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=859524
In Dreams Begin Representations

Broadly speaking, illusion and reality—terms used with some caution—are the two modes by which César Birotteau’s history is represented. The novel begins impressionistically with Constance Birotteau awakening in fear from a dream in which she has seen herself doubled—an old woman in rags begging alms from her younger self sitting at the counter in the store. The dream is as real as her panic at not finding César in bed (6: 38). In several other Balzac novels, dreams and illusions are opposed to the harsh realities, such as Illusions perdues, Modeste Mignon, Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes, or Albert Savarus. Illusions and harsh realities in those novels concern love; in César Birotteau, illusions and reality generally line up on an axis of money. The key moment of crisis that precipitates Birotteau into bankruptcy opposes illusions—“mon neveu, plus d’illusions! On doit faire les affaires avec des écus et non avec des sentiments” [my dear nephew, no more illusions! Business is done with money, not with feelings]—to the cold hard facts of his real financial situation (6: 252). But the “real” assets are “non réalisables” (6: 249), and the arrival at the fatal moment is described as waking up from a dream of twenty-two years (6: 260).

1. The heading is modeled on W. B. Yeats and Delmore Schwartz’s “In dreams begin responsibilities.”
The rarest of Balzacian titles inaugurates this double representation. In its full form: *Histoire de la Grandeur et de la Décadence de César Birotteau, marchand parfumeur, adjoint au maire du deuxième arrondissement de Paris, chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, etc.* And the novel is divided into two chapters: “César à son apogée” [César at his peak] and “César aux prises avec le Malheur” [César at grips with Misfortune]. But which chapter recounts his grandeur, which his decadence? Where is the reality and where the illusion of this representation? The answer is not the obvious one, and we can generally read the novel ironically. Thus when on the fifth page Constance accuses César of dreaming as he announces they will give a grand ball, the representation of grandeur begins to be tied to the mode of dreaming. Hélène Gomart, throughout her fine analysis of the perfumer’s financial dealings, underscores the illusions and dreams, the irrationality and the desire that undermine his ability to make real financial decisions.

For the reader, the protagonist poses a basic problem of interpretation: Are Birotteau’s actions exemplars of probité or bêtise? Grandeur or décadence? Is the implied author’s attitude one of mockery or empathy? Does he treat his character with sincerity or irony? These and other questions undermine the reader's comfortable relation to the story throughout, in a challenge that echoes the reading effect of *Mémories de deux jeunes mariées*. Only naive readers would take mentions of Birotteau’s probité at face value, failing to see that, at thirty-five repetitions of the word, Balzac’s narrative doth protest too much. Most readers have indeed noticed, and some go very far: André Wurmser in his preface to the Folio edition skewers Birotteau’s morality altogether. Others compare this “martyr de la probité” [martyr of integrity] (which is the last use of the word *probité*), explicitly likened to Christ (6: 260, 312), to the “Christ de la Paternité,” le père Goriot. Any reader can be convinced of one view, and my intent is not to argue the merits of either side or decide between them. Rather, I am struck by how contradictory the representation is; elements of the answers to these questions line up either on the side of illusion or on the side of reality.

This doubleness is expressed in a variety of ways. In the *explication nécessaire* of the Birotteau past, Constance and César *represent* the opposite of what they actually *are*; César evolves in the virtual, whereas Constance is characterized by realism and the reality of her desires, as Gomart has put it (35). Thus:

A
t*Ayant apprécié César durant les trois premières années de leur mariage, sa femme fut en proie à des transes continuelles; elle représentait dans cette union la partie sagace et prévoyante, le doute, l’opposition, la crainte; César*
[Having appreciated César during the first three years of their marriage, his wife was prey to continual fears; she represented in this union the sagacious and far-sighted part, the doubt, the opposition, the dread; César represented audacity, ambition, action, the unheard of good fortune of fate. In spite of appearances, the merchant was a timid, apprehensive person, while his wife actually had patience and courage.]

In this passage the repeated verb représenter is theatrical, each character taking on a role before the public. Similarly, the “commercial drama” of bankruptcy is described as a “double spectacle” where “il y a la représentation vue du parterre et la représentation vue des coulisses” [there is the performance seen from the stalls and the performance seen from the wings] (6: 272)—the latter being the hidden devices set off stage as opposed to the public presentation. Repeatedly, representation is shown to sit on the side of illusion, as opposed to reality. At the moment of the fall, near the start of part two, Birotteau will not let his wife see the disaster: “Birotteau se faisait gai, jovial pour sa femme” [Birotteau acted gay, jovial for his wife] (6: 203), another illusion.

Adjectives on opposite ends of various scales describe César Birotteau throughout, lining up on the poles of reality and illusion (or appearance). He is simple, gross, of limited intelligence, but he appears intelligent, clever, sharp. As a merchant and judge of the tribune of commerce, he appears honest, fair, and just, but (as Wurmser has hammered it home) his business dealings are based on dishonest speculation, abusive profits, lies, deceitful advertising, and unfair competition. He appears modest but he is ambitious, in the first chapter; the terms could easily be reversed in the second. At the moment of the fatal ball (first chapter), whose excessive cost contributes to his bankruptcy, Birotteau thinks about being modest (6: 168) by reminding himself of his origins, but what stands instead for the modest origin he does not think about is the oft-repeated sentence by which he explains to others why he was decorated: “Peut-être . . . me suis-je rendu digne de cette . . . insigne . . . et . . . royale . . . faveur . . . en siégeant au tribunal consulaire et en combattant pour les Bourbons sur les marches de Saint-Roch au 13 vendémiaire, où je fus blessé par Napoléon” [Maybe . . . I have made myself worthy of this . . . signal . . . and . . . royal . . . favor . . . by serving on the bench of the consular tribunal and by fighting for the Bourbons on the steps of Saint-Roch on 13 vendémiaire, where I was wounded by Napoleon] (6: 101). This
formulaic sentence is characterized as Birotteau’s attempt to “apprendre avec modestie ses grandeurs au prochain” [modestly inform his fellow-creatures of his importance] (6: 101), but for the fellow-creatures, the ball represents ambition and political pretensions, not modesty.

Once bankrupt, Birotteau is driven by a real ambition so overwhelming that, like many a passion-driven Balzacian character, he dies from the expenditure of his vital energy—and that ambition is to return every penny to his creditors, giving proof of humility and honor beyond all expectation or necessity. His real probity is often the greatest when the word is not being used in the text (“Je connais ton père, il ne soustraira pas un denier” [I know your father, he will not subtract a single farthing] [6: 237], as Constance tells her daughter). Neither brave nor politically astute, he represents political bravery for those around him, and he is named captain in the national guard (6: 63): “Le coup de feu qu’il avait reçu sur les marches de Saint-Roch lui donna la réputation d’un homme mêlé aux secrets de la politique et celle d’un homme courageux, quoiqu’il n’eût aucun courage militaire au cœur et nulle idée politique dans la cervelle” [The gunshot wound he had received on the steps of Saint-Roch gave him the reputation of a man involved in political secrets and that of a courageous man, although he had no military courage in his heart and no political ideas in his brain] (6: 62). Stupid in reality according to the first chapter, Birotteau appears as if he is acting stupid: “Quoique Birotteau n’eût pas joué sa bêtise, on lui donna le talent de savoir faire la bête à propos” [Although Birotteau had not played at being stupid, they assumed he had the talent of knowing how to pretend stupidity at the right moment] (6: 65). It is precisely his upright, truthful, honest nature that makes du Tillet hate him (6: 219).

So do we find César admirable or contemptible? On the side of admirable actions we find real, stated facts about Birotteau in which his honesty and good qualities are visible; for instance, he enjoys good social credit (in a highly appropriate metaphor) because he is regular in his business affairs and correct in his dealings and never has any debt (6: 68–69). As commerce judge, his sense of justice, his rectitude, and his good will make him “un des juges les plus estimés” [one of the most highly valued judges] (6: 67). He shows himself an astute and intelligent negotiator with François Keller, but his apparent successes with the banker are then called illusions (6: 209–12). Concrete, measurable indicators of Birotteau’s real grandeur can be undermined, precisely because reality is constantly challenged by illusion: “Ses défauts contribuèrent également à sa réputation” [His faults likewise contributed to his reputation] (6: 67). The irony is patent throughout and is expressed from the detached vantage point of the intelligent observer of
bourgeois limitations. In a witty paragraph, whose manner is close to the indirect free style more frequently used by Flaubert in his ironic treatment of the bourgeois mentality in Madame Bovary, the Balzacian narrator enumerates “le langage, les erreurs, les opinions du bourgeois de Paris” [the language, errors, opinions of the Parisian bourgeois] (6: 69) with evident sarcasm, even scorn, accumulating the examples of ignorance and stupidity. The passage ends with this pointedly ironic statement: “Ces points lumineux de leurs connaissances en langue française, en art dramatique, en politique, en littérature, en science expliquent la portée de ces intelligences bourgeoises” [These luminous examples of their knowledge in the French language, in the dramatic arts, in politics, in literature, in the sciences explain the extent of this bourgeois intelligence] (6: 70). The relation between illusion and reality is doubly devious: “[Birotteau] avait sur les lèvres le sourire de bienveillance que prennent les marchands quand vous entrez chez eux; mais ce sourire commercial était l’image de son contentement intérieur et peignait l’état de son âme douce” [on his lips, [Birotteau] had the benevolent smile that merchants put on when you enter their store; but this commercial smile was the image of his interior contentment and painted the state of his gentle soul] (6: 78). The actual, real smile on Birotteau’s lips is the same as the fake one that merchants use to cover their eagerness for your business, but in Birotteau’s case, although reality is expressed in terms of image, its origin in the depths of his soul guarantees its authenticity. What a doubly devious maneuver in Balzac’s representation of realism!

César’s identities are also double. What is he? Marchand parfumeur [perfume merchant] or adjoint [assistant mayor]? Parfumeur [perfumer] or spéculateur [speculator]? Constance will keep reminding him that he is a parfumeur; César keeps dreaming that he will become a député de Paris (6: 48). From a quite different perspective, Graham Falconer comments that the cause of Birotteau’s end is the series of difficult passages “entre ces différentes strates sociales, mondes parallèles où règnent des attitudes, des croyances et des systèmes de valeurs tout à fait différents, sinon contradictoires” [among these different social strata, parallel worlds where completely different, if not contradictory, attitudes, beliefs, and value systems reign] (58). It is a question of titles. One of the possible interpretations of the etc. at the end of the book’s title would maintain that there are additional identities one can ascribe to César. At the Restoration, “Il fut nommé chef de bataillon dans la Garde nationale, quoiqu’il fut incapable de répéter le moindre mot de commandement” [He was appointed major in the national guard, although he was incapable of repeating the least word of command] (6: 77). A short-lived etc., this chef de bataillon, because Napoleon divests him in 1815. Balzac’s text
uses a vast variety of terms to designate the man. Aside from the omnipresent *parfumeur* (an amazing 205 times in 276 pages) and the frequent *négociant* [trader] and *marchand*, we find *paysan parvenu* [newly-rich peasant], *royaliste*, *chevalier de la Légion d’honneur* [knight of the Legion of Honor], *ange* [angel], *adjoint*, *juge*, *le pauvre homme* [the poor man], *généreux martyr* [generous martyr], *homme politique* [politician], *ce pauvre niais* [that poor fool], *vieux juge consulaire* [aged consular judge], *ancien négociant* [former trader], and finally, *martyr*. Not to mention comparisons and periphrases like “comme un héros de Plutarque” [like a hero in Plutarch] (6: 94) or “la machine inerte qui avait nom César” [the sluggish contraption which had César as a name] (6: 189) and “une ganache royaliste près de faire faillite” [a royalist blockhead close to bankruptcy] (6: 214)—and afterwards: “ce noble cadavre commercial” [that noble commercial cadaver] (6: 279).

In sum, the double representations produce a history that cannot be settled: the image is disparate, the presentation duplicitous.

A Calculable Duplicity—or Duplicitous Calculations

The double representations of Birotteau are numerated: how this novel is understood depends on how we read the structures of money in it. There is a parallel between the elaborate financial dealings on the one hand and the narrative structure on the other (as is often the case in *La Comédie humaine*). *César Birotteau* is a “financial narrative” as I called *La Maison Nucingen*, the novella with which this novel is paired in Balzac’s structural design (see chapter 7). Not unlike the tone of persiflage in that novella, Balzac will indulge us in a wonderfully comical description of the new structure of capital under the name of “la Spéculation,” as narrated by the amoral operative Claparon; it is the poetic scaffold for the concrete realization of the novel (6: 241–42). Speculation was a new way to make money at the time the novel took place, between 1818 and 1820, and to underscore the novelty of this approach, Balzac shows us Birotteau wide-eyed with bewilderment when Claparon tells him: “Ne carottez pas avec des pots de pommade et des peignes: mauvais! mauvais! Tondez le public, entrez dans la Spéculation” [Don’t fiddle around with pots of pomade and combs. Bad! Bad! Shave the public, get into Speculation] (6: 241). Wurmser, in his introduction to the novel in the Folio edition, characterizes speculation as fraud (22). But Claparon calls it “le commerce abstrait” and predicts that it will remain secret for another ten years or so; certainly it remains a mystery to César, until Claparon finds a useful but utterly comical metaphor to concretize the abstract:

[Listen . . . such actions need men. There is the idea man who hasn’t got a bean, like all the men with ideas. . . . Picture him like a pig that roots around in the truffle wood! He is followed by a strong fellow, the money man, who awaits the grunt occasioned by the discovery. When the idea man has come upon some good deal, the money man gives him a tap on the shoulder and says: “What’s this? You are putting your head into a gaping oven, my good man, you haven’t got strong enough shoulders; here is a thousand francs, and let me do the staging of this business.” Okay! The Banker then calls in the industrialists. Friends, to work! Prospectuses! What a joke! They get some hunting horns and they shout like trumpets: “A hundred thousand francs for five sous! Or five sous for a hundred thousand francs, gold mines, coal mines.” Anyway all the finagling of commerce. They buy the opinions of the men of science or art, the show takes shape, the public comes in, they get to keep their money, the income is in our hands. The pig is boxed in under his own roof with potatoes, and the others are contented with banknotes. There you have it, my dear sir. Go into business. What do you want to be? Pig, turkey, doormat, or millionaire? Think about it: I’ve outlined for you the theory of modern borrowing.]

What is most suggestive about this lesson in the new finance is the relentlessly concrete nature of its grotesque imagery. In César Birotteau, real money
means cold hard cash, not speculation. Claparon indulges in this comical extended metaphor—a parody of an allegory—precisely because he wants to justify and drive home his refusal to lend real money when Birotteau needs it. Instead, the speculator’s purpose to make money out of money undermines the real, and the absence of solid instruments of credit make real money as illusory as speculation, as Gomart has shown. Her analysis of the complete picture of money in César Birotteau is based on the most careful reading of the actual financial operations and in particular emphasizes the monetary and semiotic concept of circulation.

The sums of money, in each case, appear to indicate a reference to reality (in Balzac’s world, nothing is deemed more real than money), but in effect they are figments of writing. Money refers us to semiosis—the action of signs—not to mimesis. The factual, concrete nature of money ought to make real calculations possible, and by the same token verifiable, but this reality is not operable. Balzac’s maneuvers with money are in general products of writing and not of brute factual reality; they cannot exist in the real world, and yet Balzac acts as though the financial calculations of his narrative are the most grounded in reality. Just as the speculator “écritte les revenus avant qu’ils n’existent” [skims the income off the top before it exists] (6: 241), the calculations by which Balzac restores Birotteau to probity have no foundation in real money; they are dreams and illusions. Try to reproduce the calculations and the financial deals, try to operate this reality, and one sees that it does not work. One cannot, as a reader, actualize those moments in the text, in spite of Balzac’s apparent certainty that nothing is more real.

Nevertheless, a few determined readers have attempted to operate these financial manipulations. Pierre Laubriet and René Bouvier have both written extensively about the calculations in César Birotteau, and Jean-Hervé Donnard (282–83) also examines Birotteau’s business dealings, to conclude that they fail only because he cannot obtain credit. But such verifications work only at the price of slight modifications to Balzac’s text. It is rather the connections among the words, among the parts of the text, that determine the

2. See also Péraud, who describes how the lack of credit gave rise to fake monetary instruments: “Billets à ordre et lettres de change deviennent ainsi une sorte de monnaie-bis, mais une monnaie extrêmement volatile dont la valeur nominale n’abuse personne et dont le pouvoir d’achat réel peut, selon la conjoncture et la fiabilité du porteur, passer du simple au double. . . . De la chute de l’Empire à 1848, ‘l’argent [ . . . ] fait défaut, en face d’une infinité de titres trompeurs, de billets de complaisance’” [Promissory notes and bills of exchange thus become a sort of parallel currency, but an extremely volatile currency whose nominal value fools no one and whose real purchasing power can go from the single to the double, depending on the circumstances and the reliability of the bearer. . . . From the fall of the Empire to 1848, “money . . . is lacking, as opposed to an infinity of fake securities and obliging drafts”] (152).
numbers and amounts Balzac mentions, which correspond to a need of the writing, not of the invented reality. For instance, somehow Birrotteau’s need for ten thousand francs’ credit suddenly becomes a need for thirty thousand francs; not long afterward, it is forty thousand. After his faillite, within a matter of pages, César goes from owing hundreds of thousands of francs to owning ten thousand francs of income, as trickles and streams unite to form an improbable river of cash, in a narrative device quite common in Balzac’s writing about money. The function of the writing is to bring César Birrotteau to the ending in death as a martyr of probity, debts paid, wife and daughter well off, and himself rehabilitated at the price of his life.

Financial success came to Birrotteau with the invention of La Double Pâte des Sultanes, a “double cosmétique” capable of both tightening loose skins and loosening tight ones (6: 64), which certainly sounds double in the duplicitous sense I am examining. The novel’s title reads like a prospectus for such a beauty product, full of duplicitous claims: it too is on the side of theatrical representation, not humble reality. Le Figaro, in its issue of 17 December 1837, announced Balzac’s novel as a free premium for people who subscribe for three months in terms that read just like such a prospectus. This promise of publication, the last in a series, was the one that was eventually fulfilled, the genesis of César Birrotteau being among the most difficult in La Comédie humaine. But the interesting thing is that the publicity for the novel resembles the publicity for Birrotteau’s cosmetics: it is a financial success only on the level of the writing. I want to show the narratological implications of this duplicity.

When grandeur, probity, or high morality are the subject of sarcasm and scorn, irony and mockery, the obvious values are reversed; Birrotteau is apparently decadent or fallen in his grandiose phase, and he becomes grand and admirable only because he has lost his grandeur. A graduate student

3. The text of the announcement is found in a footnote to a December 20 letter to Mme Hanska (1: 426), and it is interesting for the variation on the novel’s title: “Avis, en souscrivant pour trois mois (20 fr) au Figaro on reçoit gratuitement à titre de prime: l’Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birrotteau, parfumeur, chevalier de la Légion d’honneur, adjoint au maire du 2e arrondissement de la ville de Paris, nouvelle Scène de la vie parisienne, par M. de Balzac, 2 volumes in-8o, entièrement inédits” [Notice: by subscribing for three months (20 fr) to the Figaro, you’ll receive free, as a premium, the History of the grandeur and of the decadence of César Birrotteau, perfumer, Knight of the Legion of Honor, assistant mayor of the 2nd arrondissement of the city of Paris, a new Scene of Parisian Life, by M. de Balzac, 2 volumes in octavo, never before published].
reading this novel had the excellent insight that perhaps we should not take the grandeur and décadence of the title as an outline of the narrative to come, but rather see them as simultaneous. Grandeur and decadence acting together produce a tension of duplicity. That duplicity then casts its shadow on the Balzacian project.

Thus the etc. of the title can further be interpreted as commenting on the title itself: the title could continue, becoming a story in itself. Beyond the story of Birotteau, seen as going from organization to disorganization (a structure opposite to the desired unity of Les Chouans), Balzac adumbrates the history of far vaster organizations. The trailing etc. propels us toward a larger application of the system of grandeur vs. decadence, of apogee vs. the fall, and that is precisely what Balzac develops in an extremely important passage where he applies this system to nothing less than “tout ce qui s’organise ici-bas” [everything that has existence here below] (6: 81)—death, our terrestrial globe, History with a capital H, sovereigns, politics, nations, even pyramids. The rest of my analysis will be about this passage:

Toute existence a son apogée, une époque pendant laquelle les causes agissent et sont en rapport exact avec les résultats. Ce midi de la vie, où les forces vives s’équilibrent et se produisent dans tout leur éclat, est non seulement commun aux êtres organisés, mais encore aux cités, aux nations, aux idées, aux institutions, aux commerces, aux entreprises qui, semblables aux races nobles et aux dynasties, naissent, s’élèvent et tombent. D’où vient la rigueur avec laquelle ce thème de croissance et de décroissance s’applique à tout ce qui s’organise ici-bas? car la mort elle-même a, dans les temps de fléau, son progrès, son ralentissement, sa recrudescence et son sommeil. Notre globe lui-même est peut-être une fusée un peu plus durable que les autres. L’Histoire, en redisant les causes de la grandeur et de la décadence de tout ce qui fut ici-bas, pourrait avertir l’homme du moment où il doit arrêter le jeu de toutes ses facultés; mais ni les conquérants, ni les acteurs, ni les femmes, ni les auteurs n’en écouteront la voix salutaire.

César Birotteau, qui devait se considérer comme étant à l’apogée de sa fortune, prenait ce temps d’arrêt comme un nouveau point de départ. Il ne savait pas, et d’ailleurs ni les nations, ni les rois n’ont tenté d’écrire en caractères inéffacables la cause de ces renversements dont l’Histoire est grosse, dont tant de maisons souveraines ou commerciales offrent de si grands exemples. Pourquoi de nouvelles pyramides ne rappelleraient-elles pas incessamment ce principe qui doit dominer la politique des nations aussi bien que celle des particuliers: Quand l’effet produit n’est plus en rapport direct ni en proportion égale avec sa cause, la désorganisation commence? Mais
ces monuments existent partout, c’est les traditions et les pierres qui nous parlent du passé, qui consacrent les caprices de l’indomptable Destin, dont la main efface nos songes et nous prouve que les plus grands événements se résument dans une idée. Troie et Napoléon ne sont que des poèmes. Puise cette histoire être le poème des vicissitudes bourgeoises auxquelles nulle voix n’a songé, tant elles semblent dénueées de grandeur, tandis qu’elles sont au même titre immenses: il ne s’agit pas d’un seul homme ici, mais de tout un peuple de douleurs. (6: 80–81)

[Every existence has its apogee, a period during which the causes act and are in direct relation with the results. This prime of life, where the lively forces reach equilibrium and are present in all their glory, is not only common to organic beings, but also to cities, nations, ideas, institutions, businesses, enterprises, which, like the noble breeds and dynasties, are born, rise, and fall. Whence comes the rigor with which this theme of growth and decline is applied to everything that has existence here below? For death itself has, in times of plague, its progress, its slowing down, its renewed outbreak, and its sleep. Our globe itself is perhaps a flare lasting a little longer than others. History, by retelling the causes of the grandeur and the decadence of everything that has existence here below, could warn a man of the moment when he should bring an end to the action of all his faculties; but neither conquerors, nor actors, nor women, nor authors listen to its salutary voice.

César Birotteau, who should have considered himself at the apogee of his fortune, took this pause as a new point of departure. He did not know, and moreover neither nations nor kings have attempted to write in indelible characters the cause of these reversals of which History is full, of which so many sovereign or commercial families offer such important examples. Why shouldn’t new pyramids ceaselessly call to mind this principle that must dominate the politics of nations as well as of individuals: When the produced effect is no longer in direct relation or equal proportion to the cause, disorganization begins? But these monuments exist everywhere, they are the traditions and the stones that speak to us about the past, that sanctify the whims of indomitable Destiny, whose hand erases our dreams and proves to us that the greatest events are summed up in one idea. Troy and Napoleon are but poems. May this story be the poem of the bourgeois vicissitudes that no voice has dreamed of, since they seem to be so devoid of grandeur, while they are by the same claim immense: this is not about a single man, but about an entire populace of suffering.]

Balzac quickly makes the connection whereby a particular history, the first
word of the title, can represent all History. From the story of one man, a bourgeois merchant during the Restoration, to the history of many: an entire populace of suffering. And we are justified in understanding that general History as the one Balzac sought to contain in *La Comédie humaine*. *Décadence, croissance, décroissance, renversements, apogée, chute, fin, début* [Decadence, growth, decline, reversals, peak, fall, end, beginning], organization, disorganization—all these things enabled *La Comédie humaine*. Everything rises or falls or grows and diminishes.4

What is more, this passage reveals that Balzac perceived he would not finish his great work. The words Balzac himself italicized contain the key terms *cause* and *effet*. As is well known, the *Études de mœurs* were to be the *effects* visible in the organization, the *Études philosophiques* the *causes*, the *Études analytiques* the principles. This three-part logical structure is weakest on principles—few titles, little ground covered; the structure functions rather as if it were a two-part one, with causes underlying and explaining effects. But there are far more effects than causes.

The effects are the observable elements, the actions, decors, events, characters, and plots whose details make up the world we call Balzacian. They correspond to the tendency for Balzac’s novels to create and put forward vast quantities of information. The causes of these effects are the machinery of desires, the passions, the will, and the visions that motivate action in the real world. Narratologically speaking, the twenty titles in the *Études philosophiques*, in addition to narrating stories of the human mind, erect the signifying structures into which the myriad observable details can be agglomerated until the whole takes on a meaning; the *Études philosophiques* are the narratological causes, or forms, for the myriad effects, or facts, of the *Études de mœurs*. But there is a disproportion: there are far fewer of these signifying structures and they cannot accommodate everything Balzac’s fertile pen captured (or more accurately created); as a result, like the italicized phrase on this page of *César Birotteau*, the effect is not in direct connection with the cause, and disorganization ensues.

How could it have been otherwise? Characters, plots, events, decors and so on are not limited to the novels of the *Études de mœurs*; effects and the tendency to overload on information are necessarily out of proportion to the structures of imagination on which they rely for intelligibility; and those

---

4. Butor considers the rise and fall of the French and writes: “Si la bourgeoisie évolue du côté d’Anselme Popinot, la France ira vers son salut, vers la grandeur; si elle se laisse tromper par du Tillet, elle ira vers la catastrophe, la décadence” [If the bourgeoisie evolves in the direction of Anselme Popinot, France will go toward salvation, toward grandeur; if it lets itself be fooled by du Tillet, it will go toward catastrophe, toward decadence] (*Paris* 176).
structures of imagination are certainly not limited to the Études philosophiques. As Balzac wrote to Mme Hanska in 1834, “à mesure que l’œuvre gagne en spirale les hauteurs de la pensée, elle se resserre et se condense” [as the work spirals to the heights of thought, it tightens and condenses] (Hanska 1: 204). In enunciating this principle, Balzac is admitting that as he writes, he himself goes toward disorganization.

Notice that dreams—“songes”—are what our monuments (stones and traditions) erase, and that (even) the greatest events can be reduced to an idea—events in their massive quantity being the detailed information Balzac’s novels supply and the ideas to which they can be reduced being the themes and motifs of their narrative structure. Eventually, only the reality, not the dream or illusion, will remain; dreams are crushed by the sheer weight of the massive monuments. “Ces monuments existent partout” [These monuments exist everywhere], Balzac writes: these new pyramids—almost inconceivable acts of labor—represent Balzac’s very novels, “qui nous parlent du passé” [that speak to us about the past]. Grandiose audacity lies in these words. Balzac posed himself as the mere secretary taking down the stories written by History, but neither nations nor kings have succeeded in the effort to “écrire en caractères ineffaçables” [write in indelible characters] the mammoth events of History; only Balzac will do so, we are to believe. The humble realities of bourgeois fortunes are not “dénuées de grandeur” [devoid of grandeur], they are “immense,” and César’s history equals in importance, as an idea, the mammoth events of History that are represented by the two names, Troy and Napoleon.

This important passage occurs quite early in the novel, and Balzac uses it to explain the notion of apogee—which is also in the title of the first chapter, “César à son apogée.” Balzac was at his height when he wrote César Birotteau starting in 1834. Like his perfumer, he took it for the moment to make a new departure, toward the wonderful organized disorganization that is La Comédie humaine. Was he using this passage and this plot to hint at an unconscious anxiety about his future? Was he poised at his apogee, without apparently knowing it—as a slight syntactical anomaly highlights: “il ne savait pas” [he did not know]—and sensing that he should admonish himself to “arrêter le jeu de toutes ses facultés” [bring an end to the action of all his faculties] while at the same time confessing that “ni les conquérants, ni les acteurs, ni les femmes, ni les auteurs n’en écoutent la voix salutaire” [neither conquerors, nor actors, nor women, nor authors listen to its salutary voice] (emphasis added)? Yet he writes to Mme Hanska: “Quelque jour, quand j’aurai fini, nous rirons bien” [Some day, when I am finished, we will have a good laugh] (Hanska 1: 205; emphasis added). Working on César Birotteau, he
tells his mistress that he is motivated by his desire to appear grander to her, that César Birotteau and La Maison Nucingen “vous feront arriver mon nom à vos oreilles plus grand que par le passé” [will make my name reach your ears grander than in the past] (Hanska 1: 371). But Balzac like Birotteau is double, representing himself writing as both illusion and reality, appearing only as a dream in the never written Essai sur les forces humaines, which was to be “l’ouvrage de toute ma vie” [the work of my whole life] (Vachon, Les travaux 144). This system works only because we, his willing readers, grant to his duplicitous representations the credit that, unlike Birotteau, keeps Balzac safe from bankruptcy and the martyrdom of his probity.