For Love or for Money

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One of the strongest claims to realism lies in the desire or need to explain; at the same time, the novelist puts his creative power at risk. Commenting about the secret the novelist purports to convey, Chantal Massol writes: “En s’affirmant détenteur de secrets, le romancier s’arroge un pouvoir-dire. En les divulguant, il s’expose à être décevant—à affaiblir lui-même le pouvoir dont il se targue” [Asserting that he is the keeper of secrets, the novelist claims to have the power-to-tell. In revealing secrets, he runs the risk of being disappointing—of weakening the very power that he boasts of] (119). Balzac, the great explicator, proves his mettle in the novel that some readers have described as the first mystery novel in French,¹ *Une ténébreuse affaire*, a political novel written with passion and penetration. In this “affair” so dark as to earn the description “tenebrous,” something visible and apparent obscures from view something that an explanation will uncover: the real story. The attractive underside, the “envers,” gave Balzac the power to expose, to reveal. But the relation of fact to fiction is complex, and the layers of meaning reveal how the novel creates realism.

1. René Guise quite rightly opposes this designation in his introduction in the Folio edition (9); not a “roman policier,” it is “le roman de la police” (11).
In Une ténébreuse affaire, Balzac postures as the one who knows the answer to the question his novel poses—what really happened and why?—for if ever an explication was nécessaire, it is in this “impure fiction” (one that has strong referentiality to history or philosophical reflection, according to Genette [Seuils 305]). The real event of the kidnapping of the senator Dominique Clément de Ris in 1800 underlies Balzac’s story, a murky business of multiple royalist and republican conspiracies set in three moments of the Consulate and early Empire. History thus apparently comes first, but Balzac claims to prove what really happened by retelling the story in a fiction; facts will be learned via fictions. André Wurmser appreciates this subtle relation to history: “Parce qu’il dit l’essentiel: la bassesse de la police, les rivalités des ambitieux, la vacillation des destins individuels, tout grand homme pouvant à tout moment disparaître dans une trapp[e]—et la continuité de l’histoire, que les grands hommes sont impuissants à dévier de son chemin” [Because he says what is essential: the despicable acts of the police, the rivalries of ambitious men, the vacillations of individual destinies, when any great man may disappear through a trap door—and the continuity of history, which great men are impotent to deviate from its path] (La comédie inhumaine 283). In its relation to history, the novel engages in hysteron proteron, which is not only a figure of speech in which natural or rational order is reversed, but also a figure in logic: the fallacy of assuming as a premise a proposition following something yet to be proved (for hysteron proteron, see Lukacher 262). This apparently simple yet devious rhetorical device is the brilliant invention of this novel.

To begin with, the title contains a striking reversal that strategically controls meaning and direction from the outset. Prosaic word order would call for “Une affaire ténébreuse,” two anapests with the stressed syllables at regular intervals. Instead, the adjective placed abnormally before the noun forces equal accentuation on the three syllables of “ténébreuse.” Thus foregrounded, “ténébreuse” alerts the reader to a potential for mystification and intrigue, which naturally provokes the desire to find out the truth. Richly signifying, the adjective “ténébreux” means dark, sinister, gloomy, dismal; secret, hidden, covered, obscure, mysterious, impenetrable, difficult to elucidate (the Petit Robert dictionary cites Balzac’s title for the sense “obscur pour l’esprit,” and the expression “ténébreuse affaire” has come to mean, since Balzac, a conspiracy). “Ténébreux” also means perfidious, unavowable, dishonest (“qui fait le mal en se cachant; qui se cache, se trame dans l’ombre” [which hides the evil it does; which hides, plots in the shadows], according to the Robert); and melancholic. In the novel, “ténébreuse” occasionally alludes to the atmosphere both meteorological and moral. The obscure and impen-
etrable, in sum, readily become perfidious. Such is the “tenebrosity” of the political story told by the fiction that the reader, confused and distressed, also craves explication.

For the question the novel poses on behalf of the reader—what really happened and why?—authorizes us to also ask about the novel: “what really really happened?” In other words, it is pertinent to comment on Balzac’s narrative strategies. *Une ténébreuse affaire* has the advantage of including in its mimetic narrative a semiotic model for each of the terms or limits between which the novel lies: tenebrosity and explication. The “cachot” [dark prison cell] in the impenetrable center of the forest of Nodesme figures its tenebrous affairs, while the interpretive reading of the “procès politique” [political trial] gives consistency to the idea of necessary explications. I suggest that the novel also illustrates the precarious posture of all Balzacian narratives between tenebrous affairs and necessary explications. The outer limits of any narration are the secrecy of its affairs and the necessity of unfolding them. In *Pierrette* we will also see a criminal trial that purports to bring truth to light in the face of the forces of obscurity (see chapter 8).

Balzac believed he alone could tell the real story of the kidnapping of Clément de Ris because he had inside information from his father and from Mme de Berny, whose knowledge of the facts came from her lover André Campi, involved in the case. Balzac presumes to correct mistakes in other accounts, such as the *Mémoires* of the duchesse d’Abrantès, which had already added a layer of mediation between story and event. (The duchess retells the history because she also thinks she can “correct” it.) In a long preface later suppressed, Balzac claimed that his novel answers a question that remains unanswered to this day about the historical event of the kidnapping: who did it? On the stage of real history, the novel purports to play the historian’s role; as Marthe Robert writes, “ce ne sont pas les hommes politiques, mais les personnages de Balzac qui ont fait l’Histoire du pays” [it is not the politicians, *but Balzac’s characters* that made the country’s History] (258). An additional layer of “correction” is added by the editors of the novel in the Pléiade edition, Suzanne-J. Bérard and Pierre-Georges Castex, who cite archives that disagree with contemporary written accounts.

What Balzac “knows” and tells us is that his character Malin de Gondreville (or the real senator Clément de Ris) acted in concert with a secret party born of the Revolution, opposed to Bonaparte and conspiring to create a new government. In Balzac’s account, Talleyrand, Fouché, Sieyès, and Carnot, joined by Malin as factotum, plot against the Premier Consul on the eve of the battle of Marengo, on June 13, 1800. If Napoleon is defeated, the conspirators intend to exploit popular disappointment to take power; if
victorious, they will rally round the Consulate. Fouché has forced Malin to print and stockpile the documents needed for the “gouvernement inédit” (8: 1501) in sufficient quantities for distribution. When news of Napoleon’s decisive victory reaches Paris, Malin hastens to conceal the compromising papers in his château at Gondreville, a “bien national” [national property] filched from the Simeuse family, and returns to Paris in time to congratulate the Premier Consul. Six years later, the distrustful Fouché, to bury the conspiracy more surely, secretly sends his police, led by Corentin, to Gondreville, to seek and destroy any evidence. To cover their actions, five policemen disguised as the four noble Simeuse and d’Hauteserre brothers and their faithful follower Michu kidnap and sequester the senator. Fouché pretends to investigate the kidnapping and has the four aristocrats and Michu arrested; they are tried and convicted. Thus is consummated an official crime, in which the guilty punish the innocent. Not unlike a La Fontaine fable, the moral of the story is something like might makes right: “La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure.”

As Bérard writes, “Balzac croyait savoir que, dans la véritable affaire, des agents mandatés par Fouché et le secrétaire de préfecture lui-même, Sénéchal, avaient aidé, organisé l’erreur judiciaire et n’avaient pas reculé devant l’irréparable: la condamnation à mort” [Balzac believed that, in the real affair, agents under Fouché’s orders and the secretary of the prefecture himself, Sénéchal, had helped and organized the judicial error and had not retreated in the face of the irreparable consequence: the death penalty] (8: 1456). So convinced was Balzac of the truth of his story that he told it a second time, as part of the muddy past of the character du Bousquier in La vieille fille.

To be clear about this: the answer Balzac gives in his impure fiction may or may not be the truth of history. Taken with respect to facts, the story of the novel stands in an awkward and uncertain relation as to revealing or hiding. It may darken or eclipse the story of Clément de Ris, in altering it for fiction’s purposes, or reveal something hitherto unknown about it.

The change of title from the first draft’s “Une affaire secrète” (8: 1495) concisely indexes how what was merely secret became tenebrous, in all the senses cited above. The draft began by portraying the five conspirators in dialogue in a certain boudoir, this conspiracy being the cause of the events the novel was to recount. Between the first draft and the later manuscript version, a major reordering of the novel’s parts resulted in a tenebrous reading effect: Balzac moved these necessary explications to the last few pages of the novel.

2. Michu is blamed by public opinion for cutting off heads during the Terror, “lui ou son beau-père” [he or his father-in-law] (8: 640), quite like the guilt by association that concludes La Fontaine’s fable “Le loup et l’agneau,” whose first line, which Balzac quotes, gives its moral.
(making at the same time several smaller changes which contribute to entenebrating causes; for instance, while the first version immediately identifies Talleyrand, the second resorts to various enigmatic but colorful periphrases, such as “Celui qui marchait difficilement” [He who walked with difficulty] [8: 689]). Hysteron proteron begins to overtake narrative logic: the telling of the cause now follows the telling of its complex effects. The last chapter of the Souverain edition of 1842 (chapter divisions have been retained in the Folio edition), is called “Les ténèbres dissipées” [Darkness Dissipated], an apt name for the place of necessary explanations; but would the sky have been so dark if the explanations had come in chapter 1? The life of the plot now depends on the final scene of explication without which the story would remain entenebrated. Yet, instead of one of those assertive, informative, airless explanations by the familiar, all-knowing narrator, the one Proust chided for striking but disharmonious images (270), the “secret de l’affaire” (8: 695) comes mediated by a secondary narration. Now an aged and wizened Henri de Marsay tells the story at a classic gathering of duchesses and princesses in 1833, decades after the event, to reveal why the countess Laurence de Cinq-Cygne leaves in a huff of ancien régime disdain when the comte—d’Empire—Malin de Gondreville arrives. This genteel mediation necessitates, as a trait of verisimilitude, the frequent use of phrases like “je crois” [I believe] or “il a dû dire” [he must have said] and several other markers of hearsay knowledge—and of taking a safe political distance.

Putting the necessary explication after the tenebrous affair mirrors the psychological effect that receivers of the event experience; the story remains inexplicable until all the facts are in. When we read the cause in the last chapter, we must mentally retell everything that has been recounted, not unlike those who would interpret evidence for the trial. Intelligence comes only when the novel is done and the chronology made whole again. Having forced us to seek explanations, the novel turns the reader into something like the Proustian character, one who says “plus tard j’ai compris” [later on I understood]. This characteristic choice for complication defines Une ténébreuse affaire and the character Malin, “l’un de ces personnages qui ont tant de faces et tant de profondeur sous chaque face, qu’ils sont impénétrables au moment où ils jouent et qu’ils ne peuvent être expliqués que longtemps après la partie” [one of those characters who have so many faces and such depth behind each face that they are impenetrable when they are playing and cannot be explained until long after the game] (8: 523). Another example of this delay in the ability to understand: “La présence [du duc d’Enghien] sur le territoire de Bade . . . donna plus tard du poids à ces suppositions” [The presence [of the duc d’Enghien] on the territory of Bade . . . later gave
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weight to these suppositions] (8: 538; emphasis added). Complication precedes explication.

The premise according to which personal or small history unfolds from prior cause to later result functions, microscopically, in the narrative of the hatreds and alliances among the characters Malin, Marion, Michu, Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, the Simeuse twins, and others. The novel proposes to do what Balzac’s necessary explications do: explaining or unfolding personal history replicates, in small, the macroscopic unfolding of past causes in history. (A great deal of La Comédie humaine owes its existence to the productivity arising from the political instability from 1789 to 1830, or from what Taylor calls the “trajectoires aberrantes” of the players of the period [4].) A typical introduction of a necessary explication reads: “Peut-être n’est-il pas inutile de raconter les circonstances” [Perhaps it is not unnecessary to explain the circumstances] (8: 520). Speaking of himself in an almost pompous third person, Balzac writes in his preface: “Il a changé les lieux, changé les intérêts, tout en conservant le point de départ politique; il a enfin rendu, littérairement parlant, l’impossible, vrai” [He changed the locations, changed the interests, while conserving the political starting point; finally, literarily speaking, he made the impossible true] (8: 493). So much and no less does the fiction claim for itself; making real history into literary fiction, he has made it “true.” In retelling the story, Balzac’s hysteron proteron makes it possible to “know” much more about history than his suppressed preface recounted, for the fabulation in Une ténébreuse affaire retells a “secret” deeper and greater than the truth about the kidnapping.

The cachot in the Nodesme forest is also a cachette [hiding-place]; it is plurivalent and expressive, natural and symbolic. Hard to find, difficult to get to, invisible from the outside, the prison suggests a crypt that protects the aristocrats but also situates danger. It emblematizes tenebrosity. It represents the heart of darkness of the story as it lies in the heart of the dense forest, unknown, implausibly, to Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, who spends entire days riding in the woods. The space of this hiding place defines its location in a historic past as the secret prison of a monastery eight centuries old, for the relation of space to time is archeological (8: 565). Of the five avenues that once led to the monastery, several are nearly effaced, symbolizing incomplete and difficult access to the secret. The “bords inaccessibles” [inaccessible boundary] and the “épais buissons impénétrables” [thick, impenetrable shrubbery] that surround the cave naturalize the allegory of the inaccessible (8: 564,
565). In telling how Michu guides Laurence to the cachot, “en faisant des détours, des retours, coupant son propre chemin à travers des clairières pour y perdre la trace” [by taking detours, turning back, cutting across his own path through the clearings to hide his tracks] (8: 563), Balzac provides a fine metaphor for how the characters experience events and for how knowledge is encrypted in his narrative.

Once inside, characters are in the dark, figuratively and literally (8: 526), for people in the midst of actions do not know what they mean: “Marthe, épuisée, tremblante, s’attendait à un dénouement quelconque après une pareille course. A quoi devait-elle servir? à une bonne action ou à un crime?” [Marthe, exhausted and trembling, was waiting for some sort of outcome after such a journey. What was its purpose? Was it for a good action or a crime?] (8: 532). If the notion of a dénouement implies seeing clearly, with the characters, actions in the meantime are enshrouded in tenebrosity. By the same logic an essential element of the power of the police lies in avoiding darkness, for instance by reconnoitering hiding places: “Corentin reçut de Fouché l’ordre d’explorer le château de Gondreville, d’en inscrire le plan dans sa mémoire, et d’y reconnaître les moindres cachettes” [Corentin received from Fouché the order to explore the castle of Gondreville, to commit its layout to memory, and to locate its smallest hiding places] (8: 554). The novel also develops the “buried treasure” theme (à la Poe). A document indexes the location of the aristocrats’ fortune which Michu buried in the forest (8: 568–69). As in Poe’s “The Gold Bug,” one has to know how to interpret a coded map to arrive at wealth, happiness, and possibly marriage.

While de Marsay eventually explains the conspiracy that secretly initiated the entire sequence of events in the novel, not all of its proliferating tenebrosity is assigned to revelation by a knowledgeable informer. Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, bearer of all past generations of her family’s history, including its political secrets, reinvents herself in the text in a way that keeps her secret stance intact and throws up obstacles to revisions of her history. The virility of her character masks a heart of excessive sensitivity; the comparison to the “buried treasure” motif is explicit: “mais cette sensibilité gisait, chez elle, comme un trésor caché à une profondeur infinie sous un bloc de granit” [but in her this sensitivity lay like a treasure hidden at an infinite depth under a granite rock] (8: 588). Large stone blocks are precisely what cover the opening of the cachot. Laurence’s behavior and speech are determined by what Esther Rashkin has called a phantom: her unstinting devotion to the legitimist cause. So adamantly is her refusal to recognize any but ancien régime royalty that well into the July Monarchy she continues to refer to Louis-Philippe as “monseigneur le duc d’Orléans” (8: 686). All the aristo-
crats are too unyielding in their pretensions based on inheritance and a dead past (“Nous sommes de vrais chevaliers du Moyen Âge” [We are true knights of the Middle Ages], says the elder Simeuse [8: 620]); they are the victims of “la fierté de leurs sentiments” [the haughtiness of their views] (8: 670). Laurence, however, not only appears in the story as the exemplary heroine of chivalric romance, but she covers another archeological figure and its secrets. In tandem with this secret of the old aristocracy, which is meant to be found out just as the police must find the cachot for the story to go forward, the novel unfolds another secret. When de Marsay explains what happened, at the end, he clears a path, in our later retelling, to a tenebrosity of the highest stature, which the novel encodes. It is Napoleon’s secret that the novel tells and repeats, a secret preserved in the family of France in the generations preceding the July Monarchy. To bring us to that deeper hidden meaning, Balzac employs devices signifying darkness and explication.

The cachot provides a powerful model for writing or encrypting the story, which remains in a state of tension with the reading or decrypting exemplified in the judicial trial. Christopher Prendergast’s useful term “extended structural metonymy” applies well to the function of the trial in the narrative discourse (90). Like the model of composition in Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu, the trial creates “truth” by addition, fabricating it out of the fragments of evidence—the “remains” or “fossils.” Tiny details in the writing lend convincing complicity to the story; variants reveal, moreover, that for Balzac to revise is to complicate (see 8: 1569). The notion of a proof is the very meat of a trial, and of an interpretation; a proof bolsters. One reasons on the basis of testimony and evidence; reasoning leads to the truth (8: 646). Reasoning, however, may fail; proofs may be absent or incomplete; they may lie; they may even be manufactured to suit a political interest: the five disguised men contrived by the police are taken as proof, a duplication that prevents the introduction of accurate evidence. For although in principle a judicial trial tests guilt by uncovering the truth, in Balzac’s emplotment formulating the events for the retelling during the trial primarily puts into question credibility. As elsewhere, Balzac here deploys his intrigue to speculate on the paradoxical relation between “le vrai” [what is real] and “le vraisemblable” [what is plausible], and, once again, the truth is not plausible.

The defense attorney Bordin, who judges the defendants’ case indiscernible for the accusers and the court (8: 647), gives a fascinating performance as an interpreter of facts. After listening to the defendants recounting the events we know from Balzac’s narration (the truth), the attorney interprets them according to plausibility. Bordin demonstrates how justice, which will not be just (8: 643–44), will badly explain actions. No one on the side of
the defense understands how the senator was kidnapped, and plausibility is put into play to cast light on this still tenebrous action. What plausible reason could there be for five men to disguise themselves as the four noblemen and Michu, to the extent of procuring identical horses and shoeing them identically? Surely they would not go to all that trouble “exprès pour perdre Michu, messieurs d’Hauteserre et de Simeuse” [on purpose to condemn Michu, the Hauteserres and the Simeuses], the defense opines (8: 645); that would be implausible. And yet that is exactly what did happen. Similarly, the presumption of guilt taints neutral and insignificant events with telling significance because they fit the plausible account the accusation composes. The “vrai de la nature”—the fact that the aristocrats had spent the day in the forest recovering their secret treasure—would be “invraisemblable,” and on no account should the jury be told such a truth, Bordin holds. Either it would be laughed out of court, or it would condemn them more surely. The truth would convince the jury (and the public) that the cousins are lying, since they would be seen as having resorted to inventing such an implausible story to support their claim. Or it would make them appear guilty of a theft, because no one would believe the preposterous reality: that Michu, whom everyone takes for a revolutionary, had protected the Simeuse treasure during the years of their emigration.

Three times Balzac tells us that people habitually judge events “sous une présomption arrivée à l’état de certitude” [through a presumption that has reached a state of certainty] (8: 625, 628, 640). Public accuser, jury, judges, audience, and all France would “know” with the certitude of presumption that the Simeuse brothers had kidnapped Malin to steal his money. Balzac chooses a most paradoxical way of saying the truth may cause the greatest harm: “En admettant l’accusation telle qu’elle est en ce moment, l’affaire n’est pas claire; mais, dans sa vérité pure, elle deviendrait limpide; les jurés expliqueraient par le vol toutes les parties ténébreuses, car royaliste aujourd’hui veut dire brigand!” [If we accept the accusation as it stands right now, the affair is not clear; but, in its pure truth, it would become limpid; the jury would explain all the obscure parts as theft, because people today take royalists for thieves!] (8: 644; emphasis added). And yet, for all its limpidity, that explanation would be false. Among the acts and words that the jury would unfailingly interpret to condemn the accused, Bordin lists “les mots dits à Beauvisage” [the words said to Beauvisage], a farmer (8: 619), and “les paroles dites dans la cour” [the remarks said in the courtyard], overheard by a man from the village (8: 616). Bordin’s reading thus forces the reader to remember these details where they occurred in the novel, or, failing that, to seek out the sentences in which those events were narrated; the call to
memory resembles the tenebrous effect that putting the cause last has on the reading.

No surprise, then, that the text explicitly compares the trial to all the dynamics at play in reading a novel: “L’innocence doit un compte claire et plausible de ses actions. Le devoir de la Défense est donc d’opposer un roman probable au roman improbable de l’Accusation [qui] devient une fable” [Innocence owes a clear and plausible account of its actions. The duty of the Defense is to offer up a probable story to oppose the Prosecution’s improbable story, which then becomes a fable] (8: 656). The facts be damned. Plausible lies told by the defendants during the trial, the “roman probable,” nearly bring their acquittal (an example concerns their use of the plaster [8: 657–58]). As the narrator observes, “Si, en justice, la vérité ressemble souvent à une fable, la fable aussi ressemble beaucoup à la vérité” [If, in courts of justice, truth often resembles a fable, fables also closely resemble the truth] (8: 657)—expressing in a nutshell the credo of the realistic author. In his suppressed preface, Balzac recounted in passionate detail the visit of the judge who presided at the first trial of Clément de Ris’s kidnappers, one Viriot, who claims to have learned “le secret du mystère,” Balzac triumphantly reports, by reading the pre-publication of his novel in Le Commerce (8: 499). The novel as creator of truth . . . or was Balzac still writing fiction? When truth is not believed, it loses its ethical value.

In all, the trial suggests that explication saves, while inexplicability, or the failure to explicate, is fatal, for the noblemen’s inability to explain that they spent the day of the crime recovering buried treasure causes their condemnation. Not all complication admits explication. Implausibility requires them to keep it a secret that they were digging up their own money—1,100,000 francs buried seven feet deep, two feet from the foot of eleven old oak trees scattered in an obscure part of the forest, their locations indicated by a ciphered map (8: 568–69). Innocence means clarity (8: 641), and “Avec le temps, les innocents éclaircissent les affaires” [In time, the innocent make matters clear] (8: 645), but the “circonstances inexplicables” [inexplicable circumstances], the “parties ténèbreuses” [obscure parts] (8: 665) make victims, for this “affaire” remains “indéchiffrable,” “inexplicable,” for the accused and accusers, for justice and the public (8: 665, 645, 647). The crime seems obscure, the outcome of the trial muddy at best, and above all, the true story cannot be unfolded for justice; it is tenebrous. Yet if the “real” true story is saved at all, it is because Balzac recasts it into his fiction.

The historical truth that Balzac writes, obeying the “devoir d’un historien” [historian’s duty] (8: 564), is embedded in the complex verisimilitude of the plot: it is Fouché himself, he claims, who ordered the kidnapping and
framed the noblemen and Michu by disguising five men as the accused. As history, this is not credible—it is a fable; yet it stands in the structural position of history, and that is how we are intended to read it. Verisimilitude mediates between history and the reader, to whom is granted that safe political distance that the story’s tenebrosity vouchsafes. The text would force the reader to follow in the great explicator’s wake and to use plausibility to explicate tenebrosity, to pursue our trial reading into deeper crypts.

A broader perspective connects the narrow story of the kidnapping to the general history of France during the Consulate and the start of the Empire. The political history underlying the story implies that the author may not monkey with the relation between causes and effects, but Balzac plays fast and loose. “Le style est tellement la marque de la transformation que la pensée de l’écrivain fait subir à la réalité,” wrote Proust, “que, dans Balzac, il n’y a pas à proprement parler de style” [Style so clearly marks the transformation that the writer’s thought imposes on reality that, in Balzac’s case, one cannot truly speak of style] (269). Was Proust so taken in by the reality claims of the Balzacian text that he failed to see in what multiple ways Balzac does impose style on reality? Hysteron proteron in the narrative logic shows that it is fallacious to assume as a premise that a cause can be uncovered for the puzzling events the characters undergo (and for the incoherencies of the narrative). It is not simply that the cause remains untold until the end; it also remains to be proved what did indeed cause the events. And Balzac did much to obscure the relation to history when he suppressed his preface with its parallel account of the historical events: pulling a “coup,” he effaced the pathways. He thus acted on his premise that Malin represents a type—“un personnage qui résume en lui-même les traits caractéristiques de tous ceux qui lui ressemblent plus ou moins” [a character who sums up in himself the traits that characterize all those who more or less resemble him]—and reaffirmed his claim that he had transposed a most implausible event into “un milieu vrai” [a real environment], the transposed version being the only true story (8: 492–93).

In effect, the stance of the novel in the face of the historical event is tenebrous. As a reader of the tenebrous affair of the trial, Napoleon holds the key to its explication. With a single stunning sentence, the third in the novel, Balzac inaugurates a governing metaphor that connects sunshine dissipating darkness to the prestige Napoleon enjoys for bringing prosperity to France: “Aussi le peuple commençait-il à établir entre le ciel et Bonaparte, alors déclaré consul à vie, une entente à laquelle cet homme a dû l’un de ses
prestiges; et, chose étrange! le jour où, en 1812, le soleil lui manqua, ses prospérités cessèrent” [Thus the people had come to believe there existed between the heavens and Bonaparte, now declared consul for life, an agreement to which this man owed some of his prestige; and, strange to say, the day when, in 1812, the sun failed him, their prosperity ceased] (8: 501). Balzac may well have borrowed the metaphor from Napoleon himself, who wrote in his *Pensées politiques et sociales* in 1801: “Le gouvernement est au centre des sociétés comme le soleil: les diverses institutions doivent parcourir autour de lui leur orbite, sans s’en écarter jamais” [The government lies at the center of societies like the sun: the various institutions must run their orbit around it, without ever diverging from it] (65). Max Andréoli, in a detailed commentary on Balzac’s opening lines, points out the miracle accompanying this alliance; he also underscores the contrast of the sun with the significant obscurity throughout the novel: “La présence du soleil est d’autant plus prégnante qu’elle marque le seuil d’un texte où règne l’obscur; les personnages se meuvent dans les ténèbres, celles de la nuit ou celles des machinations nouées par le hasard et par les hommes” [The sun’s presence is all the more telling that it marks the threshold of a text where obscurity reigns; the characters evolve in darkness, either of the night or of the machinations wrought by chance or by men] (“Sur le début” 96). Interestingly, justices of the peace were required as of 1796 to display a symbol of their policing authority consisting of an eye surrounded by rays, poetically suggesting the clarity that comes with seeing well in sunshine, as if in an equation: eye plus sun equals power (8: 1505–6). And one might suggest that the resetting of the events in the department of Aube, meaning Dawn, is poetically justified.

The suggestion that a mystique hovers about this “entente,” placing Napoleon above mere mortals, contributes to the mystical comprehension of history (“chose étrange”) that Balzac proposes in this novel. Folding the time of the writing, the July Monarchy, onto the period of the events, the era of Napoleon, in a narrative that oscillates between entenebration and explication, Balzac teaches that the connections between facts or events—the causes—and their atmospheric effects are obscure, concealed, mysterious. He gives us to understand that the tenebrosity Napoleon most feared is represented by Fouché, described twice as possessing a “génie ténébreux” [obscure genius] and as a “singulier génie qui frappa Napoléon d’une sorte de terreur” [singular genius who struck Napoleon with a sort of terror] (8: 552, 553, 692). Balzac writes:

Certes l’amour-propre excessif de Napoléon est une des mille raisons de sa chute qui, d’ailleurs, a cruellement expié ses torts. Il se rencontrait chez ce
défiant souverain une jalousie de son jeune pouvoir qui influa sur ses actes autant que sa haine secrète contre les hommes habiles, legs précieux de la Révolution. (8: 553)

[To be sure, Napoleon's excessive pride is one of the thousand reasons for his fall, which incidentally has cruelly atoned for his wrongs. In this defiant sovereign, there was a jealous guarding of his young power that influenced his acts as much as his secret hatred for capable men, the precious legacy of the Revolution.]

The minister of police acting behind the scenes insures that what is (merely) obscure, impenetrable, or secret becomes pernicious, that the hidden acts are also the evil ones. Fouché is the only character in the action who stands to explicate the story better than the narrator can: “Fouché se réservait ainsi une grande partie des secrets qu'il surprenait, et se ménageait sur les personnes un pouvoir supérieur à celui de Bonaparte” [Fouché kept for himself a large part of the secrets that he uncovered, and he held over people a power superior to that of Bonaparte] (8: 554); he plans “absolument comme” [utterly like] Napoleon at Austerlitz; he is the Napoleon of police. In the chapter of “ténèbres dissipées,” de Marsay observes about Fouché, Masséna, and Talleyrand, with some exaggeration: “si Napoléon les avait franchement associés à son œuvre, il n’y aurait plus d’Europe, mais un vaste empire français” [if Napoleon had freely associated them with his work, there would no longer be a Europe, but rather a vast French empire] (8: 692).

On a deeper level, therefore, the ultimate tenebrous affair explicated only for a reader of genius is that Napoleon’s fear of Fouché represents the central Balzacian theme of the harm caused by mediocrities and the failure of government to make a place for capable men. In an uncanny repetition, this huge defect of France since the July Monarchy, in Balzac’s analysis, stems from Napoleon’s tenebrosity and undermines the potential of France for greatness since his fall. Napoleon’s secret defect has played out over time and several governments, as if a germ has spread from one to many, from the unique to the general.

What Balzac the explicator unfolds therefore has stature, not only as a reading out of history but also in bolstering the fundamental stance of La Comédie humaine as both social document and narrative model. The flaw that Napoleon expiated in exile, a secret fear of superiorities, is the very defect that permanently undermined the July Monarchy and that had such a large role in the existence of La Comédie humaine. “1830 fut pour Balzac une sorte de mort du père—à la fois deuil et libération” [1830 was for
Balzac a sort of death of the father—both a loss and a liberation], writes Nicole Mozet ("Temps historique" 241). This archeological family secret of a nation motivates Balzac’s political writing (however the novels are classified in La Comédie humaine); it is the well-known secret of the Balzacian novel, a motive force that makes stories happen. Moreover, scarcely has one opened the book when a Balzac family secret parades before our eyes: Jean de Margonne, to whom the novel is dedicated, was Mme Balzac’s lover and the father of younger brother Henri. More overt than covert, like a perverse secret that reveals by hiding, and like many supposedly secret details of the Clément de Ris affair, Mme Balzac’s adultery can qualify as tenebrous in its effects on our author. Proust alludes to causes of which Balzac has never spoken: “Là, sous l’action apparente et extérieure du drame, circulent de mystérieuses lois de la chair et du sentiment” [There, beneath the apparent, external action of the drama, mysterious laws of the flesh and of the senses circulate] (277–78). If it is virtually certain that Proust had homosexuality in mind, it is also possible to think about the relation between revealing and concealing in writing a narrative. Perhaps the quality of Mme Balzac’s secret was particularly on Balzac’s mind as he wrote Une ténébreuse affaire, because in October 1840 he was moving from les Jardies to Paris, and his mother was to move in with him in November. Was the absent father, dead since 1829 but the source of the writer’s exceptional knowledge about the historical tenebrous affair, to be enveloped in darkness?

Politics imposes a way to run the country: it represents order, meaning, and direction, in both senses (to direct the country, to go in a certain direction); power invested in authority; a use of history dependent on knowledge thereof; the march of time to the future; and progress. As Lukacher writes, Bonapartism reintroduced hierarchy reversing anarchic republicanism (266), and therein lay its value and its harm. According to Une ténébreuse affaire, Balzac’s assessment of Napoleon remains dark, hidden, or contradictory, the verity of his pro-Napoleonic sentiment apparently conflicting with the verisimilitude of his monarchical intention. If the four ancien régime aristocrats (but not Michu) are saved from condemnation, it is only because Napoleon grants them amnesty. Heaping paradox upon paradox, Balzac gives us to understand that the figure of a lost aristocracy whose nobility is yet imperishable (also illustrated by the Chouans who are serving both sides in the affair) stands in apparent conflict but secret affinity with Napoleon the Emperor. When the plausible fables recounted by the accused noblemen fail to prevent their conviction, only the majesty of Napoleon’s nobility and grace saves them. The grandeur of the accord Laurence wins, in the memorable scene at Napoleon’s bivouac at Iéna (a scene Balzac added on proofs), plays out and
projects onto the metonymic narrative line a metaphoric replication of the old and the new aristocracies. “Comprenez-vous ce que doit être l’Empire français? . . .,” the emperor asks [Do you understand what the French Empire is to be?]. “Ah! je ne comprenais en ce moment que l’Empereur, dit-elle vaincue par la bonhomie avec laquelle l’homme du destin avait dit ces paroles qui faisaient pressentir la grâce” [“Ah! at this moment I understand only the Emperor,” said she, vanquished by the good-heartedness with which the man of destiny had said these words that hinted at the granting of clemency] (8: 681). The novel displays at once the arrogance of telling the real story and the assurance that it is impossible to do so except by narrating the plausible. Following the plausible, the “it-must-have-been-this-way,” Balzac’s narrative eschews hierarchy, ascribing no certain historical cause; it buries sense and direction, disseminates the power of authority; it looks backward to an archeological present-in-the-past.

What makes this novel especially compelling is that the tensions between hiding and revealing exemplify those of realistic writing in general. In other words, not only does the novel include in its story the structure of its own semiotic processes, the strategies by which it makes meaning and guides the reader, but it can also stand as a general reader’s guide to Balzac. The processes of the events that entenebrated history, on the referential level, and the narrative events that entenebrate the story, which constitute the mimetic level, are analogous. This is not surprising; it is the common business of mimesis to pretend to imitate, in a narrative, what happened in the world, even if it does so by convention. That is, although we know that mimesis is a composition, not a reflection, of reality, we agree that in mimesis narrative imitates reality. It is less of a common business that a further analogy governs the hiding that happens in the story and the structure of Balzac’s writing, which creates and hides secret motivation. The events of the writing, on the semiotic level, replicate those of the story, the mimetic level. Everywhere there are “mechanisms of concealment and dissembling that thwart readability” (Rashkin 33)—which are in fact the essential strategy for awakening and sustaining interest. Although Balzac most characteristically fulfills his mission to describe when he obeys what Genette has called his “démon explicatif” [explanatory demon] (“Vraisemblance et motivation” 79), paintings that obscure the message abound in La Comédie humaine. To paint is to cover over as well as to depict; in Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu, the creation of the masterpiece obscures what it intends to show; it reveals instead an unintended message (there are messages loaded with death, like Le message, as Ross Chambers has shown in a brilliant reading [“Reading”]). A writer cannot show too little, or understanding fails; or too much, for then interest
flags; as Lucien Dällenbach writes, the text that fills all the holes loses interest ("Du fragment au cosmos" 430). The ideal would lie somewhere between tenebrous affairs and necessary explications—the equilibrium also struck in this novel between noble sentiment and base dealings.

One may thus take Une ténébreuse affaire as a model for many other novels and especially for a certain kind of reading that Balzac’s novels require of us. Reading is an affair of genius, and it is significant that “le génie du mal” [the evil genius], the police who incarnate evil, read according to the political process of the trial. Describing the devious policemen Corentin and Peyrade as “impénétrables,” Balzac compares them to reasoning canines:

Mais, pour qui eût suivi les effets du flair moral de ces deux limiers à la piste des faits inconnus et cachés, pour qui eût compris les mouvements d’agilité canine qui les portaient à trouver le vrai par le rapide examen des probabilités, il y avait de quoi frémir! Comment et pourquoi ces hommes de génie étaient-ils si bas quand ils pouvaient être si haut? (8: 579; emphasis added)

[But, for anyone who had followed the effects of the moral flair of these two bloodhounds on the track of unknown and hidden facts, for anyone who understood the agile canine movements that led them to find the truth by quickly examining the probabilities, there was something worth shuddering about! How and why were these men of genius so low when they could be so great?]

When Corentin and Peyrade find the cachot, the heart of the darkness, they guide the reader to the Kurtz-like evil of Fouché. It is the reading of the probabilities, the plausible in the domain of fiction, and not of the real facts, that uncovers the secret horror in this history. Reading is “un procès politique,” fraught with murkiness, fringing the horrible. Balzac’s preposterous claim that the truth would not save the story, that he tells the “vraisemblable” because the truth would not be convincing, deviously lends an excessive degree of truth to the truth when mediated by his narration, and only then. Explication, finally, constitutes Balzac’s greatest presumption to an aristocracy of realistic writing.