Les Chouans is the only novel of the Scènes de la vie militaire, and it earns its right to inhabit that classification of the Études de mœurs because it depicts the conflict between the forces of the Republic and the Chouans, insurgents loyal to the exiled royal family, in the last year of the eighteenth century. In parallel with the military plot which sees the Republican effort to infiltrate the loosely organized Chouans and capture the marquis de Montauran, their charismatic leader, a love plot develops and challenges the “scène militaire” designation. Elements of the story serve both plots. This inherent generic instability is the primary mimetic characteristic of the novel. Its realism is grounded in history, but the union of this history with the love plot characterizes its rhetorical realism.

A thread of symbolism ties together the shapes of this realism according to a general semiotic pattern that progresses from the heterogeneous to the uniform. This movement, which may produce harmonious uniformity out of ill-sorted elements, acts like a formula for the production of the novel; there are small and large versions of it, in descriptions, in the love story, in the military plot, in the geography, and in knowledge. It is a motif that is present in a literal manner starting with the first words of the novel, with the opening description of the conscripts; this literal motif, the initiator of the military plot, then leads to a more metaphoric version by the end of the novel, represented by Marie de Verneuil’s marriage with the marquis de Montauran. Heteronomy, disparity, and disjunction on the one side, present
in many forms, arrive or fail to arrive at a desired uniformity and unity on the other.

As the powerful opening of the novel shows, disparity characterizes everything on the side of the non-Republican elements, where a military uniform would be the desired symbol of a uniformity of sentiment and destiny. The novel plunges immediately into heteronomy; here are the opening words:

Dans les premiers jours de l’an VIII . . . une centaine de paysans et un assez grand nombre de bourgeois, partis le matin de Fougères pour se rendre à Mayenne, gravissaient la montagne de la Pèlerine. . . . Ce détachement, divisé en groupes plus ou moins nombreux, offrait une collection de costumes si bizarres et une réunion d’individus appartenant à des localités ou à des professions si diverses, qu’il ne sera pas inutile de décrire leurs différences caractéristiques pour donner à cette histoire les couleurs vives aux- quelles on met tant de prix aujourd’hui. (8: 905)

[In the first days of year VIII . . . about a hundred peasants and a rather large number of bourgeois, having left Fougères in the morning to make their way to Mayenne, were climbing the mountain of la Pèlerine. . . . This detachment, divided into smaller and larger groups, offered a collection of costumes so bizarre and an assembly of individuals belonging to localities and professions so diverse, that it would not be unprofitable to describe their characteristic differences to give this story the vivid color that people prize so much today.]

The “characteristic differences” give a certain cachet to the story that begins with these words, which immediately stress the value Balzac places on the heterogeneous, under the concept of vivid color; Arlette Michel speaks of “la bizarriére insolite de cette foule hétéroclite” [the exceptional bizarreness of this heterogeneous crowd] (Le réel 38). A terminology of differences rich in variations already marks these two sentences of the first paragraph: the peasants set apart from the bourgeois; the adjective “divided”; the different numbers within the groups and the approximations of the phrases “about a hundred” and “a rather large number”; the “collection of costumes” and the “assembly of individuals” that are “so bizarre” and “so diverse.” In the following four pages, Balzac describes in detail this heterogeneous group of conscripts who will be recruited for the Republican side in Mayenne, “où la discipline militaire devait promptement leur donner un même esprit, une même livrée et l’uniformité d’allure qui leur manquait alors si complètement”
I: Rhetorical Forms of Realism

[where military discipline was to promptly give them a single sentiment, a single livery, and the uniformity of bearing that was now lacking so completely] (8: 909). The commandant Hulot hopes to fill the ranks of his demi-brigade with these Breton conscripts.

But, in opposition to this desired uniformity, which is salutary to the Directoire government that has taken over the rule of the Republic, disparity reigns—not without a degree of conflict with the realistic aims of the novel. For there always exists in Balzac’s work a tendency toward the type, a zoological classification, and this tendency enters into conflict with the insistence on the diverse. Thus the descriptions whose purpose is to detail the disparity of the band of conscripts follow in orderly fashion, depicting five categories or classes presented in order from the lowest to the highest, in such a way that to a certain extent the organized progression of these categories works against the disparity that nevertheless is present on several levels.

The first class or group, that of the peasants, goes barefooted and wears long-haired goatskins with which the peasant’s own hair is intermingled. These poor men could be mistaken for animals, but they each carry a large stick made of oak from which an almost empty bag is suspended. Their distance from humanity contains, in the manner of a disorganized or badly composed tableau, all the absence of harmony and unity with which one could tax an entity that is missing a uniform—although a military uniform alone would probably not be enough to make them into a harmonious unity. In the second category, another group of peasants, we find those who dress themselves entirely in the coarse cloth from which the first group’s pants were fashioned and a large felt hat above the “sale toque” [dirty cap] that those near-animals from the first group wore. Once again rather far from the human categories, “[ils] n’offraient presque rien dans leur costume qui appartînt à la civilisation nouvelle” [they offered almost nothing in their costume that might belong to the new civilization] (8: 906). All the details of their clothing—pants, jacket, clogs, or shoes held in their hands, felt hat with wool chenille—produce a rhetorical effect of accumulation; the heterogeneous operates especially in the details.

With the third class, it is again the clothes but also placement that accentuate the disparity: they are “quelques hommes qui, dispersés çà et là, au milieu de la troupe, y brillaient comme des fleurs” [a few men who, scattered here and there in the middle of the throng, shone like flowers] (8: 906). Their blue pants, their red or yellow waistcoats with copper buttons “tranchaient aussi vivement sur les vêtements blancs et les peaux de leurs compagnons, que des bleuets et des coquelicots dans un champ de blé” [stood out as sharply from the white clothes and the skins of their companions as corn-
flowers and poppies in a field of wheat] (8: 906)—a painterly effect where the eye is attracted by what is set off from the background. The contrast between the clogs on some of their feet and the solid hobnailed shoes of the majority also introduces variation within the group, and the number and precision of details of clothing, down to the buttons in the shape of hearts or anchors, exaggerate the absence of uniformity with the first two classes. Also, their sacks are “mieux fournis que ne l’étaient ceux de leurs compagnons” [better filled than those of their companions] (8: 907).

With the fourth class, a distinct social promotion is introduced: “Quelques citadins apparaissaient au milieu de ces hommes à demi sauvages, comme pour marquer le dernier terme de la civilisation de ces contrées” [A few town-dwellers appeared in the middle of these half-savage men, as if to mark the last footing of civilization in these parts] (8: 907). Here Balzac introduces some subcategories: “ils présentaient comme les paysans des différences remarquables dans leurs costumes. Une dizaine d’entre eux portaient cette veste républicaine connue sous le nom de carmagnole. D’autres, de riches artisans sans doute, étaient vêtus de la tête aux pieds en drap de la même couleur” [they presented, as did the peasants, noticeable differences in their costumes. Around ten of them wore that Republican jacket known as the carmagnole. Others, rich artisans without a doubt, were dressed from head to foot in a cloth of one color], and the ones with the most recherché apparel distinguish themselves with frock-coats and “portaient des bottes de diverses formes” [wore boots of diverse shapes] (8: 907). Among these “véritables personnages” [notable figures] can be found a few “têtes soigneusement poudrées” [carefully powdered heads] and well-braided pigtails, the indicators of good fortune or education. If all of this seems “ramassés comme au hasard” [gathered as if randomly together]—and the march of this heterogeneous mob along a single road gives the best image of such an assemblage of random elements—it is for political reasons, and there also Balzac stresses the heterogeneous: “Un observateur initié au secret des discordes civiles qui agitaient alors la France aurait pu facilement reconnaître le petit nombre de citoyens sur la fidélité desquels la République devait compter dans cette troupe, presque entièrement composée de gens qui, quatre ans auparavant, avaient guerroyé contre elle” [An observer initiated into the secrets of the civil discord that was afflicting France at the time could have easily recognized the small number of citizens in this band on whose fidelity the Republic could count, almost entirely composed of people who, four years earlier, had warred against it] (8: 907). In the phrasing of “almost entirely composed” can be found an ironic unity that is not the unity to which the absent military discipline would promptly have led them: “Les républicains
seuls marchaient avec une sorte de gaieté. Quant aux autres individus de la troupe, s’ils offraient des différences sensibles dans leurs costumes, ils montraient sur leurs figures et dans leurs attitudes cette expression uniforme que donne le malheur” [Only the Republicans walked with a sort of gaiety. As to the other individuals of the troop, if they offered palpable differences in their costumes, they showed on their faces and in their posture the uniform expression that misfortune gives] (8: 907–8). Such ironic uniformity is not the desired one. The bourgeois and the peasants seem “courbés sous le joug d’une même pensée” [bent under the yoke of the same thought] (8: 908), and we have an idea of what that rebellious thought might be—one that cannot constitute a real unity for France, on the contrary.

So much for the first four categories. The difference between the fifth group and the four others is clearly marked at the outset by the only paragraph indentation of these four pages, forming a separate paragraph for the fifth category alone. “La marche de cette colonne sur Mayenne, les éléments hétérogènes qui la composaient et les divers sentiments qu’elle exprimait s’expliquaient naturellement par la présence d’une autre troupe formant la tête du détachement” [The march of this column toward Mayenne, the heterogeneous elements from which it was composed, and the diverse feelings that it expressed were explained naturally enough by the presence of another group forming the head of the detachment] (8: 908). These regulars from a demi-brigade of infantry are called the “Bleus,” like all the soldiers of the Republic: “Ce surnom était dû à ces premiers uniformes bleus et rouges dont le souvenir est encore assez frais pour rendre leur description superflue” [This nickname was due to those first blue and red uniforms, the memory of which is fresh enough to render their description superfluous] (8: 908). Differentiated from the four other types of men by their function as escort to the conscripts, but assembled with them in the same detachment, and differentiated also by their uniformity denoted by precisely this uniform, this fifth category has the effect of emphasizing the heterogeneous nature of the four others and of stressing the conflict inherent in this random gathering.

This remarkable depiction inaugurates the novel as if with an explosion, which must be compressed into the narrow part of a funnel, forcing out a single form. As Arlette Michel has written,

La description de la colonne des conscrits bretons qui ouvre le roman n’est pas un encadrement pour un drame à venir, elle en est déjà la manifestation, elle le porte comme en abîme. . . . Alors la masse opaque de ses “détails” révèle son étrangeté et, par décantations successives, laisse déposer dans
l’imagination du lecteur le principe d’unité qui en assure à la fois le sens et la beauté originale. La description . . . est exemplaire de la méthode que Balzac est en train de découvrir. (Le réel 38)

[The description of the column of Breton conscripts that opens the novel is not a frame-setting device for a drama to come; it is already a manifestation of the drama, it carries it en abyme. . . . Thus the opaque mass of its “details” reveals its strangeness and, by successive decantings, deposits in the reader’s imagination the principle of unity that provides both its meaning and its original beauty. The description . . . is exemplary of the method Balzac is in the process of discovering.]

How can these men, representing opposite interests, be made to act as a single unit? Not only is that the problem Balzac poses for his novel, but on a larger scale, this is exactly France’s problem.

The same can be said of the reiterated spectacle that is presented at the castle of la Vivetière. After the Chouans massacre the Bleus, these soldiers of a new species amuse themselves by throwing their victims’ bodies into the pond. “Ce spectacle, joint aux différents tableaux que présentaient les bizarres costumes et les sauvages expressions de ces gars insouciants et barbares, était si extraordinaire et si nouveau” [This spectacle, joined with the different tableaux presented by the bizarre costumes and the savage expression of these heedless and barbarous lads, was so extraordinary and so new] (8: 1060) in comparison to the troops of the Vendée that “avaient offert quelque chose de noble et de régulier” [had offered something noble and regular] (8: 1060) that one wonders how such undisciplined soldiers could act as one in a unified action. And in fact they will not be able to. In the last quarter of the book, here is how the five to six thousand Chouans who are at Saint-James appear, during a strange war scene:

Leurs costumes, assez semblables à ceux des réquisitionnaires de la Pèlerine, excluaient toute idée de guerre. Cette tumultueuse réunion d’hommes ressemblant à celle d’une grande foire. Il fallait même quelque attention pour découvrir que ces Bretons étaient armés, car leurs peaux de bique si diversément façonnées cachaient presque leurs fusils. . . . Il n’y avait aucune apparence d’ordre et de discipline. (8: 1122–23)
[Their clothes, rather similar to those of the requisitioned men from la Pèlerine, excluded all thought of war. This tumultuous assemblage of men resembled that of a large fair. Some attention was needed even to discover that these Bretons were armed, for their goatskins, so diversely shaped, almost hid their guns. . . . There was no appearance of order and discipline.]

Each time the Chouans’ clothing is discussed, and even that of the counter-Chouans who are actually the Bleus disguised as Chouans, it is the absence of uniformity in their uniform that is stressed.

As with clothing, buildings can be burdened by the disorder of the heterogeneous. The castle of la Vivetière is nothing but a ruin, quite like the gothic buildings one finds in Edgar Allan Poe, as in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The main house is surrounded by two ponds whose abrupt banks mark the limits of the courtyard:

Ces berges sauvages, baignées par des eaux couvertes de grandes taches vertes, avaient pour tout ornement des arbres aquatiques dépouillés de feuilles, dont les troncs rabougris, les têtes énormes et chenues, élevées au-dessus des roseaux et des broussailles, ressemblaient à des marmousets grotesques. . . . La cour entourée d’herbes hautes et flétries, d’ajoncs, d’arbustes nains ou parasites, excluait toute idée d’ordre et de splendeur. (8: 1026)

[These wild banks, bathed by waters covered with large green spots, had as sole ornament some aquatic trees divested of leaves, whose stunted trunks, whose enormous and hoary tops, elevated above the rushes and underbrush, resembled grotesque urchins. . . . The courtyard, encircled by high, withered grasses, by gorse bushes, by dwarf or parasitic shrubs, excluded all thought of order and splendor.]

The house is in such disorder that it resembles something other than what it is; made of stone, it is nonetheless animal and vegetable: its roof is broken open under the weight of the vegetation that grows there; the cracked walls seem to be made of ivy; the granite and schistose stones create a dark and empty carcass: “Ses pierres disjointes, ses croisées sans vitres, sa tour à créneaux, ses toits à jour lui donnaient tout à fait l’air d’un squelette; et les oiseaux de proie qui s’envolèrent en criant ajoutaient un trait de plus à cette vague ressemblance” [Its disjointed stones, its casement windows lacking panes, the tower with its embattlements, its gaping roof gave it absolutely the appearance of a skeleton; and the birds of prey that flew off with a cry added another feature to this vague resemblance] (8: 1027). In addition to
its disorder in space, the chateau incarnates a temporal disorder: “Enfin, la forme des portes, la grossièreté des ornements, le peu d’ensemble des constructions, tout annonçait un de ces manoirs féodaux . . . des temps nébuleux qui précèdent l’établissement de la Monarchie” [Finally, the shape of the doors, the coarseness of the ornamentation, the lack of ensemble in the construction, everything announced one of those feudal manors . . . from the nebulous times that precede the establishment of the monarchy] (8: 1027). Symbolically, the castle represents this ill-defined, disorderly time from before the monarchy. Yet for Mlle de Verneuil, the word castle “réveillait toujours les formes d’un type convenu” [always awakened the forms of a conventional type]. In front of la Vivetière, she instead finds herself thrown back into that indecision that existed before historic time, when the heterogeneous elements of society were not yet united under one central authority.

This symbolism is continued within: the interior rooms are “en harmonie avec le spectacle de destruction qu’offraient les dehors du château. Les boiseries de noyer poli, mais de formes rudes et grossières, saillantes, mal travaillées, étaient disjointes et semblaient près de tomber. . . . quelques meubles séculaires et en ruine s’harmoniaient avec cet ensemble de débris” [in harmony with the spectacle of destruction that the outside of the castle offered. The walnut woodwork, polished but made into shapes that were primitive and coarse, jutting out and badly formed, was disjointed and seemed about to fall. . . . a few centuries-old, decayed pieces of furniture were in keeping with this ensemble of debris] (8: 1031). Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, in her edition of the novel, finds that by employing the word “tableau” for the scene that Mlle de Verneuil is contemplating, Balzac shows the need to “redonner au tableau son unité en dégageant, grâce au regard d’un personnage, une impression d’ensemble, qui résume ce que suggérait chaque détail” [return unity to the tableau by delineating, by means of a character’s gaze, an impression of ensemble that sums up what each detail was suggesting] (8: 1748). Although I am generally in agreement that Balzacian descriptions can function as a unifying stratagem, I think that here the tableau remains one of disparity in spite of being told through a single character’s gaze. Whatever unity there may be in the description, such as the use of the word “harmony,” is ironic, and it is not enough for Balzac to use the word “tableau” for the disharmony to dissolve into unity.

For what is happening at la Vivetière? The two enemy camps are there together: the marquis de Montauran and Mme de Gua on one side, backed up by some eighty-seven Chouans, and Marie de Verneuil with her escort of sixty-five Bleus on the other. On behalf of these Republican soldiers, Marie de Verneuil solicits and obtains a solemn promise that they will be safe in the
castle; but the Chouans will massacre them nonetheless. What is more, Marie and the marquis are simultaneously lovers and enemies, thrown together by chance or by passion in this dead-end shelter far from the road. Their union at la Vivetière is brought about by war and by passionate love, but the harmony is temporary and factitious—so precarious that it is soon destroyed, because it is not yet solidly established on a true acquaintance based on their real identities. Too often, Marie is still “l’inconnue” [the stranger] for Montauran. Anne-Marie Baron observes that Balzac uses a device of crystallization, the process of love analyzed by Stendhal, along with “les erreurs qu’elle provoque sur le compte de l’être aimé et du monde extérieur. Dans la malle qui les emporte vers Fougères, Montauran transfigure Marie de Verneuil en imagination” [the errors it provokes as concerns the loved one and the external world. In the carriage that takes them to Fougères, Montauran transfigures Marie de Verneuil in his imagination] (L’auguste mensonge 99). And as their relationship continues, through successive encounters often clouded with fog, the possibility of union is threatened by these differences, emphasized by the heterogeneous nature of the opposing troops. When the Bleus take off their uniforms to don the various costumes of the Chouans, disguising themselves as counter-Chouans, Marie and Montauran find themselves in the cottage of Galope-Chopine: “Une même espérance unissait leur pensée, un même doute les séparait, c’était une angoisse, c’était une volupté” [The same hope united their thoughts, the same doubt separated them, it was a single distress, it was a single pleasure] (8: 1165).

Geography plays a very large role in the military plot of Les Chouans and eventually affects the love plot. The spectacle of Fougères seen from the mountain of la Pèlerine is a scene of diverse features brought together only in the gaze that embraces the entire site (8: 912–14). Those many different features of Fougères are described in detail in the opening of the third chapter (8: 1069), one of the longest, most elaborate, and most important descriptions of an outdoor location in La Comédie humaine. The description contributes to the sense of the heterogeneous, which is also the sensation of the actors in the drama that takes place along the Promenade in Fougères or the gorge of the Nançon and the valley of the Couesnon. After three and a half pages of the most intensely diverse written geography, describing mountains, gorges, rivers and branches of rivers, valleys, craggy rocks, plateaus, churches, ramparts, castles, tortuous paths, bridges, towers, prairies, cottages, and houses, the reader can only hope to have formed a vision of a multifarious, acci-
dented site of many levels, directions, and terrains. Balzac summarizes by emphasizing the contrasts and randomness:

Tels sont les traits les plus saillants de cette nature dont le principal caractère est une âpreté sauvage, adoucie par de riant motifs, par un heureux mélange des travaux les plus magnifiques de l'homme avec les caprices d'un sol tourmenté par des oppositions inattendues, par je ne sais quoi d'imprévu qui surprend, étonne et confond. (8: 1072)

[Such are the most salient features of this natural setting whose principal character is a savage harshness, tempered by gay scenes, by a happy mixture of the most magnificent works of man with the caprices of a terrain tormented by unexpected oppositions, by heavens knows what unforeseen quality, which surprises, astonishes, and confounds.]

As for the Breton countryside, its geography forbids uniformity and unity. The Bretons live in isolated dwellings lacking the unification of a village: “Chaque famille y vit comme dans un désert” [Each family lives there as if in a desert] (8: 919); each flowered hedge hides invisible aggressors (8: 920). One of the reasons the Chouans hold off their pursuers for so long around Fougères is that their fields are cut up into separate pieces like the squares of a chessboard, outlined by impenetrable hedges planted with tall trees; tortuous paths border each field, but to go from one to the other, a complicated gate fixed partly into the hedge has to be maneuvered; and only the Chouans know where the openings are. “Ces haies et ces échaliers donnent au sol la physionomie d’un immense échiquier dont chaque champ forme une case parfaitement isolée des autres, close comme une forteresse, protégée comme elle par des remparts. La porte, facile à défendre, offre à des assaillants la plus périlleuse de toutes les conquêtes” [These hedges and these gates give the land the physiognomy of an immense chessboard in which each field forms a square perfectly isolated from the others, enclosed like a fortress and protected like one by ramparts. The gate, easy to defend, offers attackers the most perilous of all conquests] (8: 1114). The symbolism of this disjoined landscape echoes that of the novel’s opening scene.

The heterogeneous also characterizes knowledge, particularly in the form of identity. By the end of the opening scene, when the Chouans have dispersed after attacking the band of conscripts and the Republican troops, the com-
mandant Hulot is wondering about the identity of their leader, called “le Gars,” and conjectures that a royalist with a white hat and black tie briefly glimpsed is he (8: 939, 940). But before Balzac allows his characters to be sure of this identity, he parades the reader through several different identifications of the man, each time with a different name or designation. As for Marie de Verneuil, who is she really, and when is she playing a part? She is called “cette mystérieuse personne” (8: 990), and Montauran wonders whether she is the queen or the slave of her Republican escort at Mortagne (8: 985). Similarly, who is Mme du Gua, really? Can she really be the marquis’s mother, or his mistress? In short order we read “la dame inconnue” and “C’est sa mère” and then “Est-ce bien sa mère?” [the unknown woman; it’s his mother; is it really his mother?] (8: 1019). The Chouans call her “la Grande Garce” (8: 1082) and “la Jument de Charrette” (8: 1085). Nearly every character, when first introduced, is called “l’inconnu” or “l’inconnue,” like Marche-à-terre (8: 916). Both the marquis and Mlle de Verneuil are called “inconnu” repeatedly, as is Mme du Gua; the text insists on pretending not to know who they are until their union in marriage establishes the truth of their character once and for all. Montauran has been known by two other names, le Gars and du Gua, pronounced the same except for the article; before arriving at la Vivetière, he has sworn that his real identity is vicomte de Bauvan (8: 1009) (not to be confused with the real comte de Bauvan). The hearts of Mlle de Verneuil and Montauran have spoken, and Marie is called his mistress and he her lover, but Mlle de Verneuil is still guessing that he is the dangerous chieftain of the Chouans (8: 1023–24). But knowledge given can be taken away: “l’inconnu” applies to Montauran after he has already been identified, such sleight of hand being fostered by Balzac’s manipulation of point of view. If Montauran is known to some, he is unknown to others; our knowledge depends on the perspective we are given, and the reader will be plunged again into ignorance when it serves the rhetorical realism of the plot, but at the cost of some verisimilitude. Even in a very late scene, at the ball in Saint-James, Marie de Verneuil, long since identified and her history given, becomes once again “l’inconnue,” as if her ball gown were a disguise. The heterogeneous is expressed here in terms of the stark opposition between “fille” and “femme vertueuse” [courtesan and virtuous woman] (8: 1146), a disparity in her identity that will be settled only after her marriage. In such conditions, uniformity will consist in reaching a state of knowledge, symbolized by the lifting of the fog on the eleventh and last day of the love plot (8: 1208).
This structure that represents unstable unity constantly threatened by the heterogeneous is prevalent in the present time frame of the novel, but there is also a version for the future whose stakes are higher: to reunify France, by uniting France’s noble past to a future just as noble. Within the strange personal history and destiny of Marie de Verneuil herself, there is a reunion of disparities: from illegitimate daughter to marquise, she unites the two contrary poles of the novel, history and sentiment, military politics and love. “Êtes-vous fille ou femme, ange ou démon?” [Are you courtesan or lady, angel or demon?], wonders Montauran (8: 1005). Her assignment, to seduce Montauran, contains the heterogeneous elements: handled like a marionette by Corentin, she uses love to effect a change in politics. Corentin’s methods make him feel like God:

Employer habilement les passions des hommes ou des femmes comme des ressorts que l’on fait mouvoir au profit de l’État, mettre les rouages à leur place dans cette grande machine que nous appelons un gouvernement, et se plaire à y renfermer les plus indomptables sentiments comme des détentes que l’on s’amuse à surveiller, n’est-ce pas créer, et, comme Dieu, se placer au centre de l’univers? (8: 1148)

[To cleverly use the passions of men or women like springs that one activates for the profit of the State, to put the wheels into place in this great machine we call government, and to take pleasure in locking into it the most unconquerable feelings like triggers that one toys with and subjects to surveillance, is that not to create and, like God, to place oneself at the center of the universe?]

The machine creates uniformity—a universe with a center.

At the end of the novel, the priest, performing the marriage ceremony of Marie and Montauran in Marie’s house, carries out the symbolic marriage of the two enemy factions and embodies the future union of Republican ideas with an enlightened monarchy (8: 1205). The marriage, a calm at the center of the tempest that makes the union a success on a personal level and in the love plot, forecasts the union of opposing parties in the future. If the priest must work in secret for now, as Balzac specifies, he assures us that such marriages will be recognized in the future: “L’union du marquis et de Mlle de Verneuil allait être consacrée, comme tant d’autres unions, par un acte contraire à la législation nouvelle; mais plus tard, ces mariages, bénis pour la plupart au pied des chênes, furent tous scrupuleusement reconnus” [The union of the marquis and Mlle de Verneuil would be consecrated, like
so many other unions, by an act running counter to the new legislation; but later, these marriages, mostly blessed at the foot of oak trees, were all scrupulously recognized] (8: 1205). In this marriage, a conflation of home and church, royalist and Republican, religion and politics anticipates the future unity of France.

To better prepare for such happiness, Marie obtains an effect of unity by arranging the furniture in her room before Montauran’s arrival. Balzac’s penchant for interior decoration is well known; here he worked to make all the details of this scene stress the importance of unity. Marie de Verneuil has rented a house in Fougères abandoned by an émigré noble, a “maison nationale.” In contrast to the harmonious unity she achieved for her love, she had settled into the house after escaping from la Vivetière with only the thought of revenge on her mind, and she takes possession of every last piece of décor as if it belonged to her, with a sudden appropriation of the furniture as if it were familiar to her. “Il semblait qu’un rêve l’eût familiarisée par avance avec cette demeure où elle vécut de sa haine” [It seemed as if a dream had prepared her in advance to know this dwelling, where she lived off her hatred] (8: 1065). But when vengeance has at last settled permanently into love, Mlle de Verneuil carefully makes harmony in her décor. First she has everything that is superfluous removed: “ôte ces babioles qui encombrent la cheminée, et n’y laisse que la pendule et les deux vases de Saxe. . . . Sors toutes les chaises, je ne veux voir ici que le canapé et un fauteuil” [take away these knick-knacks that are cluttering the mantel, and leave only the clock and the two Dresden vases. . . . Take out all these chairs, I only want the sofa and an armchair here] (8: 1181). Then, studying the tapestries on the walls, “elle sut trouver, parmi les brillantes nuances de la haute lisse, les teintes qui pouvaient servir à lier cette antique décoration aux meubles et aux accessoires de ce boudoir par l’harmonie des couleurs ou par le charme des oppositions. La même pensée dirigea l’arrangement des fleurs” [she was able to find, among the brilliant nuances of the yarns in the tapestry, the hues that could serve to tie together this antique decoration and the furniture and accessories of this boudoir through the harmony of the colors or the charm of contrast. The same thoughts directed the arrangement of the flowers] (8: 1182). Everything will be harmonious, balanced, linked, and symmetrical, organized according to a unified idea.

Connecting such unity contrasted with heteronomy to the larger frame of France’s history, Balzac recalls for us the unusual word “nébuleux,” the adjective he had used to characterize the disunity of France in times before the monarchy: “une espèce d’histoire monumentale des temps nébuleux qui précèdent l’établissement de la Monarchie” [a kind of monumental history
from the nebulous times that precede the establishment of the monarchy] (8: 1027). In that earlier use of the symbolism of the nebulous, the context was also a house: the manor of la Vivetière. As Mlle de Verneuil prepares her randomly decorated rental house for her marriage, she says: “Ce jour est le dernier de mes jours nébuleux, il est gros de ma mort ou de notre bonheur” [Today is the last of my nebulous days; it is heavy with my death or our happiness] (8: 1181)—and she comments on the hateful fog. The lifting of the fog allows her at last to know the uniformity of her thought and Montauran’s.

One could say that this thought of unity is the feminine equivalent of the desire the marquis will articulate as he is dying, when he tells his enemy, the commandant Hulot: “je compte sur votre probité pour annoncer ma mort à mon jeune frère qui se trouve à Londres, écrivez-lui que s’il veut obéir à mes dernières paroles, il ne portera pas les armes contre la France, sans néanmoins abandonner le service du Roi” [I am counting on your integrity to report my death to my young brother, who is in London. Write him that if he will obey my last wishes, he will not take up arms against France, without for all that abandoning the service of the King] (8: 1210). Solemn and ultimate words of the head of the Chouans and a clotural expression of the ideal of unity, this promise for the future lends grandiose dimensions to this motif of union extracted from separation: to reunite France. The union of contraries in the marriage envisions the future reunification of the French.

At the level of the novel, disparity is found in the elements that compound it: venerable history as well as the daily life of society, Brittany as well as Normandy, politics and private life, literature (Walter Scott, Chateaubriand, Cooper) and geography. There is fluidity in the use of narrative point of view, with freely flowing changes of perspective provoked by mere proximity, giving another image of the disparate in the rhetoric of this realism. Without transition, and without authorial commentary, the point of view can change from the Chouans to the Bleus, from Marie to the marquis, from victim to aggressor, and so on.

From this diversity, Balzac forges a uniform and homogenous composition. Uniformity wrenched from the heterogeneous: that is the essential trait of composition in Balzac and a lesson for the reader about how to read a Balzac novel. Lucien Dällenbach’s classic two-part vision of what he eventually calls the “chaosmos” of La Comédie humaine remains powerfully expressive of the two conflicting tendencies in the work as a whole. What Les Chouans shows us, I think, is “un Système de fragments conçu, en définitive, comme
totalité organique. Inessentiel et provisoire, le chaos est de toujours voué à se muer en cosmos. Pas de débris non totalisables chez Balzac; pas de pièces irrémédiablement détachées et disjointes” [a System of fragments definitively designed as an organic totality. Inessential and temporary, chaos is from the start destined to mutate into cosmos. No debris that cannot be totalized in Balzac; no pieces irremediably detached and disjointed] (“Du fragment au cosmos” 428).

Several similar comments are found in the copious notes to *Les Chouans* in the Pléiade edition by Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, who observes that “Le regard donne son unité à cette succession de notations fragmentaires” [The gaze gives its unity to this succession of fragmentary notations] (8: 1766). Dällenbach tells us how the success is only partial by showing that Balzac,

[d’avoir résolument opté à la fois pour l’Inconnu, le Tout et le désordre, et d’avoir su tirer de ce choix les conséquences structurelles qu’il fallait pour que son Grand Œuvre . . . devînt mosaïque—mosaïque inachevée et en un certain sens, interminable—plutôt que pyramide, [a pu] manifester avec le plus d’éclat possible l’apanage du roman: rendre visible ce que nous ne verrions pas sans lui. (La canne de Balzac 69)

[from having resolutely opted at the same time for the Unknown, the Whole, and disorder, and from having extracted from these choices the structural results that were needed for his Grand Work . . . to become a mosaic—an unfinished mosaic and in a certain sense an interminable one—rather than a pyramid, [was able] to reveal with the greatest possible brilliance the prerogative of the novel: to make visible what we would not see without it.]

Through the conflicts and tension that set Marie and the marquis against each other, then allow their marriage; in the marriage of a novel of romance with a historical or political novel; in the outcome in a unified future for France beyond the final words, Balzac composes the only form capable of achieving unity in the story.

According to this idea of unity, the future union will be realized in the evolution toward realism in Balzac’s writing. The union of history takes place in fiction, and Balzac strives to realize this union by writing, always writing, obsessively.