For Love or for Money

Mortimer, Armine Kotin

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Mortimer, Armine Kotin.
For Love or for Money: Balzac's Rhetorical Realism.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24273.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24273

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=859520
Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées

Balzac’s only epistolary novel in La Comédie humaine, Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées, serves to inaugurate the reader into the general problematic of reading a Balzacian narrative. It exposes and explicates how to understand the mimetic world the writer creates, and because it lacks the familiar narrator who explains everything, the novel raises this problematic in a particularly pointed way.

Written in 1841, the first of the novels in La Comédie humaine as it was published poses problems of interpretation arising in differing points of view, like Les liaisons dangereuses. Unlike Laclos’s novel, however, the difficulty of interpretation concerns so fundamental a matter that an essential question remains without a satisfactory answer: what Balzac thinks about his characters. Louise and Renée, the two heroines, present widely divergent images of the role of love in a woman’s life. As an immediate consequence, the reader seeks to understand the ethos that each represents. Since only Louise and Renée tell each other their stories, no single voiced narration guides our reading or helps us decide between their conflicting fundamental philosophies of life; direct authorial interventions are entirely lacking. That this is so defies convention: one might expect at least a framing narration, such as one finds
in classic epistolary novels of the eighteenth century, disingenuously explaining the existence of these letters, commenting on them, or describing an editor’s role. Usually such a prefatory text is motivated by a moral purpose (whether sincere or ironic) or serves as an interpretive guide. Yet, from the Furne edition on, remarkably, such mediation was limited to the hand that apparently numbered each letter and added the names of sender and receiver. A short preface in the first edition, however, sketchily followed convention—except that even it gave no hint of a moral interpretation.

Since there are for the most part only two letter writers, unlike Les liaisons dangereuses, this largely dual rather than multiple point of view combined with the more relaxed pace and longer time frame maintains a balanced focus on the stories of Louise de Chaulieu and Renée de Maucombe (although Louise occupies 108 pages and Renée 69, according to Pich [17]). Nor do other stories intervene, except as anecdotes. The correspondence begins at the moment the two young women leave their convent school, and it continues at first frequently, then more rarely, during their entire young adulthood, through marriage, Renée’s motherhood, and Louise’s widowhood and remarriage. Louise’s quasi-suicidal death closes the correspondence. The problems of point of view, in short, are not those that stem from the accidental, obstacle-strewn structure of letters in Les liaisons dangereuses. Rather, as two lives diverge, the reader falls between them and very likely finds it difficult to choose. A rigorous dialogism rejects dialectical synthesis and sustains opposed values: Paris and the provinces, Society and Nature, aristocrat and bourgeois (Renée, though not strictly speaking a bourgeoisie, makes a bourgeois marriage), illicit passionate love vs. legitimate conjugal love, two parallel but antithetical destinies, a chiasmic outcome (the provinciale finishes in Paris, the Parisienne in Nature), and a double morality. Louise’s passionate life full of movement, uncertainty, and change contrasts wildly with Renée’s calm, secure, but dull existence whose course is traced in advance. Louise clearly represents a Balzaccian Ideal, the temptation of the absolute—where danger and death lie too. Renée stands for the Family, often proclaimed by Balzac as the only solid foundation for society, and some of the warmest pages defend this view—but how proper and insipid! Renée preaches those deep-seated values, while Louise wants excitement and risk. Philippe Berthier metaphorically speaks of two “instruments à la sonorité complémentaire, mais irréductible à toute fusion” [instruments whose sound is complementary but irreducible to any fusion] (“Accoucher au masculin” 294).

All commentators on the novel necessarily seek to elucidate the philosophies implied by the two life stories, but readers find it difficult to assert unequivocally which of the women conveys Balzac’s thought. It is interest-
ing that George Sand suffered little such doubt and indeed assumed Balzac wanted to promote the values represented by Renée. Sand wrote: “Je n’arrive pas à vos conclusions, et il me semble au contraire que vous prouvez tout l’opposé de ce que vous voulez prouver” [I don’t come to your conclusions, and it seems to me on the contrary that you prove exactly the opposite of what you want to prove]; “J’admire celle qui procréé, mais j’adore celle qui meurt d’amour. Voilà tout ce que vous avez prouvé, et c’est plus que vous n’avez voulu” [I admire the woman who procreates, but I adore the one who dies of love. That is all you have proved, and it is more than you wanted to] (quoted in Michel, ed., Mémoires 306, 308). Sand’s significant reading against Balzac offers a model for the reader’s freedom to choose.

Yet what did Balzac think of the two “solutions” to the “problem” of passion in marriage? Every writer about this novel who has wrestled with those dialogic poles I have mentioned must resort to some affirmation of both, to avoid misrepresenting Balzac’s thought. As Arlette Michel postulates, Balzac is attracted by both Renée and Louise, excluding neither opposed term and trying to operate a mediation between them (Introduction 32). Michel also writes, in a study of passion in marriage, that for all the seriousness of the Bonaldism Renée represents, Balzac does not give her a triumphant position in the narrative: “Mais qu’il serait faux de voir dans les succès de Renée le triomphe du mariage de raison!” [How wrong it would be to see in Renée’s successes the triumph of the marriage of reason!] (“Balzac juge du féminisme” 187). No more can Louise’s failure be taken to invalidate the morality she represents. It is typical of the results of such analyses of the novel that Michel must resort to the following interesting formula to position the novelist with regard to his creations: “[Renée] offre ainsi l’exemple d’un personnage que Balzac ‘philosophe’ approuve et que, romancier, il déteste” [Renée thus offers the example of a character that Balzac as a “philosopher” approves of and that, as a novelist, he detests] (“Balzac juge du féminisme” 192). Only a split subject can hold both sides of the story in his hands, it would seem.

I feel the question of Balzac’s philosophy has been adequately dealt with in the critical literature on Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées (mainly in the prefaces of different editions), and my purpose is not to bring another brick to that edifice. Rather, I would claim that this duality, this scarcely under-

1. That is not the case with Edgard Pich, who writes: “De là la préférence affichée de Balzac pour Louise, malgré sa folie, parce que ce qui l’oppose à Renée n’est pas au fond son enthousiasme pour les délires romantiques de la passion, mais son choix de l’absolu” [Hence Balzac’s stated preference for Louise, in spite of her folly, because what opposes her to Renée is not so much her enthusiasm for the romantic deliriums of passion as her preference for the absolute] (19).
standable affirmation of doubleness, stands, for Balzac’s writing, in the position of obstacle, of stumbling block—and hence of a creative prod. It may well be that Balzac the philosopher casts his vote with Renée, while adoring, like George Sand, a life like Louise’s, but I suspect that the novelist is no less involved in this dilemma. It is not so clear that as a novelist he hates Renée and all she represents, because on her opposition with Louise depends the very existence of the novel. In this I am in disagreement with Edgard Pich who, motivated by the genetic record of the text, believes that “Balzac ne semble donc pas avoir maîtrisé une évolution qui allait à l’encontre de ses plans, qui aboutissait, contre son gré, à un parallélisme entre deux conceptions sociales et qui débouchait sur une sorte de symétrie de la construction” [Balzac does not seem to have mastered an evolution that contradicted his plans, that concluded, against his will, in a parallelism between two ideas of society and that ended in a sort of symmetry of construction] (19). Not symmetry, but duality, and a fruitful, productive one; it is an opposition (a schizophrenia, Pich does allow [20]), that is put relentlessly to good use by the master novelist. It is the figure of his semiosis.

The idea of a double woman initially proposes a vision of unity made from duality; it represents a potentially complete being made of contrary parts, but the image lies in the past and survives, artificially, only a short time. On the first page we find Louise and Renée compared to Siamese twins, an apt symbol of their girlish intimacy in the convent (1: 196). Through their letters, now separated by more than geography, Louise “lives” with Renée in her Provence valley, while Renée “lives” with Louise in Paris (1: 197). They agree to a division of labor. Renée writes, “Tu seras, ma chère Louise, la partie romanesque de mon existence. . . . Tu seras deux à écouter, à danser, à sentir le bout de tes doigts pressé” [You, my dear Louise, will be the romantic part of my existence. . . . There will be two of you, listening, dancing, feeling the tips of your fingers pressed] (1: 222). It is up to Louise to weave “some fine passion”—and she does!—“dans l’intérêt bien entendu de notre double existence” [in the interest, to be sure, of our double existence] (1: 240), while Renée knows all the joys and anguish of having children.

Philippe Berthier stresses the porosity, the mutual contamination, and the exchange that characterizes the relation between the two women, rather than binary differences, and concludes on the copula, rather than the disjunction, between them (“Frauenlieben” 158–59, 170). Edgard Pich similarly writes: “On peut poursuivre l’analyse pour montrer l’acharnement de Balzac
à montrer que Renée et Louise ne sont qu’une seule et même personne, alors que la géographie, la maternité, le milieu, l’idéologie semblent les opposer point par point” [One could continue the analysis to show Balzac’s determination to show that Renée and Louise are one and the same, whereas geography, maternity, social milieu, and ideology seem to oppose them point by point] (27). But the double woman figure is merely a configuration from the prenovelistic past (the convent school, of which there is properly nothing to be recounted); it is a deceptive misguidance for the reader, an initial condition of unity destined to be upset. Significantly, the Siamese twins of the first page are mentioned in their death (“nos âmes soudées l’une à l’autre, comme étaient ces deux filles hongroises dont la mort nous a été racontée” [our souls fused to each other, like those two Hungarian girls whose death was recounted to us] [1: 196]); what the comparison gives, it immediately takes away. Repeatedly, Renée and Louise accentuate their differences, sometimes in strong language. Each envies the other, but each also writes freely of her contempt for the life the other has chosen. Never does one change in response to the other’s exhortations. No letter mediates between contraries.

Because writing has a double origin in the two correspondents, it readily construes these relentless conflicts; the necessary condition of letter-writing, physical separation, provides a mirror of the unrealizable union. The correspondence accentuates unmediated opposition, and since it is virtually limited to the two writers, their opposition is sustained rather than diffuse or multiple: “Le propre de l’idée, pour Balzac, est de mettre en présence les contraires, elle procède par dépassement des apories, jouant le jeu contrasté de l’analyse et de la synthèse” [The essence of the idea, for Balzac, is to confront contraries; it proceeds by overtaking aporias, playing out the contrasting game of analysis and synthesis] (Michel, “Balzac ou l’idée” 39). (In a different form, that contrasting game will again be seen in La recherche de l’Absolu.) In the mimetic realism of this correspondence, the conflicts and contrasts portrayed or staged for the benefit of Balzac’s reader are left entirely up to the writers and readers of the correspondence to express, to resolve, or to reaffirm.

This is the very condition of Balzac himself before his writing: his narratives usually flow from and depend on the oppositional. It is the well-known “secret” of his composition, and the foundation of his philosophy: the only way to obtain wholeness and completeness is to add two conflicting parts together. Unity passes through duplicity. The complete being is made of contrary parts and is naturally, profoundly double, as attested by figures of the androgyne, the transsexual or the ambisexual, and the angel (see Séraphîta). The irreconcilable nature of the two writings expresses the nostalgia for the whole and the tragedy of incompleteness in Balzac’s work. Henri Gauthier has
I: Rhetorical Forms of Realism

noted the desire for a monological system: “Balzac en effet, découvrant l’unité du multiple et la complémentarité des contraires, tend à transformer la triade structurelle et la dyade vitale dont les manifestations paraissent imposer un dualisme de fait, en un monisme conceptuel” [Balzac, then, discovering the unity of the multiple and the complementarity of contraries, tends to transform the structural triad and the vital dyad whose manifestations seem to impose a de facto dualism into a conceptual monism] (26). Or Pich notes: “On a affaire à une écriture de la gémellité où la répétition et la différence se confondent: l’homogénéité de l’écriture est absolue, à l’inverse de ce qui se passe dans l’écriture théâtrale” [We are dealing with a writing of twinhood in which repetition and difference are conjoined: the homogeneity of the writing is absolute, as opposed to what happens in theatrical writing] (35–36).

The unity Balzac finds lies less in the writing than in the reading; only then is there “copula” and not “disjunction,” in the terms Berthier opposed: “indémêlable mixage . . . qui . . . cherche toujours obscurément à surmonter la loi de la coupure pour rêver la suture, à inscrire au cœur de la dualité le filigrane tantalissant de l’unité” [inextricable mixing . . . that . . . always tries mysteriously to overcome the law of separation and imagine the suture, to inscribe the tantalizing filigree of unity in the very heart of duality] (“Frauenlieben” 170). If, as Berthier eloquently states, each term of the diverging pair remains “intrinsèquement habité et fragilisé par l’autre” [intrinsically inhabited and made fragile by the other] (159), it is because of the activity of the reading. The reader who is presumed ignorant, though not the first receiver of the letters, is forced to participate in their interpretation and supplements the absent “explications nécessaires,” potentially to combine writing and reading and make the work whole. Through the direct address to its two alternating receivers, the writing portrays the drive to reach the real reader, whose activity is interpretation. Alternately taking the place of Renée and Louise as letter readers, reading over their shoulders, as it were, the interpreter each time completes the fullness of the figure, unites the contraries, and operates the complementariness that the two opposed positions of writer and reader configure. Renée and Louise, in their primary semiotic activity, are our mimetic guides into semiosis. To be the reader presumed ignorant is to undertake the semiosis that supports interpretation: let us not be either Louises or Renées, but a successful combination of both in their semiotic roles. That combination occurs only in the outside writer (Balzac) and reader (us). Each woman by writing places herself with Balzac; each when she reads is an ever-contemporary reader. Anne-Marie Baron remarks that “Balzac est présent . . . en Louise et Renée, incarnations féminines du moi-plaisir et du moi-réalité” [Balzac is present . . . in Louise and Renée, female incarnations
Mimetic Figures of Semiosis

of the pleasure-self and the reality-self] (L’auguste mensonge 70). More philosophically, following Arlette Michel’s analysis in “Balzac et la rhétorique,” we can think of the letter reading as the “threshold” where contrary realities blend together in an absolute in which all antagonism is resolved (258–59).

The lesson, then, concerns how to interpret writing, with what knowledge and with what strategy, to grasp Balzac’s stance. Forcing the reader to stand alternately with his two narrators, Balzac uses the epistolary form to problematize realism. If we read with a simple, straightforward, perhaps naive notion of realism, we simply identify with the letter writers, whose writing serves the direct function of presenting and re-presenting their selves, again and again. If we follow the rhetorical schema laid out in the semiotic figure of Balzac’s mimesis, we recognize in this alternating, doubled identification the reader’s guide to the essential fact of Balzac’s realism, that a creation of the whole is to be won over its conflicting parts by dint of constant writing.

La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote

Ellipsis

In La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote, Balzac’s realism relies on an elliptical narrative device, centered on a painting; the elliptical story of the painting, an element of the mimesis, becomes a figure for the semiosis of the novella.

Anne-Marie Meininger, introducing the story in the Pléiade edition, describes it as a “drame familial” founded on the reality of the disastrous marriage of Balzac’s cherished younger sister Laurence to M. de Montzaigle, a ruined nobleman and faithless husband. Laurence dies in sorrow in 1825 at age twenty-three, tragically misunderstood by her family, neglected even by her loving brother, for he is otherwise occupied with the duchesse d’Abrantès and his social and amorous ambitions (Introduction 1: 32). The social background skillfully recreated in the story is that of the merchant family Guillaume, similar to the milieu of Balzac’s parents, grandparents, and cousins. The moral background stems from Balzac’s childhood as well. His mother and grandmother laid down draconian rules of work, strictly curtailed his sisters’ activities, imposed exaggerated economies, and disallowed poetry and intellectual activity. Such is the upbringing Balzac supplied for the fictional incarnation of his sister, Augustine Guillaume, a draper’s daughter. In this story, to which Balzac gave the unique role of opening La Comédie humaine, realism borrows much of its reality from the real.

Augustine’s marriage to a romantic nobleman, the painter Théodore de Sommervieux, is a misalliance—of upbringing, temperament, social back-
ground, birth—that nevertheless thrives on love for three years before coming to a tragic downfall. Augustine’s complete lack of ideas, her narrow experience of life, and her miseducation ill suit her to the stimulated life of an artist, and Sommervieux soon tires of his wife and takes several mistresses. Chief among these is the duchesse de Carigliano, a beautiful, enchanting siren, a “célèbre coquette” (1: 76) (apparently modeled on the duchesse d’Abrantès).

Still in love with her husband, Augustine takes the desperate step of visiting the duchesse de Carigliano herself, naively hoping to learn from that skilled practitioner of feminine wiles just how to win back her husband’s affections. The duchess had demanded Sommervieux’s portrait of Augustine as a proof of his love, and she takes the occasion of Augustine’s visit to return the portrait to her lover, a perfectly unmistakable signal that she is through with him. To the innocent Augustine, she pretends that repossessing the painting will give her a hold over her husband; he will tremble to think that his secret love affair will be discovered: “je vais vous donner un moyen de mettre votre mari à la chaîne” [I am going to give you the means to put the chain on your husband] (1: 90). She adds: “Si, armée de ce talisman, vous n’êtes pas maîtresse de votre mari pendant cent ans, vous n’êtes pas une femme, et vous mériterez votre sort!” [If, armed with this talisman, you are not master of your husband for a hundred years, you are not a woman, and you will deserve your fate!] (1: 91).

This story about the painting pretends to endow it with a symbolic power of accusation: Augustine may use it to blackmail her husband. But in fact this story is designed to mislead the naive Augustine, uneducated in the realities of aristocratic social life. Balzac has underscored her simple-mindedness: when she arrives in the duchess’s living room, “elle tâcha d’y deviner le caractère de sa rivale par l’aspect des objets éparis; mais il y avait là quelque chose d’impénétrable . . . et pour la simple Augustine ce fut lettres closes” [she attempted to guess at her rival’s character from the appearance of the scattered objects; but there was something impenetrable about this . . . and for poor Augustine it was a closed book] (1: 85). For the full effect of the irony, for the requisition against the miseducation of young women, for the commemorative portrait of his own sister, Balzac cannot bring the story to a happy ending. There is no such thing as a “talisman” that will overcome the errors of her marriage motivated by love, and the second message the portrait represents also remains lettres closes. The second symbolic function of the portrait signifies that the duchess no longer accepts the painter’s homage, but it has to be read in the hints that only a better reader than Augustine will grasp.
Of course Sommervieux is that better reader, and when the artist sees Augustine’s portrait once again in his home, he instantly recognizes the second message it conveys: “Cela est digne d’elle, s’écria l’artiste d’une voix tonnante. Je me vengerai” [“That is worthy of her,” cried the artist in a thunderous voice. “I will get revenge”] (1: 92). As the unknowing bearer of this sentence of “death,” Augustine has transmitted a message that the receiver does not wish to hear. At eight o’clock the following morning Mme Guillaume finds Augustine weeping over the portrait torn into fragments, its gilded frame in pieces. Sommervieux has thus killed if not the messenger of death, at least her image. And when Augustine does die, the destruction of the painting, a symbolic anticipation of her death, stands as its only cause, for there is never any other explanation of her death. Immediately after the scene of the fragmented painting comes the description of her tombstone, written in the historical present (see chapter 19). No romantic illness, languor, sorrow, or moral suicide intervenes to explain the message on her grave. In this significant ellipsis, the typically full explication of the Balzacian text stands out for its absence.

Three or four years pass between the destruction of the painting and Augustine’s death, leaving the skilled reader to fill in the missing causes. A “friend” standing before her grave sees in it “la dernière scène d’un drame” [the last scene of a tragedy] (1: 93). Like the friend (an image of Balzac himself), the reader must supply these last events, ultimately, perhaps, imagining a direct attack on the living portrait of Augustine. The reader fills the gap between the destruction of the painting and the inscription on the tomb.

There is a very important variant that may serve as a guide. In the manuscript version, there was no dialogue between Augustine and Théodore around the painting; Théodore did not become angry, nor did he destroy the painting and its frame. All of this was added later. Instead, after the scene at the duchess’s house the text continued: “Cette scène était la ruine du caractère d’innocence et de candeur d’Augustine” [This scene was the ruin of Augustine’s innocent and ingenuous character] (1: 1207, variant). Thus began a final summarizing paragraph that told of Augustine’s grave and described her as a flower too gentle to survive the burning embraces of a man of genius—the explanation of her death according to the familiar terms of Balzacian philosophy. The grave stands as a possible solution to “le problème de l’existence d’Augustine postérieure même à cette scène” [the problem of Augustine’s existence, subsequent even to this scene], according to this original final paragraph (1: 1208). In writing “cette scène,” Balzac clearly had in mind the encounter between Augustine and the duchesse de Carigliano in her boudoir, since these lines immediately followed that scene.
Any “dernière scène d’un drame,” then, as Balzac later wrote in the revised version, would come after “cette scène.” In writing the last paragraphs of the new version, therefore, Balzac could have been thinking of the scene he had just then invented last, the one where she discovers Théodore has destroyed the painting, which is effectively last in the writing, if not in the chronology of Augustine’s life. At the level of dramatic structure, if not of diegetic chronology, since she did not die until a few years later, this “dernière scène d’un drame,” the destruction of the painting, might actually be considered the last scene of Augustine’s drama, which would naturally be equivalent to her death. Dramatically speaking, therefore, the last scene around the portrait appears as the actual cause of Augustine’s death, an effect of Balzac’s rhetorical realism.

In the final version, the few lines of dialogue following the scene of the painter’s anger, the short conversation between Augustine and her mother as she discovers the torn painting, supply the coup de grâce. Mme Guillaume’s continuing lack of compassion turns the knife in the wound, reminding us of the ultimate and initial cause of Augustine’s death: the total incomprehension of her family, especially her mother, and the narrow education of which she was a victim. This completes the requisition against the miseducation of girls, and the story returns in its closure to the Balzac family drama.

Thus the original version neglected the symbolic role of the painting; it was neither an indirect message from the duchess to Sommervieux, nor a symbol of the “power” a wife can have over her wayward husband. The return of the painting to Augustine’s home was not even mentioned. The narrative moved from the scene in the duchess’s boudoir to Augustine’s grave, without transition. In changing the ending, Balzac oriented the reading toward the discovery of the ellipsis, which tells us not only that Théodore is thrown out by the duchess in favor of the “petit colonel de cavalerie” [little cavalry colonel] but also, beyond that indirect message of the painting, the story of Augustine’s death at Sommervieux’s hands.

Parenthetically, a possible explanation for the text’s use of this elliptical construction might lie in Balzac’s own emotions. Perhaps he himself felt so much pain at the memory of his sister’s death that he could not bring himself to recount it even in fictional form. He remains silent, incapable of writing it, possibly because of his own feeling of guilt with respect to his sister. In 1835, six years after the initial writing of La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote and ten years after Laurence’s death, he will minutely describe the death of Mme de Mortsauf in Le lys dans la vallée, perhaps as a compensation for his silence on Augustine’s death, as if to produce a belated act of repentance. Le lys offers an important correction to the earlier tableau of the life of a woman
in love and sadly misunderstood, with an appropriate punishment falling on Félix de Vandenesse, a character whose childhood resembles Balzac’s. In the last sentence of *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote*, the description of Augustine as a flower too fragile to survive the passions of an artist brings to mind the flower symbolism of *Le lys*.

Whatever personal or biographical reasons there may have been, what makes the story important is that it functions very much like the painting. Like the second message of the painting, the one the duchesse de Carigliano sent, disguised with false meanings, Augustine’s death occurs indirectly, by symbol. Her death is buried in silence, encoded in other symbols that must be unearthed from the subcodes of the text. The too naive or too hasty reader will not grasp it, or will say that Augustine died of sorrow or the conventional “broken heart.” It is clear that one must not be naive like Augustine; one must not be content with the overt story, nor the first communicative function of the painting.

If Augustine had been a better reader, if she had understood, like a clever woman skilled in the relations between the sexes, the second message the painting obviously conveyed, she would certainly have hidden the painting and its message to Théodore, saving him from the shame, the fallen self-respect, the wounded vanity he would inevitably suffer. Théodore would not have become angry, the “dernière scène” would not have taken place—but then how would the story have ended? Not unlike the original version, which flatly misconstrued its own meaning and ended by petering out, with the inconclusive and inexplicable simple extinction of a sad life. The accusation against the painter is, in the final version, much more insinuating. So incomplete is the story without the portrait device, in fact, that I would conjecture that Balzac had planned to include it, and that he simply did not have time to write it until making additions to his original version.

The ultimate message of the novella is centered on Théodore’s portrait of Augustine, but another painting mentioned at the beginning of the story, as part of one of those archeological, anthropological, and sociological descriptions that give the Balzacian decor such significance, alerts the reader to the deeper theme signaled by the elliptical construction. There is a strong link, via contrast, between the two paintings. The first two paragraphs, a typical Balzacian opening, detail the zoological and archeological significance of Augustine’s family home above her father’s fabric store, seen through the amused eyes of the young aristocratic painter, disdainful of the style of the bourgeois merchant class. The house is old and old-fashioned, rooted in bourgeois mentality, whimsical and frail, and opposed in all ways to the house where Augustine will later live after she marries Théodore and especially to
the elegant salons and sumptuous boudoirs of the duchesse de Carigliano, spaces characteristic of Balzacian noble dwellings. The story’s ultimate title (Balzac changed it from Gloire et malheur in the Furne edition), by its very oddity, focuses the reader’s attention on the second paragraph (four pages long) which describes the painter observing the shop sign that hangs from the house. The sign depicts a cat engaged in the aristocratic jeu de paume or pelote, a game forbidden to commoners. The cat holds a racket as large as he is in one of his forepaws, while standing on his hind legs to aim for an enormous ball sent his way by a nobleman in an embroidered costume. By its design, colors, and accessories, the painting is immediately interpreted as intending to mock the merchant and the passersby, and it provokes the painter’s hilarity.

As a painting and as a shop sign, it contrasts with the portrait of Augustine (shown at the salon). This ironic juxtaposition of the merchant’s sign with Augustine’s portrait encapsulates the central purpose of the entire story: the merchant class errs in taking on aristocratic airs just as Augustine was mistaken to marry Sommervieux. Balzac weaves enough symbolism around this sign in the beginning pages, while focusing our attention through the painter himself, that the connection to the story’s elliptical closure will become clear. When in addition we read in the opening that such store signs replicate devices that, in the past, rhetorically connected the living with the dead, we are, without knowing it, close to the other painting whose destruction is a metonym for Augustine’s death: “ces enseignes . . . sont les tableaux morts de vivants tableaux à l’aide desquels nos espiègles ancêtres avaient réussi à amener les chalands dans leurs maisons” [these street signs . . . are the dead paintings of the living tableaux with which our clever ancestors had succeeded in attracting customers to their shops] (1: 41; emphasis added). Contrast is the chief quality of the archeological beginning, a separation of two worlds, and it is in that abyss of misunderstanding that Augustine will founder. If her death is not actually narrated in the closing pages, one could say it is because the narration itself stumbled into the abyss. The beginning of the story, one finds on second reading, contains a powerful clue to Augustine’s end, by preparing the destruction of the painting as symbolic of her death.

In La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote the tragic ending can be explained only by the necessary insertion of the second story into the space of the ellipsis. This second story can be compared to what Umberto Eco has called a “ghost
chapter,” which the reader tentatively writes, and which the text implicitly validates (214). What is elided in this story is the death narrative and even the preparation for that death in any but symbolic form. Only the painting stands as a major, symbolic clue to her death. The portrait is part of what Barthes called the symbolic code (see *S/Z*). Sommervieux kills Augustine in slow motion by tearing her apart, emotionally and morally, the way he had, in fast motion, torn apart the painting. No detail at all is supplied in the elliptical story, suggesting that the story fails narrative etiquette (which can be compared to narrative convention) because it gives too few clues to the known outcome (see Eco 255). As a supplement to that blank center, or to that blank which stands off-center in one focus of the ellipse, there is only the painting as the figure in the tapestry (with the Chat-qui-pelote shop sign at the second focus of the ellipse). The painting thus stands as a necessary element for the completion of the design.

Ellipsis as a figure gives meaning through emptiness; it makes present what is absent, but only after the fact, when it has been recognized from its borders. In the case of a narrative with ellipsis, the action of making present occurs in the actualization of the story by the reader, just as the conjoining of duality in *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* takes place because the reader is the receiver of letters from both writers.

**Une fille d’Ève**

*Interest*

*Une fille d’Ève* offers one of the most explicit and concise expressions of the intimate link between Love and Money—or Money and Love, as I feel one should say in the case of this novel, where love is largely ironic and money only too brutal. The irony about love extends to the author’s view of a woman’s desire which, as Isabelle Hoog Naginski notes, is briefly exhibited but does not upset the social structure (147).

In the perfection of a uniformly happy and monotonous conjugal life, the countess Marie-Angélique de Vandenesse, wife of Félix, has nothing to wish for: “Vandenesse . . . avait supprimé le Désir” [Vandenesse . . . had eliminated Desire] (2: 294). “L’histoire des bons ménages . . . s’écrit en deux lignes et n’a rien de littéraire” [The story of good marriages . . . can be written in two lines and is in no way literary] (2: 293), for it is a Balzacian truism that there would be no story to tell if there were not a breach in paradise. Money indexes desire and unleashes the narrative, when, in the opening scene, Marie-Angélique asks to borrow 40,000 francs from her sister Marie-Eugénie du Tillet
to pay the writer Raoul Nathan’s debts. A particular conduct is needed to remedy the lack of money, and narrative interest follows the fortunes of this need. Love, “ces vivantes richesses du cœur” [those living riches of the heart] (2: 286), is also expressed in terms of interest: “Quel bonheur . . . que d’avoir à toute minute un intérêt énorme qui multiplie les fibres du cœur” [How fortunate . . . to have an enormous interest at every moment, which multiplies the fibers of the heart] (2: 285; emphasis added). Never mind that the interest rate is usurious!

A complicated round dance of lettres de change (bills of exchange) figures the circulation of interest and corresponds to the economy of the narrative. Christopher Prendergast spells out such narrative economy, in general terms: “Novels and bills of exchange have metaphorically something in common: they are a form of contractual note, promises to pay the bearer; they assure a system of credit” (102). Each monetary instrument represents a narrative potential, retaining value or detaining the reader’s attention, but as long as money keeps passing from hand to hand, no result is certain. When each value returns to its emitter, narrative interest ceases. Similarly, when love can no longer be expressed in terms of interest, the narrative ends with the return to the conjugal paradise: “Mme de Vandenesse eut un mouvement de honte en songeant qu’elle s’était intéressée à Raoul” [Mme de Vandenesse, remembering that she had been interested in Raoul, felt a pang of shame], we learn on the last page (2: 382; emphasis added).

Interest motivates three intrigues: du Tillet conspires to ruin Nathan, get elected, and obtain the peerage; the two sisters plot to obtain money from Delphine de Nucingen; and Félix intrigues to extricate his Eve from the serpent’s charms. The complex interweaving of love, desire, politics, ambition, money, and hatred structures these plots, each anchored in the story by an exchange of equal values, swapping lettres de change for cash, cash for love, love for politics, politics for hatred. Du Tillet maneuvers to discredit Nathan by forcing him into prison for his debts. Nathan borrows from du Tillet, then from Gigonnet to pay off du Tillet, not realizing that Gigonnet is du Tillet’s straw man. Marie-Angélique obtains 40,000 francs from Delphine in exchange for four 10,000-franc lettres de change which have been signed by Schmucke, the sisters’ piano teacher; Nathan uses this money to pay off Gigonnet, but now Marie is indebted to Delphine. Her signature on a promise to pay, “dans le portefeuille de la maison Nucingen” [in a portfolio in Nucingen’s bank] (2: 371), attaches her honor to du Tillet’s maneuvers, creating the potential for a plot in which she becomes his victim. The passage from this intrigue, with its possible catastrophic outcome, to the next and last (which prepares the happy dénouement) occurs as Marie-Eugénie retells the sisters’ plot to Félix.
This puts narrative interest now in his hands, and while Marie-Eugénie goes off reassured, Félix buys back his wife’s signature. He pays Delphine and destroys the lettres de change, but obtains from Nathan a “contre-valeur” for Schmucke in the same amount, to get the 40,000 francs back from Nathan. Félix gives this final lettre de change to Florine, the actress Nathan lives with, in exchange for the letters Marie had written to Nathan; the writer is now indebted to Florine. Vandenesse has admirably exploited the exchangeability of lettres de change.3 Nathan forfeits his part in their newspaper to du Tillet, who gets elected. The Vandenesse are never reimbursed for their 40,000 francs, which is the price of compromising letters and the value of a thank-you note, so to speak, to Florine, who deserves it in untold ways. Just as each loan is converted into another, while power, knowledge, and interest move from person to person, just as three major plots (with subplots) succeed each other, so the narrative structure moves from one potentiality to another, until ultimate knowledge remains with Félix and Marie de Vandenesse and ultimate power with du Tillet, Nucingen, and their associates. The changing fortunes formulate a method for constructing intrigues: how to write a plot.

Of course none of this narrative interest would occur without what one might call the initiating plot, which is Raoul Nathan’s, but this intrigue remains in the background and is no more focused than is the word that always applies to it, the polyvalent word fortune. However, Balzac exploits its ambiguous meanings to unite these semiotic structures, like a Riffaterrian matrix which linguistically cements love to money and thence to political power. “Tenu de produire par son manque de fortune” [Forced to produce by his lack of fortune] (2: 303), Nathan lacks and borrows and loses a financial fortune that signifies his political fortune or ambition, which he has invested in his newspaper: “La Presse avait été le moyen de tant de fortunes faites autour de lui” [The Press had been the means of so many fortunes made all around him] (2: 323). The word resonates with at least two meanings in the following sentences: “Si Nathan avait mis sa fortune dans son journal, il périrait bientôt” [If Nathan had put his fortune into his newspaper, he would soon perish] (2: 350); “Une arrestation tuait ses espérances de fortune politique” [An arrest would kill his chances of a political fortune] (2: 353). Moreover, the worldly love affair with a countess comes to Nathan by an effect of fortune, as the wisecracking Blondet punningly counsels him not to neglect “une bonne fortune aussi capitale” [so capital a good fortune]

3. As Nicole Ward Jouve has shown, Marie-Angélique’s letters and lettres de change symbolically imprison her: “Retrieving the compromising trail of letters left by his wife, Félix is both freeing her from symbolic gaols . . . and removing her from circulation. He signals that from now on she will remain in his possession” (43).
The matrix compels us to reflect how “faire fortune” and “fortune politique” cluster with “une bonne fortune,” an almost untranslatable expression euphemistically referring to a man’s success in seducing a woman (see chapter 18 on the language of sex). Just as the events of the mimetic plot concur in the outcome, so these multiple senses are resolved in the chances that determine results (“un jeu du Hasard qui modifie tout ici-bas” [an act of Chance that modifies everything here below] [2: 373])—the narrative. Balzac shows his hand: follow this precarious fortune, this pile of *billets de banque*, this trail of *lettres de change*, and you will discover how the narrative arrives at its fortunate end, dispelling ignorance all around.

A dictum from the preface to *Le Cabinet des Antiques* lends moral authority to Balzac’s realism: “Le vrai souvent ne serait pas vraisemblable, de même que le vrai littéraire ne saurait être le vrai de la nature” [The truth would often not be plausible, just as the truth of literature cannot in any way be the truth of nature] (4: 961). Balzac’s constant effort to motivate the “vrai littéraire,” directed toward the reader presumed ignorant, in Martin Kanes’s term, leads him to marry mimetic and semiotic themes, in an economy of means dependent on a double use of signs. Christopher Prendergast has written that the novel comes into being through a circuit of exchange which “turns on a circular principle of reciprocity at the level of the symbolic, whereby the text acts as the locus in and through which signs and meanings are exchanged; the reader gives credence to the mimetic claims of the text in return for confirmation by the writer of the reader’s expectations” (37). Something like this happens when mimesis figures semiosis, provided we distinguish between naive representation (“the mimetic claims”) and a “vraisemblable,” a plausibility, found in the semiotic structures of realism. At crucial moments in Balzacian mimesis, the writing conforms to the composed realism of *La Comédie humaine*: the society of which Balzac is the historian is not “real” French society but the shadowy double he offers us.

4. Kanes writes that there is “a spectrum ranging from a reader presumed totally ignorant to a reader presumed totally knowing. In the first case the novel would be impossible, since it would entail the establishment of a whole conceptual world. . . . In the second case the novel would be unnecessary, since the presumed reader already knows everything. In the former instance the product would be endless language; in the latter it would be silence. In practical terms, the pole of ignorance is characterized by language that is sequentially minute, painstaking, and highly explicative. As it moves toward the assumption of a knowing reader, language tends to lose its explicative qualities, to short-circuit logic and sequentiality, until at the theoretical extreme nothing is left” (191).
as real. As Butor simply states: “Balzac, pour faire connaître le réel, raconte des histoires qui n’ont pas eu lieu” [Balzac makes us know the real by telling stories that didn’t take place] (“Balzac et la réalité” 89). Signs created that realism, through the efficacy of semiotic verisimilitude, and thence the “reality” words imitate.

Semiosis configures the moral purpose of Balzac’s mimetic realism. We are made to believe as true something that is demonstrably fictive; this practice is fundamentally deceptive, a necessary fraud and a manipulation. If we do not take offense and instead willingly submit to the “deceit,” it is because semiosis is always real. While none but the naive may think of the mimetic story told as real, every reader must accept the reality of the semiosis. And from that reality, Balzac drew the moral truth of his mimesis. Balzac understood that what happened, as it were, to his stories—the semiotic structures that brought them to his readers—was a true expression of his moral-esthetic purpose. While he defended himself in several prefaces by proclaiming the ultimate aim of his complete, truthful portrayal of French society, better and more voluminous defense lies in the semiosis of his texts themselves, provided we bring it to the fore. The ever more knowing reader of Balzac comes to know a reality progressively closer to literary truth and farther from the truth of nature. No less is the paradox: reading Balzac implies an increasing “ignorance” of French society; we approach the pole of knowledge by accrediting the writing at the cost of a belief in naive representation.

I have been flirting with the notion of the explication nécessaire, the largely unsaid mimetic figure of my own semiosis. Apparently mere mortar to his bricks, Balzac’s necessary explanations justify and motivate novelistic realism; as Gérard Genette writes in “Vraisemblance et Motivation,” “elles bouchent toutes ses fissures, elles balisent tous ses carrefours” [they fill in all its cracks, they signal all its intersections] (81). These examples may help to suggest, on the contrary, that the mortar is the essential, not the accessory.