In May 1837, Balzac wrote to Mme Hanska in words now familiar to readers of the “artistic” stories of the Études philosophiques, explaining the principle behind Massimilla Doni:

Massimilla Doni et Gambara sont, dans les Études philosophiques, l’apparition de la musique, sous la double forme d’exécution et de composition, soumise à la même épreuve que la pensée dans Louis Lambert, c’est-à-dire l’œuvre et l’exécution tuées par la trop grande abondance du principe créateur, ce qui m’a dicté le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu pour la peinture. (Hanska 1: 382–83, 24 May 1837)

[Massimilla Doni and Gambara are, in the Études philosophiques, the appearance of music, under the double form of execution and composition, put to the same trial as is thought in Louis Lambert, that is to say the work and its execution killed by too great an abundance of the creative principle, the subject that dictated the Chef-d’œuvre inconnu to me as concerns painting.]

This abundance of the creative principle, the root of the novella’s philosophy, expresses itself in the three forms of content my title begins with, objects of men’s desires and figures of the semiotics governing meaning in this story

Love, Music, and Opium

Medical Semiotics of Massimilla Doni

La phrase est griffes d’acier au cœur!
[Sentences are steel clawing at the heart!]
—Hanska 1: 509, May 1840

In May 1837, Balzac wrote to Mme Hanska in words now familiar to readers of the “artistic” stories of the Études philosophiques, explaining the principle behind Massimilla Doni:
“rich in figures,” in Jeannine Jallat’s description (74). Music, love, and opium are the three passions expressed differentially by the duc de Cataneo, Emilio Memmi, and Marco Vendramini, Venetians to whom the officious French doctor seeks to bring nothing less than a cure. Although the chief focus of the plot is on Emilio and his love for the duchesse de Cataneo, Massimilla Doni, Balzac brings these three forms of desire together in key passages. Identified as three representations of the same human capacity, they together tie down what Balzac called the “psychological subject” of his novella, which he said was a “marvel” and a “mythical page” difficult to write (Hanska 1: 437–38, 22 January 1838). As Arlette Michel has put it, “Tous ont choisi le parti suicidaire de vivre de manière absolue et radicale la division en eux du corps et de l’âme” [They have all chosen the suicidal route of living absolutely and radically the division within themselves of body and soul] (Le réel 245).

The “trop grande abondance” of these lethal creative passions, the psychological subject of the novella, is expressed not only in the descriptions of these characters and their stories but also in Balzac’s use throughout of highly figural language. As abundance is the topic of the story, so its execution, its forms of expression, represent abundance by excessive imagery. Forms of content and forms of expression are matched; the content is mirrored in the expression. It is as if Balzac sought to illustrate his principle, the underlying subject, not only by characters and events and situations, but also in the very language used to bring them to the reader. This figural language is poetic. In Modeste Mignon, the familiar opposition between “reality” and “poetry” aligns with that between Money and Love; in Massimilla Doni, poetry is opposed to “brutal nature,” and that contrast is made visible in the writing, most strikingly in the last two paragraphs.

**Love**

The contrast between the psycho-philosophical subject matter and the narration of sexual union accompanies the first mention of love in the story, “l’amour d’une duchesse et d’un joli jeune homme, lequel est une œuvre de poésie fort éloignée des fins de la brutale nature” [the love between a duchess and a handsome young man, which is a work of poetry far removed from the purposes of brutal nature] (10: 545). Love has conflicting sexual and emotional expressions.1 Thus the obscenity for which Balzac feared readers

---

1. For an excellent and concise explanation of this conflict, see Max Milner’s introduction to his edition of the story.
would (again) reproach him is immediately connected with this philosophical subject. Brutal nature’s ends are exactly what love comes to on the last page of the story, by which point the poetic and impotent Emilio has overcome his problem and the duchess is quite pregnant. But for most of the story, “ils s’aimaient trop” [they loved each other too much] (10: 546). Desire for Massimilla makes Emilio impotent with her, until his friends conspire to put her in his bed instead of the famous and adulated soprano he was to sleep with, Clarina Tinti. Already their love had strikingly illustrated the Platonic conception of reunited souls. When they first met, “une voix cria: le voilà! dans les oreilles de la duchesse. . . . ces deux ignorances se confondirent comme deux substances de la même nature qui n’en font qu’une seule en se rencontrant” [a voice cried out: he is the one! in the duchess’s ears. . . . these two unknowing people blended like two substances of the same nature which become only one when they meet] (10: 547).

Emilio’s soul has so taken up his body (10: 547), and he has placed Massimilla so high above him (10: 548), that he cannot consummate his love. The too-full heart makes the body empty, just as Emilio’s brilliant palace in Venice is empty and his principality broke: “une âme sans action sur le corps . . . un corps vide et un cœur plein, mille antithèses désespérantes” [a soul that cannot act on the body . . . an empty body and a full heart, a thousand heart-breaking antitheses] (10: 552). Massimilla has only to ask him what he desires, and “life” leaves his body (made ignoble, at that point, because he has been deflowered by la Tinti) to take refuge in his heart (10: 564). In writing to Ève Hanska, Balzac calls la Tinti a “misérable fille” [wretched girl], perhaps because of her talent for sex. That the wretched girl sees Emilio as a child shows that he was a novice in sex until the opera singer’s actions taught him to know this other kind of love.

A page-long allegory (10: 560–61) contrasting poetry and brutal nature in terms of landscapes opposes these two sides of love. Balzac’s authorial presence is palpable in this passage addressed directly to the reader, as he pulls out all the romantic stops in a highly detailed description: “Si vous n’avez pas voyagé en Suisse, vous lirez peut-être avec plaisir cette description, et si vous avez grimpé par ces Alpes-là, vous ne vous en rappellerez pas les accidents sans émotion” [If you haven’t traveled in Switzerland, you will perhaps read this description with pleasure, and if you have climbed on those Alps, you will not recall that rugged terrain without emotion]. Hidden in a valley between high peaks lies a vast and deep basin, of blue like sapphires or green like emeralds (depending on the light), nourished by waters flowing down from the St. Gothard or the Simplon. Nothing better represents “les idées de profondeur, de calme, d’immensité, de céleste affection, de bonheur éter-
nel, comme ce diamant liquide” [ideas of depth, calm, immensity, heavenly affection, and eternal happiness than this liquid diamond]. So calm is this bed of water that its surface shows no ripple: “vous ne voyez aucun trouble à la surface où la voiture se mire en passant” [you see no disturbance on the surface where the carriage is reflected in passing]—and the word that Balzac chooses to speak of what is lacking on the water’s surface is also the one that connotes sexual excitement, “trouble”—precisely what Emilio cannot feel for Massimilla. His love for Massimilla is a sleepy pond and a beautiful blue stream flowing calmly in the Alps—and we know that blue codifies purity in Balzac.

But whip the horses round a bend, and you are assailed with an opposite image: “tout à coup rugit un horrible concert de cascades se ruant les unes sur les autres; le torrent, échappé par une bonde furieuse, se brise en vingt chutes, se casse sur mille gros cailloux; il étincelle en cent gerbes contre un rocher tombé du haut de la chaîne qui domine la vallée” [all of a sudden, you hear the roar of a horrible concert of waterfalls rushing one atop the other; the torrent, escaping with a furious bound, divides into twenty cascades, and breaks on a thousand stones; it sparkles in a hundred sprays against a boulder that has fallen from the tops of the mountain chain that dominates the valley]. Sex with Tinti comes like an exploding cannon, and the numbers are suspiciously high.

But in case the allegorical nature of this brilliant passage has escaped the inattentive reader, Balzac will follow it with a summary that makes the interpretation explicit, according to a narrative design characteristic of his interpretations: “Si vous avez bien saisi ce paysage, vous aurez dans cette eau endormie une image de l’amour d’Emilio pour la duchesse, et dans les cascades bondissant comme un troupeau de moutons, une image de sa nuit amoureuse avec la Tinti. Au milieu de ces torrents d’amour, il s’élevait un rocher contre lequel se brisait l’onde” [If you have grasped this landscape well, you will have in this sleeping pond an image of Emilio’s love for the duchess, and in the waterfalls bounding like a herd of sheep an image of his night of love with la Tinti. In the middle of these torrents of love arose a rock against which the wave broke]. Note that the broken wave is not without hints of the broken love instrument and the rock a suggestion of the immobility of this kind of love.

In writing to Mme Hanska that the work would be misunderstood, in spite of the “énormes travaux [qu’elle me donne] par ses difficultés” [immense labor [it is costing me] because of its difficulties], the language Balzac used glosses the idea of the psychological subject: “mais je n’ai rien tant caressé que cette page mythique, parce que le mythe est bien profondément enfoui
sous la réalité” [but nothing have I caressed so much as this mythical page, because the myth is buried quite deep under the reality] (Hanska 1: 414, 20 October 1837). Reality, as often when Balzac uses this word, has to do with vulgar matters of everyday life—in this case, simplifying only a little, sex. The careless, uncomprehending reader will see that obscene story, but the deeply buried myth is what the author called the “sujet psychique,” the wonderful story of art in the form of execution being slaughtered by an excess of the creative principle.

In 1838, when the story was almost finished, Balzac anticipated the usual “mauvaises et méchantes sottises” [mean, stupid criticisms] from readers, as he wrote to Mme Hanska:

Vu d’un côté, le sujet donne prise à la critique, on dira que je suis un homme obscène, mais voyez le sujet psychique, c’est une merveille selon moi. Mais il y a longtemps que je suis fait à ces détractions. . . . Dans cinq ans, Massimilla Doni sera comprise comme une belle explication des plus intimes procédés de l’art. Aux yeux des lecteurs du 1er jour, ce sera ce que ça est en apparence, un amoureux qui ne peut posséder la femme qu’il adore parce qu’il la désire trop et qui possède une misérable fille. Faites-les donc conclure de là à l’enfantement des œuvres d’art! . . . (Hanska 1: 437–38, 22 January 1838)

[Seen from one side, the subject lays itself open to criticism; they will say I am an obscene man, but look at the psychological subject; in my opinion it is a marvel. But I have been accustomed to this disparagement for a long time. . . . In five years, Massimilla Doni will be understood as a fine explanation of the most intimate processes of art. But in the eyes of the first readers, it will be what it appears to be, a lover who cannot possess the woman he adores because he desires her too much and who possesses a wretched girl. From that to the birthing of works of art, get them to draw any conclusions! . . .]

Admitting that most readers will not see beyond the apparent subject of impotence stemming from too much idealized love, Balzac explicitly links this subject to the real but occulted one, the birthing of a work of art. The link makes of love a semiotic figure of creation. Those happy readers who see that the story illustrates, in this form of content and again in the other two, the proposition that an excess of desire makes one impotent, will have captured the essence of the story even from its apparent subject, guided by this semiotic figure of its creation.
If love furnishes the core of the moral plot, music constitutes its philosophy. Music possesses the ability to speak directly to the heart, while writing addresses the intelligence; the painter Balzac admired most, Raphael, gave music priority over poetry (10: 581–82), and Balzac devoted great care to the effort to place music on the supreme plane. It is through Massimilla Doni’s sensitive illustration of Rossini’s opera Mosè that Balzac expresses the position he ascribes to music in this novella: “ Là où les autres arts cercle nos pensées en les fixant sur une chose déterminée, la musique les déchaîne sur la nature entière qu’elle a le pouvoir de nous exprimer” [Whereas other arts encircle our thoughts by fixing them on a specific thing, music lets them loose on all of nature, which it has the power to express for us] (10: 588). The poetic Capraja is the “rêveur” [dreamer] and “théoricien fantasque” [whimsical theorist] (10: 580) of harmony and melody, but the passion of music has for its chief figure a grossly caricatured duc de Cataneo.

The duke is a premature old man who has sold his body to debauchery in search of excessive pleasures: “La Débauche avait détruit la créature humaine et s’en était fait une autre à son usage. . . . En héritier avide, chaque vice avait marqué sa part du cadavre encore vivant” [Debauchery had destroyed the human creature and had created another for its personal use. . . . Each vice, like an avid heir, had marked its share of the still living cadaver] (10: 555–56). Only music can bring him pleasure now, la Tinti explains. Soul, intelligence, heart, sinews, “tout ce qui produit chez l’homme un élan et le rattache au ciel par le désir ou par le feu du plaisir, tient non pas tant à la musique qu’à un effet pris dans les innombrables effets de la musique, à un accord parfait entre deux voix, ou entre une voix et la chanterelle de son violon” [everything that produces an impetus in a man and links him with the heavens through desire or through the fire of pleasure results not so much from music as from an effect found among the innumerable effects of music, a perfect accord between two voices, or between a voice and the highest string of his violin] (10: 561). When the perfect harmony occurs, the duke experiences what can only be described as a parody of an orgasm: “ce vieillard tombe alors en extase, ses yeux morts jettent leurs derniers feux, il est heureux, il se roule à terre comme un homme ivre. . . . Il mourra dans quelque attaque d’accord parfait” [this old man then falls into ecstasy, his deadened eyes emit their last sparks, he is content, he rolls on the ground like a drunken man. . . . He will die in an attack of some perfect chord] (10: 561–62). Death by music.

And it is not even music with a subject or theme, as defended poetically
by Capraja, but the mere principle of harmony and the science of sounds, which have a magical power:

L’accord de deux voix ou d’une voix et du violon, l’instrument dont l’effet se rapproche le plus de la voix humaine. . . . Cet accord parfait nous mène plus avant dans le centre de la vie sur le fleuve d’éléments qui ranime les voluptés et qui porte l’homme au milieu de la sphère lumineuse où sa pensée peut convoquer le monde entier. . . . je sais embrasser l’infini! (10: 582)

[The harmony of two voices or of one voice and the violin, the instrument whose effect is the closest to a human voice. . . . This perfect harmony leads us forward into the center of life on the elemental river that reanimates sensual pleasures and lifts a man into the middle of the luminous sphere where his thoughts can summon up the entire world. . . . I can embrace infinity!]

The philosophy that illuminates this power of music is, like the moral action of love in the story, a semiotic figure of Balzac’s creation. The achievement of the perfect harmony allows the creator to embrace infinity.

**Opium**

Opium is probably not as familiar as music and love, but comparisons make it comprehensible for this novella. While love is the moral symbol and music the philosophical one, opium is in fact the key symbol of creative power. To begin with, the state of mental excitation brought on by opium is compared to the effects of excessive coffee use: not unlike Balzac himself, Emilio Memmi uses coffee as a crutch for his idealized passion, “pour se soutenir jusqu’au soir dans une excitation nerveuse, sur l’abus de laquelle il comptait pour mourir” [to sustain himself until nighttime in a nervous excitation, the abuse of which he was counting on in order to die] (10: 551); in the same way, Vendramini uses opium: “Vendramin comptait, lui, sur l’opium” [As for Vendramin, he counted on opium] (10: 551). The comparison de-marginalizes opium and opium use, and it becomes the physiological expression of the passions of love and music. In the same manner, Cataneo faces death from a perfect chord, and idealization in love has an opium-like effect: “Or, sur un jeune homme assez puissant pour idéaliser une maîtresse au point de ne plus y voir de femme, l’arrivée trop subite de la fortune devait faire l’effet d’une dose d’opium” [Now, for a young man powerful enough to idealize a mistress
to the point of no longer seeing a woman in her, the too sudden arrival of
good fortune must have the same effect as a dose of opium] (10: 554).

Opium also leads the user to art. Thanks to the brilliant vapors of his
intoxication, Vendramini sees Massimilla Doni as the highest expression of
art, a Raphael portrait (10: 572), and opium makes his mind contain mul-
titudes like an opera (10: 576). In Vendramini’s lapidary formulation about
those whose passion is music, love and music are as addicting as opium: “ils
vont dans l’Art là où te conduit ton extrême amour, là où me mène l’opium”
[they go into Art the way your extreme love directs you, the way opium leads
me] (10: 584). This single sentence fragment identifies the three figures as
three versions of the same principle. The de-marginalized opium lends power-
ful consistency to all three mind-expanding passions.

It is the opium addict who describes Cataneo’s passion for music, the sci-
ence of sounds, in a way that makes Emilio understand his love, in a passage
where abundance of imagery dominates:

Tu viens d’expliquer mon amour pour la Massimilla, dit Emilio. Cher, il
est en moi-même une puissance qui se réveille au feu de ses regards, à son
moindre contact, et me jette en un monde de lumière où se développent des
effets dont je n’osais te parler. . . . Le désir soulève mon crâne en y remuant
cette monde invisible au lieu de soulever mon corps inerte; et l’air devient alors
rouge et pétille, des parfums inconnus et d’une force inexprimable détendent
mes nerfs, des roses me tapissent les parois de la tête, et il me semble que
mon sang s’écoule par toutes mes artères ouvertes, tant ma langueur est
complète. (10: 585)

[You have just explained my love for la Massimilla, said Emilio. Dear friend,
there is within me a force that reawakens with the fire of her glances, at
the slightest contact with her, and projects me into a world of light where
effects that I dared not tell you about develop. . . . Desire raises up my skull
and agitates the invisible world in it instead of lifting up my inert body; and
the air then becomes red and sparkles, unknown fragrances calm my nerves
with an inexpressible force, roses carpet the inner walls of my head, and
my languor is so complete, it seems like my blood flows out of all my open
arteries.]

“Ainsi fait mon opium fumé” [That is what my smoking opium does] (10:
585), Vendramini replies, and I am almost ready to say that writing does the
same to Balzac.
All three men are taken over by their passions and suffer a loss of self. The drama is the greater for it being a man who loses the self to a passion. For this impotence redefined broadly, opium serves as the most telling model, because it is a physiological, psycho-pharmaceutical one. Love and music would be more metaphorical expressions of the same inherently psychological principle. Yet precisely the point of the comparison or blending of the three passions is that love and music are as powerful, physically, as the known mind-altering substance that opium is. In Vendramini’s description of the passion that Capraja submits to, it is a question of the belief that sounds encounter within us a substance analogous to that which engenders the phenomena of light, a substance that produces ideas in man: “l’homme a des touches intérieures que les sons affectent, et qui correspondent à nos centres nerveux d’où s’élancent nos sensations et nos idées” [the human being has internal keys that are affected by sounds and that correspond to the nerve centers from which our sensations and our ideas are launched] (10: 584).

Having lost the self, the man of passion is freed, poetically, to embrace the infinite; his narrow mind expands to contain the universe, and he can create:

Imagine une création sublime où les merveilles de la création visible sont reproduites avec un grandiose, une légèreté, une rapidité, une étendue incommensurables, où les sensations sont infinies, et où peuvent pénétrer certaines organisations privilégiées qui possèdent une divine puissance, tuauras alors une idée des jouissances extatiques dont parlaient Cataneo et Capraja, poètes pour eux seuls. (10: 585)

[Imagine a sublime creation where the marvels of visible creation are reproduced with incommensurable grandiosity, lightness, rapidity, and breadth, where the sensations are infinite, and where certain privileged organizations that possess a divine power can penetrate, and you will have an idea of the ecstatic raptures of which Cataneo and Capraja spoke, poets for themselves alone.]

Such men surpass “la sphère où s’enfantent les œuvres plastiques par les procédés de l’imitation, pour entrer dans le royaume tout spirituel des abstractions où tout se contemple dans son principe et s’aperçoit dans l’omnipotence des résultats” [the sphere where the plastic arts are given birth through procedures of imitation, in order to enter the entirely spiritual kingdom of abstractions, where everything can be observed in its principles and
is seen in the omnipotence of the results] (10: 585). These words, spoken by the opium addict, describe music; Emilio understands music in terms of his love, which he then describes with poetic expressions; Vendramini then applies those terms to his feelings with opium. In short, opium gives us a physiological, analytical model for a philosophical formulation, music, which expresses itself in a moral action, love. The tripartite structure mirrors that of *La Comédie humaine* in its entirety. In this passage, the three passions unite in this entirely spiritual realm of abstractions where the creator sees the beginnings of everything and the omnipotence of his results, the incorporeal essence of a thought captured by poetry and brought forth in powerful illustration.

What could be more Balzacian? It is a Frenchman, and a doctor at that, in whom we can easily recognize a partial double of Balzac, who undertakes to cure the opium addict, the manic musician, and the impotent lover. Vendramini’s opium passion connects to death, a voluptuous and not vulgar death; to political empire, saving Venice from its slavery; to music, captured by every pore; to love, enhanced beyond the limits of the flesh (10: 574–75); but primarily, it expresses itself in the desire for Venice’s political freedom during his opium dreams: “Oui, pour trois livres d’opium il meuble notre arsenal vide” [Yes, for three pounds of opium, he furnishes our empty arsenals] (10: 575). Though the French doctor aspires to cure the opium user, it is the only one of the three passions that he will fail to cure, and that is because the political realities oppose poetic aspirations: “L’amour d’une patrie qui n’existe plus est une passion sans remède” [Love of a fatherland that no longer exists is a passion without remedy] (10: 619). Massimilla explains the genius of music to the Frenchman, “car il faut être à la fois poète et musicien pour comprendre la portée d’une pareille musique. Vous appartenez à une nation dont la langue et le génie sont trop positifs pour qu’elle puisse entrer de plain-pied dans la musique” [for one must be at once a poet and a musician to comprehend the full significance of such music. You belong to a nation whose language and genius are too positive for it to be able to enter music on an equal footing] (10: 587). Nevertheless, she reassures him that the French can succeed in loving this new music because France is “compréhensive.” Having erected an artistic system, the novella, in which he captures the poetic principle of music, Balzac slyly places himself among those comprehending elite.

The fact that the duchess becomes pregnant signals that the doctor has cured Emilio of his passion. Martine Léonard opposes the “mode vulgaire” by which this pregnancy is signified on the last page, the four words set off in their own paragraph, “La duchesse était grosse” [The duchess was pregnant], to the “mode poétique” constituting the fifteen-line, single sentence
final paragraph, in which “la phrase se gonfle à l’infini des figures de l’art” [the sentence swells infinitely with the figures of art], as Léonard aptly puts it (67). The opposition echoes that between “la brutale nature” and “la poésie” (10: 545). In spite of the necessary vulgarity of a “grossesse” (and that is not even the most euphonic word Balzac could have used), poetry tries to reassert its prerogatives in the long last sentence—and what is held decisively at bay by this long accumulation of poetic figures is the sex act of which the pregnancy is irrefutable evidence. As in many of Balzac’s endings, the authorial narrator takes his leave with a flourish, a final bow that restores his presence on the stage as the one in charge and indicates the direction interpretation should take. In this poetic inflation—poetic partly because it simulates the puffing up of Massimilla Doni’s figure while it also allows us to think how her pregnancy brings Massimilla Doni, the novella, to fulfillment—artistic feminine angelic figures from the civilized world hasten to her bedside and weep. They signal the duchess’s capitulation to her lover, the highest moment of sublime parody, as Max Andréoli has shown (“Sublime et parodie” 28 and passim):

Les péris, les ondines, les fées, les sylphides du vieux temps, les muses de la Grèce, les vierges de marbre de la Certosa da Pavia, le Jour et la Nuit de Michel-Ange, les petits anges que Bellini le premier mit au bas des tableaux d’église, et que Raphaël a si divinement peints au bas de la Vierge au donataire, et de la madone qui gèle à Dresde, les délicieuses filles d’Orcagna dans l’église de San-Michele à Florence, les chœurs célestes du tombeau de saint Sébald à Nuremberg, quelques vierges du Duomo de Milan, les peuplades de cent cathédrales gothiques, toute la nation des figures qui brisent leur forme pour venir à vous, artistes compréhensifs, toutes ces angéliques filles incorporelles accoururent autour du lit de Massimilla, et y pleurèrent! (10: 619)

[The peris, the undines, the fairies, the sylphs of olden times, the muses of Greece, the marble virgins of the Certosa da Pavia, the Day and the Night by Michelangelo, the little angels that Bellini was the first to put on the bottom of his church paintings and that Raphael so divinely painted on the bottom of the Virgin of the Donee and of the Madonna freezing in Dresden, the delicious girls by Orcagna in the San-Michele church in Florence, the celestial choruses of the tomb of Saint Sebald in Nuremberg, a few virgins from the Duomo in Milan, the peoples of a hundred gothic cathedrals, the entire nation of figures who break their material forms to come to you, comprehensive and comprehending artists, all these incorporeal angelic women hurried to Massimilla’s bedside, and wept!]
One little phrase in this swollen sentence, a phrase summarizing the host of angelic figures, alludes to how artists created them: “toute la nation des figures qui brisent leur forme pour venir à vous, artistes compréhensifs.” Balzac thus places himself among these comprehending and comprehensive artists (it is the French who are “compréhensifs,” as Massimilla had assured the doctor) capable of receiving the incorporeal, formless essences of these artistic incarnations and making of them the figures we can see in “cent cathédrales gothiques” and in the works of Bellini, Raphael, Orcagna, and many others.

That is not all. Charles Nodier had given a particular meaning to the adjective “compréhensif” in an article published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1832 which prompted Balzac’s “Lettre à M. Ch. Nodier” in October of that year in the same review. Nodier’s “De la palingénésie humaine et de la résurrection” imagines a future form of humanity that will surpass even the most evolved human being; he called this future being “l’être compréhensif.” It is perfectly plausible that, in choosing to reuse the word “comprehensive” in this final paragraph, recalling its only other use in *Massimilla Doni* to describe the French, in particular the understanding French doctor, Balzac wished to allude to Nodier’s notion of the superior being to come, as a way to reassert the unique nature of the artist among present humanity. I have suggested, in translating the quotation, that the adjective is already polyvalent, meaning both all-inclusive and understanding and even providing a connection between these two meanings. To this polyvalence, in his final paragraph, Balzac adds the hint of Nodier’s utopian reverie, crowning the idea of the artist as the only person who can clothe ideas in words.

Balzac believes he possesses the mind-expanding passion he has triply illustrated. He can place himself among the one or two men of genius per century that Massimilla talks about, who have the power to “devancer les temps, et qui formulent ces mélodies pleines de faits accomplis, grosses de poèmes immenses” [be ahead of their time, and who formulate these melodies full of accomplished facts, pregnant with immense poems] (10: 609). How can we but think of these adjectives “pleines” and “grosses” in the context of the ending to which Balzac brought his novella? Thanks to the passion but also thanks to its cure, a narrative will be born out of the difficult conception, executed according to a sublime ideal that loses nothing for being vulgarly real: “Car il ne suffit pas que l’artiste, pour mériter ce nom, aperçoive l’idéal: il doit encore le confronter au réel en en donnant une image dans l’ordre du sensible, faute de quoi l’œuvre disparaît” [For it is not enough that the artist, to merit that name, perceives the ideal: he must also confront it with reality by providing an image within the order of the senses, without which the work will disappear] (Andréoli, “Sublime et parodie” 16).