In this first novel of the *Scènes de la vie de Province*, written in 1841, a familiar picture of the provincial town emerges, one that is found in several other Balzac novels. Here Nemours is represented as a stifling, narrow-minded milieu in which a stupid, greedy, and powerful bourgeoisie smothers the good and the noble. As if to underscore the underlying dichotomy of Paris and the provinces, several escapes to the capital designate it as the place where one makes money (or spends it), and as the locus of illumination and knowledge. While money flows loosely in Paris, in Nemours it is as inbred as the social structure, in which pernicious ignorance breeds unchecked. The peasantry are exploited and cheated by the rising bourgeoisie, who hold all the positions in town, while the aristocracy stubbornly retains its ancien régime prejudices and falls by its own impoverishments under the determined attack of the bourgeoisie. The social picture is a standard in *La Comédie humaine*, as I’ve suggested, but two figures of semiosis particularize it: the omnipresent relations among the four families of Minoret, Levrault, Massin, and Crémière representing the pervasive extension of the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and, on the other, the extraordinary coterie enfolding the heroine, uniquely identified by its belonging to no class and by its elite intellectuality. I characterize as genealogical the relations among the four bourgeois families, whereas the classless intellectuals are connected by inheritance, particularly in the case of the two central characters, Ursule Mirouët and her tutor. The
pure and innocent Ursule is put in grave danger by the lowly evils of the triumphant bourgeoisie, as in *Pierrette*, but all nevertheless ends happily, with order, justice, truth, and light, thanks to spiritualism.

For a major effect of the novel is to demonstrate that spirituality triumphs over materiality. Balzac opposes these deeper themes of the novel in the same way as genealogy and inheritance, mimetic structures which these themes extend into the domain of ideas. The topic is central and vital to *La Comédie humaine*, but no subject however profound is immune to those puns and word games that Balzac can never resist. Consider this sterling example, in which lapidary wit puts spirituality and materiality momentarily on the same plane: “Croyez-vous aux revenants? dit Zélie au curé.—Croyez-vous aux revenus? répondit le prêtre en souriant” [“Do you believe in ghosts?” said Zélie to the priest. “Do you believe in gold?” replied the priest, smiling] (3: 976). The play on words is ironic: the materialistic Zélie speaks of spirits, while the priest reminds her of money. Like so many Balzacian novels, it seems, this one is built on series of oppositions, functioning in tandem.

The action begins in 1829 and turns repeatedly to near and distant past times to provide necessary explanations, until a return to the present. After a rich, enlightened life in Paris, the philosophically minded doctor Denis Minoret has returned in 1815 to Nemours, where he was born, to finish his life with his ward and three chosen friends: the abbé Chaperon, justice of the peace Bongrand, and captain Jordy. Together, these four men have been raising Ursule Mirouët, Minoret’s deceased wife’s half-brother’s child, who in 1815 was an orphan of ten months. By 1829, Minoret’s nieces and nephews in Nemours are fearful of losing their inheritance to Ursule. The striking opening pages portray their alarm when the doctor attends mass for the first time in his life (his conversion is the work of Ursule, who is now fifteen, and of animal magnetism). When the doctor dies, Ursule does not receive the fortune he left her, because Minoret-Levrault, the nephew, steals three “inscriptions de rentes en trois pour cent, au porteur” [government stock certificates at 3 percent, to the bearer] intended for Ursule and together worth 36,000 francs of income. For good measure, Minoret-Levrault also burns the doctor’s will. In the purity of her spirituality, Ursule is visited by the doctor’s image in her dreams. He shows her Minoret-Levrault’s crime and the numbers of the *inscriptions de rente*; she recovers the fortune, marries the aristocrat Savinien de Portenduère whom she loves, and moves to Paris. Minoret-Levrault becomes an honest man, but his wife Zélie loses her mind when their son Désiré dies after an accident.

This astute narrative design thus combines an affair of succession with a story of animal magnetism: the stolen inheritance returns to Ursule only
because she possesses somnambulistic powers. For Balzac, this combination whereby a spiritual faculty produces a material gain is not in the least contradictory. It is central to the effectiveness of the narrative semiosis of this novel.

Minoret at eighty-three can well be called an uncle to inherit from (3: 776): his nephew Minoret-Levrault, niece Mme Crémière-Crémière, and first cousin once removed Mme Massin-Levrault with their spouses expect to inherit the doctor’s considerable wealth, and in fact they have virtually no other collective designation than “the heirs.” Upon first arriving in Nemours, Minoret asks his nephew: “Ai-je d’autres héritiers?” [“Have I other heirs?”] (3: 786), and, henceforth, whenever they are collectively mentioned, that is the word for the Massins, Levraults, Minorets, and Crémières, almost exclusively. “Héritiers” is used 105 times in the 220 pages of the Pléiade edition—by far the greatest number of occurrences among the forty-nine novels included in an electronic concordance of La Comédie humaine. In addition, “héritier” occurs seven times in the singular and “héritière” five times in singular and plural forms. “Cohéritier” and “cohéritières” occur six times. “Héritier” applies to family members; the Petit Robert gives this definition: “relative designated by law to receive the succession of a dead person. . . . The heirs or blood heirs are distinguished from irregular successors, from legatees” (emphasis added). The term “héritiers” thus represents immense narrative potential or plot-value, which is only heightened when Balzac, in a sociological vein, uses instead the broader terms “bourgeois” and “bourgeoise” (twenty-nine times), and “bourgeoisie” (ten times). Savinien de Portenduère, referring to the heirs, will say, “Ces bourgeois sont comme des chiens à la curée” [“These bourgeois are like dogs going for quarry”] (3: 925). The strength of their evil lies partly in their common purpose as “cohéritiers.” As Georges Poulet observes, “Conspiration, coalition, l’ensemble des convoitises se forme volontiers en une association des forces tendues vers un même but. Dans presque chaque roman de Balzac, autour d’une figure qui est à la fois une victime et un objet d’envie, se constitue un cercle de volontés avides” [Conspiracy or coalition, the instances of cupidity readily come together into an association of forces directed toward a single goal. In almost every novel by Balzac, around a figure who is both a victim and an object of envy, there forms a ring of greedy desires] (209).

Balzac often indulged in complex genealogies, notably in Pierrette, La Rabouilleuse, and Les paysans, but none is so relentless, so pervasive, so inescapable in its action as the one he created here. Thierry Bodin has sketched the development of Balzac’s idea of the evil in bourgeois genealogies in the case of Les paysans. The unfinished Les héritiers Boirouge consists almost entirely of the family tree whose final version will end up in Ursule Mirouët,
but Balzac complicated the genealogy so much that he had to abandon that novel. The genealogy in *Ursule Mirouët* is a mimetic figure of his semiosis. Madeleine Ambrière-Fargeaud writes, in notes to the novel: “*Ursule Mirouët, La Rabouilleuse* et *Les Paysans* peuvent être considérés comme des avatars des *Héritiers Boirouge*, projet reparaissant, ondoyant et divers, mais toujours centré sur le grand thème du partage, de la succession” [*Ursule Mirouët, La Rabouilleuse, and Les paysans* can be considered incarnations of *Les héritiers Boirouge*, a recurring project, undulating and diverse, but always centered on the vast theme of distribution, of succession] (3: 1524). The four indigenous families of Nemours—Minoret, Massin, Levrault, and Crémière—forge the links of a “zigzag” network; they are the four “shuttles” that weave the “lacework” of a “human cloth,” the pieces configuring the “domestic kaleidoscope” of the bourgeois “cousinage” (3: 782, 783). The image of a kaleidoscope, in which the same few pieces taking different positions form a vast number of configurations, aptly figures the internal genetic crossings and the thousands of possible varieties stemming from them. Minutely, obsessively explicative, the genealogy of these families, which Balzac anchors in the time of Louis XI, is both an obstacle to reading and an excellent example of a text presuming ignorance. Its complexity would stump a genealogical scientist, Balzac writes: “Les variations de ce kaléidoscope domestique à quatre éléments se compliquaient tellement par les naissances et par les mariages, que l’arbre généalogique des bourgeois de Nemours eût embarrassé les Bénédictins de l’Almanach de Gotha eux-même” [The variations in this four-piece domestic kaleidoscope were becoming so complicated by births and marriages that the genealogical tree of the bourgeois of Nemours would have embarrassed the Benedictines of the Almanach de Gotha themselves] (3: 782). (My own response to such complexity, as with *La Rabouilleuse* and *Pierrette*, is to draw the family tree: see figure 11.1.)

Ubiquitous hyphenated combinations of the four names arise under Louis XIII, and arise in Balzac’s text as an astonishing exercise in excessive, unreasonable writing:


> [these four families were already producing some Massin-Crémieres, Levrault-Massins, Massin-Minorets, Minoret-Minorets, Crémière-Levraults,
Figure 11.1 Ursule Mirouët genealogy
Surely this is Balzac at his most obsessive. These connections (to which are added a fifth name, the lawyer usually called Dionis whose full name is Crémière-Dionis, and who is associated with Massin-Levrault in usury) make it impossible to apprehend a character unless one also interrogates his relationships; in reading for knowledge, we read multiple relations, and thus we approach impossible closure and endless language. The hyphenated linkages signal the alliances that offer “le curieux spectacle de l’irradiation de quelques familles autochtones” [“the odd spectacle of the irradiation of a few autochthonous families”] (3: 782) and the “entrecroisements de races au fond des provinces” [intertwining of races deep in the provinces] (3: 781). One also finds this odd spectacle in the Swiss cantons, Balzac writes (3: 782). (The spectacle continues: in January 1996, in Saas-Fee in the Wallis canton, I saw the surnames of about ten families, often linked by hyphens, emblazoned on every hotel, restaurant, store, or service in town.) These hyphenated relations become emblems of the complex narration, mimetic figures of the plot and of the structure of writing. A further complication, for my reading at least, stems from a certain laxity in using the full versions of the names: Massin-Levrault is often called simply Massin; Crémière is actually Crémière-Crémière, etc. Balzac relies heavily on the reader’s assiduity in acquiring knowledge. But this repeated mechanism also allows the name Minoret to apply equally to the two chief antagonists in the possession of the fortune, the doctor and his nephew Minoret-Levrault.

A second set of relations concerns what Balzac innovatively called “cognomonisme,” the connection of a person’s name to his work: the profession gives rise to the name. In the present case, cognomonism justifies designating the person by the profession; thus Minoret-Levrault is the “maître de poste” or captain of the post, Crémière is the “percepteur de Nemours” or tax collector, and Massin is the “greffier de la justice de paix,” the clerk of the justice of the peace, and these designations are as likely to occur as the names, in Balzac’s writing. The effect is to lend greater weight to the dominating forces of the bourgeoisie, which govern both the social and the narrative structures.

In juxtaposition to this semiotic structure of genealogy, excessive in its manifestations, Balzac places the harmonious unity of Ursule Mirouët. Several passages underscore this unity. For instance:

Bientôt la mélancolie de ses pensées insensiblement adoucie teignit en quelque sorte ses heures, et relia toutes ces choses par une indéfinissable
harmonie: ce fut une exquise propreté, la plus exacte symétrie dans la disposition des meubles . . . une paix que les habitudes de la jeune fille communi-quaient aux choses et qui rendit son chez-soi aimable. (3: 930−31)

[Soon the gently stilled melancholy of her thoughts colored her hours, as it were, and brought all these things together by an indefinable harmony: there was an exquisite cleanliness, the most exact symmetry in the position of her furniture . . . a peacefulness that the young girl’s habits communicated to things and that made her home lovable.]

While the spider’s web of the bourgeois genealogy surrounds the doctor’s succession (“ils essayèrent d’entourer moins l’oncle que la succession” [they tried to surround not so much the uncle as the inheritance] [3: 790]) and nearly destroys the rightful heiress, the plot schemes to explain how the fortune comes to the central figure, Ursule Mirouët, after being lost among the collaterals. The circulation of money, never secondary or insignificant in Balzac, follows a complex structure analogous to the excessive complexities of the genealogy.

Autochthonous families thus form the bourgeoisie of Nemours, which is endogamous, materialistic, anti-intellectual, and anti-musical. The heirs fail to appreciate Ursule’s piano-playing of Beethoven’s seventh symphony (“Bête à vent” [Beet oven], says Mme Crémière, the Mrs. Malaprop of the héritiers [3: 871]). They want nothing so much as to demolish Minoret’s exquisite library after his death. In contrast, Minoret’s chosen company explicitly excludes the bourgeoisie and is exogamous, spiritual, intellectual, and musical. Ursule’s upbringing reproduces the ideals of the Enlightenment, and the members of the minute society that separates her from the town are repeatedly characterized by their luminosity and illumination (3: 793, 794, 797). They constitute a “family of chosen minds,” whose “fraternity” forms a “compact, exclusive society,” an “oasis” (3: 798) in the doctor’s living room. Under the effect of the light that streams forth from Ursule, the doctor’s wall of incredulity cracks and crumbles (3: 837–38). From the opening pages, after Minoret’s conversion, the mystical and the spiritual hold sway in his household, with the support of the priest. In the confrontation between the heirs and Ursule, these many structures of opposition repeatedly place Ursule outside the materialistic pathways by which a succession usually passes. The transfer of money to her is thus made problematic by the very semiotic structures of the novel.

As if to exacerbate this repudiation of bourgeois breeding and inbreeding, the novel, not without irony, is structured to bring about the passage of the
succession through illegitimacy, for Ursule’s father Joseph Mirouët is the illegitimate though recognized half-brother of the doctor Minoret’s wife. (Nicole Mozet, in Balzac au pluriel, has called the novel “une véritable apologie de la bâtardise et de la mésalliance” [a veritable justification of illegitimacy and misalliance] [53]). It is useful to spell out this relationship (an explication nécessaire). Minoret’s wife, also named Ursule Mirouët, was the daughter of Valentin Mirouët, an organist and builder of musical instruments. (Having left Nemours in his youth, Minoret did not take a wife from among the bourgeois cousinage.) This first Ursule Mirouët died in 1793, leaving the doctor childless after several of their children died. Ursule’s father Valentin, meanwhile, had an illegitimate son in his old age, Joseph, whose mother he did not marry in order to avoid bringing dishonor to the legitimate Ursule. Joseph Mirouët, “excessivement mauvais sujet” [an exceedingly bad fellow] (3: 812), after an adventurous life, married Dinah Grollman in Germany, and the legitimate product of that union is the Ursule Mirouët who is the heroine of this novel, born in 1814 and costing her mother’s life. Joseph Mirouët, “the natural brother-in-law” of the doctor and the half-brother of the doctor’s wife, died soon after, leaving Ursule an orphan. Thus Balzac can describe her as Minoret’s “natural niece” (3: 843), since her father is the illegitimate brother of his wife. It is to be noted that the blood relation, which is only half a blood relation, passes through the wife, not the doctor, and that the first Ursule Mirouët was dead twenty-one years before the heroine was born. There is, strictly speaking, no blood relation between Denis Minoret and Ursule Mirouët, and the text underscores this fact by calling him her godfather and her guardian, never her uncle.

Exogamy compounded by illegitimacy thus defines Ursule’s distinctness from the bourgeois cousinage. In this matter the text exploits French law, which held that legitimization of bastards did not extend to the next generation: illegitimate descent does not continue beyond the first degree, according to notes by Madeleine Ambrière-Fargeaud in the Folio edition (389). The legitimate child of an illegitimate child can make no claim on its grandfather. Ursule, second-generation offspring of illegitimacy, is a stranger to Minoret (3: 851), “car on peut soutenir qu’il n’existe aucun lien de parenté entre Ursule et le docteur” [for one can maintain that there is no family relation between Ursule and the doctor] (3: 843), according to Dionis the lawyer. The text insists on this absence of relationship, and indeed depends on it. (Nicole Mozet’s observation in “Ursule Mirouët ou le test du bâtard” is not entirely in agreement with Balzac. She writes: “De ce fait, au regard des lois et des mœurs de l’époque, elle n’est pour lui ni une parente ni une étrangère, et tout testament en sa faveur serait susceptible de faire l’objet d’un procès de la part
des neveux et nièces en attente d’héritage” [Because of this fact, with respect to the laws and mores of the time, she is neither a relative nor a stranger to him, and any will in her favor would be susceptible of being the object of a lawsuit brought by the nephews and nieces awaiting their inheritance] [217].

The legal situation is however complicated enough to require two sets of explanations in the novel (which are yet not adequate without the extensive additional information found in the editor’s notes). The explanation Dionis supplies to the heirs, supplemented by information from Goupil the clerk and Désiré, newly become a lawyer (3: 843−48), favors the heirs, while justice of the peace Bongrand’s detailed discussion with the doctor (3: 850−52) seeks Ursule’s interest. Yet both come to the same conclusion, the gist of which is that Minoret cannot leave his fortune to Ursule by making a will in her favor. This is not strictly speaking the case, however. If Minoret were Ursule’s natural (not legitimate) father, the law would prevent his leaving his entire fortune to her, for the spirit of the law is to prevent the natural parent’s predilection for the illegitimate child from disinheriting the legitimate children. But, as Balzac wrote (in referring to an earlier version), “Ursule Mirouët est évidemment une étrangère pour le Dr Minoret” [Ursule Mirouët is obviously a stranger for Dr. Minoret] (3: 1533). In fact Minoret could write a will in Ursule’s favor—just as he does write a will bequeathing 36,000 francs of income to Savinien. What really prevents the doctor from bequeathing his fortune directly to Ursule is quite precisely the greediness of the heirs and their very conviction that they deserve Minoret’s entire fortune. So certain and predictable is this circumstance that both camps reach the same conclusion, that the doctor cannot bequeath his fortune to Ursule, and for the same reason: the heirs are sure to bring a lawsuit against Ursule, who would be, though legally in her right, too feeble to win. As Balzac wrote, “le docteur, justement effrayé de cette perspective, renonce à laisser à sa filleule sa succession par testament” [the doctor, justly alarmed by this perspective, abandons the attempt to leave his inheritance to his godchild by testament] (3: 1533).

In legal terms, then, there is no family relationship and thus no relation of genealogy between Minoret and Ursule. Instead, by a semantic turn of phrase, the doctor “inherited” her when Joseph Mirouët “légua sa fille au docteur” [bequeathed his daughter to the doctor] (3: 813). This welcome metaphor provides an excellent example of Balzac’s supplying pointed markers for our guidance. Inheritance is the indicator of desire and preference: Minoret is father, mother, friend, doctor, and godfather to Ursule (3: 855); desire and preference characterize their relationship, whereas mindless and reiterated intermarriage produced the genealogy. One may say that interest governs the
genealogy, desire the inheritance; or, in the basic terms of the prime movers, Money on the one hand, Love on the other. As Nicole Mozet writes, “Espace utopique dans une certaine mesure, le Nemours balzacien est le lieu d’une stupéfiante redéfinition de la filialité, conçue en termes d’amour et non plus en termes de sang” [Balzac’s Nemours, a utopian space to a degree, is the site of a stunning redefinition of filiation, conceived in terms of love rather than blood] (La ville de province 219). We learn in detail about the disappointed paternity of the doctor (3: 813), who compensates for the loss of his several children by accepting “avec bonheur le legs que lui fit Joseph Mirouët” [with joy the bequest that Joseph Mirouët made him] (3: 813; emphasis added). (Just as the heir is distinct from the legatee, the “legs” or bequest is defined by the Petit Robert as “free disposition made by testament.”) In Minoret’s letter expressing his last wishes and telling Ursule where to find the stock certificates, he recalls her resemblance to the first Ursule Mirouët, his wife, which also motivates his paternal affection; and he mentions “le serment que j’ai fait à ton pauvre père de le remplacer” [the oath I made to your poor father to replace him] (3: 915). Through this metaphor of inheritance, Ursule replaces the doctor’s wife and the doctor replaces Ursule’s father, in a perfect, closed system, which also recovers lost time by superposing past and present. Attached to this letter is a testament granting 36,000 francs of income to Savinien de Portenduère, in case Ursule refuses to take the money herself. Indirectly, this provision shows how Ursule is defined by her refusal of greediness, her refusal to “salir par des pensées d’intérêt” [sully by thoughts of self-interest] (3: 930) her affection for her guardian, while thoughts of interest alone characterize the greed of the heirs. Most important, I take a key word from the short testament itself to characterize the essential nature of the relations of inheritance between Minoret and Ursule: preference. The doctor’s money goes to Savinien “par préférence à tous mes héritiers” [in preference to all my heirs] (3: 917). (As a minor point contributing to the relations by inheritance, captain Jordy writes a touching will by which he bequeaths his 10,000 francs of savings to Ursule [3: 817].)

In short, Minoret chooses to pass the succession to Ursule by a mechanism that does not fall under the legality of the relationships defined by intermarriages and births. The fortune Minoret leaves to his cherished pupil in the form of the government certificates to the bearer is hidden in the pages of a folio volume of the Pandectes in his library. Not only is it worthy of Minoret’s keen sense of fairness to place these writings in a volume of the Roman civil law which forms the basis for European law, but the wit in Balzac no doubt chose this title because it means, in Latin, “book containing everything” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language). Every-
thing, indeed, for without the inscriptions de rente Ursule has a mere pittance; she is described as “sans aucune fortune” [with no fortune at all] (3: 925). The money that has been converted to these certificates no longer has any connection to the succession or the doctor’s estate, any more than Ursule has to Minoret, legally speaking. Rather, these papers have value only for the hands that hold them. Because they are immediately related to their cash value, they can be removed from the succession both literally (as by robbery) and in terms of the financial portion they represent. This monetary document thus becomes an emblem for the position of the writing in this novel. Both the nature of the writing and its location are figures for how writing achieves significance and value by its location; eventually the position of the inscriptions will become the focus of spiritualism, the value of which resides specifically in its placement in the narrative. As for the doctor’s will, once it is stolen and burned it has no value of any sort. The fact that both camps continue to look for a will as if it were merely unfound indicates that it too depends on position for value. As Balzac writes, “Pour les monuments comme pour les hommes, la position fait tout” [For monuments as for men, position is all] (3: 777).

By these mechanisms Minoret sees to it that his preferred relation will inherit most of his money. When Minoret-Levrault steals the money, and tells no one, the full value of the estate becomes moot. (“Et les valeurs?” [“And the shares?”] asks the priest. “Courez donc après!” [“See if you can catch them!”] says Bongrand [3: 926].) Those portions of Minoret’s succession that are publicly known, including his house, are divided among three heirs, while Ursule receives nothing. Predilection characterizes the reader’s desire to see the money returned to Ursule, but, true to her upbringing and her nature, Ursule refuses to employ the greedy strategies variously proposed to her by the townsfolk. The harmful actions of the domestic coalition, centered on Minoret-Levrault’s theft of the government stock certificates, counteract the reader’s desire until spiritualism, a concrete and active manifestation of a penetrating influence focused by will and desire, conquers materialism and brings the money to the unitary figure of composition, Ursule.

Just as somnambulism arises in a concentration of the will, the narrative’s recourse to somnambulism indicates the concentration of unitary thought in the composition of the novel, seen in the genotextual process by which money enters the system of the spiritual. Somnambulism is the mechanism that transfers the certificates from the semiotic figure of genealogy to that
of inheritance. A passing mention of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (3: 823) in the explication nécessaire that justifies the doctor’s conversion by magnetism and mesmerism is no incidental reference but a precious guide to the structure of the plot and its unitary thought. Balzac is at his most fervent in his explanation of magnetism, which is anchored in its opposition to the materialism of eighteenth-century philosophy. What for Balzac is a misrecognized or badly exploited phenomenon of nature manifest not only in the inscrutable Orient but also in Jesus Christ was in the eighteenth century “repoussé par les doubles atteintes des gens religieux et des philosophes matérialistes également alarmés” [repulsed by the twin attacks from religious people and materialist philosophers both equally alarmed] (3: 822). Balzac compares this erroneous assessment of magnetism to the “sort qu’avait eu la vérité dans la personne de Galilée” [fate that truth had had in the person of Galileo] in the sixteenth century (3: 822). To Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire belongs the merit of the “immense progrès que font en ce moment les sciences naturelles” [immense progress that the natural sciences are now making] (3: 823), under the idea of unity. That such a unity takes the form, in this novel, of magnetism or mesmerism, in their somnambulistic version, stems from Balzac’s profound belief in the “ancient human power” (3: 822) that allows one person to influence another by concentrating one’s will.

Mesmerism underlies the novel as the principle of its effects. This science of imponderable fluids (3: 823) is profoundly rooted in the luminous figure of Ursule Mirouët; Balzac says it is “étroitement lié[e] par la nature de ses phénomènes à la lumière” [narrowly linked, by the nature of its phenomena, to light] (3: 823). Music, which plays a significant role (see also chapter 14), provides another expression of mesmerism:

Il existe en toute musique, outre la pensée du compositeur, l’âme de l’exécutant [Ursule], qui, par un privilège acquis seulement à cet art, peut donner du sens et de la poésie à des phrases sans grande valeur. . . . Par sa sublime et périlleuse organisation, Ursule appartenait à cette école de génies si rares. . . . Par un jeu à la fois suave et rêveur, son âme parlait à l’âme du jeune homme [Savinien] et l’enveloppait comme d’un nuage par des idées presque visibles. (3: 890–91)

[One finds in all music, in addition to the composer’s ideas, the soul of the performer [Ursule], who, by a privilege pertaining only to this art, can give meaning and poetry to phrases lacking much value. . . . By her sublime and perilous organization, Ursule belonged to this school of rarefied geniuses. . . . Through her at once suave and dreamy playing, her soul spoke
Music and harmonic unity, genius, and the mesmeric concentration of thought all combine to elevate the composition of the novel to the level of the sublime.

Readers like Allan Pasco suggest it is necessary to recognize the part played by God in the symbolic or semantic structures of this novel ("Ursule"). The conversion of the deist but unbelieving (3: 826, 828) doctor Minoret to Christian religion motivates his faith in his ability to protect Ursule after his death. Yet, since this protection from beyond death takes the form of somnambulism, a science to which Balzac takes the trouble to provide its letters of patent, we should think of a God and a Christianity much secularized by these explications nécessaires. Significantly, it is to Chaperon the priest that Balzac gives the task of explaining Minoret’s scientific understanding of somnambulism, as if to suggest that religion recognizes the superior ability of science to explain the occult:

Il avait reconnu la possibilité de l’existence d’un monde spirituel, d’un monde des idées. Si les idées sont une création propre à l’homme, si elles subsistent en vivant d’une vie qui leur soit propre, elles doivent avoir des formes insaisissables à nos sens extérieurs, mais perceptibles à nos sens intérieurs quand ils sont dans certaines conditions. Ainsi les idées de votre parrain peuvent vous envelopper, et peut-être les avez-vous revêtues de son apparence. Puis, si Minoret a commis ces actions, elles se résolvent en idées; car toute action est le résultat de plusieurs idées. Or, si les idées se meuvent dans le monde spirituel, votre esprit a pu les apercevoir en y pénétrant. (3: 961–62)

[He had recognized the possible existence of a spiritual world, of a world of thought. If ideas are a creation proper to the human being, if they subsist by living a life that is proper to them, they must have a shape that cannot be grasped by our external senses, but which is perceptible to our internal senses in certain conditions. Thus your godfather’s ideas can enclose you, and perhaps you have clothed them in his appearance. Then, if Minoret performed these actions, they would resolve into ideas; for every action is the result of several ideas. And so, if ideas move about in the spiritual world, your mind, by entering it, was able to perceive them.]

Here Balzac offers the double guide of the converted non-believer, Minoret,
and the intelligent, unbigoted priest, Chaperon, to make it possible for the reader to believe also—believe in somnambulism, that is. It takes very little reflection to extend this explanation to the process of composition, and to realize that Balzac grounds in a scientific vision of unity the spiritual basis of *La Comédie humaine*.

Although the powerful mesmerist, whose demonstrations in Paris convince and help to convert Minoret, may well describe his power as emanating from God (3: 827), although his power to heal may well be compared to the Savior’s (3: 826), the narrative significantly elevates this power to the status of *science* and *principle*. Mozet also stresses the importance of science “behind” God and comments that Ursule’s happiness was “indispensable au triomphe de la vérité scientifique” [indispensable to the triumph of scientific truth] (“Ursule Mirouët” 218, 225). Faith and unity are taken up by the scientific system of *La Comédie humaine*. Françoise Gaillard, in a rich commentary on unitary science in the *Avant-propos*, shows that for Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, as for Balzac, the theory is one of analogy, which postulates a principle of resemblance and a principle of continuity among species (“La science” 64–65). Founded on analogy, the semiotic unity of the novel is represented by the transformation I have described from a system of relations based on genealogy (intermarriage) to one based on inheritance, desire, preference, and the generosity that consistently characterize Ursule Mirouët. (Arguing for a new form of nobility against his mother’s prejudices, Savinien de Portenduère uses the telling metaphor “une chimère” [3: 885] to designate the old system. The monstrous, composite chimera symbolizes another contrast to the harmonious unity of Ursule.) Analogy underlies Minoret’s love for Ursule, because she is like another Ursule Mirouët, but also, paradoxically, because she is a stranger to the doctor, and love arises where there is no genealogy. Analogy as a principle of composition lies in the semiotic structures based on preference and predilection. When the descendant of exogamous and illegitimate unions marries the only eligible aristocrat in town, the happy alliance reaffirms the inheritance against the harmful posterity of the bourgeois cousinage of Nemours.

Spirituality as it appears in *Ursule Mirouët* focuses on written texts, especially on their position. This necessary connection between the spiritual and writing has been well prepared in the novel. Ursule’s visionary genius specifically includes the ability to see written texts: while Savinien is at sea in the marines, Ursule sees each of his letters in a dream before receiving them, and never fails to announce their arrival by recounting her dream (3: 900). Likewise, during the demonstration of mesmerism in Paris, what convinced the doctor of the real existence of magnetism was the mesmerized subject’s
ability to see Minoret’s two bank notes stored between the two next-to-last leaves of the Pandectes, volume II, in Nemours (3: 831). The position of the 500-franc notes gives them their value in the narrative of the experiments, for the precision with which the subject locates them leaves the doctor thunderstruck (3: 832).

Connecting semiosis to mimesis, we can say that the passing of the fortune from a genealogy described as a pernicious system, mindless and materialistic, to an inheritance formed by love and preference provides both the mimetic frame of the narrative (the represented story) and the semiotic structure of our reading. The very materiality of money lends strength and consistency to the ideality of the moral plot here: while the money is lost among the collaterals, it figures error in the spiritual sense and failure of the narrative. When it is at last returned to Ursule, it figures the reward of spirituality and recovery from error. In like fashion, we are in error until we realize the power of spirituality to unify composition. That is the message of the unity of composition: the ideal is not contaminated by the real.