**Introduction**

**The Prime Movers**

Toutes les femmes, tous les hommes créés par Balzac peuvent répéter le mot de Mme de Beauséant: “J’ai voulu vivre.”

[All the women, all the men created by Balzac could repeat Mme de Beauséant’s mot: “I wanted to live.”]

—Gadenne

**Eugène and Delphine**

Consider the effect of money on Eugène de Rastignac when he is still a poor student in *Le père Goriot*:

A l’instant où l’argent se glisse dans la poche d’un étudiant, il se dresse en lui-même une colonne fantastique sur laquelle il s’appuie. Il marche mieux qu’auparavant, il se sent un point d’appui pour son levier, il a le regard plein, direct, il a les mouvements agiles; la veille, humble et timide, il aurait reçu des coups; le lendemain il en donnerait à un premier ministre. Il se passe en lui des phénomènes inouïs: il veut tout et peut tout, il désire à tort et à travers, il est gai, généreux, expansif. Enfin, l’oiseau naguère sans ailes a retrouvé son envergure. . . . Paris lui appartient tout entier. (3: 131)¹

¹. All references to *La Comédie humaine*, including editorial material, are to the Pléiade edition listed at the head of the bibliography, except where noted.
[The instant money finds its way into a student’s pocket, there arises inside him a fantastic column on which he leans. He walks better than before, he feels a fulcrum for his lever, his gaze is full and direct, his movements are agile; humble and timid the night before, he would have accepted blows; the next day he would strike a prime minister. Unheard-of phenomena occur within him. He wishes for everything and can do everything, he desires wildly, he is cheerful, generous, and expansive. In all, the once wingless bird has recovered his wingspan. . . . All Paris belongs to him.]

This apparently minor moment in the student’s life gives a rhetorical image of the power of money to make things happen. It is typical of Balzac’s rhetoric that the small event—money finding its way into the pocket—connects to the momentous by means of rhetorical embellishment. A metaphorical column rises up, the first result of the agency of money; the pocket change metamorphoses into a major support, such as one might find not only in the pompous façade of a monumental building, but also, suggestively, as the base upholding the statue of a famous person; money is that support instantly raising the indebted student to ranks of power. In a society where demeanor and style indicate social position, the physical changes—walking better, a full, direct gaze, agile movements—are the literal expressions of an expansion that develops from sentence to sentence and places the poor student among the elite to which he aspires. By the device of hypothesis, expressed by the verbs in the conditional tense, Balzac offers an image of his character so outranking a prime minister that he would hypothetically give blows. Finally, the image of the wingless bird regaining his wingspan and his grandeur along with his power of flight adds by another metaphor to the soaring effect of money, and the all-embracing vision of Paris that ensues multiplies the perspective and crowns the rhetorical inflation.

These devices of rhetoric raise the agency of money to the highest level of importance. In the language of this passage, at least two connections internal to La Comédie humaine expand the minor moment further. The non-metaphorical description “il veut tout et peut tout, il désire à tort et à travers” connects Eugène de Rastignac to Raphaël de Valentin in La peau de chagrin. Encompassing the reference to “vouloir” and “pouvoir,” these words about Rastignac restate the foundation of Balzac’s philosophy of energy and desire found throughout La Comédie humaine. “Vouloir nous brûle et Pouvoir nous détruit” [Will burns us up and Power destroys us] (10: 85), according to the antiquarian as he presents Raphaël with the magic skin, and these two actions of the “great mysteries of human life” are also the two causes of death. The final phrase, “Paris lui appartient tout entier,” anticipates the
famous challenge Rastignac addresses to the city from the heights of the Père Lachaise cemetery at the end of the novel, “À nous deux maintenant” [It’s between you and me now], marking the final point of his evolution in this novel and the entry into the other increasingly powerful manifestations of this much reappearing character. Money is the dangerous talisman that would procure Rastignac’s every desire, as the magic skin is for Valentin, and the possession of Paris, so vigorously sought after in the novel’s closure, is presented in this passage as something achieved thanks to a few coins, in a very surprising prediction.

Although it may pass unnoticed, this paragraph also contains an image akin to that of the Aristotelian Prime Mover: “il se sent un point d’appui pour son levier.” As a metaphorical expression of a potential inherent in Rastignac, like the potential Balzac felt in himself, this image of the fulcrum for whatever action his lever would propose may make the reader think of Archimedes’ boast that he could move the earth, given a lever long enough and a place to stand. Rastignac’s place to stand occurs at the end of this novel; the accomplishments of his career in other novels, the lever, contribute to the changes in French society, the displacement of the world so obsessively charted by Balzac.

Goriot’s maxims also express the centrality of money: “L’argent, c’est la vie. Monnaie fait tout” [Money is life. Cash does everything] (3: 242). Vautrin emits another concise expression of the primacy of money in the often-quoted observation, “Si jamais vous fouillez des cœurs de femmes à Paris, vous y trouverez l’usurier avant l’amant” [If you ever dig into the hearts of women in Paris, you will find a usurer there before a lover] (3: 86). And Delphine de Nucingen, in a tirade of contained fury against her faithless lover de Marsay, confirms Vautrin: “L’argent ne devient quelque chose qu’au moment où le sentiment n’est plus” [Money becomes something only after sentiment is no longer] (3: 173). These one-liners about money also confirm the place of Le père Goriot at the center of La Comédie humaine, as others have noted, for instance Rose Fortassier in the preface to the Pléiade edition: “En somme, Le père Goriot aimante, annexe tout ce qui a été écrit ou va s’écrire. . . . Ce roman [était] destiné à être au centre de son œuvre par le nombre d’intrigues qui en rayonnaient” [In short, Le père Goriot, like a magnet, draws to it and annexes everything that has already been written or will be written. . . . This novel [was] destined to be in the center of his opus by the number of plots that radiated from it] (3: 27, 33–34). More recently, Arlette Michel reaffirms this centrality of Le Père Goriot, and hence of money: “Tous les commentateurs s’accordent pour voir dans Le père Goriot un archétype du roman balzacien. C’est à juste titre” [Critics all agree that Le père Goriot is an
archetype of the Balzacian novel. They are right) (Le réel 136). And with the novel’s place at the archetypal center, money and love take center stage.

One of the radiating narratives stemming from Le père Goriot is Gobseck. Devoting a chapter to the central role of Gobseck in La Comédie humaine, Jean-Joseph Goux writes: “Le roman réaliste dans sa possibilité la plus intense, serait concomitant à l’émergence de celui que Balzac appelle parfois le ‘capitaliste’ ou le ‘financier,’ comme personnage central-intitulant” [The realistic novel, in its most perfect realization, is concomitant with the emergence of the character Balzac sometimes calls the “capitalist” or the “financier” as a central title character] (89). Goux notes that the novel genre becomes realistic at the same time as money takes on a dominant role: “Non seulement Balzac n’épargne au lecteur aucun détail sur les manipulations touchant l’argent, mais il situe au centre de la scène, des personnages dont l’activité principale est cette manipulation, et il noue une intrigue dont les fils se concentrent autour de ses enjeux” [Not only does Balzac spare the reader none of the details about manipulations concerning money, he also situates characters at center stage whose principal activity is such manipulations, and he devises plots whose threads converge on their actions] (87). Nothing is more “realistic,” it seems, than matters that can be expressed in terms of their cost, where a financial number solidifies the concrete nature of the human interactions.

It is easy to assume that Love, as a motivation for the characters’ actions, is opposed to Money. Love may sound like the antithesis of money, as in the expression “for love or for money” which places the terms in the position of alternatives, and one finds a sense of this idea in the critical literature. Raymond Mahieu for instance describes Eugénie Grandet as built on the interaction of the “principes antagonistes qui gouvernent le monde” [the antagonistic principles that govern the world] (49), which he calls Capital and Eros. (According to La Maison Nucingen, the “fusion” of love with money would have been considered dishonorable for Delphine and Eugène: “tout intérêt matériel est en dehors des sentiments” [any material interest lies outside sentiment] [6: 335].) Such an opposition could be made to account for the antagonisms, contraries, oppositions, dualities, and so on, that characterize the essence of the Balzacian conception. But from opposition Balzac draws unity. As Arlette Michel has written, “La poétique et la rhétorique de La Comédie humaine tendront à être unitaires parce que fondées sur la

2. In addition: “Ce roman peut ainsi être lu comme une ouverture à l’univers romanesque balzacien” [This novel can thus be read as an opening to the world of the Balzacian novel], proposes the introductory matter by Olivier Bara in the Bibliothèque Gallimard edition of Le père Goriot, aimed at students (14).
Introduction: The Prime Movers

coexistence des contraires”; “il s’agit de maintenir en présence des postu-
lations antagonistes . . . pour qu’il résulte de leur mise en relation non un
moyen terme rassurant par sa stabilité, mais une réalité radicalement neuve
parce que née d’une tension, d’un déséquilibre corrigé” [The poetics and the
rhetoric of La Comédie humaine will tend to be unitary because they are
founded on the coexistence of contraries]; [he maintains antagonistic postula-
tions together . . . so that their encounter results not in a middle term reas-
suming in its stability but in a radically new reality born from tension, from a
corrected disequilibrium] (“Balzac et la rhétorique” 257). The interconnect-
edness of Love and Money forges this reality founded on a corrected disequi-
librium; the unloved and unloving Gobseck’s passion for gold is a question of
Love as well as of Money. By means of this interconnectedness, what Balzac
invented was precisely a world in which Love needs Money and vice versa;
neither ever works alone, and it is the powerful interaction between them
that defines La Comédie humaine. On such a basis, Balzac builds his particu-
lar brand of realism.

In Le père Goriot, the connection of Love to Money is Delphine de Nucin-
gen’s problem. Rastignac has just won seven thousand francs by proverbial
beginner’s luck at the gambling tables; the money acts on Delphine as if a
dam had burst, and she launches into a two-and-a-half page paragraph about
her money-and-love problems. Of course the problem is that Nucingen does
not give her enough money, and that to obtain money from him implies giv-
ing her “love” to him: “Je suis trop fière pour l’implorer. Ne serais-je pas la
dernière des créatures si j’achetais son argent au prix où il veut me le ven-
dre!” [I am too proud to beg. I would be the lowest of the low if I were to
buy his money for the price he wants to sell it to me!] (3: 172). Marriage is a
disappointment; out of delicacy, Delphine will only tell Eugène: “qu’il vous
suffise de savoir que je me jetterais par la fenêtre s’il fallait vivre avec Nucin-
gen autrement qu’en ayant chacun notre appartement séparé” [know only
that I would throw myself out of a window if I had to live with Nucingen in
any way other than having separate bedrooms] (3: 172). Clearly money can
be traded for love, even within a marriage.

Or outside a marriage. And here the relation of love and money becomes
more complex, when we learn that de Marsay, Delphine’s former lover, gave
her money. On the one hand, she needed money to show herself worthy of
his pride: “j’ai voulu répondre à l’amour-propre de quelqu’un que vous con-
naissez” [I wanted to satisfy the pride of someone you know] (3: 172). This
causes her to go into debt. On the other hand, de Marsay gives her money, which she then has to return when his “love” ceases:

On ne devrait jamais abandonner une femme à laquelle on a jeté, dans un jour de détresse, un tas d’or! On doit l’aimer toujours! . . . Mon Dieu! n’est-il pas naturel de tout partager avec l’être auquel nous devons notre bonheur? Quand on s’est tout donné, qui pourrait s’inquiéter d’une parcelle de ce tout? (3: 172–73)

[One should never abandon a woman to whom one has thrown a pile of gold in a moment of misery! One should love her forever! . . . Goodness! Isn’t it natural to share everything with the one to whom we owe our happiness? When we have given everything, why should anyone be concerned about a small part of this everything?]

With consummate irony, Delphine treats money as a small parcel of the complete package, the “everything” that includes, according to the laws of the language of sex in Balzac, sexual love. The topic of Love embraces the range of human sentiments. Delphine has a husband, a former lover, and a future lover. In all three cases, the relation of love (if we can include the rejected sexual relation with Nucingen among the forms of love) to money determines the nature of the relationship. A telling symbol in the opening pages of Le père Goriot taints love from the start: it is a statue of Eros found in the garden of the pension Vauquer whose flaking varnish indexes Parisian love as an illness that needs to be treated at the nearby Hôpital des Vénériens. This is the entry of love into this central novel, a cynical portrait and a forewarning. The novel nevertheless produces a potent analysis of the many aspects of love in the liaison that will become one of the longest lasting in La Comédie humaine, described in Le père Goriot as “une passion véritable” for Eugène and “le véritable amour” for Delphine (3: 181, 182). Holding the watch Delphine has sent him, Eugène says, “Ah! ce soir je serai donc heureux! . . . Tout m’a réussi! Quand on s’aime bien pour toujours, l’on peut s’aider, je puis recevoir cela. D’ailleurs je parviendrai, certes, et pourrai tout rendre au centuple” [Ah! so I will have love tonight! . . . Everything is working out for me! When you love one another forever, you can help each other. I can receive this. Besides, I will surely succeed, and I can return everything a hundred times over] (3: 216). The watch, a love token, indicates the moment when, for the first time, Delphine and Eugène will sleep together, but it also becomes the focus of Eugène’s reflection about how love motivates him to succeed, and to return everything to Delphine multiplied by a hundred. The suspicion of
a numeration attaches to the pure expression of sentiment. If there are some moments of sincere appreciation for love as a full and complete sentiment uniting two beings—moments that follow the satisfaction of the sexual desire of the couple and where Balzac suspends his otherwise pervasive irony—much of the analysis instead ties love to money, especially in the form of power:

L’amour à Paris ne ressemble en rien aux autres amours. . . . En ce pays, une femme ne doit pas satisfaire seulement le cœur et les sens, elle sait parfaitement qu’elle a de plus grandes obligations à remplir envers les mille vanités dont se compose la vie. Là surtout l’amour est essentiellement vantard, effronté, gaspilleur, charlatan et fastueux. . . . L’amour est une religion, et son culte doit coûter plus cher que celui de toutes les autres religions. (3: 236)

[Love in Paris isn’t anything like love elsewhere. . . . In this place a woman is expected to do more than satisfy the heart and the senses; she knows perfectly well that she must fulfill greater obligations to the thousands of vanities that compose a life. Here especially love is essentially boastful, shameless, wasteful, deceitful, and sumptuous. . . . Love is a religion, and its practice should cost more than that of all the other religions.]

It is right, in Balzac’s analysis, that love should cost a lot. Delphine exemplifies this practice of a cult as she uses excessive language to describe the power of love: “Il n’est plus aujourd’hui qu’une seule crainte, un seul malheur pour moi, c’est de perdre l’amour qui m’a fait sentir le plaisir de vivre. En dehors de ce sentiment tout m’est indifférent, je n’aime plus rien au monde” [For me, now, there is only one fear, only one misfortune: to lose the love that has made me feel the pleasure of living. Everything else is indifferent to me; I love nothing else in the world] (3: 255). Even love can be expressed as a possession, an object to love, with the power to give pleasure to life.

And love is also a powerful motivator for Eugène. In the moral struggle depicted in Le père Goriot, the temptation of money takes the form of Vautrin’s machinations with Victorine Taillefer and her brother, and it is this motivation that his love for Delphine will eventually overcome. Later Balzac will turn to delicate language to describe the sexual pleasure that cements the love between Eugène and Delphine, language I analyze in chapter 18. But until that chimerical moment of the magical union of physical desire with ideal sentiment, Eugène sees the love of a woman as the entry into the domain of power and seeks to combat Paris armed to the teeth. It is both love and money that give Rastignac power.
Chapter 1

For Love or for Money
The Prime Movers of La Comédie humaine

This book brings together published and unpublished studies I have written on Balzac. The roots of my Balzac readings reach deeply into the geological layers of my professional life: all the way to graduate school and a course on Balzac taught by Peter Brooks. Out of these roots grew the first article I published on Balzac, "La Maison Nucingen, ou le récit financier," whose acceptance by Michael Riffaterre for publication in Romanic Review was one of the gratifying highlights of the probationary period of my professorship at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The reader will not find here anything like a complete interpretation of La Comédie humaine. I do not discuss every work in the ensemble, nor do I offer a full treatment of those I do discuss. My focus is specific, even narrow. For specific and sometimes contingent reasons, these are the Balzac titles that offered me the promise of the particular sort of pleasure that reading in depth affords; and that pleasure pointed to the aspects of each text that needed interpretation and analysis. Quite often these interpretations arose during the close reading one does to teach a novel or story, whether to undergraduates or to graduates. Now these readings have brought me to a certain remove from the geological origins of this fascination with Balzac, at which point it has become clear to me that everything happens in La Comédie humaine because of love and money. I call Love and Money the Prime Movers.

A few words follow to introduce this perspective on Balzac, but the real meat of the matter lies in the following chapters: this book is not only about love and money in Balzac (both of these topics have been treated in the critical literature), but about the interlacing network of images that give structure and meaning to La Comédie humaine.

Aristotelian causality reigns throughout La Comédie humaine; things move, but what moves them? What is the primary cause, the original impetus that gives rise to causality? In a given universe (the Aristotelian ousia), the social and physical world of Balzac’s creation, the Prime Movers set matter into motion; Love and Money act both singly and together. I think of them as the motor that puts the whole narrative system into motion, that makes the spheres revolve, rotate, and orbit. Emblematic of this identification of the Prime Movers is the well-known introduction to La fille aux yeux d’or, where Balzac waxes horribly eloquent about gold and pleasure—“l’or et le
plaisir”—in Paris. Pleasure is, after all, a form of love, even if it is assimilated into the populace of a Paris seen as an inferno à la Dante. The beginning and end of all feelings, beliefs, and mores are gold and pleasure (5: 1040); gold has a natural movement of ascension (5: 1046); the entire population of Paris, from the bottom to the top, is moved by gold and pleasure.

The importance of love and money has not gone unnoticed in the enormous body of critical literature on La Comédie humaine—it is scarcely necessary to inventory the list. Some of the notable Balzacian readers of the twentieth century brought the role of money to the fore, and critical discussions of money are more prevalent than analyses of love. Jean-Hervé Donnard’s Les réalités économiques et sociales dans La Comédie humaine links the forces of money to the social situation of the characters. André Wurmser’s diatribe against what he wittily calls La comédie inhumaine also addresses the harsh realities of material life in the times depicted in Balzac’s immense fresco. Other writers have given their attention to banking, like Bertrand Gille in La banque et le crédit en France, de 1818 à 1848, and one also finds shorter articles about how money functions in the work.3

René Guise ends his introduction to César Birotteau with these words: “Il fut un temps où, dans les romans, l’amour était le mobile majeur des actions héroïques, nobles, vertueuses . . . Avec César Birotteau, Balzac nous peint un monde où l’amour et la vertu se prouvent en gagnant de l’argent” [There was a time when love was the major motivation of heroic, noble, and virtuous actions in novels . . . With César Birotteau, Balzac paints for us a world in which love and virtue are proved by gaining money] (6: 34). Gérard David writes quite similarly about Balzac:

Il fut d’abord le premier écrivain à prendre aussi nettement conscience de l’importance et parfois de la prépondérance des réalités économiques sur les sentiments ou les idées. Il eut ensuite l’audace de mettre en scène dans le roman ces préoccupations financières en montrant leur influence sur le comportement des individus et des classes constitutives de la nation. (322)

[To begin with, he was the first writer to take cognizance so distinctly of the importance and sometimes the preponderance of economic realities over feelings or ideas. Then he had the audacity to narrate these financial preoccupations in the novel by showing their influence on the behavior of the individuals and the classes that constitute the nation.]

3. An interesting complement to studies of the fictions is the analysis of Balzac himself as a businessman, in Bouvier’s Balzac homme d’affaires.
Perhaps because Balzac was both first and audacious in writing money into his novels, readers of La Comédie humaine have been drawn to its manipulations. One of the most complete explanations of money manipulations is found in Hélène Gomart’s book, Les opérations financières dans le roman réaliste. Her extensive, detailed analysis of the instruments of money in César Birotteau illuminates the mysteries of the pathetic industrialist and his bankruptcy. Allan H. Pasco, in “Process Structure in Balzac’s La Rabouilleuse,” remarks that “Balzac repeatedly returned to the dangers of a society ruled by money” (28). Christopher Prendergast, in writing about Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes, observes that “the form of paper that most completely [summarizes] the circulating and self-dissipating energies of the society is paper money. The passing of bits of paper from hand to hand in connection with Lucien’s forged bills of exchange is described by Balzac as generating ‘capitaux fictifs.’ . . . Paper money is ‘unsound’ money” (114). The view of money as merchandise, as opposed to “money-as-sign (as a token whose representative value is determined by consent),” is consistent with the political right of Balzac’s time after the Revolution and the theoreticians on whom Balzac leaned (114). Prendergast also notes that the emptiness of money as sign is dangerous; “its circulation promotes an expansion of the system of credit that is without secure foundations in ‘real’ property and wealth” (115).

Others, but not as many, have focused on love. Arlette Michel’s indispensable study of love and marriage, a monumental thesis, exhaustively examines all the male–female relations in La Comédie humaine. The same critic devotes a section of Le réel et la beauté to defining and distinguishing ideal love and absolute love, with an illustration from Massimilla Doni.

Love leading to marriage is the classic plot line of literature, and Balzac is in some respects at his most classic, as opposed to modern, in following this tradition. Many are the plots in which marriage is the end point, like Modeste Mignon, or some semblance of marriage, such as the long love affair of the princesse de Cadignan with d’Arthez. Other plots build out from the classic design to form variants. Sarrasine’s love for La Zambinella, the love of half-sister and half-brother for one woman in La fille aux yeux d’or, the unequal love of Agathe Bridau for her two sons in La Rabouilleuse, the unrequited, hidden love of Paz in La fausse maîtresse, a panther’s love in Une passion dans le désert—these are some examples of situations in which love as Prime Mover motivates variants of the classic plot. Of course adultery has pride of place, and it is with typical self-mocking humor that Balzac has one of the bourgeois characters in La muse du département speak about love and Parisian women: “depuis quelque temps, les livres que vous faites, messieurs les écrivains, vos revues, vos pièces de théâtre, toute votre infâme littéra-
In the following chapters, a variety of reading strategies pertains, and the focus is adaptable to the objective. Yet always in the background one will find what I am calling the Prime Movers, and in the foreground, the overall objective of describing Balzacian realism.

The methodology that I have found the most persuasive addresses the constant interaction of levels of meaning that I call rhetorical, mimetic, and semiotic. The details, the plot, what is being conveyed to inform the reader constitute the mimesis; the semiosis concerns the methods for conveying that information; rhetoric (taken broadly) provides the tools for mimesis and semiosis and in a sense subsumes both mimesis and semiosis. What is happening on the level of the story being invented, the conception of content or the mimesis, seeks matching signs to execute the story, a symbolic language. Or, put differently, a structure or a form in Balzac’s prose mirrors a structure of its content; the symbolic language matches the creation of content, which is the business of Balzacian realism. I have chosen to use semiosis and mimesis as the terms designating these two forms in interaction. The example I gave at the beginning of this introduction—the effect of money on Rastignac—shows how the mimetic and the semiotic work together: Balzac’s rhetoric of realism rises up to match the growth of new power in Rastignac.

To draw out the distinction would be to reach for far-ranging explanations, as these two terms highlight the fundamental axes of signification through language. The semiotic concerns the activity of the signs, in particular the relations among them; the mimetic concerns the relation of the signs to what they represent. C. S. Peirce initiated the term semiosis to designate the formation and development of the linguistic sign and the movement toward another sign. Applying this general concept, I use semiosis to designate a form of expression, which relates to a form of content, mimesis. To distinguish between forms of expression and forms of content, the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, writing in 1966, defined the sign as the unit constituted by the form of expression and the form of content, established by the solidarity of the semiotic function (77). Forms of content are the place where, in this study, we will find the mimetic expression of semiosis. There is always a double level of analysis.

In its rhetorical, semiotic, and mimetic aspects, Balzac’s language provides the structures that create realism. I have grouped the following chapters under these three descriptors of Balzaccian writing, which however point to phenomena that interact in such a way that all are present to some degree.
at all times. In the first part, I examine rhetorical forms such as doubleness, interest, unity, identity, and representation, which guide us into a method for reading out the realism of the Balzaci narra"ve according to its language. For the second part, I have grouped analyses that focus on in-dwelling sign systems, such as myth in *Pierrette*, the corset of the prose in *La vieille fille*, voyages in several narratives, and genealogies (one of Balzac’s most consistent approaches to realism). In part three, the focus is on structures of mimesis such as magnetism, chemistry, medicine, historical present, and closure, narrative structures that create meaning. All these readings aim to reveal the interlacing network of narrative devices, in the author’s strategies and choices of language, that express his world. The concluding chapter assesses Balzac’s invention of realism in *La Comédie humaine*. 