In the End was the Word: Balzac's Modernist Absolute

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> The word has nothing absolute about it: we act more on the word than it acts on us; its force is due to the images we have acquired and associate with it.
> Balzac, *Louis Lambert*

> Couldn't one write a beautiful book by telling the life and adventures of a word?
> Balzac, *Louis Lambert*

Balzac's *The Search for the Absolute* ends with one of the most gripping yet mystifying scenes in the *Comédie humaine*: Balthazar Claës, in the throes of death after exhausting his life's energies, his marriage, and several family fortunes in search of "the absolute," unexpectedly sits erect with the flash of insight needed to solve his mystery. Yet instead of uttering the word that might convey his insight, he produces an inarticulate groan, collapses to his death, and takes his secret to his grave:

> All of a sudden, the dying man sat up on his two fists, threw a glance at his frightened children, which struck them like of bolt of lightning; the hair on the back of his neck moved, his wrinkles twitched, his face became animated with a spirit of fire, a breath of air passed over this face and rendered it sublime; he lifted a hand clenched by his rage and shouted in a ringing voice Archimedes' famous word: EUREKA! (*I have found it*). He fell back to his bed with the heavy thud of an inert body; he died while producing a horrible groan; and his convulsed eyes expressed, until the

> moment the doctor shut them, the regret of not having bequeathed to science the key word (*le mot d'une énigme*) whose veil was belatedly ripped away by the fleshless fingers of Death.(299)(1)

Having convinced readers that the novel is plotted to reveal the object of Balthazar's scientific research (and thus the hidden cause of all the sacrifice and destruction), Balzac's open-ended conclusion provides little intellectual satisfaction. He leaves us to speculate: What is the meaning of "the absolute"? What final "word" would Balthazar have uttered? Why, indeed, does the novelist go to such exaggerated lengths to prevent his character from speaking at the moment of illumination? Note that not only does the chemist's death implausibly coincide with his final discovery, but verbal communication had already been structurally impeded by another improbable event: Balthazar's "paralysis of the tongue."

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Although the aporia produced by Balthazar's linguistic paralysis and premature death appears to render his eleventh-hour "discovery" a permanent mystery and the nature of his mental status consequently undecidable (scientific genius or charlatan?), this obviously *strategic* deferral of meaning may contain a deeper theoretical purpose: to focus attention on the contagious effects of mimetic desire and on the impossibility of capturing its paradoxical structure *in a single word* . He points, in other words, to the Gansian insight that desire and language stand in a paradoxical relation: that language works as a harmonious solution to mimetic rivalry over scarce objects (such as the sacred centrality implied by "the absolute") through deferred appropriation and symbolic substitution.(2)

Nearly universally overlooked in previous critical analyses of *The Search* is the fact that Balthazar's passion for science has less to do with a desire for empirical knowledge of a chemical absolute (however it may be construed) than it does with his mimetic attraction to, and rivalry with, his original mediator of knowledge, Adam de Wierzschownia.(3) What Adam mediates to Balthazar is not so much an object of knowledge, or even a concrete idea of an object, but the desire for knowledge suggested by a "word." Paradoxically, Adam functions both as Balthazar's mediator to the "absolute" and the obstacle preventing him from attaining it. But it is this obstacle of mediation–the very obstacle that the reader confronts at the end of the novel–that forces Balthazar, and the reader as well, to circle back and finally to understand the mimetic origins of his verbal passion.

Balzac, of course, never directly says this to his reader; he demonstrates his insight by strategically arousing competing desires for the absolute through the promise of appropriation, but then he breaks this promise through ironic deferral; he points to

an (illusory) position of transcendence, but simultaneously displaces desire from center to periphery through the obstacle of renewed mediation. Left unrevealed, the spiral of desire and symbolic responses generated by this mimetic paradox could, theoretically, stretch to infinity. Yet, over time, the accumulation of failed appropriations (Balthazar's, previous readers', our own) should eventually reveal to readers, as it finally was revealed to Balthazar, that the search for the absolute is a stumbling block–or what Girard, and Kierkegaard before him, call a *skandalon*. The "absolute" scandalizes because its object is none other than the intersubjective and infinitely contagious movement of desire itself. Any attempt by readers to speak (or write) in the space of Balthazar's (that is, Balzac's) silence, to name the sacred center that he leaves unnamed, merely perpetuates the eternal chain of mimetic effects–we simply add more language to the pile without grasping the underlying causal mechanism.(4)

The mimetic/anthropological dimension of this novel can be easily missed because Balzac appears to historicize the question of the absolute by embedding its referent in a specific science from the early nineteenth century–unitary chemistry. Once we observe Balthazar receive "word" of the absolute from his mediator, the narrator quickly deflects our attention away from the event of mediation to the details of Balthazar's chemical theories and experimental activities, the fortunes he squanders on chemical substances and equipment, the dilemmas he causes his family, and so on. What is more, in response to the dichotomy established between Balthazar-as-misunderstood-genius and the simpletons that are his family and community, we naturally (but incorrectly) side with the "genius" against the community and anxiously cast about for a solution to his mystery. The standard assumption, based on a traditional realist view of Balzac and encouragement by a double-dealing narrator, is that the clues to the mystery are located somewhere in the descriptions of Balthazar's chemical theories and activities. This leads to erudite speculation about the various (pseudo-) scientific sources Balzac drew upon to construct his fictional scientist, the historical fidelity of his representation, and the like.

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Though obviously illuminating in many ways, the flaw in this approach (deconstructive critique notwithstanding) is that it overlooks the internally-mediated origins of Balthazar's desire. Thus even if the "referent" of the absolute can be found to correspond to some early nineteenth-century science, this approach fails to consider that *for Balthazar* its primary significance is the illusion of transcendence that he imagines he will attain by its appropriation. More than anything, what Adam communicates to his disciple is his infectious enthusiasm for the possibility of absolute knowledge, the effect of which is to arouse in Balthazar

(and in some readers) the desire to search, although he (we) has (have) no precise idea of what the absolute is or where to find it.

Balzac telegraphs this point to us in one of Balthazar's fleeting moments of rationality:

> –No, *it's not an idea*, my angel, that sent me down this beautiful path, *it's a man*. –A man! she cried out in terror. –Do you remember, Pépita, the Polish officer who stayed with us in 1809? –You ask if I remember?!. . . . –[T]here was something passionate and concentrated [in Adam] *that words cannot express*. . . . [H]e told me in confidence and with a solemn voice words of which I can remember only the general meaning, but he said them with such powerful and warm inflexions and forceful gestures that he shook my soul and struck my comprehension as a hammer strikes iron on an anvil. This is a summary of the reasoning that was for me the hot coal that God put on Isaiah's tongue, because my studies with Lavoisier allowed me to feel its full scope. Tears of rage flowed over this man's hollow cheeks while he threw the fire of this reasoning into my soul . . . (110; my emphasis).

Balthazar's study with Lavoisier aside, we have cause to wonder: what exactly did he understand from this encounter? Although Balthazar goes on to explain some of the technical details of Adam's chemical theory, and although he gives the impression of being an authority on the subject, his feelings of passion (over a "voice") combined with the Isaiah analogy suggest more a religious conversion than an authentic chemistry lesson.(5)

To see, in fact, that the scientific stakes in this text are more important than an antiquarian interest in nineteenth-century chemistry, we have only to consider this novel's place within the broader context of the *Philosophical Studies*, the aim of which, as Balzac repeatedly insisted, was to reveal the secret causes of the *social* behaviors (effects) portrayed in his better-known group of novels, the *Studies of Manners*.(6) The fact that various other mad geniuses in the *Philosophical Studies* fail similarly at opera, symphony, painting, and philosophy (always accompanied by a corresponding marital or sexual catastrophe) suggests that chemistry is merely one expression among many of a more common human motivation: spiritualized paternal creation, simultaneously fictionalized and theorized by Balzac in this set of "studies." The novelist's own genius, arguably, is precisely his uncanny ability to conceal the repetition of the same basic idea in diverse forms.

Let us then shift our attention from an historicized conception of the absolute back

to the more fundamental anthropological issue of the mediated/linguistic origin of Balthazar's desire for the absolute and the pathological and violent effects that ensue from this origin. Similar to the "originary scene" postulated by Gans, Balzac postulates the birth of Balthazar's desire as a minimal scene of mimetic attraction to / rivalry with a mediator (Adam de Wierzschownia) over the sacred center of knowledge implied by the appropriation of the absolute. Despite the scarcity of this object/position (only one can *discover* it), no violence occurs at this point because the rivalry that lurks behind Balthazar's attraction is deferred by its vertical displacement onto the empty signifier "absolute." The word stands in for the idea they project onto it and displaces their desires away from each other as obstacles. Thus while the potential for violence is present from the beginning, it remains initially imperceptible due to the simultaneity of desire's arousal and linguistic deferral. Balzac quietly underscores his understanding of the violence-deferring mechanism of language by making the original object of mimetic desire/rivalry a piece of language–a word.

4

If the word "absolute" initially works like Gans's originary "ostensive" to defer mimetic violence, Balzac's scenario later diverges when delayed violent effects crop up between Balthazar and his family and community. As the narrator foreshadows early on, the violence will slowly trickle out, until it is unleashed in a mad frenzy at the end. The key point, however, is Balzac's indication of a hidden cause-effect unity underlying the violence: "[T]he spiritual malady of her husband came in phases and only gradually worked its way toward the intolerable violence that destroyed the happiness of her household" (65). On the surface, violence appears to erupt because of the contradiction between Balthazar's insatiable appetite for scientific equipment and chemical compounds and the limited family funds to finance this appetite. But more than a contradiction between science and family, it is the double displacement of mediated desire that constitutes the deeper structural and linguistic reasons for the destruction. That is, once Balthazar's mimetic desire fastens onto the (pseudo-) verticality of the signifier "absolute," it simultaneously passes back into the horizontal object-world of chemical research in search of transcendental expression. Balthazar is thus perpetually frustrated because the linguistic illusion of transcendence he unwittingly seeks is radically discontinuous with the experimental techniques he employs in his research. The more he searches, the more he distances his founding dream (and the event of mediation behind it) from conscious reflection, which, in turn, only intensifies his original desire to conduct research, requiring ever more funds, and so on. It also explains why the correspondence theory of referentiality underlying the traditional realist interpretation is epistemologically inadequate: it merely piggy-backs onto Balthazar's delusion, mistaking a fictional character's mimetically-constructed word-

object for a “real” historical referent.

Despite its speculative foundations, Generative Anthropology offers a useful alternative for elucidating the paradoxical structure of Balzac’s realism; and it finds surprising textual support. To take another example, after the tiresome speech by Balthazar concerning the technical merits of Adam’s chemistry lesson (the founding moment of his desire to search for the absolute), Pépita (or rather Balzac through Pépita) distills the anthropological essence of her husband’s encounter with a few brief questions: “What? By spending only one night under our roof, this man (Adam) stole your affections from us? He destroyed with a single phrase, *a single word*, a family’s happiness?. . . From this day forward, you have no longer been a father, husband, or head of the household. (110, 116-7; my emphasis).

Isolated by Pépita in this scene (if we interpret it allegorically) is the precise originary event of the linguistic displacement of Balthazar’s desire onto a “word” and the importance this displacement plays in his subsequent social actions and object desires. Isolated also is the fact that behind this word lies a violent force of mimetic attraction, more powerful than the desire for conventional marital or sexual union or the natural bond between a father and his offspring. Balzac demonstrates this simple fact by having Balthazar sacrifice his familial relations, social relations, and even his own life for the dream of transcendence held out by Adam’s word. If Adam’s force of mimetic attraction works simultaneously as a violent force of repulsion/propulsion, it is because his “word” creates an asymptotic barrier between Balthazar’s desire and his imagined object. Balthazar’s unyielding desire to destroy this barrier is the motor of both his genius (the discoveries made along the way are by-products of this deeper *linguistic* fixation) and his madness (no final Word is available in the modern representational order to exhaust his desire for the sacred center).

5

From Being to Having the Phallus

Given Balthazar’s self-confessed attraction to Adam and Pépita’s improbable terror that “a man!” stands behind her husband’s “scientific research,” we may be tempted at this point to extrapolate a homoerotic dimension to Balthazar’s desire.(7) Several clues, in fact, seem to point in this direction, including the scientist’s unusual affection for his “lab assistant” Lemulquinier (they spend day and night in Balthazar’s laboratory, a.k.a. “the workshop of seduction”; Pépita suspects that Balthazar prefers Lemulquinier to herself; the two men live as a married couple after Pépita’s death); the homosocial coding of the laboratory (only men are permitted entry; the principal piece of equipment is a “pneumatic

machine"; analogies can be drawn between Balthazar's lab activity and homoerotic and onanistic activity) and Balthazar's strategic choice of spouse. Balthazar sought out Pépita quite explicitly for her self-sacrificing devotion and submissiveness (to protect his secret?), but also for her male appearance–"the trait that lent the most distinction to *this male face* . . ." (38; my emphasis); Pépita seduces her husband with the prosthesis of phallic-shaped tulips;(8) and as the text clearly states: "[Balthazar] no doubt had some peculiar ideas about marriage because he was accused from his youth of not walking in the common path" (49).

There is no denying that, like Balzac's other mad geniuses, Balthazar Claës is irresistibly drawn to males and male- or phallic-looking objects. Yet to consider Balthazar's object desires in purely modern and sexual terms alone would be to overlook the Old-Regime Christian/patriarchal identification that inflects them and whose hidden psychological operations Balzac is quietly reconstructing for the reader. Contrary to Pépita's claim (and to the view offered by the surface-level narrative) that Balthazar's desire for the absolute stands in radical opposition to his marital/paternal desire, both desires share the same origin in a Christo- and phallogo-centric ideal of marital union and paternity. He seeks to satisfy in the laboratory an ideal desire for "creative knowledge," which was traditionally satisfied within the Old Regime sacramental marriage, but which he unconsciously displaces into a problem of scientific research.(9)

As a preliminary indication, we might recall that the knowledge Balthazar claims to be seeking in the "absolute" is the "principle of all fecundation" and the point from which "creation descends"–desires easily traceable to a sacred paternal ideal. Also noteworthy in this connection is Balthazar's Adamic "fall" (or spiritual death) at the precise moment that he makes his "discovery" in the final pages: he realizes only when it is too late that the condition of idealized marital/paternal knowledge in the modern secular order is the permanent repression of his "real" sexual desire.

The Anthropology of Marriage

But to better situate our claim, and to see its deeper anthropological significance, we must first bring into tighter focus the crucial distinction between the pre-Revolutionary "marriage sacrament" and the post-Revolutionary, secularized version of marriage, the "marriage contract." What I will show in a later section is that the two principal motivating desires throughout Balthazar's adult life–the desire for mystical/sexual union and for sacred centrality–derive from his internalization of pre-Revolutionary views of marriage and paternity. His problem is essentially that he attempts to satisfy these absolutist desires in a secularized context in which the dream of mystical union and paternal transcendence are no longer culturally operative.

Let us simplify the complex differences between secular and sacred marriage to the three essential points useful for our purposes:

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(1) The “marriage contract” is a written mediation of two competing wills under the authority of the law, while the “marriage sacrament,” grounded in Christ-mediated “grace,” magically fuses two bodies and two souls into one. As a visible reflection of the invisible, mystical union between Christ and the Church and between God and the individual’s soul, sacramental union was thought to be metaphysically indissoluble.(10)Put in mimetic terms, the marriage sacrament cut through the paradox of desire by spiritualizing the “other” into the “same”: as both a “Word” (the word-made-flesh) and mediator of love/grace, Christ-as-mystical spouse dissolved the model-obstacle problem by conceiving marriage as an essentially non-mediated (or internally-mediated) relation.(11)

(2) The founding fathers of Catholicism, beginning with St. Paul, conceived of sacralized marriage as a means to “spiritualize” intercourse so that sexual desire could be expressed “chastely” and with divine purpose. According to St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and St. Jerome, the marital ideal was a direct, mystical union between the human soul and God without the intermediary of a female. Since sexual desire is for most people unavoidable, sacralized marriage was invented as a “remedy.” As Jean-Claude Bologne writes: “To live chastely does not mean abstinence, but a sexuality channeled by marriage; as for procreation, for the Christian, it can be done spiritually but not carnally (83). . . . The original marriage in paradise, that of Adam and Eve before the fall, did not know of concupiscence” (86).

(3) The traditional patriarchal position was considered both central and sacred, and it was guaranteed by the mystical “effect” of the marriage sacrament. According to J. Mulliez, for example: “What characterizes paternity on the eve of the Revolution is its dependence on the sacramental nature of marriage. According to canon law, which until the law of September 20, 1792 presides over these questions, as soon as marriage, and it alone, legitimizes copulation, the child appears as a necessary effect of marriage” (Delumeau 291). “The norm is constituted by marriage: only the husband is a father” (Delumeau 47). The designation of father is above all “a religious act” (49). As Mulliez further points out, the question of marriage bore a direct relation to paternal “will” (*la volonté*). In the pre-Revolutionary era, the desire for a stable paternal identity did not require an effort of will; every husband was granted sacred centrality within the household by virtue of the distributive logic of the sacramental union. The husband/father was considered a God or monarch within his household-kingdom: [Paternity] is an effect of marriage: no manifestation of will is necessary” (51). “The father is the image of God on earth, respected

sovereign at the heart of the well structured family unit. . . . He is associated with the paternity of God" (11-12).

And to the question: "How to articulate [the difference between] biological paternity and spiritual paternity?" (164), the answer given by Old Regime theologians is: imitation of the Holy father, Joseph, and the imitation of Jesus (164, 166).

Let us return now to Balthazar Claës's situation in *The Search for the Absolute*: married in 1795, just three years after the abolition of the marriage sacrament, Balthazar was radically severed from the pre-1792 Christocentric order in which his marital and paternal ideas were shaped and found their affective roots. We know from the dates of events that Balthazar is the first generation of his patriarchal line to have crossed the cultural divide from sacred to secular orders. But the narrator also insists on the historical and social reasons for Balthazar's need to repress his Old Regime identity: "[T]he vanity of the Belgian bourgeoisie was superior to Castilian pride. Thus, when the civil state was instituted, Balthazar left behind the tatters of his Spanish nobility" (29). Or: "The young Claës found [in Paris] some relatives and friends who initiated him into this great [noble] world at the moment that this great world was going to collapse" (48).

7

Despite the obvious psychological blow of being shut out of the promised land at the moment of entry, Balthazar appears initially to have taken it in stride. Over time, however, his efforts to "modernize" (evidenced by the concession of his noble identity, his attempt to succeed at chemistry in Paris, and so on) could not hold in place the repression of his old-world attachments:

> The dream of success didn't last long; after breathing the Parisian air, Balthazar left, tired of the empty life that corresponded neither to his burning soul nor to his loving heart. . . . One needs to be without home or country to stay in Paris. Paris is the city of the cosmopolitan, of men who have married the world and embrace it incessantly with the arms of science, art or power. The child of Flanders came back to Douai like La Fontaine's pigeon to his nest, he cried tears of joy upon returning the day of the Gayant promenade. . . . [H]e felt the need to get married in order to fulfill the happy existence with which religions envelop this need. (49)

Balthazar's trouble, of course, is that by the time he returns home, the Revolution will have fundamentally displaced the metaphysics grounding his desires. To use Balzac's metaphor: Balthazar finds himself caught between two impossible

“marriages”: he lacks the force of character to “marry the world” via science, but his secularized marriage to a woman will prove equally difficult and disappointing. We know, for example, that sexual relations between Balthazar and his wife were severely strained. But we also find references to an internal *spiritual* distance within the union (for example, “the unknown abyss that eternally separated her from the Claës of the early days,” 66; compare also 72, 77, 122, 165), suggesting that the sacramental union of souls that Balthazar sought in marriage was not realized. This would explain why Balthazar’s spiritual and sexual desires appear to split off: Balthazar continues, intermittently, to have sexual relations with his wife, but only when he is not a scientist. And when he is engaged in science, his wife no longer physically exists for him.(12) What he seeks in his “mistress,” Science, in other words, is the *spiritualized* eroticism unavailable in the marriage contract. Thus when Balzac characterizes Balthazar as “walking on an uncommon path” and having “particular ideas on marriage,” this need not imply a latent homosexuality; it means rather that he is fixated on a form of spiritualized/patriarchal marriage no longer supported by communal belief. The phallocentric foundation of the traditional marriage–that is, Christ’s mediated love/grace–explains why Balthazar gravitates toward masculine-appearing objects. Balthazar’s object choices necessarily appear to modern eyes as homoerotic, but his choices are ultimately rooted in an Old Regime/Catholic conception of male love.

If we return now to Adam’s mediation of the absolute in 1809, we see that rather than “stealing” or “destroying” Balthazar’s conjugal and paternal desires, as Pépita charged, Adam–considered here allegorically as humanity’s ideal “first father” and discoverer of God’s secret of creation–merely lifts an earlier repression of them. The cultural habits, desires, and dreams instilled in Balthazar in childhood and that had once been centered vertically on the sacred Word (Christ) are unconsciously transferred to Adam and to the pseudo-verticality of the word “absolute.” The horizontal infinity of scientific research permits Balthazar to express, at least temporarily, his vertically-centered marital/paternal desire in displaced form:

We see evidence of this transference mechanism in the following passages:

> The cultural habits of this man had to be pure, his word was sacred, his friendship seemed constant, his devotion complete; but the will that [normally] activates these qualities in the interest of the homeland, the world and of the family *had been fatally shifted elsewhere*. This citizen . . . lived outside of his duties and his affections in the exercise of some familiar talent. (45; my emphasis)
>
> This man’s love for his wife and children was not merely immense, it was

> *infinite*. These feelings *could not be abolished*; they were no doubt enhanced by reproducing themselves *in another form* (82-3; my emphasis).
>
> Even though he espoused the philosophical principles of the eighteenth century, he took on a live-in Catholic priest until 1801, in order to avoid thwarting the Spanish fanaticism for Roman Catholicism that his wife had imbibed with her mother's milk; then, when the Church was reestablished in France, he accompanied his wife to mass every Sunday. Never did his attachment depart from the forms of the Passion. (56)

Later the transference will become more obvious as Balthazar's "marriage" to Science will manifest itself as a direct rival to his real marriage to Pépita–a point to which I shall return shortly.

Readers familiar with *The Search for the Absolute* may object at this point to this emphasis on the religious and cultural dimension of Balthazar's search, since his scientific genius seems unmistakable and the opposition between science and family self-evident. However, if we read the novel as *Balzac's* communication of a human-scientific theory (anthropology) rather than as a realist work *about* science, we must conclude that Balthazar is not an authentic genius, that he makes no real discoveries (Balzac merely transposed well-known experiments of his time) and the final discovery–the one that might have put Balthazar's name in the annals of chemistry–was irretrievably (and strategically) lost. The purpose of the deception is to attract (via desiring mimesis) the attention of serious readers so that as we scour the descriptions of Balthazar's secret lab activities we discover evidence for Balzac's embedded theorization of the structural "causes" of Balthazar's pathological desire to search. The interpretive stumbling block for most readers is that the evidence for both the primary narrative (Balthazar-as-genius) and the theoretical counter-narrative (causes of his pathology) is precisely the same: like a Janus-face, the way we interpret the evidence depends on the narrative perspective (genius or madness?) we adopt.

The key to reversing the genius side of this Janus-faced narrative, as Balzac tells us, is *doubt*: "Doubt, so dramatic in love, is the secret of this meticulously detailed analysis" (51). As with the cheated lover, the first crack of doubt fuels further doubt, making a skeptic and a careful detective of even the least suspicious minds. Yet the reality of this counter-interpretive process is more complicated, because, again like the cheated lover, we do not so easily free ourselves from our initial affection. And for good reason: the narrator's aim is not to have us exchange one narrative

paradigm for another (genius for madman); it is to demonstrate the causes and effects of mimetic desire through a vicarious, esthetic *experience* of identification and disenchantment with an illusion of transcendence. To be properly understood, the two poles of the sequence must remain in tension: too much identification leads to permanent mystification (we see only genius); too much doubt will either block or dialectically overturn the mimetic/mystification process (we see nothing).

In any case, once doubt sets in, we are naturally motivated to reexamine the text for evidence of how and why Balzac has duped us. His principal trick is to play on our intellectual vanity–to invite a (false) transcendence into the sphere of the genius by contrasting simple or vulgar observation with sophisticated, genius-caliber observation, but without any detailed explanation of which is which. To take just one example, as Balthazar at one point exits his lab in “spotted” and “half-unbuttoned” and “torn-up” clothing (44), the narrator adds this: “Too often vice and genius produce similar effects which confound the vulgar [observer]” (44). In response to this, most “serious” readers wishing to avoid the charge of vulgarity will assume that spots and torn clothing signify “genius” and will make the evidence fit their preconceived image of Balthazar. But it is, in fact, the other way around: Balthazar’s unkempt appearance and bizarre behaviors are evidence of a “vice” that, in turn, should be observed in light of Balthazar’s deeper cultural problem of displaced mystical/sexual desire. As mentioned earlier, Balzac encodes the “science” conducted in the “workshop of seduction” as homoeroticism and onanism. But he does this not to suggest “real” sexual activity; rather, the sexual metaphors are used in the manner of Christian mystics to portray an abstract drama of spiritual union–in this case, a drama of failed or impossible union.

To follow up on this point, we later get a chance to view the lab’s interior, which we are certain will provide clues for understanding Balthazar’s science. But this time Marguerite catches her father in a pose that strikes terror in her. Balthazar was “unclothed, [his] arms bare like those of a worker, [his] exposed chest . . . covered with hairs silvered like those on his head. His vacant eyes were riveted on a pneumatic machine. . . . [H]er father . . . in an almost-kneeling position before his machine, was bathed in a vertical stream of sunlight. . . (212).

Although Marguerite concludes without hesitation that her father is “mad” (212), the narrative’s dominant “scientific” hermeneutic leads the reader to assume “vulgarity” on her part. It is only when we doubt Balthazar’s genius that we begin to wonder: why the insistence on exposed body parts? Why the obsession with the “pneumatic machine” and the streams of light? What are the madness-inducing “manipulations” that Lemulquinier assists Balthazar with?(13) What is the “goal of

research" that keeps slipping from his hand? Finally, why, if real chemistry is at issue, does Balthazar react so violently when the females of his family attempt to enter his "workshop of seduction"? What does he fear they will see?

Balthazar's secret, critics have traditionally assumed, requires sophisticated scientific and historical erudition to be understood. But a counter-reading suggests that Pépita, Lemulquinier, Marguerite, and even the younger children either understand, or are ultimately capable of understanding, Balthazar's secret activity.(14) Balthazar is no doubt the best judge of this: for example, just before the local kids shower him with mud and stones, they mock his science by suggesting with lewd hand gestures that his "gold" and "diamonds" come from "a [body] part that young schoolboys show so often as a sign of scorn" (294). This event may seem inconsequential until we discover one page later that Balthazar is terrified that his own children may be able figure him out: "The old man's return was a horrible spectacle; he was struggling less against death than against the terror of seeing his children penetrate the secret of his misery" (295).

Why is Balthazar after so many years of confident research suddenly fearful of losing his secret? What do the children's mocking gestures reveal that he had not previously understood? His fear seems to indicate that his secret activity is understandable by *anybody*, which, in turn, means that the traditional "realist" or history-of-science approach is largely beside the point. Even if Balthazar conducts "real" scientific experiments, the secret he withholds is not specialized scientific information incomprehensible by common minds but information that is common yet potentially scandalous if publicly revealed.

Balzac's narrator, as I have briefly tried to show, is highly duplicitous. But his cat-and-mouse strategy of narration is no mere game; it corresponds to a serious epistemological and moral problem confronting the anthropologist, namely: How to communicate an archaic, religiously-grounded set of desires in the modern and secularized context, especially if, in this case, the misdirected sexualized expression of them would appear scandalously deviant to modern (or at least to nineteenth-century) eyes? How are we to bring together the causes and effects of Balthazar's actions if their internal division corresponds to a general, historical displacement (religion by cultural modernity) that most modern readers would unquestioningly accept? In normal conditions, the discourses of history or intellectual biography would be sufficient to understand the hidden connections between Balthazar's ancestral dreams and wishes and his adult actions. But the radical historical and cultural discontinuity produced by the Revolutionary experience renders Balthazar's past (and therefore his present) nearly undecipherable without a careful and sympathetic reconstruction of the Christian/patriarchal habits, codes and beliefs into which he was initiated. Let us not

forget that Balthazar was constructed as an “individualized type” (the strategy of characterization in the *Philosophical Studies*), not as an “individual typified” (the strategy of characterization in the *Studies of Manners*). Which means that the proper way to interpret Balthazar’s actions is not as a “modern” and “unique” individual (the romantic genius) held back by a conservative and backward-looking community, but as the opposite, a banal *type* (the Catholic patriarch) stranded like a piece of archaeological refuse in a modern–or rapidly modernizing–social context. He *looks* unique to modern eyes because his “will” is attached to an absolute value for which he is prepared to sacrifice everything, including his life–something the modern bourgeois would never do.

10

Like Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, or Freud, meaningful anthropological knowledge for Balzac cannot be derived directly from phenomenological observation;(15) it comes from theorizing the discontinuities *between* orders of reality–or more specifically, by reducing surface-level differences to a fundamental order or event that accounts for these differences in structural or causal terms.(16) Rousseau theorized a natural order of humanity based on the myth of the noble savage whom he imagined to lie uncontaminated beneath the accretions of culture, and Freud and Lévi-Strauss conceived of humanity in terms of geological or archaeological layers where the oldest and deepest layers structure and explain the visible topology. Balzac’s anthropology, likewise, appeals to the “layered” epistemologies and methods of inquiry of geology and archaeology, but unlike Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, or Freud, Balzac does not attempt to reconstruct a pre- or extra-cultural order. Instead, he theorizes anthropological constants from specific instantiations of French culture along a time-space continuum from the Catholic Middle Ages, living examples of which were still available in remote regions of France, to Parisian modernity. To be sure, Balzac frequently uses the terms “nature” and “primitive,” but these terms most often apply to provincial ways of life which, because frozen in time, continue to reflect pre-modern habits and mentalities into the post-Revolutionary present. According to this scenario, Brittany would be the most archaic or primitive layer of French culture, Paris the most “civilized,” and everything else in various stages in between. Balzac makes this point in an infrequently read novel called *Béatrix*:

> Anybody who would like to travel as an archaeologist of mores and observe men instead of rocks could find an image of the century of Louis XV in some village in Provence, that of Louis XIV in Poitou, that of even more remote times in the far reaches of Brittany. Most of these cities have fallen from some splendor that historians, more preoccupied with dates than customs, no longer speak of, but whose memory lives on, such

> as in Brittany, where the national character scarcely accepts the forgetting of what this country is fundamentally about. . . All [of these cities] have their primitive character (25-6).

To return to *The Search for the Absolute*, we might say that the *Maison* Claës is the Brittany of Flanders: it is one of the last strongholds of traditional religious and patriarchal values, stubbornly resistant to the forces of modernity sweeping through the rest of Douai (21). If Balzac devotes scores of pages to describing the "archaeological" details of the house's architecture, the family's traditional practices, and its medieval mentality, it is not, as is customarily assumed, to serve as a contrastive backdrop to Balthazar's scientific "modernity," but rather to reveal the paradoxically "sacred" origins of Balthazar's scientific behavior–a point that Balzac reveals in a theoretical aphorism on the first page of the novel:

> [P]erhaps we need to establish . . . the necessity of these didactic preparations against which certain ignorant and voracious persons, who prefer emotions without experiencing their generative principle, the flower without the seed, the baby without the gestation process, might protest. Are we to believe that art might be stronger than nature?
>
> The events of human life, whether public or private, are so intimately linked to architecture that most observers can reconstruct nations *or individuals* in all the truth of their habits from the remains of their public monuments or from their domestic relics. Archaeology is to social nature what comparative anatomy is to organized nature. A mosaic reveals an entire society, just as a skeleton of an ichthyosaur suggests an entire creation. Everything is deducible, everything is linked. The cause allows one to guess the effect, just as each effect allows one to reconstruct a cause. The scientist can resuscitate in this manner even the warts of ancient times. From this comes without doubt the prodigious interest that an architectural description can inspire when the writer's fantasy is faithful to its basic elements. Cannot each person reattach it to its past by rigorous deductions? And as for man, does not the past singularly resemble the future? Tell him what was and is this not almost always the same thing as telling him what will be? (22; my emphasis)

This passage seeks to justify the boredom the reader might endure when poring over the lengthy archaeological descriptions of traditional Douai and, in particular, the Claës household; but it also lays bare the cause-effect organization of the

narrative. The key points to retain are that (1) archaeology is not merely a realist *description* of things past but a “hypothesis” concerning the rigorous relation between observable effects and an *unknown* causal origin (2) this hypothesis is admittedly a circular loop or bootstrapping operation and, most importantly, (3) the hypothesis can be applied to individuals. The *anthropological* import of Balzac’s examination of a singular life derives, again, from the fact that individuals in the *Philosophical Studies* are constructed as *types*, as an extension of the social order. The internal drama of the individual, in other words, allegorically reflects the broader cultural and social tensions of the period.

In order to see that the meaningful discontinuity to be examined here is not the one we first imagine between Balthazar (as modern “genius”) and his surrounding community (as backward-looking and traditional), we must discover that Balthazar’s affections are tied to the obsolete past while Douai is, relatively speaking, on the side of modernity. To be sure, Douai is not Paris. Yet by the time the events of this story occur, Douai has modernized to the point of identifying more with the customs of Paris than it does with its own traditions. This point is easily missed because it is delivered in a fleeting aside at the end of a very long description of Douai’s traditional ways:

> But the sweet poetries of this patriarchal life will be found in the portrait of one of the last houses which, at the time when this story begins, still maintained the character of Douai. . . . Of all the towns in the North Department, Douai is, alas! the one that is modernizing the most, where the innovative spirit has made its most rapid conquests, where the love of social progress is the most widely developed. There, the old dwellings are disappearing each day, the old customs are being effaced. The fashions and ways of Paris dominate. . . . The well-to-do appearance of Dutch forms will have ceded to the changing elegance of French fashion (26-7).

Two Orders of Culture

Let us now examine some of the hidden connections between Balthazar’s search for the “absolute” (effect) and the Catholic/patriarchal customs and emotions he internalized during his Old Regime upbringing (cause). Such an approach will reveal that the binary opposition between family/religion and science can be reduced to a paradoxical origin–that Balthazar’s scientific desire for the absolute is in fact a repression and displacement of its opposite (the Catholic/patriarchal ideal grounded in the Word), and that this repressed ideal Word is what Balthazar rediscovers in his final traumatic crisis.

The internal connections between the two orders of Balthazar's existence are numerous and complexly intertwined. I will limit my demonstration to three distinct but overlapping issues: **(1) the sacrality of space:** the sacrality of the traditional Claës household and how Balthazar liquidates it in the marketplace while at the same time attempting to sacralize the laboratory and his lab activities; **(2) mystical union:**Balthazar's traditional desire for an unmediated mystical/sexual union with Pépita and how this desire resurfaces as a "chaste" pursuit of creative knowledge in the sacred space of the laboratory; and **(3) sacred positionality:** Balthazar's desire for the sacred center of the household and how this becomes a desire to occupy the absolute center of universal knowledge through the discovery of an abstract principle of creation or fecundation.

1. The Sacrality of Space. Sacred spaces and the emotional attachments people develop in relation to such spaces play an important role in understanding the affective life of Balzac's characters, as is articulated in this theoretical aside: "Nobody has yet noticed that emotions have a life of their own, a nature that proceeds from the circumstances in which they are born; they keep both the physiognomy of the places where they were developed and the mark of the ideas that influenced their development (162).

In this case, the role of the Claës household as a sacred space and locus of deep attachment is made clear by its cathedral-like features, including external crosses, gargoyles, and a large rose-window (30-31); but also in details such as the sunlight that "lent a *mysterious grace* to [the house's] figures and slightest details" (33). We discover also that the household had once possessed a living "soul" but that it died with Pépita (176). At its origin, the household (and, by extension, the community) was founded on a violent sacrifice of the first patriarch of the Claës family, Van Claës, who was executed as a rebel during a revolt against the tyranny of Charles V–a death that was later viewed by the liberated townspeople as a self-sacrifice for their own freedom: "Of all the seeds entrusted to the earth, the spilt blood of martyrs is the one that gives the quickest harvest" (28). This violence constituted the sacred foundation of the household and community, and was commemorated by a set of wood panels, carved for the Van Claës family by Van Huysium de Bruges. Although the panels existed before the execution/sacrifice, they were delivered after it and therefore function, along with his portrait, as a symbol of the household's origins (34-5). After this founding event, each generation of Claës patriarchs made similar offerings of art objects, portraits, furniture, silver, jewels, and so on, until, after two hundred years of accumulation, "it seemed difficult to add anything worthy of what was already there" (62). If we recall that Balthazar is the first patriarch of the secular era, we realize that the narrator here indirectly

explains Balthazar's turn to science for a contribution "worthy" of his ancestors. Paradoxically, Balthazar will destroy or sell off the sacred collection of the patriarchal household–including the original panels–in order to contribute to the family's sacred collection; thus he simultaneously descralizes the household on one level by turning it over to the marketplace while attempting to resacralize it on another in the name of Science–a fact that becomes fully perceptible only in the final paroxysm of Balthazar's desire:

> The admirable panels sculpted by Van Huysium and the portrait of the President had been sold, it was said, to Lord Spencer. The dining room was empty, there were only two wicker chairs and a common table on which Marguerite glimpsed in terror two plates, two bowls, two silver place-settings and a serving plate with the remains of a kippered herring that Claës and his chamber servant had no doubt just shared. She ran quickly through the house, each room of which offered the sad spectacle of an emptiness similar to the parlor and dining room. *The idea of the absolute had passed through everywhere like a fire*. . . . The slightest object of value in the house, everything, even the kitchen utensils, had been sold. (289; my emphasis)(17)

But perhaps the best piece of evidence for the household's sacrality is the respect it commanded in the community: "The inhabitants of the town had a sort of religious respect for this family, which for them was a prejudice. The undying honesty, the stainless loyalty of the Claës, their unchanging decorum made of them a superstition as deep-rooted as that of the Feast of Gayant, and was succinctly expressed by this name: la Maison Claës. The spirit of [medieval] Flanders breathed throughout this dwelling" (29).

13

This positive valence of the community's religious feeling is emphasized throughout the novel but is transformed into a superstitious fear and morbid fascination by the end. This reversal occurs in direct response to Balthazar's attempt to shift the locus of the household's sacrality from its museum-like objects and potlatch-style feasts to his own extravagant pursuit of an Idea in the laboratory. The family Claës, we are told, was legendary for outbidding the other families with ever-increasing levels of luxury and expense in its feasts (127). And this ritualized "waste" was traditionally accepted by this normally ultra-frugal community because, in Mauss-like fashion, they intuitively perceived that it nourished their communal ties. The fact that the community derived an obvious pleasure from the sacrifice is secondary to this deeper social function. Balthazar's ritualized waste in the name of Science, on the

other hand, is rejected by the community because it is incomprehensible from either a technical or a socio-economic point of view. This incomprehension gives way to a sacrificial paranoia as the community eventually perceives the displacement, if not the destruction, of the household's (and, by extension, its own) sacred origins.(18)

> For the whole society Balthazar was a man to ban, a bad father who had devoured six fortunes, millions, and was looking for the philosopher's stone in the nineteenth century, this enlightened century, this unbelieving century, this century, etc. . . . A lot of people came before the *maison* Claës to point out the rose-window of the attic where so much gold and coal had been burnt up. . . . The feelings of the entire town were thus generally hostile to this great old man and his companion (291-2)

The mock sacrifice discussed earlier immediately follows this expression of hostility.

The cathedral-like rose window mentioned above is, significantly, the window of Balthazar's laboratory, indicating not only a symbolic equivalence between religion and science, but a concentration of the household's sacrality in the lab.(19) Balzac sacralizes the lab (and the secret activities in it) in other ways as well. As Gans points out, sacrality is not an intrinsic characteristic of Being; it is constituted by an object's inaccessibility or deferred access (92). Balthazar's diligent protection of his inner sanctum, doubled by a near absence of description by the narrator, work as a *de facto* sacralization. The narrator offers only two furtive glances inside the lab (one of which was discussed earlier), indexical or symbolic clues (such as Balthazar's appearance as he exits, verbal testimony of what occurs there), and structural parallels such as that between the lab and the inaccessible space of Pépita's "sacred" bedroom (106). Pépita's seduction of Balthazar in her inner sanctum helps us to infer the secret activity of Balthazar's "workshop of seduction."(20) To round this out, in the following passage Balzac describes Balthazar's attachment to the lab as a set of sacramentally supported hopes (spiritual union, immortality, transcendence), as evidenced by the marriage metaphor, the life-or-death stakes of his "union," and the reference to heaven:

> [Balthazar's] life depended for all intents and purposes on the places with which he had identified; his thought, *married to his laboratory* and to his house, had rendered these places indispensable . . . . There lay his hopes, there descended from heaven the only atmosphere in which his lungs could breathe vital air. This marriage between men and places (and things), so powerful in weak-natured people, becomes nearly tyrannical in men of science or study. For Balthazar, to leave the house meant

renouncing science, his research, it meant death.(21) (249)

13

2. Mystical Union. Earlier we discussed Pépita's "masculine" features to which Balthazar appears to be particularly drawn, such as her face and her special way with tulips. But the text gives a sacred dimension to these forms by insisting on Pépita's deep connection to Christian mysticism through the "mystical education" she received as a nun (59); the description of her love for Balthazar as "the truly mysterious passion, a heated embrace of souls, a feeling for which the day of disenchantment never arrives" (58); in her "Eve-like" devotion to her spouse (60); and in her elevation of Balthazar into God's sphere (60, 82). Balthazar calls further attention to this point by describing Pépita's personal priest and life-long confident, l'abbé de Solis, as an ecstatic mystic and enthusiast of St. Theresa (148-9).

This insistence on Pépita's mystical ties, her possession of a beautiful and *marriageable soul* (50-53) and her exposure to the erotic spirituality of St. Theresa, thematizes an important aspect of her desirability for Balthazar, especially because she is otherwise characterized as physically unattractive and even "defective." More precisely, it thematizes the type of idealized–two equals one–spiritual fusion and social transcendence that the couple would have realized before the 1792 marriage law. The experience of their union as a "wound" (77) or an "abyss" (66) internally dividing them is comprehensible, in my view, only within the context of the displacement of France's traditional sacred order.

Both Balthazar and Pépita sensed this internal division early in the marriage: "[Pépita] plumb[ed] the depths of the unknown abyss that separated her forever from Claës from the very first days" (66).(22) Yet while Pépita will sacrifice everything including normal sexual relations, the well-being of her children, and even her life to uphold the dream of a complete union (60-1), Balthazar finds an alternative outlet in Science. Such a displacement of desire explains his obsession with Adam's secret of creation, the (homo-) eroticization of his lab activity (the mystical spouse, God or Christ, is gendered male while the souls of human males are gendered female), his attachment to his valet, Lemulquinier, as well as Pépita's implausible jealously of / rivalry with Balthazar's new "mistress." Balthazar's transfer of marital desire to a search for purely idealized knowledge of paternal creation effectively shuts Pépita–as material object of affection–out of the relation:

> The feelings of this Spanish woman roiled inside her when she discovered a rival in science, which was stealing her husband. . . . How to kill an invisible rival? How can a woman of limited power struggle with an idea

> whose joys (*jouissances*) are infinite and whose appeal is ever renewed? . . . [H]is wife wanted at least to stay beside him, lock herself up with him in the attic where he withdrew, engage in hand-to-hand battle with her rival during the long hours that her husband lavished on this terrible mistress. (72-3)

Another related issue, previously unexplored, is the onanistic dimension of Balthazar's expression of desire. This aspect of his secret activity is encoded in a strategic use of the "pathological" symptoms of onanism, which Balzac no doubt lifted from a vast contemporaneous medical literature devoted to explaining the dangers of this practice.(23) It would be tedious to line up systematically all of the evidence here. Suffice it to say that the repeated references to Balthazar's physical and moral degradation, his sunken eyes, hollow face and cheeks, heavy and inclined head, excessive tears, heavy sweating, blank stares, dilated pupils, infantile behaviors, loss of sensory perception such as hearing or speech (Balthazar goes deaf and dumb at the end), impotence, madness, and so on, all correspond to onanistic symptoms discussed in early nineteenth-century medical literature. Balthazar is also guilty of committing the dangerous acts that onanism was thought to cause: he turns away from marriage and society.

I mention these onanistic symptoms not for their prurient interest but because they help "diagnose" the pathological pleasure Balthazar takes in conducting experiments, his absence of desire for Pépita while a chemist, the frequent references to Balthazar's finding or communicating his secret with his "hands,"(24) and, more importantly, the various characteristics of the absolute. It is referred to as a "preoccupation," a "habit," a "liquid," the "principle of creation," "the principle of fecundation," and an "ethereal matter that is projected." This onanistic perspective also throws into sharp relief what I take to be the novel's main theme: if Balthazar's desire to be an ideal spouse and father-creator has been displaced onto science, then Balzac's distillation of this problem to its graphic essence in misdirected insemination renders this theme unmistakable.

Despite their mutual love and best intentions, we can understand from the foregoing discussion why Balthazar's and Pépita's union devolved toward this: "A complete separation. . . . Claës slept far from his wife, got up first thing in the morning, and locked himself up in the laboratory or his office. . . . These two beings, formerly accustomed to thinking together, no longer had–were further and further removed from–these moments of communication (165).

We see the mirror-image of Balthazar's (failed) mystical union to Pépita in his

homosocial union with Lemulquinier. The following passage, for example, serves as an index of Balthazar's transfer of his marital sentiments to his servant: "These two old people enveloped by an idea . . ., animated by the same breath–one represented the envelope, the other the soul of their common existence–formed a spectacle both horrible and touching (267).

3. Sacred Positionality. If traditional sacramental marriage accorded males a position of sacred centrality within the household, then the desire for this position after the abolition of the marriage sacrament is, by definition, *without object*. Which is why, once this desire is expressed in terms of scientific research, there is nothing to stop it. No single discovery could effectuate the metaphysical exhaustion of desire in the same way that the marriage sacrament could have–a point demonstrated by Balthazar's perpetual dissatisfaction with his experimental results (even when he is successful).

To see that Balthazar's scientific objective is at bottom sacred transcendence, we might turn to Balthazar's response to Pépita's accusation that he has abandoned his patriarchal role: "What! . . . You blame your husband for elevating himself above other men in order to throw at your feet the divine purple of glory, as a minimal offering next to the treasures of your heart? You have no idea what I've been doing for the past three years?" (117). Or his later response to a similar accusation by Marguerite: "You will be like a queen. Bah! Nature in all its plenitude will belong to us, we will be above everything" (225).

Despite the numerous technical descriptions of the "absolute," the subtext that continually surfaces and that better explains Balthazar's motivation is the central "position" that he hopes to gain through discovery. For example, when he thinks he has nearly solved his technical problems, he describes this success in terms of a physical "distance": "I didn't dare tell you that between me and the absolute there is hardly a hair's distance" (140).

Pépita, too, describes Balthazar's science in terms of "elevation": "Science is more powerful in you than you are, and its flight has carried you too high for you ever to come back down and be the companion of a poor wife" (120). More specifically, she imagines Balthazar reaching for God's position: "You forget, Claës, that you are committing the sin of pride of which Satan was guilty. You are attacking God" (119). This idea is echoed by Lemulquinier: "We almost put our hand on the secret. . . . Ah! What a man! He's almost in God's pants [*chausses*]" (216).

The anthropological significance of Balthazar's behavior is revealed primarily in the mystified reaction to him (negative and positive) by others. If, as mentioned above,

Balthazar ends up arousing fear, resentment, and eventually (mock) sacrificial violence, it is because his continued reach for power and radical social differentiation within his modern and desacralized context appears illegitimate. According to historians Daniel Roche and Jean Delumeau, the social effects produced by the desacralization of marriage in 1792 are clear: “In the flash of an instant, the utopia transformed the relations between fathers and their families, and therefore their place in society, by means of a juridical upheaval. The old edifice was shaken due to the disappearance of paternal power, the legalization of divorce, and the abolition of the distinction between people, children, spouses” (243).

Because of the family’s firm rooting in Old Regime structures, the Claës family does not immediately experience the violent effects of desacralization. Even if the 1792 law had effectively destroyed the metaphysical guarantee of the family’s traditional beliefs (intuited by Pépita in her feeling of the “abyss”), tradition prolonged the patriarchal illusion well into the nineteenth century. It is only when Balthazar’s repeated dilapidation of the family wealth and patrimonial heritage threatens the children’s existence that Pépita’s illusion cracks (82). Too weak herself to challenge Balthazar’s power, her half-efforts merely defer the inevitable conflict onto the eldest daughter, Marguerite. Foreseeing an Oedipal rivalry and eventual parricide if she reveals to Marguerite the truth of Balthazar’s decadence, she goes the other way and attempts to instill in her daughter a pious respect. Marguerite, however, sees through this, divines the causes of her father’s fall, and eventually takes the measures necessary to save the family: she exiles her father to Brittany, has the other children educated, and through shrewd financial maneuvering is able to restore the family’s squandered wealth. At this point, the social leveling described by Roche and Delumeau becomes visible as Marguerite becomes the *de facto* patriarch. Eventually she returns her father to his former position, but only after he has been effectively stripped of his “real” power. As the text makes clear: “[Marguerite] was going to be father, and he the child” (242).

The Modernist Absolute

> Everything is bilateral in the domain of thought. Ideas are binary. Janus is the myth of criticism and the symbol of genius. Only God is triangular!
> Balzac, *Illusions perdues*

Dramatized through this toppling of Balthazar and the reversal of family positions are the delayed effects of France’s *formal* desacralization of the social order–a legal event that had, in fact, occurred many years prior. The radical social leveling and the rivalries that emerged between the Claës family and Balthazar should thus be viewed as a microcosmic “effect” of a macrocosmic displacement of Old Regime

structures by the modern bourgeoisie and market economy. To be sure, the process of cultural modernization was slow and gradual, and it occurred at noticeably different rates within France according to geographical region. But according to Balzac, the bourgeois revolution of 1830–an event that corresponds directly to Balthazar's dramatic "fall"–unleashed the pent-up mimetic rivalries and violence that had formerly been stratified by the traditional order. As Balzac indicates in a brief aside, once this illusion is shattered, desire suddenly shifts from its vertical axis to a horizontal one, thereby producing a nation of violent rivals:

> For two years, the town's social order had been divided into two enemy camps. The nobility had formed one circle and the bourgeoisie a second, naturally very hostile to the first. This sudden separation which occurred throughout France and divided it into two enemy nations, whose jealous irritations only increased, was one of the principal reasons that the provinces participated in the July 1830 revolution. (238)

If the text casts Balthazar's search for the "absolute" in terms of a purely scientific endeavor, what he finally discovers, or rather what we discover through his failure, has substantially nothing to do with chemistry: Balthazar's patriarchal position had been irreversibly displaced and his continued attempt to exhaust the desire for paternal/creative transcendence via a "word" led to an extreme form of desirelessness, impotence, and (from an external point of view) madness

On a first reading, Balzac manages temporarily to mystify his readers because we are convinced that the word "absolute" contains deep meaning, even if only for Balthazar or Balzac. What Balzac shows, however, is that the "absolute" is just a word–an empty and infinitely displaceable signifier onto which Balthazar erroneously projects his hopes, desires, dreams, and emotions from the Old Regime (see epigraph #1).

Balzac reveals Balthazar's internal discovery in two different ways, following the double (mystical-sexual / linguistic) trajectory of the problem. Earlier we mentioned that Balthazar appears to have become self-conscious of the repressed eroticism of his lab activities and of his symbolic impotence when mocked by the young children and their crude hand gestures. This impression is reinforced if we examine the (mock) sacrificial scene. It is here that Balthazar realizes that the foundation of his phallocentric power/identity has been radically displaced, that his desire for mystical-sexual-linguistic unity is impossible:

> All of the children ran up like a flock of birds and surrounded the two chemists. . . . The children, feeling supported [by the community], threw their projectiles, which struck the two old men. . . . The blow was struck. Balthazar, whose faculties had been preserved by the natural chastity of scientists for whom the preoccupation with discovery has annihilated the passions, guessed, through a mechanism of intussusception [*invagination*], the secret of this scene (294-5).

Balzac's eroticization of this sacrificial scene reveals that Balzathar's social/spiritual "deflowering" comes in an imaginary penetration of his soul by a mob of children, a clear metaphor for the uncultivated "masses" of the modern (post-1830) order. In other words, the mob's penetration means that the phallus lies on the side of the modern social order, not with the traditional patriarch. The general physical "paralysis" that Balthazar suffers from this experience marks thematically his social impotence. Which is why after this symbolic transfer of power, the (now modern and equalitarian) community is prepared to venerate him.(25)

The second part of Balthazar's discovery brings us back to the issue of language and to Balzac's thoughts on the emotional impact of "words." To understand the linguistic component of the final revelation scene, it is useful to consider Adam's seduction of Balthazar with the "absolute" in light of the narrator's comments on Pierquin's attempted seduction of Marguerite with amorous words. Interpretive clues can be gleaned from the common emphasis on the impact of the look, the voice, and bodily gestures: "Whatever one does, whatever one says, there exists an admirable magnetism whose effects do not deceive. The sound of a voice, a look, the passionate gestures of a loving man can be imitated, a young girl can be deceived by a clever actor, but to succeed, doesn't he need to be alone" (186)? This passage takes on added significance if we recall Balthazar's heated "passion" during his single night alone with Adam (discussing chemistry).

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We find similar commentary later when Pierquin shifts his attention to Félicie, another Claës daughter. This again could easily apply to Balthazar: "Félicie [...] listened to this language, always so sweet even when it is deceptive; *she took emptiness for profundity*. . . " (240; my emphasis).

After the mob scene, Balthazar's paralysis reduced him to a state of "infancy" (295) and eventually his paralysis narrowed to his "tongue" (295). Effectively silenced by the crowd, Balthazar finds alternative means of communication, namely via his hands and his eyes. To be properly understood, the significance of this communication must be interpreted in light of Balthazar's misdirected

mystical/sexual (that is, “chaste”) form of expression. First, the hands: “When seeing her, Balthazar blushed, his eyes welled up without shedding any tears. He could squeeze his daughter’s hand with his cold fingers, and he put in this squeeze all of the feelings and ideas that he could not express (verbally)” (296). Let us recall that this “squeezing” of Marguerite’s hands resembles in a striking way Balthazar’s earlier squeezing of Pépita’s hands when he communicated Adam’s secret to her. The strategic repetition of this hand gesture clearly establishes a hidden link between Balthazar’s “bodily expression” and the absolute.

Now the eyes:

> [Balthazar] was constantly affectionate in his glances, through which he could manifest his feelings; his eyes contracted suddenly such a great variety of expression that they produced an easy-to-understand language of light. . . . The old man began moving with an incredible force to shake off the chains of his paralysis; he wanted to speak and moved his tongue but without being able to produce sounds; *his eyes projected his thoughts* . . . he sweated in huge droplets. (297-8; my emphasis).

This passage, too, becomes more meaningful if we recall the narrator’s explicit signifying equation between “projected matter” and the absolute: “‘Ethereal matter that is projected,’ said Claës, ‘and that is without doubt the word of the absolute'” (119). According to this formula, the projected matter *is* the word; the absolute is therefore the ineffable and unmasterable emotion/desire associated with the matter. To ensure that we do not miss this point, Balzac insists on it again in his Introduction to the *Philosophical Studies*: “Bring together these scattered fragments from the beautiful pages where Balthazar Claës explains the chemical absolute to his wife as: ‘. . . our feelings are the effects of a gas that is projected,’ don’t you perceive in this the elements of a scientific work whose flashes of light spurt out in spite of the author?” (1212).

If the signifier of the absolute is the materiality of the projected light, then we can conclude that Balthazar’s body in fact communicates what his mouth cannot, but that this communication must be contextualized within an sacred order of signification no longer directly available to the reader.

The final event that contributes to the triggering of Balthazar’s “Eureka!” is his discovery in the newspaper that the absolute had been “sold” by Adam de Wierzschownia. At the precise moment Balthazar hears (or sees?) the printed words *découverte de l’absolu*, his lingering crisis explodes into a final paroxysm of bodily expression. The significance of this event clearly lies in the fact that the sign that Balthazar had believed could exhaust his desire for sexual and spiritual union and

that exclusively grounded his deepest paternal emotions and belief had been co-opted by the market. If the “absolute” can, after all, be bought and sold by anybody, no one can any longer claim exclusive access; the sacred position he seeks is, in fact, secularized and infinitely displaceable.

18

That Balthazar discovers the final meaning of the absolute in the most banal and widely-diffused form of communication merely drives home the point that the “absolute” is in the end a word like another other. This discovery of the materiality of the word, insisted on by the italics (“he saw the words, *discovery of the absolute*,” 298), reveals in the flash of an instant the spatial and temporal *différance* between Adam’s originary verbal revelation of the absolute and its written iteration in the infinitely reproducible medium of moveable type. This deconstruction of Balthazar’s illusion works to lift the repression of his spiritual and sexual desires, but it at the same time tragically casts him (Adam-like) into the fray of humanity. Balthazar’s genius and his madness is to have spent his life trying to hold up a sacred center that was no longer there to be held. He sacrificed his wife, his family, and his life for a meaningless word.

19

Notes

1. All translations from the original French are my own. (back)

2. To realize that resentment against the “great man” was a concern for Balzac, we need only glance at his non-fictional commentaries. In a series of documents called “On Artists,” for example, he explicitly refers to this problem, and he cites the resentment against Christ as the most striking example of the sacrificial mechanism: “We have tried to demonstrate, in considering the artist both as creator and creature, that he was already himself a great obstacle to his social cohesion. Everything repels a man whose quick passage to the center of the world upsets others, things, and ideas. The moral of these observations can be summed up in a word: *A great man must be unhappy*. . . . In this respect, Christ is the most admirable example. This man receiving Death for the price of the divine light that he radiated on the earth and for climbing on a cross where he will be transformed into God, offers an immense spectacle: there’s more there than a religion; it’s an eternal type of glory. . . . Christ on the cross, dying in order to be reborn, shedding his mortal flesh to reign in the heavens. Man and God: man first, God after; man, for the majority; God, for the few faithful; little understood, then all of a sudden adored; finally, becoming God only when he’s been baptized in blood” (289-290). (back)

3. Josué Harari's article on *La Recherche de l'absolu* is one exception. Much of this current piece was, in fact, originally inspired by this article and by a graduate seminar at The Johns Hopkins University on the structure of desire and knowledge in Balzac's Etudes philosophiques. Susan Derwin's reading of *La Recherche* is also very illuminating and touches on several of the issues I will explore here, most notably mimesis, subjectivity, and language. Guided primarily by Freud and Lukacs, Derwin does not, however, focus on the issue of mimetic desire, nor does she attempt to theorize Balthazar's behaviors from an historical/cultural or anthropological point of view. (back)

4. It is interesting to note that despite Balthazar's linguistic paralysis, he manages to articulate the word "EUREKA"–a fact that suggests that he could have uttered, if he had wished it, the content of his deathbed revelation. I do not point out this contradiction to criticize Balzac for carelessness in his construction of the novel; on the contrary, his contradiction underscores the fact that Balthazar's silence is self-conscious and strategic. There is deep significance in the fact that Balzac has his character pull back and withhold the final word. (back)

5. The "content" of Adam's discourse also suggests a religious dimension. His unusual emphasis on the number "three" and the triadic structure of his chemical theory points quite clearly to the Trinity. (back)

6. Balzac: "The *Study of Manners* will represent all the social effects . . . . While the second part is the *Philosophical Studies*, because after the *effects* come the *causes*"*(Lettres à Madame Hanska*, 204). (back)

7. This is Christopher Fox's claim: "The implication, of course, is that Balthazar not only has neglected his wife in favor of a homosocial activity in the laboratory, but also has relocated the source of his most intense pleasures not in science, but in a man, such that, at the source of his homosocial activity lies an implied homosexual activity, an implication which persists, as I argue, well after Joséphine's death" (684). (back)

8. Here are some examples of Balthazar's bizarre attachment to tulips and Pépita's "knowing" use of them: "Balthazar Claës's passion for his wife, and that his wife knew how to perpetuate, seemed, as he observed himself, to harness its innate constancy in the culture of happiness that was equal in value to his passion for tulips for which he had a penchant stemming from childhood" (64). Later when Pépita makes it clear that she wants to make love with Balthazar, the text describes the effects of the tulip arrangement in her bedroom: "The lavish gaiety of a triumphant woman exploded in the splendid colors of the tulips that rose, cleverly arranged, from the long neck of big, Chinese porcelain vase . . . . The secret of

these preparations, was him, always him! . . . Joséphine couldn't have said more eloquently to Balthazar that he was always the principle of her joys and pains" (107). The phallic form of tulips is obvious from common sense, but Balzac insists on it here: "The stem was enormous, erect, firm . . ." (103). (back)

20

9. Gaston Bachelard takes a psychoanalytic approach to the question of Balthazar's displacement of sexual desire into science. His argument, though interesting, is largely anachronistic in that it fails to take into account the cultural and religious inflection of Balthazar's sexual desire. (back)

10. *Cf.* Bologne 134. (back)

11. Josué Harari explains the contradiction between desire and object in terms of a displacement between philosophical and scientific orders of knowledge: "This 'scientific' knowledge which will deliver up nature's secret is, to be sure, knowledge relative to the act of creation: that is Balthazar's objective. His language is that of experimentation but his quest is entirely in the philosophic realm. . . . In philosophic terms, it is the point where all that is multiple finds its unity and where unity manifests itself as the point from which all diversity is created. In other words, this is precisely the focal point where God is situated" (151). Formally, I agree with each of the points that Harari makes. But what he describes as "philosophical" is more properly called "religious," a fact that his reference to "God" betrays. Harari's description of Balthazar's lab activity in terms of "praying to the divine illumination" (152) also reveals this deeper religious dimension. By situating Balthazar's problem within a religious problematic, we can perhaps see more clearly the relation between marriage/paternity and the "act of creation" Balthazar would like to produce in the scientific realm. The mystical concept of non-mediated union also would account for Harari's description of Balthazar's essential desire to be the "man of desire without relation" (155). (back)

12. One can observe this logic in passages such as this: "After becoming once again father and husband, the chemist took his last child from his wife's lap . . . " (95). Or: "[H]e had become once again a father, reason had chased away science. . . " (223).(back)

13. "By helping Balthazar in his manipulations, he had espoused his madness. Either he had seized the scope of his research in the explanations that escaped the chemist when the goal slipped from his hands, or the innate penchant in man to imitate made him adopt the ideas of the one in whose atmosphere he lived . . ." (101). (back)

14. Here are some indications that various characters have understood Balthazar's secret: "In spite of Madame de Claës' discretion, her daughter imperceptibly discovered, thread by thread, the mysterious weave of this domestic drama" (145). "I [Balthazar] am talking about Lemulquinier, he has finally understood me and is a big help. The poor guy, he is so devoted to me!" (272). "The trip was sufficiently long for Marguerite to become increasingly lucid about the situation in which her father and Lemulquinier found themselves" (272). (back)

15. Despite the clichés handed down from generation to generation about Balzac's realism being grounded in a naïve mimesis of external referents, Balzac himself criticizes the "copy" theory of representation: "A mediocre painter who in this instance would have copied this woman . . ." The implication is that the Balzacian narrator is not mediocre, and thus is doing something more sophisticated than merely copying observable reality. (back)

16. It is noteworthy, in this connection, that, like Balzac (and Freud), Lévi-Strauss grounded his structural anthropology in an epistemological model of temporal "layers" similar to the archaeological model–geology. Anthropology for Lévi-Strauss is the discovery of constants across radically different orders of human existence:

> Every landscape appears first of all as a vast chaos . . . . [But] the most majestic meaning of all is surely that which precedes and, commands and, to a large extent, explains the others. . . . [My aim is] to recapture the master-meaning, which may be obscure but of which each of the others is a partial or distorted transposition. . . . I quite naturally looked upon [Freud's theories] as the application to the human being of a method the basic pattern of which is represented by geology. . . . [Marxism, psychoanalysis and geology] demonstrate that understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to another; that the true reality is never the most obvious; and that the nature of truth is already indicated by the care it takes to remain elusive. . . . But I had learned from my three sources of inspiration that the transition between one order and the other is discontinuous; that to reach reality one has first to reject experience, and then subsequently to reintegrate it into an objective synthesis devoid of any sentimentality (56-58). (back)

21

17. On the sacrality of the bedroom: "A long time before English manners had consecrated the woman's bedroom as a sacred space, the Flemish woman's bedroom was impenetrable" (106). The impenetrable space of Pépita's bedroom is

structurally analogous to the impenetrability of Balthazar's lab. This structural symmetry suggests that the activities that occur in each of the spaces are likewise symmetrical. (back)

18. Let us note parenthetically that this final burst is accompanied by a homosocial coupling of Balthazar and Lemulquinier. Although Marguerite's "terror" once again suggests a purely sexual relation, the reader's exterior perspective can see that this coupling, along with the sacrificial wasting of its contents, reflects Balthazar's residual dream of a spiritualized (non-material, non-mediated) union with a paternal ideal.(back)

19. Although Balthazar, too, sponsored such feasts, and was able for fifteen years to maintain the respect of the community for them, his "modern" expression of extravagance in scientific research transforms sacred respect into superstitious fear. Balzac demonstrates this displacement and reversal of the traditional sacred during Balthazar's final feast: a letter arrives announcing Adam de Wierzschownia's death, accompanied by ideas pertaining to the search for the absolute. This letter sends Balthazar into a deep depression because, as Pépita's fearful reaction indicates, it was the "death" of Balthazar as a functional patriarch: "This feast, during which the Maison Claës sparkled for the last time, had something somber and sad about it amidst so much magnificence, so many curiosities amassed by six generations, each of which had had its mania, and that the inhabitants of Douai would admire for the last time" (128).(back)

20. *Cf*. Harari p. 152 for an interesting discussion of Balthazar as a God-figure. (back)

21. A page later, the narrator describes his emotions at his forced departure as those of a man "condemned to death before going to the guillotine" (251). (back)

22. Also: "[Pépita] soon wondered if Claës hadn't married her in order to have a slave, if he didn't have some secret imperfections that obliged him to be content with a poor and disgraced young woman" (53). Or: "The weakness in my heart, yes, I often wished I wasn't a mother so that I could unite myself more intimately with your soul, to your life!" (122). (back)

23. *Cf*. *Histoire d'une grande peur: la masturbation* (Stengers and Van Neck) and more recently *Solitary Pleasures* (Bennett and Rosario II) for a historical account of masturbation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. Both works also provide lists of the various symptoms for diagnosing this activity. (back)

24. Balthazar's explanation of Adam's scientific communication to Pépita, for example, borrows heavily from this onanistic metaphorics: "My Pépita, said

Balthazar as he squeezed her hand, tears of rage flowed over the hollow cheeks of this man while he was throwing into my soul the fire of his reasoning that Lavoisier had already timidly done, without daring to let himself go" (116). (back)

25. "By a law, unknown until this time, that directs the affections of the masses, this event brought all souls to Mr. Claës. In a single moment, he became a great man, he excited the admiration and obtained all the feelings that he was denied the previous evening" (296). (back)

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