Balzac as Anthropologist

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> *Louis Lambert* has cost me so many labors. Perhaps it will lead science into new paths one day. If I had written a work purely for *savants*, it would have attracted the attention of thinkers who will not glance at it. But, if chance places the novel in their hands, they will perhaps speak of it! (Balzac,*Correspondence*)

> The most important discoveries in the mathematical and physical sciences are always just the researched, found or guessed proof of an already known fact. Entire generations had observed the revolutions of the earth and the heavens; Newton, Kepler, Lagrange, Laplace, Arago stated, and still state, the causes; they prove in a word. The moral-physical fact that makes society move was formulated better by the wisdom of nations than by even Rousseau. *The blade cuts through the sheath*, say the people. Mr. Balzac writes *Louis Lambert*. He proves in the same fashion as scientists. We have intentionally cited the example of *Louis Lambert*. In it one can find in seminal form this secretly formulated science, this cruelly positive science, that will put an end, it is said, to many a philosophical discussion. (Davin/Balzac, "Introduction to the *Philosophical Studies*")(1)

Does Balzac have anything "scientific" to say to his readers? If not, our inquiry can stop here. If so, (and for the sake of argument let's say he does) our first question must address this obvious paradox: why would he communicate his "discovery" in a novel rather than a scientific treatise, such as those written by the famous "hard" scientists he cites as his models? Since today we are familiar with Balzac above all as a writer of fiction and not as a philosopher or human scientist, we naturally assume these scientific claims to be a hoax and his choice of the novel obvious. Yet many of Balzac's early theoretical writings had human-scientific pretensions, and he insisted repeatedly, in the above epigraphs and elsewhere, that *Louis Lambert* be considered a legitimate work of science. He was also perfectly aware, as the first epigraph makes plain, that the imbrication of science and fictional narrative would pose a stumbling block both for intellectuals and ordinary readers of fiction: intellectuals, presumably, would never consider the novel a serious form of scientific mediation, and ordinary readers of novels would never comprehend the science. In the end, whatever might have been the nature of Balzac's "discovery," the French novelist was evidently prepared to hand the proper reception of his work over to chance–to risk eternal misunderstanding rather than surrender his "unknown science" to uninitiated readers. What, we cannot help but wonder, are the stakes of such a wager?

Previous criticism has taken up Balzac's scientific challenge, but without producing entirely convincing results. The typical strategy is to conflate the identities of Balzac and the fictional scientist, Louis Lambert, and to argue that Balzac's science can be culled from the jumble of axioms and formulas contained in Lambert's "Treatise of Will" (a fragmented copy of which is presented at the end of the novel) or from the narrator's memories of the experiments and sources that led to the discovery and to the resulting treatise. Framed thematically, the scientific question thus hangs primarily on the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of Balzac's mimetic reproduction of Lambert's sources (*e.g.*, Gall, Mesmer, Lavater, Bichat, Swedenborg) or on speculation about how to make sense of Lambert's/Balzac's treatise.

This traditional realist approach to Balzac's science is understandable since Lambert, it is claimed, makes an important discovery, and since many of the events in Lambert's life parallel events in Balzac's life, including the writing of a document called "Treatise of Will." At first glance, then, Balzac's extra-textual scientific claims appear to refer unproblematically to his fictional genius's thoughts, and the narrator's goal to reconstruct Lambert's lost science would appear to be a thin disguise for a restoration (and glorification) of Balzac's science. The narrative dilemma is, of course, that despite the narrator's intimate knowledge of the events surrounding Lambert's discovery and the composition of the treatise, his memory has (apparently) dimmed with time; and Lambert, himself, has gone mad. With nowhere to turn, the narrator must eventually renounce his reconstructive project, but he directly challenges readers more capable than himself to complete the puzzle: "Between these two fragments [of the treatise] there is an obvious correlation for those rare souls who take pleasure in plunging into such intellectual abysses" (XI 689). The stakes of a successful restoration, the narrator suggests elsewhere, are a possible advance in "*les sciences humaines*" (684).

A quick perusal of the treatise in question reveals that the correlation between the two fragments is far from obvious. Its incoherence combined with the irony of the narrator's challenge, in fact, only draws heightened attention to the problems attached to the traditional realist approach. First, the version of the treatise made available to readers is a severely fragmented, third-hand rewriting of the lost original. It is doubtful therefore that even the most expert readers could ever restore its contents. It would also seem problematic to view Lambert's "scientific" thoughts as Balzac's, since this assumes Balzac incapable of distinguishing between the hard sciences of Newton and Kepler, mentioned in his extra-textual claims, and the pseudo-sciences of Mesmer, Gall, and others, thematized within the novel. Balzac's scientific claims, though apparently absurd, are far more radical. Since Balzac is clearly aware of his provocation, we might do better to confront it head on. Finally, given that the absent object to which Lambert's treatise potentially refers has strategically been *made absent* within a work of fiction, Balzac has guaranteed in advance that his readers can, at best, approach it only asymptotically. What he has also guaranteed is an *endless production of new language* as critics attempt to fill in the treatise's unbridgeable gap.

2

One is tempted to conclude in the wake of deconstructive theory that the narrator's failure to recapture Lambert's discovery in stable theoretical discourse demonstrates the inadequacies or limits of mimetic representation. According to this view, language's infinite play of signifiers undercuts the narrator's (and thus Balzac's) mastery over the real; or, more generously, Balzac's creation of an illusion only to punch a hole in it displays his supreme irony and self-consciousness vis-à-vis the mimetic function of language. Chantal Massol-Bédouin makes the latter argument with respect to Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, but we could easily apply her claims to *Louis Lambert*:

> Balzac's narratives pretend to hide a secret that they could reveal in a relation of container to contained. . . . The depth is as phony as that of Frenhofer's painting. The enigmatic text has no more "inside" than the painting has an underside. . . . The mystery thus has no other existence but textual: it is a pure production of the book that creates it. . . . *The Unknown Masterpiece* ends in a failure: seeking to defend the Artist, the text shows the impossibility of being one, and the writer has deconstructed his own myth while wishing to construct it. Balzac gets out of this situation through a pirouette: he chooses the path of conscious and avowed mystification. (54-55)

Though more sensitive to Balzacian paradox and irony than the traditional realist approach, the deconstructive approach shares its principal weakness, namely, the displacement of the scientific/referential question to which Balzac attached so much importance. However much Balzac may have wished to challenge conventional assumptions about the possibilities of capturing human experience in realist representation, the alternative to a naively mimetic notion of referentiality is not necessarily textuality. The fact that the novelist is able to produce a mimetic illusion in order to distance himself from it ironically is in itself sufficient proof of a minimal level of mimetic adequacy.

In light of the principles associated with René Girard's mimetic theory and Eric Gans's Generative Anthropology, a more productive approach to the question of Balzac's "science," without discarding either the mimetic/realist or deconstructive perspectives, may be to locate it, paradoxically, in the very *deferral* of referentiality. Instead of viewing the narrator's dramatic failure to reconstruct Lambert's treatise merely as a hoax or as a proto-deconstruction of representation, we may read it as part of a deeper strategy to (1) demonstrate the mimetic causes of desire (in this case, Lambert's, the narrator's and *the reader's* desire to theorize the will) and (2) to reveal the paradoxes inherent in attempting to mediate a theory of mimetic desire in a conventional theoretical treatise. If Lambert's "Treatise of Will" is marked by an insuperable discontinuity, this is not due to the narrator's forgetfulness; he finally admits on the last page of the novel that he could have finished it for us ("Perhaps I could have transformed these fragments of thought into a *complete* book." [XI 692, my emphasis]). Rather, Balzac willfully creates this textual/epistemological gap so that the desire generated in readers to search for the (non-existent) solution will lead, in a second step, to the discovery of the mimetic principle behind the original desire to search. The point of engaging us in a reconstruction of Lambert's treatise, then, is not to have us reestablish a set of quotable propositions concerning "the will" (or "desire"); it is to reveal through our interpretive failure that (mimetic) desire is itself a stumbling block or *scandal* to conventional scientific theorization: it is inter-subjective and thus has no objective substance or stable referentiality; it has no verifiable first cause; its effects are contagious and can themselves become the cause of further effects. And more importantly, a theory of mimetic desire, according to this reading of Balzac, cannot be mediated without interference by the mimetic desires of the theorist or his reader-disciples.

The fundamental problem that arises in the transmission of a theory of will (or desire) with universal, scientific pretensions is this: the disciple's desire to know the substance of the master-theorist's theory can never be cleanly differentiated from the imitative desire generated by the charisma of the theorist.(2) Put differently, there is no way to distinguish between a disciple who has rationally comprehended the principles of mimetic theory and a disciple who is merely enacting the principles through imitation of the language and thoughts of his master. As Balzac understood, any human science aspiring to the status of a *positive* science will produce in disciples either a reaction of idolatry (and therefore mystification) or rivalry and conflict (since the disciples will naturally aspire to make their own scientific and universal claims). As there can logically be only *one* universal theory of desire, the theorist who pronounces it is doomed from the start since idolatry will lead to fatigue and boredom, and rivalry will eventually lead to overturning and displacement. Gans says in *Signs of Paradox*, “To think is to liberate oneself from an idolatrous form of mimesis, never absolutely, but by replacing it with another, less pathological form” (34). If this is true (and I think it is), it must hold even in the case of the theory of mimetic desire as object of desire. At some level even the most faithful disciple must distance himself from the master-theorist through paradox or irony in order to demonstrate critical distance and independent thinking. But at this point anthropology meets literature–for what is a scientific treatise that includes irony and paradox in its strategy of communication?

Balzac’s “scientific” accomplishment, then, should be understood precisely as he characterizes it: it is *a novel*–a novel whose anthropological insight works to scandalize readers with its mimetic effects but at the same time offers the analytical tools to grasp (and therefore transcend) the causes of the scandal. Paradoxically, if we look for science, as previous critics have, at the thematic level, we misrecognize Balzac’s deeper theoretical aims. Desire becomes trapped at this level in a literally infinite, even if erudite, game of substituting and recombining the treatise’s contents. Yet if we do not look for science at this initial thematic level we will never position ourselves to take the second and most crucial step. Misrecognition, then, is the necessary pre-condition for observing the demonstration of Balzac’s anthropology. But recognition of our misrecognition is indispensable for perceiving the mimetic principles behind the demonstration.

What this also means, if the above claims are accepted, is that Lambert’s venerable “Treatise of Will”–the treatise widely believed to express Balzac’s own thoughts on “the will”–is a sham. And the narrator obviously must know this from the outset, although he pretends not to. The narrator, in fact, lies to his readers about the treatise’s importance, he fakes his pious devotion to Lambert and his “discovery,” he reorders the chronology of events to dramatize the rediscovery of Lambert’s lost treatise, he delays to the latest possible moment the revelation of Lambert’s madness–and then he quietly blows the cover on this narrative trickery. For what reason? Again, in order to more adequately mediate his own (that is, *Balzac’s*) theory of mediated desire.(3) Having discovered the contagious effects of mimetic desire while under the thrall of Lambert’s theoretical genius, the narrator attempts to recreate this mimetic experience for the reader. His aim, paradoxically, is not to state the principles of a mimetic theory of desire in an easily reproducible format, but to reveal *how* the mimetic impulse must be observed and discovered as a function of Time as well as *why* he believes mimesis cannot be mediated *as a* *theory* in any lasting way in a treatise. The narrator's double requirement to induce a mimetic illusion and to break it, to encourage a search for science and then to discourage it, explains the awkward and ambiguous tone that so many critics have noticed (and disliked) in this text.

3

Because the narrator produces the illusion of recounting a linear chronology of Lambert's life–from his genius origins, through his tragic collapse into madness, to the rediscovery and revelation of the treatise–we are initially led to believe that the "event" of madness (as an adult) and the "event" of scientific discovery (as a child) are unrelated and that the content of Lambert's science remains valid in spite of this troubling news. Yet a moment's reflection reveals that the narrator's belated discovery of Lambert's madness is precisely what inspires him to reconstruct Lambert's science. Before learning (at age 30) of Lambert's fate, the narrator had in fact scarcely given Lambert's science a second thought. He cleverly papers over these details in the retelling of his findings, however, in order to keep his reader's desire for scientific knowledge intact as long as possible. If he revealed Lambert's madness too early, the fear is that readers would not be motivated to examine the evidence in the same careful way as if under the impression that it contains a valuable science. But more to the point: the evidence presented as key testimony to Lambert's scientific genius is at the same time key evidence for the causes of his madness, since the two events, scientific discovery and collapse into folly, are internally connected. In fact, the narrator's manipulative alignment of cause and effect would suggest that Lambert's discovery caused (or *is*) his madness, although he realizes this in a flashback only many years after the fact, at a time when the delayed symptoms become perceivable.

We can observe an example of this narrative duplicity in one of the flashbacks that immediately follows the revelation of Lambert's madness: "This illness, an abyss as deep as that of sleep, was linked to a system of proofs that Lambert had given in his 'Treatise of Will.' At the very moment Mr. Lefebvre told me about Louis's first fit, I suddenly remembered a conversation that we had had about this subject" (XI 678). On a first reading we are convinced that the narrator's flashbacks are designed to discredit the view that Lambert is mad and to save his science from oblivion. But in fact it's the other way around: Lambert's symptoms provide retrospective insight into the nature of Lambert's "scientific" activity, which, in circular fashion, exposes the deeper causes of his present symptoms. Lambert's phallocentric fantasy, his fixation on writing the ultimate theory of will, his impotence, *catalepsie*, and attempted self-castration can all be traced back to a fixation on his original discovery. The narrator does not openly tell us this; he quietly arranges the narrative events in a cause-effect schema and hopes that his readers will see how to connect the dots.

As it turns out, Lambert's discovery was *linguistic*: he believed that he had found the ideal symbol–the "towers" (*tourelles)* of the château de Rochambeau–to capture the essence of human desire in all its metaphysical and erotic complexity. We can deduce from scattered evidence (too difficult to reproduce here)(4) that the phallic shape of the towers resembled a similar shape that he had recently dreamed about, which in turn resembled this shape's analog in reality–referred to in the text not so cryptically as Lambert's "*organe*."(5) At the moment of discovery, Lambert declares: "'I saw *that* last night in a dream!' He recognized the grove of trees . . . the color of the water, *the chateau's towers* " (XI 620-1). Though Lambert's discovery turns out to be a Cratylist fantasy in which the phallic icon becomes co-substantial with the reality behind it (that is, his desire), the lifelong effects of his fantasy were real: it diverted his original spiritual desire into a pathological obsession to write an unfinishable treatise about desire, and it repressed out of existence his desire for conventional conjugal relations with his wife, Pauline de Villenoix. Under the illusion that his ideal symbol provided both erotic and spiritual satisfaction in advance of actual desiring, Lambert simply stopped desiring, or least he stopped desiring in any conventional fashion. Viewed from a slightly different angle, we might say that he repeated the same metaphysical desire his entire life. In the scientific realm, for example, he did not seek to exchange ideas with others; he merely accumulated analogies (pulled from texts ranging from Mesmer, Bichat and the Bible) that resembled "the mechanism" of his own a priori ideal.

And in matters of love, too, Lambert's interest was above all linguistic. A close reading of his letters to Pauline, for example, shows that his desire for her was never sexual in a conventional sense; he was inspired above all by the signifying potential of the towers of her château de Villenoix. As evidence, he says such things as: "Oh, if you only knew how much the shape of the towers makes my heart palpitate" (XI 669); or: "I stayed all morning seated at the edge of the road, contemplating the towers of Villenoix. . . . If only you knew what I saw in my soul!" (666). As a near perfect mimesis of his earlier Rochambeau tower-symbol, Lambert believed that Pauline would be his passageway into conventional modes of communication (both linguistic and erotic), all the while maintaining the metaphysical/linguistic unity of his original discovery. Lambert's frustration comes when he discovers that Pauline might not find the same erotic satisfaction that he did in his original symbol-object ("I was afraid I can't make you happy" [666]). What is more, the spatial and temporal *différance* separating the two iterations (tower 1 and tower 2) reveals to Lambert that he may not have truly captured the metaphysical substance of Desire in his original symbol. This explains its untranslatability either into scientific expression (the unfinishable treatise) or into expressions of love (the eventual experience of failed metaphysical union with

Pauline):

> I would like another language to exist other than the one I am using in order to express the reborn delights of my love. . . . From afar, when I am in the darkness of absence, am I not forced to use human words which are too weak to express divine sensations? . . . Still, despite science and the infinity of language, I have never found anything in these expressions that could paint the delicious embrace by which my life melts into yours when I think of you. And then, by what word can I finish when I have stopped writing that will keep you in my presence? (XI 671)

Though pursuing the causes of Lambert's linguistic madness may seem unrelated to our goal of pursuing the narrator's/Balzac's anthropology, in fact the two trajectories are intertwined. It is Lambert's belief that he could exhaust his desire in a representational mimesis of desire that leads to his extreme forms of desirelessness (impotence and attempted self-castration), and it is the bizarre events caused by this belief that reveal retrospectively to the narrator the paradox of mimetic desire that produced the original event of symbolization. Though left unstated, we can surmise that the physical expression of desire required by marriage would have constituted a detachment and horizontalization of Lambert's original union of vertical desire and ideal symbol. Such a detachment was unacceptable to Lambert because his original desire, we can now see, was to control the scene of representation by designating its center with a symbol.

4

It is no accident that Balzac chose the phallic towers of a pre-Revolutionary chateau as Lambert's founding symbol of symbols since it is connected both metaphorically and metonymically to the Christian/patriarchal order to which Balzac was so profoundly attached. The phallocentrism (or phallogocentrism) implied by this choice of symbol would point to deeper social and cultural reasons for Lambert's pathological obsession: he attempts to (re-)designate the center of representation at a historical moment when this center had already been radically displaced by political revolution. From an historical and cultural point of view, Lambert's linguistic dream is thus at bottom an expression of nostalgia for the metaphysical satisfaction of desire formerly provided by Christianity. Lambert was not necessarily fully aware of the underlying forces influencing his desire, but he intuitively realized that the shift from the vertical axis to the horizontal (or from ideal desire to physical) would have internally split the original metaphysical unity he had imagined between his desire and the tower-symbol, which in turn would have undermined the foundations of his "science." At the moment of crisis, Lambert resists the pull away from his ideal by attempting to eradicate his ideal's counterpart in material reality.

The narrator's anthropological discovery comes to him as he observes the hidden mechanism of desire governing the relation between Lambert and his wife, Pauline, which, in turn, recalls his observations of the original scene of discovery and symbolization. From direct observation and from intimate details gleaned from a cache of love letters, the narrator deduces that Pauline *repeats* his former role as Lambert's disciple, and that the sacred "sign" that binds them is the "tower-symbol" of Pauline's château de Villenoix. The fact that this symbol turns up in Lambert's love letters permits the narrator (and reader) to deduce with near certainty, both from its phallic iconicity and from the ostensive nature of his original act of linguistic designation ("I saw *that* last night . . ."), that Lambert's pathological expressions of desire as an adult are internally related to his childhood discovery. Such a connection could never be divined from the contents of Lambert's treatise because, once he begins translating his discovery into the declarative statements of a conventional treatise, he, by necessity, radically displaces the ostensive sign on which the treatise is founded. Paradoxically, the more he attempts to render his discovery present in a representational mimesis, the further he displaces the ostensive sign and the mimetic paradox that generated it–a point to which we shall return.

A visual analogy for this process can be found in Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, in which the genius painter, Frenhofer, adds layer upon layer of paint to his masterpiece only to further bury the object he is attempting to make present. The paradox extends even to the reader: the more we attempt to complete Lambert's treatise, the further we distance ourselves from its underlying truth. That is because at issue here is what Gans calls the paradoxical structure of language: the language (or representation) that is generated as a harmonious solution to mimetic conflict defers (and therefore conceals) the desires that generated it. Within the fictional world of *Louis Lambert,* only the narrator truly understands this paradox because he alone was present at the original scene of discovery and symbolization: he observed the content of the desire behind Lambert's first sign; and he also observed how far Lambert's treatise had displaced the original sign (and its content) over time. What intrigued him as a child, and what continues to intrigue him as an adult, is the *mimetic attraction* caused by Lambert's metaphysical belief. Again, it is Pauline's attachment to Lambert combined with Lambert's continued (but now hidden) attachment to his original sign-object that permits him to recall his former fascination and to find evidence for his anthropology:

> I headed toward the château de Villenoix with very strong emotions. . . . I

> wanted to reexperience the impressions and thoughts of my poor friend. No doubt these evening conversations . . . had initiated Mademoiselle de Villenoix into the secrets of this soul, so noble and so vast, just as I had myself been initiated several years prior. But the fact that preoccupied me the most, and which gave my pilgrimage an immense curiosity combined with the almost religious feelings that were guiding me, was this magnificent belief on the part of Mademoiselle de Villenoix . . . : had she over time contracted her lover's madness or had she entered so profoundly into his soul that she could understand even his most confused thoughts. I lost myself in this admirable problem. (XI 680-1)

The narrator's concern about Pauline's emotional state is at bottom a concern about his own because he realizes after the fact that a faithful adherence to Lambert's metaphysical ideal would have meant his own intellectual enslavement and folly. Despite the temporal distance that separates them, the narrator's fear of Lambert's nefarious influence in fact causes him to renounce any further visits. Though implicit in the above passage, the narrator's self-conscious understanding of mimetic desire and of its unconscious "mechanism of transmission" becomes unmistakably clear below:

> After seeing Lambert one last time, I left his wife and was haunted by ideas so contrary to social life that, despite my promise, I decided not to return to Villenoix. The sight of Lambert had exerted a sinister influence on me. I dreaded finding myself in this drunken atmosphere in which the ecstasy would be contagious. Anybody would have experienced, as I did, the desire to plunge into the infinite in the same manner as the soldiers who committed suicide in the sentry post in which one of their colleagues had committed suicide at the Boulogne camp. We know that Napoleon had to burn the woods down. . . . Maybe it's the same with Lambert's room? These two facts serve as proof for his idea on the transmission of the will. I felt an extraordinary stirring that surpassed even the most fantastic effects caused by tea, coffee, opium, by sleep and fever, mysterious agents whose terrible effects so often inflame our heads. (XI 691-2)

The mimetic principle that I argue grounds Balzac's anthropology, though more or less open to view in the above passages, remains for the most part secretly embedded in the majority of his narratives so that its cause-effect relations must be activated and observed by the reader to be understood. The purpose of such an embedding, as I have briefly tried to show, is to incorporate the paradox of communicating mimesis into the very structure of communication. In that way, Balzac assures in advance that the form of his texts never fully delivers the content of the principle that makes them operable–that the desire aroused by the central object can never be exhausted through appropriation. It is rather the irony of pointing to a central object and then withdrawing this object from our reach that guarantees the longevity of his theorization. In a strategy very similar to Søren Kierkegaard's notion of "indirect communication," Balzac requires a reaction from his readers to animate and identify the mimetic principle he wishes to communicate. However, as we have seen, the supreme paradox of indirect communication is that the best testimony to the power of mimetic desire is produced precisely when readers are the most *unaware* of its existence or operations.

5

If Balzac hides his mimetic principle from immediate observation, he nevertheless gives us plenty of clues to uncover it. He frequently uses the words *imiter* and *copier* (in all their variations) to describe the behavior of his characters; and he often provides theoretical aphorisms designed to put us onto the scent. In *Cousine Bette*, for example, he points to the rivalry and madness that can be produced by imitative desire: "[W]e don't know all of the crazy things that are attributable to the secret rivalries that drive men to imitate the model they have chosen, or to consume their life's forces in order to become the moonlight" (107). And in the analysis of the master-disciple relation between Balthazar Claës and Lemulquinier in *Search for the Absolute*, we find this: "By assisting Balthazar in his manipulations, [Lemulquinier] had espoused the folly of them. Either he had seized the impact of his research . . . or *the innate penchant in man for imitation* made him adopt the ideas of the one in whose atmosphere he lived (XI 708; my emphasis). Here Balzac clearly points to mimesis as a universal principle and he also reveals a self-conscious reflection concerning the idolatrous effects mimesis can produce in disciples.

This question concerning the nature of Lemulquinier's understanding of his master's science is the one that the narrator of *Louis Lambert* probes in his own disciple-relation to Lambert. As a third example, in fact, we might point to the narrator's open acknowledgment of the mimetic impulse behind his motivation to understand Lambert: "Louis walked in his elevated way completely detached from the things around us. *Obeying the need to imitate that dominates children*, I endeavored to shape my existence according to his" (XI 615, my emphasis). Although the narrator here appears to *will* his imitation of Lambert consciously, Balzac's point is always that mimesis operates unconsciously. His own theory of will (or desire) in fact calls into question the principle of rational voluntarism espoused by most Enlightenment philosophers and that dominated the main currents of academic philosophy in his era. Close reading shows that the narrator's childhood imitation of Lambert occurred spontaneously and naturally, to such an extent that the two were joined in a unity (referred to as a "marriage"), symbolized moreover by the singular name given to them by their classmates.(6) The narrator is able consciously to reflect on the unconscious operations of his mimetic behavior only long after Lambert's spell on him has been broken. In a flash of retrospective insight that stands as a precursor to Proustian involuntary memory, the narrator recounts how he rediscovered the unconscious cause of his former desire for Lambert's science. This memory, which finds its origin in Lambert's metaphysical/linguistic discovery, also reveals the narrator's self-conscious understanding of the desire behind Lambert's act of designation:

> I went toward the château de Villenoix with great emotion. My reflections grew deeper with every step on this road that Louis had so many times taken (XI 680). . . . At the moment I perceived the castle towers, the shape of which had so many times startled poor Lambert, my heart began to palpitate heavily (681).
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> For a long time I ignored the poetry and the treasures hidden in the heart and under the forehead of my friend. I had to reach the age of thirty, my observations had to mature and condense, a stream of bright light had to cast these observations in a new perspective so that I could understand the scope of the phenomena to which I had been an unwitting witness. . . . I had been enthralled without being able to explain either the grandeur or the mechanism. . . . Time alone permitted me to penetrate the meaning and the facts that abound in this unknown life, as they do in so many other lives lost to science. (606-7)

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> It is quite peculiar that somebody hasn't resurrected under the name Anthropology the teaching of occult philosophy, one of the glories of the old University. In this respect, Germany, a country that is at once so great and so childlike, is ahead of France because they teach this science there, which is far more useful than all of the different PHILOSOPHIES, which are all the same. (Balzac, *Cousin Pons*)

That Balzac aspired to writing anthropological theory is hardly a revelation, especially since Balzac, himself, on occasion described his intellectual activity as "anthropological." In reference to a treatise called *The Pathology of Social Life*, he indicates for example that his aim was to analyze how "man obeys the fantasies that society plants in him" (XI 1726), "to codify the laws of external existence" (1726), to write a "complete Anthropology" (1726). What is more, critics such as Pierre Castex have already drawn attention to fact that anthropology constituted something of an obsession for Balzac in his early career: "To found an anthropology, to scientifically reconstitute man, to study his ideas, his language, his faculties, to write a theory of human thought that would surpass the works of Locke, Condillac, Helvétius, Cabanis and the Idéologues, this was Balzac's first great project" (1716).

What it is missing in previous discussions of Balzac's anthropological thinking, however, is the extent to which desiring mimesis plays a role in his theorizations of the human and, furthermore, to what extent Balzac's *novels* take over where his explicitly theoretical works leave off. Though it is true that Balzac's increasing commercial success as a novelist caused a sharp decline in his theoretical publications, we need not conclude from this that his anthropological ambitions dried up or were put on hold. Such a conclusion is expressed by Castex, for example, when he says: "If the creator of the *Human Comedy* had not prematurely exhausted his forces, perhaps in order to crown his monument he would have added to his *Analytical Studies* the great theoretical treatise which had been the ambition of the schoolboy at Vendôme, Louis Lambert or Honoré Balzac" (XI 1732). The implication here is that the theoretical substance of what Balzac might have expressed in the unwritten treatise was not expressed in the *Human Comedy*, whereas I would argue the opposite–that *Louis Lambert* should be read as a self-conscious examination of the quandaries of theorizing desire in a work such as the "Treatise of Will."

6

Balzac's conception of desiring mimesis and its paradoxes could have come from several sources including Aristotle, Dante, or various Renaissance poets and humanists sensitive to the mimetic paradoxes of master-disciple relations.(7) But an almost certain precursor was the Christian ideal of *imitatio Christi* that Balzac appears to have picked up from Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Jesus Christ*.(8) Numerous references to this book are scattered throughout the *Human Comedy*, and it plays a central role in his last novel, *The Underside of Contemporary History*. Balzac's personal cynicism aside, he admired Christianity for its social and political "utility," and more particularly, for its self-conscious harnessing of mimetic desire to a divine model. For Balzac, Christ's radical difference and his mediation of divine love sublates the vanity of human desire by yoking it to a collective and ethical (because non-conflictual) praxis:

> Now, it is impossible not to be taken by *The Imitation*, which is to dogma what action is to thought. Catholicism vibrates in it, moves in it, agitates, takes on human life in hand to hand battle. . . . There is a feeling superior to all others, a soul to soul love that resembles rare flowers. . . . It's an attachment without deception, without quarrels, without vanity, without conflict, without contrasts even, so equally melded together are the moral beings. This immense, infinite feeling, born of Catholic charity, Godefroid was beginning to perceive its delights (71-72). . . These virtues were contagious; [Godefroid] was taken by the desire to imitate the unknown hero, and he wound up studying passionately the book he had at first despised (116).

Balzac, of course, has no illusions about the restoration of Christianity. The values and imitative practices described in *The Underside*, inspiring as they may be to his character, Godefroid, are supported by only a tiny secret society whose practical effect on the marketplace of ideas of 19th-century Paris is nil. The utility of *The Underside* for our purposes, however, is that it lifts visibly to the surface the hidden mimetic force behind the social pathologies portrayed in other novels. It thus indirectly reveals the historical reasons for modern society's "need" for anthropology. Born at the time when Christianity's transcendent form of knowing was being decoupled from the imitative practices grounded in it, anthropology would serve as a diagnostics for (and corrective to) the new operations and expressions of Christian mimesis.(9) Even if modern desire had in theory been detached from religious ideals and was now informed by Reason, this did not mean, in Balzac's view, that it necessarily could recognize its hidden operations or limits. On the contrary, a residual "religious" passion for the Christian infinite would remain intact; however, it would now look for models and objects along a horizontal axis where lasting satisfaction, by definition, cannot be found.

This explains why Lambert's impossible desire to find the final word for his "divine sensation" in a scientific treatise leads to disaster, and it explains the pathologies of the other searchers of absolutes in the *Philosophical Studies* who all mistakenly choose immanent forms of expression for their infinite desires. Balzac, himself, in fact states quite clearly in the "Preface to the *Mystical Book*" that the trilogy of *The Proscribed*, *Louis Lambert* and *Seraphita* "offers the clear expression of the religious thought that, like a soul, is the foundation of this long work" (*i.e.,* the *Philosophical Studies*). He goes on to say that he admires his contemporaries who are engaged in "stretching the limits of the human sciences" (XI 502) and that "however much he bows before the glories of mathematics and the miracles of chemistry, he believes, if one admits the existence of spiritual worlds, that the most beautiful theorems have no utility, that all calculations of the finite are outstripped by the infinite"

(502-3). Writing within an historical context in which faith was being overtaken by doubt, and where divine love and grace were being supplanted by skepticism and rational analysis, where collective social values were giving way to individualism, the questions to be raised, declares Balzac, are these: “What form will the religious feeling assume? What will be its new expression?” (503).

“Almost religious” were the words used earlier to describe the narrator’s emotions for Lambert; but elsewhere we can locate more explicit Christian analogies of his former, childhood attachment, such as: “[Lambert’s] system led to passive obedience, the example of which was offered by Jesus Christ” (XI 642); or: “Jesus was for [Lambert] the most beautiful example of his system: *Et verbum caro factum est*” (639). Though the analogy between the narrator’s devotion to Lambert and the Christian’s devotion to Christ is unmistakable, Lambert does not prove sufficiently substantive, either as model or as “Word made flesh,” to satisfy the narrator’s religious desire. Lambert lacks the metaphysical grounding that Christ had once had–a fact the narrator discovers before it’s too late. However, like Christ, Lambert predicts that after his death he will “reappear” to his disciple: “You will live, but I will die. If possible, I will reappear to you” (638). As it turns out, Lambert does reappear in a kind of mock resurrection in the flash of retrospective insight alluded to earlier.(10) This reappearance, however fleeting and metaphysically ungrounded, takes on a sacred function for the narrator because it is the fortuitous self-understanding he gains from this experience of involuntary memory that permits him to *will* his detachment from Lambert and to go on to write a sober account of his lost illusions.

Though a sham, Lambert’s science did teach the narrator something “scientific” after all, but only in the most circuitous and improbable way. It taught him to observe an impulse that can both blind and provide insight, that can both enslave and lead to the most liberating form of self-transcendence. It is as a monument to this discovery alone that the name “Lambert” retains any importance for the narrator. In fact, without the narrator’s chronicle, which serves as a kind of liturgical ritual to his friend’s unknown but sacred spirit, Lambert’s name would have remained entirely forgotten to historical memory: he is buried under a tombstone “without name, without date” (XI 692).

Yet recalling that the narrator, Lambert, and his “Treatise of Will” are, after all, Balzac’s self-conscious fictional inventions, we might eventually come to see that Lambert’s sacrality is constructed offstage through an act of creative violence. The improbability of Lambert’s being destroyed and buried without a communal memorializing of these events draws attention to the fact that Balzac’s narrator has destroyed and *un-named* his own creation (XI 657).(11) Similar, then, to the “catastrophe” of Lambert’s treatise (“It was in memory of the catastrophe of Louis’s book that. . . .” [634]), Lambert, too, undergoes a catastrophe: we learn in the final pages that the genius and everything associated with him are in ruins, as if suddenly destroyed by some terrible, transcendent force. His treatise, his love letters, the château de Villenoix, are all presented as remnants of a lost era, while Lambert, himself, is depicted as “a piece of debris torn from his grave,” a mind “broken into pieces, like an empire too vast” (692). Even Lambert’s name is at one point marked by fragmentation: “I am not taken by any love for the two syllables *Lam* et *bert*: pronounced with veneration or with nonchalance on my tomb, they will change nothing of my destiny” (655).

7

These discontinuities–which are too systematically marked at every level of the text (nominal, thematic, structural) to be accidental–serve as symbolic reminders of the narrator’s own self-conscious violence against his “master’s” memory. Is this the violence that the narrator foreshadows when he states that, like Napoleon’s burning of the Boulogne forest, Lambert’s room may likewise have to be destroyed? The narrator, of course, conceals his secret hand in this violence by presenting himself as the disciple of a victim of the wider community. We see obvious examples of Lambert’s victim status in the hostile resentment that he generates in his classmates and teachers at the Collège de Vendôme, in the humiliating scenes of his public punishment (where the acts of violence are compared, for example, to the infamous guillotinings of the Reign of Terror) and in his social exclusion as an adult. By playing up Lambert’s victimary status within his community and by downplaying his own victimizing and exclusionary gestures, the narrator’s chronicle serves the dual purpose of mythologizing Lambert’s sacred difference and displacing our attention away from the latent resentment and mimetic rivalry that existed between the narrator and Lambert and that ultimately erupted in the narrator’s violent act.

This resentment/rivalry remains invisible for most of the novel because Lambert’s “discovery,” that is, his linguistic designation of the sacred center, appeared to bind their desires into a perfect and harmonious union. But, in retrospect, we can see that this act of symbolization merely *deferred* their rivalry until the moment when the narrator belatedly understood that Lambert’s originary designation was ungrounded, and that the sacred center was held in place only by the narrator’s erroneous belief in Lambert’s power to hold it in place. The narrator’s violence against his own fictive creation cannot be due to some (real) blind rage or deep-seated animus; it is rather a symbolic indication of his secret understanding of the mechanism by which language works to defer resentment and violence. The novel, in that sense, should be read as a scientific hypothesis about events that cannot be observed or proven in a positive, scientific manner, but that are perhaps no less real without this proof. Thus, just as the narrator originally displaced our possible resentment against Lambert-as-scientific-genius by ploughing our desire into the false infinity of his treatise, at a deeper level, he displaces his readers' resentment *against himself* (as master theorist) by focusing our attention on the ephemeral and unmasterable sacred space that is evoked and withdrawn with his own word: "Lambert."

In the end, then, it is Balzac/the narrator who names the sacred center, but he simultaneously un-names it in order to indicate that a sacred center cannot be named or occupied in any durable way in modern times. The reason for this is that the modern order of representation, unlike the old Christian order, lacks the transcendental authority to guarantee this central position's sacred difference and stable symbolism. The resentment and mimetic rivalries that had once been repressed or displaced through a vertical projection of desire onto "the Word" had in Balzac's time been brought back down to the level of humanity. Nobody was exempt from resentment, least of all those who claimed a transcendent knowledge of humanity. As Balzac/the narrator demonstrates through Lambert's dramatic error: any bid for transcendent or scientific knowledge of the human is simultaneously a call for the bidder's destruction–a fact that Lambert (that is, Balzac/the narrator via Lambert) admits in a moment of lucidity:

> I feel strong, energetic and could become a power; I feel in me a life so luminous that it could animate a world, but I am locked up in a sort of mineral. . . . One would need to embrace all of this world, embrace it in order to remake it; but those who have embraced and remade it like this, haven't they begun by being a cog in the machine? I would be ground into bits. To Mohammed his sword, to Jesus the cross, I will suffer an obscure death. (XI 655)

Critics often talk (with resentment) about Balzac as a God over his world–the omniscient author who masters and manipulates his characters. There is obviously some truth to this, but not, I believe, in the way people customarily conceive of his divinity. If Balzac is still read and studied some 170 years after the publication of his works it is because his secret *anthropological* insight taught him that the way out of the modern dilemma is to conceal one's desire for the sacred center by having a fictional surrogate stand there in one's place. Balzac's sacrifice of Lambert is thus ultimately a kind of ironic *self-sacrifice*: he centers himself through a fictive surrogate, but then he de-centers this position via the narrator's (mock) violence; he marks this center with a "word" and then he un-marks it through erasure. And then he renames the unnamable space created by this centering/de-centering, marking/erasing process as a novel. As the modernists would discover much later, it is precisely this ironic and paradoxical verbal dance, possible only in *literature*, that allows Balzac to communicate his universal thoughts about the human condition and at the same time inoculate himself against any *real* resentment.

Notes

1. Cf. Balzac, *Oeuvres complètes* XI, 1211-12. Though Davin signed this introduction, it is widely believed that Balzac dictated or wrote most of it. All translations except the first epigraph are my own. (back)

2. See François Roustang's *Un destin si funeste* for a psychoanalytic perspective on the mimetic paradoxes that occur in the relations between analysands and analysts and between practicing psychoanalysts and their master: Freud. Roustang uses the word transference in place of mimesis, but the operations and dilemmas are precisely the same. (back)

3. We can get a sense of this double gesture (theoretical fidelity and critical distancing) in the following passages: "I think I can offer a glimpse of Lambert's *Treatise* through the most important propositions that grounded it; but I will strip them, in spite of myself, of the ideas in which he couched them and that served as their indispensable organization. Proceeding in a direction other than his, I took from his research the ideas that better served *my system.* I'm not sure if as his disciple I will be able to translate his thoughts after having assimilated them in a manner that gives them the color of my own" (XI 625). (back)

4. For a more detailed discussion of the erotic and physiological content of Lambert's childhood science, see my "Balzac, archéologue de la conscience," in *La Mémoire en Ruines*, eds. Valérie-Angélique Deshoulières and Pascal Vacher, Clermont Ferrand: CRIMC, forthcoming 2000. This article emphasizes Balzac's imaginative use of an archaeological epistemology to speculate about how remote, childhood sexual events may influence events or cause psychopathologies in adult life. Balzac's combination of an archaeological heuristic and an emphasis on infantile eroticism anticipates Freudian psychoanalysis in a striking way.(back)

5. Here are three examples among many: "I remember that Lambert was led to believe that the collection of ideas to which we give the name feelings may just well be the spurt of some fluid that men produce more or less abundantly, depending on the way in which their organs have absorbed the 'generative substances' of their surroundings" (XI 678); "His forces seemed to shoot out of the organs made for projecting them. . . . This child . . . took me by the hand, squeezed it in his moist

hand, so feverish had he become by his search for the truth" (623); "Dedicated already at a young age to a precocious activity, due no doubt to . . . the perfection of his organs, his forces could be summed up as an overproduction of fluid" (643).(back)

6. Here is an example of how Balzac characterizes their union: "I alone was permitted to penetrate this sublime, even divine, soul. What is closer to the heart of a child than God if not genius? Our brotherhood became so great that our classmates joined our two names; one was not pronounced without the other: The Poet-and-Pythagoras! Other names offered this kind of marriage" (XI 606).(back)

7. See Thomas Greene's *Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* for an analysis of the mimetic paradoxes of master-disciple relations at work in Renaissance poetry. (back)

8. The authorship of this book has been in dispute for most of its history. Balzac cites Gerson (Jean Charlier de) as the author. Most contemporary experts, however, have come to the consensus that the real author is Thomas à Kempis. (back)

9. We see an example of the possible "corrective" value of anthropology in *An Old Maid*: "Doesn't [this story] demonstrate the necessity of a new kind of teaching? Doesn't it invoke [the need for] . . . the creation of a chair of anthropology, this science in which the Germans are ahead of us? Modern myths are even less understood than ancient myths, although we are being devoured by myths. . . . If Mademoiselle Cormon had been more literate, if there had been a professor of anthropology in the Department of Orne . . . would these horrible misfortunes in her conjugal life ever have taken place?" (IV 936) (back)

10. I say "mock" because the images Balzac uses in this resurrection scene play on Lambert's childhood sexual fantasies. If we recall that the narrator experiences his involuntary memory before the towers of the château de Villenoix, then the stream of bright/living light that is projected forth from it takes on entirely new meaning.(back)

11. The text offers ample evidence for the idea that the narrator has invented Lambert. Many of Lambert's utterances, for example, can easily be interpreted as clues to interpret what the narrator is *performing.* When Lambert says, for example, "Wouldn't it be a beautiful book that told the adventures of the life of a word?" we can surmise that this is precisely what the narrator is doing with Lambert's "name." This idea is reinforced by other references to Christ-as-Word and to the fact that Balzac says that the novel, *Louis Lambert,* proves "in a word." The narrator also draws attention to the "constructed" nature of Lambert when he says such things as: "Those for whom this book has not yet fallen from their hands will understand, I

hope, the events that remain to recount and that form a sort of second existence to this creature, or why shouldn’t I say *this creation*…? (657).(back)

9

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