Realism's Empire

Baker, Geoffrey

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CHAPTER TWO

MARGINAL REALISM IN
LE PÈRE GORIOT

“Ah!” he sighed. “If I had but the pen of Balzac! I would depict this scene.”

—Agatha Christie, Murder on the Orient Express

An exchange between Vautrin and Madame Vauquer roughly halfway through Le Père Goriot (1835) mobilizes an important uncertainty, which the text couches in metaphors of materialism and antiquarianism. It is the same uncertainty that pervades Balzac’s elaboration of the epistemological duel in La Peau de chagrin, and so it will serve here as a bridge between that earlier novel’s dependence on a foreign, physical object to embody a crisis of knowledge, and Le Père Goriot’s situation of this crisis and of its larger implications within the world. Vautrin jokingly begins,

“If we start weeping, there’ll be an explosion; but I’ll gather up the debris with an antiquarian’s care.”

“There’s a man who knows the language of true French gallantry [galanterie française]!” said the widow, bending over to speak in Madame Couture’s ear.

(3.207)

Because the reception of Goriot has insistently read Vautrin as a Romantic and even Revolutionary figure, it may surprise us that he could even pretend to the sort of orderly care of the antiquarian. Madame Vauquer’s take on Vautrin’s attractive gallantry, on the other hand, sits quite comfortably with the reading most scholars have made of him as a charming, disarming rebel. This critical consistency has precluded a hard look at the manner in which Vautrin, rather than simply act as foil to the character of Père Goriot or of
Madame de Beauséant, also represents a facet of what Dean de la Motte has called “the bureaucracy created under Napoleon and usually associated with the mechanized, scientific approach to administration” (55–56). The character of Vautrin will be central to this chapter, because he incorporates themes already voiced tentatively in *La Peau de chagrin*—the potential for enormous financial gain in the colonies, for example—and because, more importantly, he anchors the entirety of *Le Père Goriot*. Vautrin’s absence from the novel would eviscerate Rastignac’s moral dilemma and the manner in which this dilemma complicates the text’s portrayal of social class, and would obscure the local import of Rastignac’s global allegory of the murder of a Chinese Mandarin, which transports this moral dilemma into the broader, increasingly knowable world. Balzac and Rastignac both make the ties between the hypothetical victim and the avowed criminal explicit, and, from outside and underneath Paris, the Mandarin and Vautrin together structure *Le Père Goriot*.

This chapter will begin by tracing the shared narrative strategies and thematic game of *La Peau de chagrin* and *Le Père Goriot* in order to demonstrate the increasing importance of the world outside Paris as determiner of fates within Paris, the increasing narrative reliance of the domestic on the exotic. The almost superficial significance of the colonies in *La Peau de chagrin* acquires legitimate weight in *Goriot*. A close examination of the relationship between the allegory of the Mandarin and the potential facilitators of social mobility in the novel highlights the increasing complexity of the relationship between the city and the world, the domestic and the exotic, disenchantment and the possibility of its renegotiation. The allegory relates most obviously to Vautrin and his planned violence against Taillefer, as numerous critics have pointed out. However, Vautrin’s machinations and their hints at colonial violence cannot be cleanly separated from the figures of Goriot and Beauséant. More significantly, Balzac’s rendering of Vautrin’s character betrays a constant overlapping of the same two energies that animate *La Peau de chagrin*, one coded as romantic and one coded as disenchanting. *Le Père Goriot*’s fundamental ambivalence toward the outcome of this duel gives a more concrete narrative form to the epistemological crisis engendered earlier by *La Peau de chagrin*.

(a) The World Without: The Mandarin and the Subject(s) of Empire

*Goriot* builds on several important developments in Balzacian narrative that were discussed at length in the last chapter: a narrative mode motivated by
an empirical epistemology that often proceeds by observed facts and deduces their significance, for example; and the imperial penumbra of the plot, which is at best subtle in *La Peau de chagrin* but a necessary component of any reading of Vautrin and the Mandarin. Furthermore, *Goriot* shares thematic ground with Balzac’s *L’Histoire des Treize* (1833–35) and especially with *La Fille aux yeux d’or* (1835), which was conceived in 1830, well before *Goriot* was begun, and finished while Balzac was making final revisions to *Goriot*. Both are novels of Paris—indeed, their intransigent urbanism distinguishes them from a partly provincial work like *Illusions perdues*—and both consider and attempt to alter the fate of fiction in a milieu Balzac saw as disenchanted, these “times and places where magic should be impossible,” as the narrator of *La Peau de chagrin* puts it (10.79). Still, it is tempting to buy into a general critical tendency to oppose *La Peau de chagrin* and *Le Père Goriot*. As the story goes, one is fantastic, the other realistic; one Romantic, the other Realist; one philosophical, the other historical. Only a handful of critics have dared link the two works, largely in an attempt to position the earlier one as an evolutionary stepping stone in the novelist’s career. Arlette Michel points to *La Peau*’s “foundational value” in Balzac’s depictions of Paris (114). André Vanoncini positions the novel as “the product of a transitional phase in Balzacian creation between the inspiration of the youthful novels . . . and the entry into the age of reason that will culminate in the great realist works, like *Eugénie Grandet, Père Goriot*” (73). Maurice Bardèche’s authoritative account of Balzac’s work up to and including *Goriot* (a goal which asserts, in itself, the perceived importance of this text) aims to treat the “return of characters at the moment at which it was invented by Balzac, that is, by studying *Le Père Goriot*” (284). The characters whose return so impresses Bardèche all appear first, although he does not point this out, in *La Peau de chagrin*: Rastignac, Taillefer, Raphaël. It is Hugo von Hofmannsthal, however, who touches on what might be the most significant point of contact between *Goriot* and *La Peau*, when he sees in both novels an attempted erasure of the authorial voice, claiming, “You say ‘Peau de chagrin’ and don’t recall a poet’s [Dichter] achievement; you think of old Goriot and his daughters and don’t think about what the author’s [Verfasser] name is” (382). What von Hofmannsthal indirectly praises here is the same narrative empiricism on which the last chapter focused; the author is removed enough that we recall only the objects and the people. On a fundamental narrative level, the realist care evinced by *Goriot’s* painstaking attention to milieu, character, and objectivity descends from *La Peau de chagrin*. Consider the manner in which, for example, *La Peau’s* narrator repeatedly gives us observed facts and possible explanations of them. Rather than simply tell the reader that Raphaël was innocent, Raphaël’s observed behavior is said to “indicate an innocent soul”
while his “physiognomy expressed a resignation” (10.58; 10.61). One must compare this to the initial descriptions of Victorine Taillefer in Goriot, whose “eyes of grey mixed with black expressed a softness, a resignation” (3.59), and of Vautrin, whose face “offered signs of hardness” (3.61). The narrator of La Peau de chagrin goes so far at times to avoid straying from the observable that, when inner feelings simply must be described, as in the second section, he has a character do it in dialogue.

La Peau de chagrin shares with Goriot more than its narrative mode. Balzac’s imperial allusions in the former are muffled, their function largely cosmetic and hardly fundamental. (Thus have they largely escaped critical attention.) Apart from the colonial shadings of the Magic Skin itself, Raphaël and Pauline are both made wealthy by colonial commercial interests. This is the announcement to which Raphaël awakens, after the all-night orgy:

Well, sir, you are the sole heir of the Major O’Flaharty, deceased in August of 1828, at Calcutta.

It’s an incalculable fortune!, cried the critic.

The Major having bequeathed several amounts to public institutions in his will, the French Government sent in a claim for the remainder to the East India Company, the notary continued. (10.208)

The pun incalculable, which links incalculability with the foreign locale of Calcutta, is obviously an important one, and it foreshadows Vautrin’s penchant for calculation. If one chooses to believe in the powers of the Magic Skin, this sudden fortune fulfills Raphaël’s second wish. The revelation is curious for several reasons, beginning with the distinctly Irish surname of Raphaël’s benefactor, who is identified as Raphaël’s uncle in an early draft of the novel, a detail that survives only in an editing error (cf. 10.1314) later in the final version of the text, where a character proposes a toast to “son [Raphael’s] oncle, le major Martin O’Flaharty,” despite the narrator’s never having specified the relationship (10.209). It is also significant that the same event to which Raphaël owes his good fortune—the government’s seizing of the assets of the Compagnie des Indes—will prove to have been the ruin of the Rastignac family in Le Père Goriot. Eugène de Rastignac tells M. de Restaud, “my great-uncle, a vice-admiral, lost everything in the King’s service. The revolutionary government refused to recognize us as creditors [n’a pas voulu admettre nos créances] when it liquidated the Compagnie des Indes” (3.99). The juxtaposition taints Raphaël’s inheritance, sanctioned as it is by the Revolution, as much as it assures Balzac’s readers of the legitimacy

1. These deductions surpass the “physiognomical thought” that Rivers discusses.
of Rastignac’s upward mobility, which *Le Père Goriot* thus presents as a restoration on a smaller scale.

From similar geographical distances, the story of Pauline’s inheritance in *La Peau de chagrin* brings closure to an adventure whose beginning emerges earlier in the text, during Raphaël’s extended monologue:

One evening Pauline told me her story with touching simplicity. Her father had been a major in the horse grenadiers of the Imperial Guard. He had been taken prisoner by the Cossacks, at the crossing of the Beresina; and when Napoleon later on proposed an exchange, the Russian authorities made search for him in Siberia in vain; according to the other prisoners, he had escaped with a view of going to the Indies [avec le projet d’aller aux Indes], and since then Mme. Gaudin, my landlady [Pauline’s mother], had been unable to obtain any news of her husband. (10.140)

Nor does the reader hear further news, until Pauline and Raphaël are reunited later, at which point she tells him, “My father has returned. I am a rich heiress” (10.229). Precisely whence he is returned is made clear a few pages later, when Pauline states more specifically, “He has returned from the Indies” [Il est revenu de l’Indes] (10.232). Such unexpected homecomings factor, of course, in some of Balzac’s other texts, most famously in *Le Colonel Chabert* (1836) but more matter-of-factly and with similarly colonial tones in *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), with Charles Grandet’s return from the Indies; or in the later *Modeste Mignon* (1844), where, in the space of about two paragraphs in the third chapter, Dumay goes to America and returns rich. (Jane Eyre’s sudden inheritance from her uncle abroad also comes to mind.) The colonies in general and the Indies in particular are thus important and neglected elements of both *La Peau de chagrin* and *Le Père Goriot*. Their centrality to the latter novel, though, moves beyond the facilitation of the plot and into its very possibility, for without the ruination of the Rastignac family during the liquidation of the Compagnie des Indes, there is no story of Eugène’s desire to rise, and thus no novel.

Though not a specifically French colonial image in any strict historical sense, the introduction of the Chinese Mandarin into *Le Père Goriot*’s Paris is given imperial resonance, just as it is also linked specifically to Vautrin’s plot against Taillefer. Rastignac “wandered about [flâna] nearly all day, his thoughts racing feverishly in a way familiar to any young man suffering from excessive expectations. Vautrin’s arguments [raisonnements] had brought him to reflect on social life, just at the moment when he ran into his friend

2. Note the coincidence of Pauline’s word for “returned,” which bears connotations of finance.
Bianchon in the Luxembourg Gardens" (3.164). Rastignac asks Bianchon whether he remembers a certain passage from Rousseau (the editors of the Pléiade point out that it is actually from Chateaubriand): “Do you recall the passage where he asks what the reader would do if he could become rich by killing some old Mandarin in China without stirring from Paris, simply by willing it so?” Bianchon claims he would not, but Rastignac continues to push him, raising examples from Rastignac’s own situation, including the need of money for women. Bianchon’s final refusal of hypothetical murder is illuminating but rarely explored in depth. He answers Rastignac thus:

But you are asking the question that everyone has to face when they start out in life, and you are trying to cut the Gordian knot with a sword. You have to be Alexander, my dear fellow, to behave like that, otherwise you end up in gaol. For my part I am content with the modest living [la petite existence] I shall make in the provinces, where I shall quite simply [tout bêtement] take over from my father. A man’s desires can just as easily be satisfied in the smallest of circles as within an immense circumference. Napoleon didn’t dine twice a day, and couldn’t take any more mistresses than a medical student doing his house training at the Capucins. Our happiness, my friend, will always lie between the soles of our feet and the crown of our head. Whether it costs a million francs a year or a hundred louis our basic perception of it is just the same within us. So I conclude that the Chinaman lives. (3.165)

The passage merits close attention, because it accomplishes several related things at once in Le Père Goriot and because Trollope’s The Way We Live Now mimics it intriguingly (see chapter 6). First, Bianchon casts the shadow of empire over the entire dilemma by referring to Alexander and Napoleon. Without pointing to these emperors, Ginzburg’s important essay, “To Kill a Chinese Mandarin,” still situates the dilemma similarly and powerfully by referring to a reprise of the allegory in the later Modeste Mignon. The poet Canalis addresses Dumay: “At this moment, the most important [utile] Mandarin in China is breathing his last and the empire is going into mourning, and does that make you sad? In India, the English are killing thousands of

3. This allegory was first probed in depth by Ronaï. The Pléiade editors point to a far earlier incarnation of this dilemma in one of Balzac’s youthful novels, Annette et le criminel (Argou le pirate), where the question is the same but the context altered: “You, over there, if you could kill, with a look, a man in New Holland who is at death’s door, and do it without a soul knowing, and if this little half-criminal brought you a brilliant fortune, tell the truth now, wouldn’t you already be in your hotel, in your carriage? You’d be saying, ‘My horses, my land, and my credit!’ You wouldn’t hesitate to repeat, ‘A gentleman like myself . . .!’” (Comédie humaine 3.1280). The fact that Balzac shifts the allegory from “Nouvelle-Hollande” to China might pique the curiosity of Ginzburg, who asks, “But why China?,” a question neither he nor anybody else ever really answers (162). Certainly Balzac’s documented knowledge of China could have been put to use in the novels, were the specific geographical location important. On his knowledge of China, see Robb (38) and Dali, who treats its significance in the Comédie humaine after 1842.
people like ourselves [qui nous valent], at this very moment the most ravishing woman is being burned alive; but have you enjoyed your cup of coffee any less?” (1.503). Clearly, Balzac either saw or came to see in the fate of the allegorical Mandarin an embodiment of imperial violence. Ginzburg finds new resonance for this old allegory (whose roots stretch back to Aristotle) in Balzac’s period, “with the emergence of a global economic system,” a view bolstered by reflecting on the provenance of coffee—a reminder here that the daily comforts of Europeans are underwritten by the suffering of others elsewhere (166). Second, alongside his portrayal of the allegory in grand imperial terms, Bianchon’s entire speech finds virtue in smallness, in the same comforts of domestic compromise that Bruce Robbins sees in his reading of Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, which draws on Ginzburg and the Mandarin and compares Magwitch to Vautrin (*Upward Mobility* 76). Bianchon is “content with the modest living I shall make in the provinces, where I shall quite simply take over from my father” (3.165). This allure of the rural and its function within a shifting imperial geography returns in Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* and Fontane’s *Effi Briest*, but one final note on Bianchon’s language leads into an exploration of the central figure of Vautrin. Bianchon speaks, self-deprecatingly, of succeeding his father in the medical practice, “tout bêtement” [stupidly]. The implication is a changing of the guard that occurs without any sort of thought or calculation. In this, as in many other things, Bianchon’s refusal of intelligence and greatness and of the violence that greatness requires, according to the allegory, is simultaneously a critique of the entire Paris that Balzac draws in the novel through Rastignac’s several mentors: Vautrin most importantly, but also Madame de Beauséant and Goriot. Vautrin’s alliance with reason and calculation goes unremarked by critics, who have consistently read him as a revolutionary and romantic figure. He is this, of course. But Balzac also paints him with the same brush of rationalization that colors the portraits of Goriot and Beauséant. In this dual role, Vautrin encapsulates a narrative vacillation between enchantment and enlightened disenchantment.

**(b) The World Below: Vautrin on Being Seen and Known**

The Hindoo characters followed; and the English translation appeared at the end, expressed in these mysterious words:

“In the name of the Regent of the Night, whose seat is on the Antelope, whose arms embrace the four corners of the earth.

“Brothers, turn your faces to the south, and come to me in the street of many noises, which leads down to the muddy river.
“The reason is this.
“My own eyes have seen it.”

There the letter ended, without either date or signature. I handed it back to Mr Murthwaite, and owned that this curious specimen of Hindoo correspondence rather puzzled me.

—Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*

Vautrin’s function within the structure of the allegory of the Mandarin is unquestionable, even if some critics attempt to separate the criminal from the allegory. David Ellison, for example, examines “two of the novel’s characters, Bianchon and Vautrin, both of whom present Rastignac with moral problems to solve and lessons to be learned” (76). These “moral problems” are actually one problem told twice, however, and Balzac’s narrative makes this clear. Recalling Rastignac’s introduction of the Mandarin in the passage cited above, it is “Vautrin’s arguments” which force the young man to “reflect on social life,” and this reflection that, apparently, elicits the allegory. For Rastignac, the relationship is clear: Vautrin must be read through the allegory, and the allegory must be read through Vautrin. The challenge that this presents to scholarship on *Père Goriot* resides in the uncomfortable disequilibrium between Vautrin as a romantic figure and Vautrin as murderer of the romantic potential that inheres in the foreignness of the Chinese Mandarin. The romance of this distance is amplified in the passage, cited above, from the later *Modeste Mignon*. After weighing both sides of Vautrin’s character, it becomes clear that he is best seen as an embodiment of the same epistemological duel at work in the Magic Skin of *La Peau de chagrin*; Balzac’s depiction of Vautrin as romantic anti-hero from the underworld is consistently complicated by the novel’s approach to both the underworld and romance. The Parisian coldness and calculation that Chasles (if not, by name, Balzac) loathes in his preface to *La Peau de chagrin* and that the narrator of *La Fille aux yeux d’or* savages one year later, show a disenchan tedly rational side of Vautrin. They also link him in spirit to both Madame de Beauséant and Goriot, despite critics’ occasional need to oppose Vautrin to both of these characters. Moreover, the taint of imperialism subtly voiced by Bianchon’s refusal of murder persists.

Vautrin’s embodiment of what James Reid refers to as “an invisible criminal underworld” (“Reading” 68)—the glimpse Vautrin provides Balzac’s readers of such a world—conveniently contains elements of enchantment within a metaphorics of space. As I mentioned in the introduction, John McClure has asserted that this sort of fictional flight into the unmappable underworld of global crime and espionage is a hallmark of postmodern fiction’s attempt to reenchant a demystified world (e.g., Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon). Such
strategies against Entzauberung might have been inherited from Kipling or Conrad (e.g., *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent*). Kipling’s short story, “The Mutiny of the Mavericks” (1891), opens with an image of global reach and criminal connectivity: “When three obscure gentlemen in San Francisco argued on insufficient premises they condemned a fellow-creature to a most unpleasant death in a far country, which had nothing whatever to do with the United States” (70). But Balzac’s employment of shadowy organizations like Vautrin’s *Société des Dix mille* or Ferragus’s *Treize* clearly performs the same function. In an article enumerating “fantastical aspects of Paris in the realist novels of Balzac,” Geneviève Poncin-Bar would add to the category of the fantastic “the entire subterranean Paris whose presence Balzac tests intensely, monstrous bedrock that he uncovers [qu’il fait ressurgir]” (239). Questions will arise later as to whether the underworldly subplot in *Goriot* can fairly be categorized as fantastic, but Poncin-Bar’s assessment of it initially seems to be borne out by characters themselves in the novel: Poiret’s immediate and terrified reaction at the mere mention of the society’s name is telling, for example (3.190). Furthermore, the newness and foreignness of organized criminality is emphasized by the detective Gondureau, who must translate for Michonneau and Poiret the “forceful expressions in thieves’ language” [énergiques expressions du langage des voleurs], the slang and wholly unfamiliar uses of sorbonne and tronche (209). One recalls the opening salvo of Eugène Sue’s popular *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43), also a lesson in strange, criminal vocabularies that alerts readers to their entry into an entirely different manner of conceiving the world: “A *tapis-franc*, in the slang of thievery and murder, means a smoking-house or inn of the very lowest class. A discharged convict, who in this foul language is called an *ogre*, or a woman of the same class who is called an *ogresse*, commonly keeps a tavern of this kind, haunted by the refuse of the Parisian population: liberated galley slaves, sharpers, robbers, and assassins congregate there” (31; his emphases). The underworld is not just a place; it is an alien paradigm and a separate language.

The strangeness of the underworld combines complexly, in the figure of Vautrin, with a sense of its geographical uncontainability and transcultural ubiquity. I have already suggested that, in Bianchon’s rendering of his verdict on the dilemma of the Mandarin, the imperial allusions he makes and that Balzac later emboldens in *Modeste Mignon* serve to contextualize the crime in global terms. The actual murder of Frédéric Taillefer is commanded by Vautrin but committed by an Italian colonel, Franchessini (whom Rastignac later sees at Madame de Beauséant’s ball, at the novel’s end, and mistakes for Vautrin [3.266]). Yet Vautrin’s international aspirations extend beyond European assassinations and become literally colonial when he reveals to
Rastignac his plans to depart for America:

You see, I have an idea. My idea is to go off and live like a patriarch in the middle of some big estate, a hundred thousand acres for example, in the United States, in the South. I want to become a planter out there, own slaves, earn a cool few million from the sale of my cattle, tobacco, and timber, living like a king. . . . I need two hundred thousand francs, because I want two hundred niggers to satisfy my taste for the patriarchal life. Niggers, do you see? They are children, but fully grown, and you can do what you like with them without some inquisitive Royal Prosecutor coming along to ask you questions [vous en demander compte]. With this black capital, I would have three or four million in ten years. (3.141)

Foreign soil—and not just colonial French soil—will be necessary if Vautrin is to own his slaves, since the Revolutionary government had already abolished slavery (in France in 1791, and in French colonies in 1794). This passage reiterates the relationship that Le Père Goriot patiently constructs between violent crime and personal profit, and, in this context and by dint of its recalling the allegory of the Mandarin, Vautrin’s plan again summons the idea of colonial abuses into the local murder underway. This is followed immediately by Vautrin’s intricate laying out of his plans for Taillefer’s assassination, for Rastignac’s marriage of Victorine and consequent access to her inheritance, from which Vautrin will exact his small commission. The conversation horrifies Rastignac, but not as much as it ought to; soon afterward, as he ponders the exchange, “A voice cried out to him: ‘Eight hundred thousand francs!’” (3.163). The crying voice is an inner one. That final amount, though, was never spoken by Vautrin, who gave Rastignac only the raw numbers (3.142); Rastignac has, all on his own, done the required math to arrive at his projected portion of the profits. And, on the next page, he turns to China to frame the dilemma he will put to Bianchon.

The fixation on profits—in short, the number-crunching—suggests an aspect of Vautrin’s character that forcibly problematizes attempts to read, in the criminal-underworld implications of his role in Le Père Goriot, figures of enchanted or romantic potential. To be sure, superficial textual traces of romance are palpable in his character, as critics have repeatedly noted. Madame Vauquer’s judgment, from the passage cited in the first paragraph of this chapter, that Vautrin is a symbol, if ironically twisted, of “la galanterie française,” is just one example (3.207). He is referred to—and by the narrator at times, no less—as a “démon” (3.184), a Mephistophelian “tempter” (3.185), a “Turc” (3.204), and an “infernal poem in which were painted every human sentiment, except for one: repentance” (3.219). Such descriptions have easily
lent themselves to the one-sided reading most critics make of this complex figure. James Smith Allen claims that “Vautrin embodies the spirit of revolt in nineteenth-century France” (109). According to Alfred Glauser, Vautrin “is the metaphor of the spirit that knows the secrets of evil and good, and ends up an incarnation of that beauty that is founded on an undeniable, satanic magic” (585). Vito Carofiglio sees him as “anarchical student of Rousseau, ‘révolté’ and luciferean” (155), while, according to Alexander Fischler, Vautrin is a “dark angel” (844). Finally, Catherine Savage declares, in what becomes a moral condemnation of Le Père Goriot’s alleged values, that Vautrin “is a romantic outlaw who has chosen the underside of society in which to achieve individual conquest” and that he thus provides, for Balzac’s novel, “the values of individualistic, anarchical Romanticism” (104). Savage’s and Carofiglio’s apparent conflation here of the literary and the political invites a closer look at how these values—romanticism, revolution—function within Balzac’s own novelistic sphere.

A number of Romantics were, of course, Revolutionaries, in France and elsewhere. Yet even if literary historians tend to partner the two terms, it should not surprise us that Balzac would keep romance and revolution separate, even see them as enemies. In so doing, he echoes contemporary conservatives like Edmund Burke, whose Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) refer to the upstart classes as “mechanical, merely instrumental” (42). Burke sees in the new, spirit-numbing Revolutionary bureaucracy proof that “the age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever” (76). De la Motte’s argument, briefly adduced above, will bear lengthier treatment here, for it reminds us that Balzac, too, equated Napoleonism not with romance and enchantment but rather with its rationalization:

Balzac, who would go on to write Physiologie de l’employé (“Physiology of the Bureaucrat” [1841]), itself to be incorporated into a later version of La Femme supérieure entitled Les Employés (The Bureaucrats), is one of the earliest and most penetrating critics of the bureaucracy created under Napoleon and usually associated with the mechanized, scientific approach to administration synonymous with modern life. (55–56)4

In Flaubert’s L’Éducation sentimentale, Deslauriers repeats this sentiment, ranting that, “When I think that you have to fill in anything up to twenty-eight forms just to keep a boat on the river, I feel like going off to live among

4. Suck argues convincingly for a distinction between pre-Revolutionary raison and post-Revolutionary rationalization, which is inextricable from “the sphere of commodity circulation” (54).
the cannibals [anthropophages]. The Government is eating us alive [nous dévore]!” (2.170). Deslauriers’ language even recalls that of Chasles’s preface to *La Peau de chagrin*, and the idea that the scientific mindset is eating away at (*ronge*) society. Vautrin is certainly romantic—at least superficially so, via the sorts of pat references and coded phrases enumerated above—yet one must keep this surface romanticism separate from his revolutionary import, which owes itself to the frequent comparisons of him to Napoleon, and to his own frequent invocations of Rousseau, whom James Swenson has persuasively read as one of the first authors of the Revolution.

It may be going too far to position Vautrin as the sort of *employé* to which de la Motte refers and about which Balzac wrote at length and out of spite. Yet a careful discovery of the hyperrational side of Vautrin illustrates to what extent one cannot simply envision him as an otherworldly, underworldly figure. Even the possible enchantments of criminality have been subsumed, in *Goriot*, within a continual disenchantment. Where the narrator refers to Vautrin as a “démon,” Vautrin presents himself in the most reasonable light, telling Rastignac, “I want it to be not passion, not despair, but reason that sets you [qui vous détermine] to come to me” (3.183). This stands in stark contrast to the modest ideals of Bianchon, who will simply and unreflectingly (“tou bêtement,” one recalls) follow in the footsteps of his father’s provincial practice, thereby refusing to kill the Mandarin, refusing to rise. The rational side of Vautrin fits in, too, with the narrator’s description of him in terms of the same technology that disenchants the ending of *La Peau de chagrin*. In an image that will be repeated more forcefully in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, we are told that Vautrin’s “face presented a phenomenon that can only be compared to that of the motor [chaudière], full of that steam capable of moving mountains” (3.218). And where the narrator, one page later, colors Vautrin as a “tempter,” with its obviously Faustian tones, Vautrin admonishes Rastignac to think and find objectivity: “Two or three more reflections on high politics, and you will see the world as it is” (3.185), a moment of deference to the optical epistemology that is both central to Balzac’s articulation of disenchantment and a widely assumed principle of literary realism. (Peter Brooks, for example: “My understanding of realism turns crucially on its visuality” [*Realist Vision* 71].) Elsewhere, Vautrin opines against randomness and chance, stating that, “When of two living men one must disappear [in a duel], one would have to be an imbecile to leave oneself over to chance [pour s’en remettre au hasard]” (3.136). These are not the words of a heady, unthinking romantic hero, and so the narrator is correct to refer to Vautrin as “this feroce logician” [ce féroce logicien], in a phrase that seems to capture both halves of this character (3.178). Bearing this in mind, then, and recalling his penchant for number-crunching and plans for speculation, Vautrin may be
most revealingly pigeonholed by Lukács and Bardèche; the former proclaims that Vautrin fulfills “the turn from ideal to reality [Wirklichkeit]” (Balzac 60), while the latter sees in *Le Père Goriot*’s criminal not a descendant or avatar of Mephistopheles but rather a forebear of Balzac’s later character Gobseck (Bardèche 288). Karl Marx’s *Capital*, of course, offers Gobseck as the prime example of unethical and unchecked accumulation (735).

The double-depiction of Vautrin as alternately romantic and revolutionary—recalling that, for Balzac, the revolution is an exercise in disenchantment—must complicate the criminal subculture that the novel would have him represent. As I have suggested, this subculture is marked off in *Le Père Goriot* as a new body of knowledge and style of being, requiring its own vocabulary and organization. The insistent portrayal of Vautrin’s rational side, though, tarnishes the underworld’s potential mystery, shows it to be, in fact, quite worldly. In an essay on realism and the detective novel, Isabelle Husson-Casta makes a remark that may help frame, in a larger context, the sort of claim I am making here about the complexity of the criminal underworld in terms of disenchantment:

> Detective fiction will be arranged from the following materials—a degraded romanticism, a carefully [prudemment] stereotyped realism, symbolistic flourishes—into a playful and at times casual condensation: the hyper-realism of cartographic or toponymic detail, contrasts with the larger project of detective fiction [le projet policier global], which is inevitably idealist, as it presumes the resolution of enigmas and the restored coherence of a world subject to [en proie à] the Law. (114)

It would not be wholly inappropriate to suggest that we read *Goriot* as a detective novel. In the opening pages, the narrator, referring to Rastignac, claims that, “without his curious observations, and his skill at producing himself in the salons of Paris, this tale could not have been colored in those truthful hues which, without any doubt, it owes to his shrewdness, as well as to his interest in penetrating the mysteries of a shocking situation” (3.56). The mystery, of course, is that of Goriot’s hidden relationship to his daughters, and Rastignac, playing the detective, does get to the bottom of it. Husson-Casta’s assessment of the novel’s obsession with “the resolution of enigmas” and restoration of coherence is entirely apposite in the case of Vautrin. It would be a mistake, though, to term this drive for resolution—the assumption that things can be explained “coherently”—a sort of “idealism” that is *opposed* to realism, because it is also a hallmark of scientific inquiry, empirical explanation, and thus disenchantment. In an almost comical way, Vautrin himself acknowledges that the empirical will be his downfall in his
Part I: Balzac and the Problem of Empiricism

flight from the law. Throughout the novel, he sings the refrain,

\[
I've \text{ roamed the world for many a year} \\
And I've \text{ been seen in many lands . . .} \\
[J'ai \text{ longtemps parcouru le monde,} \\
Et l'on m'a \text{ vu de toute part . . .}] \text{ (3.82, e.g.)}
\]

The last time he sings this refrain before he is captured, though, he cuts the last line off:

\[
I've \text{ roamed the world for many a year} \\
And I've \text{ been seen . . .} \\
[J'ai \text{ longtemps parcouru le monde,} \\
Et l'on m'a \text{ vu . . .}] \text{ (3.200)}
\]

He has been seen, not everywhere this time—not “de toute part”—just seen, and that suffices. The “invisible criminal underworld” that Reid mentions is finally entirely visible and, ultimately, policeable. In this especially, *Le Père Goriot* belies Lukács’s contention that “Vautrin's function in Balzac’s Human Comedy is the same as that of Mephistopheles and Lucifer in Goethe’s and Byron's mystery plays” (*Studies in European Realism* 61). Unlike Mephistopheles and Lucifer, the Parisian criminal of Balzac’s imagining stands on solid ground and inhabits a social system that can hold him to account. Vautrin, of course, escapes to reappear in *Illusions perdues* and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, but *Le Père Goriot* ends with his law-enforced removal from the text. Vautrin’s parting words issue a challenge to empiricism and detection, as D.A. Miller has asserted: “[T]he moment when ‘explanations are in order’ may rightly give rise to the desire to withhold them (like Balzac’s Vautrin, whose last words to the police as they open his closet and seize his effects are ‘Vous ne saurez rien’)” (vii). Yet the mobility and unmap-pability that Vautrin represents are endangered as much by his plot-ordained capture as by his character’s earlier, repeated turns to the vocabulary of reason and calculation.

(c) “À nous deux!”: An Ethics of Disenchantment

Vautrin is not alone in exercising this vocabulary in the novel, and the disenchanting side of him bleeds into Balzac’s depictions of two other key characters, illuminating the entire world of *Le Père Goriot* as a disenchanted one. Madame de Beauséant and Père Goriot have often been positioned
opposite Vautrin: Beauséant as a more ethical mentor in Rastignac’s struggle for upward mobility and access to society, and Goriot as a more appropriate father figure to Rastignac. “Through both his name and his attributes,” Fischler argues, “Vautrin is also diametrically opposed to Mme de Beauséant, Rastignac’s other Mentor, for se vautrer is the exact antithesis of beauséer” (844). What the nominal opposition suggests, though, Balzac’s narrator will not corroborate; the text expresses an ambivalence in the construction of Beauséant similar to the one it shows in the construction of Vautrin. It is true that Rastignac invokes, early on, the fairy-godmother motif, telling her, “If you knew the situation of my family, . . . you would want to play the part of one of those fairy godmothers who enjoyed clearing away the obstacles facing their godsons” (3.108). This benign role, though, is not one that Beauséant accepts, and she instead instructs Rastignac in much the same terms Vautrin uses: “The more coldly calculating you are,” she tells him, “the further you’ll go” [Plus froidement vous calculerez, plus avant vous irez] (3.116). Of Mme de Nucingen, Beauséant tells Rastignac, “Use her” [Servez-vous d’elle], an exhortation to exploitation that mirrors Vautrin’s wish for slaves. Where Rastignac is reluctant to enlist himself in Vautrin’s most diabolical plot against Taillefer, though, he volunteers his services to Beauséant, when she asks him, hypothetically, “Would you kill someone for my sake?” Eugène responds, “Twice over” (3.109). Madame de Beauséant’s methods of mentorship share with Vautrin’s an emphasis on calculation and exploitation, and a propensity—even if it remains only hypothetical—for violence, and Rastignac himself notes this similarity (3.146).

Beauséant’s echoing of Vautrin demonstrates persuasively that the rationalization lamented in Chasles’s preface is actually pervasive in Paris, from top to bottom. That Goriot himself also lapses into the vocabulary of Vautrin is even more important, for, as the tragic title figure in the novel, Goriot is often rendered by critics as an endlessly giving and eternally unselfish father. Balzac’s own notebooks, in the first mention of Le Père Goriot’s subject, refer to “a good man . . . having ruined himself [s’étant dépouillé] for his daughters . . . dying like a dog” (3.5). It must be remembered, though, that he is also a businessman, a war profiteer for whom the aristocracy has nothing but contempt: the Duchess of Langeais refers to him as “this Loriot, who sold wheat to the choppers of heads” (3.114). The scenes depicting Rastignac’s vacillation between the poles of Vautrin and Goriot set these two characters against each other as opposites, and this is amplified by the anger Goriot shows when hearing of Rastignac’s interest in Victorine Taillefer. Interest in Victorine means interest in Vautrin’s plot; Goriot’s quick and angry reaction to the rumors, and Rastignac’s equally swift denunciation of them and declaration of his love for Goriot’s daughter, seem to further position Goriot
as the foil of Vautrin, as his competitor for narrative space. Yet at this same moment, Goriot shows a total lack of regard for the life of another, of Taillefer, whose death in the impending duel is certain and whom Rastignac wants to warn:

“Taillefer’s son fights tomorrow, and I’ve heard that he’ll be killed.”

“What’s that got to do with you?” [Qu’est-ce que cela vous fait?], said Goriot.

(3.199)

It is perfectly appropriate that the next voice we hear is Vautrin’s. By the end of the novel, Goriot’s repeated wishes to return to Odessa and make more money to support his daughters bear only a faint resemblance to Vautrin’s plans for America and slavery, but Goriot’s repeated cries for vengeance against his sons-in-law speak a darker language: “Kill them! Death to Restaud, death to the Alsatian” (3.278). Finally, the shadow of the Revolution touches both Vautrin and Goriot. Just as Vautrin’s association with the Revolution complicates him, it does the same for the calculating merchant, or, as Sandy Petrey points out, “a commoner enriched by the Revolution” (92). Goriot’s occasional resemblance to Vautrin forces a harder look at the novel’s ending, where Balzac links them in spectacular—and spectacularly inconclusive—fashion.

Anthony Pugh praises Le Père Goriot’s finale in Père Lachaise as a “structurally perfect ending” partially because it allows the reader to “witness stage by stage the decline into compromise with society” (30–32). Yet this ending cannot be reduced to an uncomplicated sponsorship of compromise. Rastignac’s final incitement to duel—his “grandiose words: ‘It’s between the two of us now!’ [mots grandioses : « À nous deux maintenant! »]—pulls together yet again the figures of Vautrin and Goriot, who have both uttered these words before (3.290). Vautrin first uses the phrase “À nous deux!” during the conversation with Rastignac in which the former first mentions his dream of owning slaves (3.137). Goriot uses it, too, though, and also in conversation with Rastignac, during a diatribe against his son-in-law Restaud in which he imagines calling him out to duel: “À nous deux!” (3.247). Even critics who point out that Rastignac’s final cry from the cemetery owes itself both to Goriot and to Vautrin, fail to observe that it also must conjure the memory of the dead Taillefer (e.g. Petrey 111–12). Taillefer is the concrete avatar of

5. Woloch has argued, in his insightful reading of the novel, that Goriot competes with Rastignac—and not with Vautrin—for primacy in the narrative, if our focus is on whom the novel constructs as major and minor characters (246). Within Rastignac’s own story, though, the opponent to Goriot’s plot is that of Vautrin, and Rastignac must choose between them.
the abstract Mandarin, the local exemplar of the global allegory, the one who must die in order for Raphaël to rise, according to Le Père Goriot’s narrative logic. Ginzburg alludes to the economy of this relationship and the history of its slow progression into the realm of the global market, but the novel makes its zero-sum nature a true leitmotif, opposing Taillefer and Rastignac in subtle but important ways. Vautrin structures the opposition around money; Taillefer’s death means his money will become Rastignac’s, should Rastignac agree to Vautrin’s plan. Quietly, repeated images bolster the contrast: whereas Taillefer “has fought in a duel. He’s been wounded in the forehead [il a reçu un coup d’épée dans le front],” for example, for Rastignac “success is written on [his] handsome forehead [beau front]” (3.211; 3.229). Vautrin’s forehead, meanwhile, stores his numbers: “‘Here’s where I keep my account books!’ he said, hitting himself in the forehead” (3.220). Rastignac’s challenge to Paris signals his affirmation of the zero-sum game, the ontology of the duel, in which, as in Rastignac’s summation of Vautrin’s version of Paris, it is “every man for himself” [chacun pour soi] (3.150). Or, as the narrator continues Rastignac’s inner monologue: In Paris, “He would, as on a battlefield, have to kill in order not to be killed, cheat in order not to be cheated; where he would have to leave his conscience at the barricade” (3.151).

The ending is “structurally perfect” for another reason, though. In accepting the zero-sum perspective of the duel, the “À nous deux!,” Rastignac is also rejecting a different possibility. This rejected possibility is likewise marked off in the text by repeated uses of “à nous deux,” and it is thus contrasted explicitly to the duel. If “à nous deux” has become, at the end of Le Père Goriot, a challenge, it is first used as an incitement to good works from outside of Paris, from the fallen, provincial Rastignac family. In her letter to Eugène in Paris, his sister Laure recounts how their other sister Agathe “was sweet. She said, ‘Let’s send him the three hundred and fifty francs from us both [à nous deux]!'” (3.128). Later, Rastignac adopts this formulation and its charitable ethos in his care of the dying Goriot, telling Bianchon, “My good Bianchon, . . . we’ll take care of him, the two of us [à nous deux]” (3.258). There are two versions of the number two: the beneficent and the maleficent, the two that help each other help a third, and the two that will reduce themselves to one. Rastignac’s vacillation between Laure’s (provincial) and Vautrin’s (urban) versions of the number two accompanies the duel framed by the moral dilemma of the Mandarin, repeating the language of this dilemma and, in so doing, highlighting further the centrality of this Eastern image to the novel’s story of Rastignac’s formation in the West.

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Balzac uses the allegory of the Mandarin to both center Rastignac’s moral dilemma within the novel and anchor it within the increasingly knowable world outside the Paris of the novel. Ginzburg reminds us that the “turning inward” of the dilemma “takes place across a geographical space—the distance from France to China—inﬁnitely wider than the Mediterranean world Aristotle wrote of” (162). “Inﬁnitely wider,” yes, but also inﬁnitely more imaginable, traversable, and able to be envisioned within a “global economic system” (166) and its increasing mobility of people. Sociologist Saskia Sassen has analyzed the effects of this increased mobility in her writings on what she calls the “global city,” an idea that will become useful later in this project, as it helps to account for Balzac’s, Trollope’s and Fontane’s particular depictions of imperial centers. Balzac later, in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, displaces the ideas of both enchantment (whether in the form of the distant, foreign exotic or the domestic underground) and the destruction of it from the allegorical sphere where, in the Paris of *Le Père Goriot*, these ideas frame everything. Ginzburg is right to embed this dilemma within a brief nod to worldly space, just as countless critics of *Goriot* have continually attended to the novel’s articulation and production of urban and Parisian space. These critics, as the following chapter demonstrates, have endlessly invoked Balzac’s *milieux* as testaments to realism, coordinates of mimetic precision. In a consideration of the fate of enchantment in *Goriot*, though, the Mandarin performs, along with Vautrin, a complex function. A careful rereading of Vautrin complicates some of the more simplistic critical renderings of him as a romantic revolutionary, for there is in him just as much calculation as there is excitement, as much of the careful antiquarian as there is of the smooth-talking gallant. The extra-Parisian influence of the Chinese Mandarin is inextricable from Vautrin and the moral dilemma he forces on Rastignac. This figure, along with the sub-Parisian murmurings of the criminal underworld Vautrin represents more explicitly, encapsulates the same novelistic energies that the Magic Skin embodies in *La Peau de chagrin*: the desperate narrative indecision between the criminally mysterious and its opposite, between what cannot or should not be known and its very cancellation.

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6. See Bell’s “Balzac and the Modern City”; Guichardet’s “Un jeu de l’oie maléfique”; Pimentel-Anduiza; Pold; and Reid, most of whom are discussed in the following chapter, in an examination of the unmapping protocols of *La Fille aux yeux d’or*. Mozet’s book is also useful in this context, because of its attention to the spatial push and pull between Paris and Provinces. For a comparative look at the Paris of the realist novelists, see Warning’s chapter, “Der Chronotopos Paris bei den Realisten” (269–312).