulfillment, or better still, of a daydream, a daytime fantasy into which the subject projects his own image and of which the reader or spectator does not occupy the empty slot of mature universal representation (something on the order of the shifter in language), but rather precisely the place of one of the other characters in the daydream. This peculiar narrative logic not only corresponds to an archaic stage in the development of the mature subject (that stage which Lacan conveniently terms the Imaginary); it also presents, according to Freud, the fundamental problem for aesthetic creation, which must somehow universalize, displace, and conceal the private wish-fulfilling elements of its content if it wants to make the latter receivable as art by other subjects who are "repelled" by the poet's own private wish-fulfillments.¹⁷ Flaubert's program for the depersonalization of the literary text can thus in one way be seen as the recognition of the dilemma designated by Freud, and as the systematic attempt to remove all traces of wish-fulfillment from the narrative surface. What is striking in Balzac, on the other hand, is not merely the continuing presence of this psychic mechanism, but also and above all the absence of any shame or self-consciousness about the process.

From this Imaginary or wish-fulfilling register of the preparatory section, the novel moves to the quite different narrative dynamic of the

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," Standard Edition, ix (London: Hogarth, 1959), 143-153.

main plot—the mission of the baleful Philippe to Issoudun and the climactic struggle for the inheritance. It would be tempting to characterize this second register in terms of what Lacan calls the Symbolic order: the emergence of the subject from the essentially “analog” or wish-fulfilling thought of the mirror stage, the accession into language, with its digital thinking, its proper names, negatives, and above all its “shifters” or empty pronominal slots in which transitory subjects can lodge in succession. But in that case we must add that it is a truncated or mutilated experience of the Symbolic, and that Balzac’s novel is essentially characterized by the dissociation of these two orders, Imaginary and Symbolic, which are normally, in mature experience—and, presumably, in the “high realism” of the constituted subject—inseparable.

Indeed, if the first or Imaginary register of the narrative is characterized by the absent presence of the mother, the second or Symbolic development of the main plot is haunted by the dead father, the enigmatic Doctor Rouget, whose only appearance as a character in this text marks the crucial moment of origins: the oneiric, Faulknerian moment in which for the first time, in early morning, the aged physician, on horseback in the fields about his calls, meets the already ravishingly beautiful peasant child stirring for crayfish in a stream (hence her patois nickname, the *rabouilleuse*).

For Lacan, the passage from the Imaginary stage to the Symbolic Order is marked by the infant’s experience of what he calls the Name-of-the-Father, a formulation which unites the classical Freudian account of the Oedipus complex and the castration anxiety to the essentially linguistic discovery of the distinction between the paternal function itself—the term “father”—and that individual biological parent to whom he has hitherto related in a more properly Imaginary mode. This is, then,

the Oedipal moment, in which a ternary structure emerges against the background of the dual structure [of the Imaginary], when the Third (the father) intrudes on the imaginary satisfaction of dual fascination, overthrows its economy, destroys its fascinations, and introduces the child to what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order, the order of objectifying language that will finally allow him to say: I, you, he, she or it, that will

therefore allow the small child to situate itself as a *human child* in the world of adult thirds.¹⁸

La Rabouilleuse, the third novel in a series Balzac called *Les Célibataires* (the unwed), in this respect tells the story of a prolonged and unnatural vacancy of the paternal function; and the struggle for the inheritance is less a matter of an object of desire—either in the sense of Propp’s quest or in that of the commodity form—than it is a symptom of paternal absence. The “bachelorhood” of the series title might indeed designate any of the principal actors in this complex *agon*: from Joseph (neglected by his mother), or Philippe, whose menacing energy is significantly accompanied by physical deterioration, to the latter’s adversary Max (rumored, according to the classical Freudian mechanism of “family romance,” to be Dr. Rouget’s bastard son) and to the *rabouilleuse* herself, Flore Brazier, whose ultimate passage beneath the conjugal yoke—in Philippe’s triumph—marks the beginning of a long degradation.

Yet the most striking of these casualties is surely the biological son, the wealthy and debilitated Jean-Jacques, whose failure to occupy the paternal succession with the appropriate authority creates the vacuum into which the other characters rush, and whose various clinical features—hereditary debility associated with venereal disease, impotence, but also masochism and incest (his mistress, Flore, also “lay with” his father)—entitle this work to take its place alongside others whose tactful but explicit evocations of male homosexuality, Lesbianism, frigidity, bestiality, transvesticism and satyriasis range Balzac in the lineage of Sade and among the precursors of modern psychopathology, just as his interest in the determining influences of profession, social class, and region mark him as a forerunner of historical materialism (and of Taine’s positivism as well).

If the Joseph narrative is distinguished by something like an overinvestment of the subject, in its wish-fulfilling and Imaginary function, the main plot of the novel, the Philippe narrative, would seem to be marked by something like an absence of psychic investment: its

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, “Freud and Lacan,” in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), p. 210.

melodramatic excitement is characterized by a peculiarly unmelodramatic lack of side-taking, a kind of fascinated indifference to either of these maimed and repulsive groups of actors. The authorial diagnosis of Jean-Jacques provides the key to this strange vacancy at the heart of the Symbolic order:

At his father's death, Jean-Jacques was aged thirty-seven, and as timid and submissive to paternal discipline as a child of twelve. For those who are not prepared to believe in his character, or in the facts of this story, this timidity is the key to his childhood, youth and indeed his entire life. . . . There are two kinds of timidity: timidity of mind and timidity of the nerves, physical and moral timidity. Each is independent of the other. The body can be afraid and tremble, whilst the mind remains calm and brave; the opposite is also true. This accounts for many strange acts of behaviour. When both kinds of timidity are found in one and the same individual, that man will be worthless throughout his life. *Complete* timidity of this kind is found in the people we call idiots.¹⁹

It is significant that, like the diagnosis of Philippe discussed earlier, this one is also fundamentally overdetermined, and provides two distinct explanations for Jean-Jacques' premature senility: heredity and environment, tainted blood and paternal oppression. The very inconsistency between the two accounts—in Philippe's case the family situation (in his case, the absence of a father) is doubled by a world-historical one, the rise and fall of the Napoleonic empire, rather than by a physiological one, as in the case of Jean-Jacques—suggests that we have here to do with a single complex of ideas, in which themes of heredity, familial situation and sociohistorical occasion are symbolically equivalent. In effect, both diagnoses of the strange case of Jean-Jacques Rouget lead back to the dead patriarch: the authoritarian father's crushing effect on the son's personality is here reduplicated by a biological mythology dear to Balzac (and significantly enough derived from thoughts cherished by his own father!), according to

¹⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *The Black Sheep*, trans. D. Adamson (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 171 (*La Rabouilleuse* [La Comédie humaine: Paris: La Pléiade, 1952, 11 vols.], 111, 971).

which human energy, and, in particular, human sexuality, is something like a fixed capital which can never be replaced once it has been spent. The father's excesses thus account only too "fatally" for the son's mysterious languour. At this point, then, the failure of the subject to constitute itself (or to assume the paternal name and function) is ultimately attributed to the dead father in a twofold thematization—authoritarianism and sexual excess—which will now allow us to identify the absent yet narratively determinant ideologeme.

Indeed, the historical message of this particular combination of semes—"tyranny" and "libertinage"—is quite unmistakable: only the *ancien régime* can be thereby designated, and the dead physician thus rises before us as the very prototype of the eighteenth-century libertine immortalized in the pages of Sade. His profession then underscores, or indeed restores, the close relationship, in the original seventeenth-century conception of *libertinage*, between scientific knowledge (materialism and atheism) and sexual license, both of which affirm the ultimate primacy of the body, whether as the horizon of all scientific inquiry or as that of the quest for *bonheur*.

In this sense, then, what Dr. Rouget was responsible for is a good deal more than the crippling of one son, or many, and far transcends even that brutal struggle for money which his disappearance authorized, extending to the whole fallen world of nascent capitalism, as it emerged from the destruction of the traditional monarchy by the twin agencies of Voltairean skepticism and the arbitrariness and excess of the state. This historical or allegorical significance of the orphaning of Jean-Jacques may, then, be seen to have its counterpart in the story of Philippe as well: son of one of the great imperial functionaries, whose health was broken by devotion and self-sacrifice, Philippe finds his spiritual progenitor in Napoleon himself, whose disappearance leaves another kind of hole against the sky. It is thus in a world which is the legacy of the bad Jacobin father, and in which the spurious benevolence of the paternal usurper (Napoleon) has been exposed, that the survivors—both of the Rouget family and of the Restoration—"red of tooth and claw," struggle for psychic and political mastery.

The heterogeneous narrative registers that allow Balzac's novel to record these social and historical overtones are thus dependent, as their condition of possibility, upon a psychic situation in which the

centered subject has not yet emerged. Nor is this reading predicated on some ideal of the unification of the psyche, the conquest of identity, the triumph of the ego, against which such psychic fragmentation was measured. On the contrary, the final perspective of the novel, in which Joseph Bridau's ultimate artistic glory and social success are foretold, has already been marked as a purely Imaginary wish-fulfillment by the opening section of the text. The Symbolic once again relaxes into the Imaginary: so dreams of privilege console the imagination tormented by unresolvable contradictions.

III

We are now able to draw some provisional conclusions as to the relationship between desire, ideology, and the possibility for certain types of narrative apparatus to lay claim to a social and historical "realism." Before doing so, however, we must address a related issue and respond to the inevitable objection about the repeated and systematic violation, in the preceding pages, of the taboo against biographical criticism.

The earliest type of biographical criticism, that against which the older New Criticism very properly reacted, was essentially a genetic affair, whose object was the discovery in the appropriate archives of the source, model, or original of this or that character, event, or situation. In a second moment, that of existential psychoanalysis, psychobiography, and most of the great literary biographies of the present day, we find a significant modification in the way in which a "life" is related to a particular "work": at its best, in such criticism, the "life" itself becomes yet one more text by the same author, no more, but no less privileged than his other works, and to be added into the corpus of study along with them.

The position of biographical information in the present framework is somewhat different from either of these: in the preceding pages, the "life" of the historical individual Balzac has been used, neither as a set of empirical facts, nor as a textual system of characteristic behavior, but rather as the traces and symptoms of a fundamental family situation which is at one and the same time a fantasy master narrative. This unconscious master narrative—which we will call, following French usage, a *fantasm*, in order to distinguish it from the connotations of

daydream or wish-fulfillment unavoidable in the English term "fantasy"—is an unstable or contradictory structure, whose persistent actantial functions and events (which are in life restaged again and again with different actors and on different levels) demand repetition, permutation, and the ceaseless generation of various structural "resolutions" which are never satisfactory, and whose initial, unreworked form is that of the Imaginary, or, in other words, of those waking fantasies, daydreams, and wish-fulfillments of which we have already spoken.

We have already sketched out some of the ways in which the "facts" of Balzac's life can be reconstructed in the form of a fantasmatic subtext of this kind: the child caught between an aging father with whom he can only imperfectly identify (Bernard-François Balzac was already fifty-three years old when his eldest son was born), and a mother not merely openly adulterous, but also distressingly attached to the pampered younger brother who was the product of this liaison. What needs to be stressed, however, is that this contradictory situation is a social as well as a private, familial, or "psychoanalytic" one: Sartre's *Search for a Method* has taught us to read the family situation as the mediation of class relationships in society at large, and to grasp the parental functions as socially coded or symbolic positions as well. Enlarged to include these meanings, a matrimonial tie between a former peasant, grown rich in land speculation during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, and a representative of the older merchant aristocracy will obviously not be without some formative relationship to Balzac's mature ideological fantasy-solution of a monarchism and landed conservatism. Yet other mediations must also be inserted here; in particular, we have already noted the paternal origins of Balzac's economic myths—most notably the fantasmatic opposition of the hoarding of energy, either economic or sexual, and its vital expenditure in a squandering that ultimately leads (as in *La Peau de chagrin*) to death. The passionate adoption of this paternal system of "hygiene" is, however, not inconsistent with the formative influence on Balzac's "mature" philosophy of his mother's passion for occult and religious literature; and indeed, Balzac's philosophy can in this sense be read as an original symbolic act, a kind of symbolic resolution, whereby a business ethic of delayed gratification (in Weber's sense of the

"protestant ethic") is mythically projected through the medium of a Romantic and nostalgic Swedenborgianism. But this projection, which can rewrite Balzacian opinion in the form of a symbolic act or of the resolution of contradictions, at best accounts for only a very specific narrative production, that of the fantastic novels and stories (grouped in the *Etudes philosophiques*) of the 1830s.

We have, however, been able to isolate certain properly Imaginary or wish-fulfilling registers in the two works of Balzac's maturity studied here: the dream of landed establishment marked out but left narratively unfulfilled in the horizon-figure of Troisville (in *La Vieille Fille*), the fantasy of ultimate reinstatement in the mother's eyes, and ultimate triumph over the unworthy sibling rival, in the Joseph section of *La Rabouilleuse*. These Imaginary or wish-fulfilling texts are then the first stage or moment in the process whereby the original fantasm seeks an (impossible) resolution.

But this moment—the production of the wish-fulfilling text—is not yet, according to Freud, the moment of genuine literary or cultural production, let alone that of "realism" in any sense this word can have. What it allows us to account for is the production of that quite different thing called ideology, which Althusser defines as "the imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her real conditions of existence."²⁰ We may now refine this "definition" by distinguishing between such an "imaginary representation" and its narrative conditions of possibility: the former is precisely the wish-fulfilling daydream or fantasy text of which *La Vieille Fille* and *La Rabouilleuse* gave us fragments, and which can be indefinitely enlarged to include Balzac's vision of himself as a great Tory landlord after the model of Sir Walter Scott, with local authority but also national influence, the head of a dynasty, but also a peer and the member of a revitalized upper chamber, an ideological spokesman for the aristocratic elite, a statesman and a cabinet minister like Rastignac or De Marsay, and finally, perhaps, that Napoleonic "strong man" needed to achieve a triumphant, and this time definitive, counterrevolution.

Balzac's ideology may now be grasped as the axiomatic of this fantasy text: in other words, as those conceptual conditions of possibility or

narrative presuppositions which one must "believe," those empirical preconditions which must have been secured, in order for the subject successfully to tell itself this particular day-dream. Primogeniture, for instance, becomes an essential preliminary requirement for the reestablishment of the great landed estates on whose basis alone a revitalized aristocracy is conceivable: it thus at once becomes a significant political "principle," and the production of the fantasy-text knows a peculiar "unconscious" reflexivity, as, in the process of generating itself, it must simultaneously secure its own ideological preconditions.

However, daydreaming and wish-fulfilling fantasy are by no means a simple operation, available at any time or place for the taking of a thought. Rather, they involve mechanisms whose inspection may have something further to tell us about the otherwise inconceivable link between wish-fulfillment and realism, between desire and history. It would seem, indeed, that the production of a whole ideology as a precondition for the indulgence of a specific daydream implies something like a reality principle or censorship within the latter. This peculiar dialectic, in which the desiring subject is forced to enumerate the objections to his or her Imaginary gratification in order to realize the latter even on the level of a daydream, has nowhere so strikingly been described as in Proust, whose narrator finds that it is no easy matter to imagine receiving a love letter from the indifferent girl with whom he is infatuated:

Every evening I indulged myself in imagining this letter, felt I could even read it before me, recited it line by line and sentence by sentence. But suddenly I would break off in terror. I understood that, were I ever to receive a letter from Gilberte, it could under no circumstances ever be this one, for I had just composed it myself. After that, I forced myself to look away in thought from the words I would have liked to have her address to me, for fear that, by pronouncing them, I would thereby have banished precisely those words—the most cherished and desirable—from the field of possible realizations.²¹

The Proustian "solution," a kind of negation of the negation of desire, may be said to be a kind of modernizing formula in which the object

²⁰ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 162.

²¹ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1954), I, 409.

to be fantasized is magically evoked by way of its very renunciation. Yet it allows us to glimpse other, "stronger" solutions which will be those of writers like Balzac. For the generation and adoption of ideological preconditions are still matters of what we may call the first level of the wish-fulfillment: the subject wishes for the realization of the ideological axiomatic in order to be able then to wish the fantasy narrative. But one can imagine a more consequent act of desire in which the wish-fulfilling mind sets out systematically to satisfy the objections of the nascent "reality principle" of capitalist society and of the bourgeois superego or censorship. Unlike the more degraded, and easily commodifiable, texts of the Imaginary level, these new, second-level narratives—we will call them, following our earlier distinction, "Symbolic texts"—entertain a far more difficult and implacable conception of the fully realized fantasy: one which is not to be satisfied by the easy solutions of an "unrealistic" omnipotence or the immediacy of a gratification that then needs no narrative trajectory in the first place, but which on the contrary seeks to endow itself with the utmost representable density and to posit the most elaborate and systematic difficulties and obstacles, in order the more surely to overcome them, just as a philosopher imagines in advance the objections his triumphant argumentation will be summoned up to confute.

It then sometimes happens that the objections are irrefutable, and that the wish-fulfilling imagination does its preparatory work so well that the wish, and desire itself, are confounded by the unanswerable resistance of the Real. This is the sense in which Lukács is right about Balzac, but for the wrong reasons: not Balzac's deeper sense of political and historical realities, but rather his incorrigible fantasy demands ultimately raise History itself over against him, as absent cause, as that on which desire must come to grief. The Real is thus—virtually by definition in the fallen world of capitalism—that which resists desire, that bedrock against which the desiring subject knows the breakup of hope and can finally measure everything that refuses its fulfillment. Yet it also follows that this Real—this absent cause, which is fundamentally unrepresentable and non-narrative, and detectable only in its effects—can be disclosed only by Desire itself, whose wish-fulfilling mechanisms are the instruments through which this resistant surface must be scanned. When, in Flaubert, Balzacian fantasy is effaced, its place taken

by the twin phenomena of *bovarysme*, that "desire to desire" whose objects have become illusory images, and of the anorexia of the first antihero, Frédéric Moreau, who no longer has the force to desire anything, at that point the Real ceases to reply, for no further demands are being made on it.

This narrative process may now be schematically represented:

