For Love or for Money

Mortimer, Armine Kotin

Published by The Ohio State University Press

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=859539
“Le passé composé,” in addition to being a verb tense (past or perfect), can be taken to refer to the past as Balzac composed it in any given text. By analogy with chemistry, the complement of composition is analysis. Together, these two processes constitute Balzac’s method: everything is either composition or analysis in La Comédie humaine. My analysis of La recherche de l’Absolu was based on this premise.

An interesting approach to this relation between composition and analysis lies in the way the past links to the present in the figurative form of the historical present. Nineteen of Balzac’s novels and novellas finish in a present tense diegesis, sometimes at a considerable distance from the time of the rest of the plot. Closing the composed past, the instances of historical present ideally situate the reader in the moment of analysis that follows immediately. In the preface to Une fille d’Ève (1839), one of those Balzac wrote and then later suppressed for the Furne edition, he put these two processes in relation to each other, as follows: “Aussi l’affaire de l’auteur est-elle principalement d’arriver à la synthèse par l’analyse” [Therefore the author’s task is principally to reach synthesis through analysis] (2: 267–68). Portraying the characters and their histories, he composes their past and at the same time the immense physiognomy of his century; the reader’s task is to take up the analysis and produce the synthesis. The following sketches show how the text prompts the reader to do the synthesis.
In *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote*, the jump to the present tense is as abrupt as possible. In chapter 2, I analyzed the elliptical semiosis of this story, which leaves a gaping hole between the composed past and the historical present. The last scene between Augustine de Sommervieux and her husband, in which Théodore violently destroys his portrait of her, ending the composed past, suddenly results in the scene depicting her gravestone at the Montmartre cemetery. The use of the historical present, like the immediately symbolic memorial marker, eternalizes the drama. Each November 2nd the unnamed friend of this timid soul, an image of Balzac himself, sees in the tomb the last act of a drama—the actual death of Augustine. In other words, the grave takes the place of a scene that was not actually “composed”—her suffering and death; that scene occurs only in the vision of the first-person witness. The friend makes the narrative endure like her memory: “Chaque année, . . . il ne passe jamais devant ce jeune marbre sans se demander s’il ne faut pas des femmes plus fortes que ne l’était Augustine pour les puissantes étreintes du génie. ‘Les humbles et modestes fleurs, écloses dans les vallées, meurent peut-être, se dit-il, quand elles sont transplantées trop près des cieux, aux régions où se forment les orages, où le soleil est brûlant’” [Each year, . . . he can never pass in front of this new marble without wondering if the powerful embraces of geniuses did not require stronger women than Augustine had been. “Humble and modest flowers, blooming in the valleys, may die,” he told himself, “when they are transplanted too close to the heavens, in the regions where storms are formed, where the sun burns strong”] (1: 93–94). The analysis formulates and finalizes the story’s fundamental theme, a theme that endures in an always renewed present.

In *Modeste Mignon*, after having written and rejected two or three detailed descriptions of Modeste’s marriage with Ernest de La Brière, her children, and her life, descriptions written mostly in the past tense, Balzac finally substituted an eight-line paragraph using the present tense. According to this paragraph, the marriage, which the novel has composed in its writing, is not a harsh reality and does not exclude the romantic ideal, as will be seen, writes Balzac, elsewhere in *La Comédie humaine*: “les connaisseurs remarqueront alors combien le mariage est doux et facile à porter avec une femme instruite et spirituelle; car Modeste, qui sut éviter selon sa promesse les ridicules du pédantisme, est encore l’orgueil et le bonheur de son mari comme de sa famille et de tous ceux qui composent sa société” [people in the know will then note how marriage can be sweet and easy to bear with an educated and intelligent woman; for Modeste, who knew to avoid the ridicule of pedantry as she had promised, is still her husband’s pride and joy, and also that of her family and of all those who make up her society] (1: 714).
Certainly a masculine prejudice prevails in this “précieuse ridicule” analysis, but the “feminine” reading I prefer obtains in the composition, because of the wily device of the anonymous correspondence between Modeste and La Brière. The historical present identifies a direction for the reader’s analysis to take: showing that Modeste has corrected any and all errors and is perpetually smart and sweet, it begins to solve the key problem of interpretation of *Modeste Mignon*: Is this a happy marriage, as Arlette Michel characterizes it (*Le mariage et l’amour* 3: 1528), or one of the most depressing endings in *La Comédie humaine*, as Anne-Marie Meininger forcefully writes (“Préface” 29)? My view is entirely on the side of the happy marriage, to which the historical present lends an aura of permanence typical of fairy-tale endings.\(^1\)

Oscar Husson had much to learn in *Un début dans la vie*, and one paragraph before the end Balzac enumerates how everything turned out well after all. In sum: “Devenu sage et capable, il fut heureux” [Having become wise and capable, he was happy] (1: 887). His happiness is guaranteed by the protection of well-placed individuals. Such is his recovery from error that he now becomes a model, and this is what constitutes the historical present (as I have redefined it): “Oscar est un homme ordinaire, doux, sans prétention, modeste et se tenant toujours, comme son gouvernement, dans un juste milieu. Il n’excite ni l’envie ni le dédain. C’est enfin le bourgeois moderne” [Oscar is an ordinary, gentle, unpretentious, modest man, who always keeps himself, like his government, within the happy medium. He excites neither envy nor disdain. In all he is the modern bourgeois] (1: 887). Irony aside, present tenses like this one establish a type. This is Balzac the anthropologist, doing a service to the human sciences by composing the past that explains the model, for our better comprehension of his society and especially of the disdain in which he held the politics of 1830. To the ending pertains the analytical mode of knowledge and the wider scope that takes in the physiognomy of a century.

The case of *Albert Savarus*, analyzed in chapter 5 as an important example of self-narration, presents interesting peculiarities in its ending. First we learn that Rosalie de Watteville, having wreaked her vicious harm on Albert and Francesca, now lives the life of the eccentric, in the present tense: “[elle] passe pour une personne extrêmement originale. Elle est une des célébrités de l’Est. . . . On dit d’elle: ‘Elle a des lubies!’” [she passes for an extremely eccentric person. She is one of the celebrities of the East. . . . They say about her: “She’s full of whims!”] (1: 1019). The first version ended essentially in

---

1. See Mortimer, *Writing Realism* (103–24), for an extended analysis of the romantic realism of *Modeste Mignon*. 
this historical present, in which Rosalie receives no comeuppance for her das-
tardly behavior. Not content to let this undistinguished ending endure, how-
ever, Balzac then returned briefly to composing in the past tense by recounting
the horrible, freakish accident that took Rosalie’s arm and leg and scarred her
face, in 1841, three years after the first historical present. This is the punish-
ment that then endures in the permanent present, according to the last words:
“sa santé soumise à des troubles horribles lui laisse peu de jours sans souf-
france. Enfin, elle ne sort plus aujourd’hui de la Chartreuse des Rouxey où
elle mène une vie entièrement vouée à des pratiques religieuses” [her health,
troubled by horrible disturbances, allows her few days without suffering. In
short, today, she no longer goes out of the Chartreuse des Rouxey, where
she leads a life entirely dedicated to religious practice] (1: 1020). To a hor-
rrible cruelty pertains a terrible punishment, and it was this stodgy maxim
that turned Balzac’s text backward (in verb tenses) to finish the composition
with Rosalie’s accident—or finish it off, with a more definitive equilibrium,
balancing a life lost to love with another life lost to love. Ebguy, pointing
to this ending as an instance of the author’s achieving silence, comments:
“L’interruption de la démarche hernéutique—dire le sens d’une conduite—
est caractéristique de la distance entre le narrateur et le personnage” [The
interruption of the hermeneutic process—which gives the meaning of a par-
ticular behavior—is characteristic of the distance between the narrator and
the character] (“Description d’une (dé)composition” 37). The hermeneutic
process is what I am calling the composed past; the arrival at the historical
present marks this taking of distance.

The very short *Étude de femme* typifies the simplest case of the present-
tense ending: “Depuis seize jours, elle ne va plus dans le monde” [It has been
sixteen days and she no longer goes out in society] (2: 179). What can the
virtuous marquise de Listomère make of the fact that Eugène de Rastignac
wrote her address on a love letter intended for another woman? When she
obtains proof that Rastignac’s letter was not for her but for Delphine de
Nucingen, the “petite crise nerveuse” [little attack of nerves] that she suffers
arises from the interpretive crisis that occurred in the story, which is now left
in the hands of those who know—starting with Bianchon, her doctor and our
narrator, and including the Balzacian reader skilled in Restoration manners
and style, on which our analysis bears. Her secret is that she not only envies
Delphine for Eugène’s fidelity but also suffers from the seductive attack on
her sensitivity that Eugène’s letter produces (“O cher ange d’amour, trésor de
vie et de bonheur!” [Oh sweet angel of love, treasure of life, of happiness!] [2: 175]). The high-minded marquise, who has never taken a lover, is never-
theless defenseless against the crystallization of these words in her mind—
and yet Rastignac did not address them to her; what caused him to think of her, if not a desire to seduce? To arrive at this analysis, the reader must deploy an intelligence on a par with Bianchon’s. Not only that perspicacious doctor, but also Stendhal and Freud help us to analyze Mme de Listomère’s enduring, present-tense attack of nerves.

Like *Albert Savarus*, *La fausse maîtresse* comes to two moments of historical present. The first ended the manuscript with a quite typical phrase indicating the arrival in the present: “Voici trois ans que Thaddée est parti. . . . La comtesse Laginska s’intéresse énormément aux expéditions de l’empe- reur Nicolas, elle est russe de cœur” [It has been three years since Thaddée left. . . . Countesse Laginska is enormously interested in Emperor Nicolas’s expeditions, she is Russian in her heart] (2: 243). The comtesse Laginska has just learned that comte Thaddée Paz loved her in secret—and kept a fake mistress to dispel suspicion; for three years now, she has wondered what has become of him in the Russian army: “elle lit avec une espèce d’avidité toutes les nouvelles qui viennent de ce pays” [she reads with a kind of avid eagerness all the news that comes from that country]. And the manuscript ended with her falsely indifferent question asking what has become of comte Paz. But Balzac, not satisfied to leave his heroine in this suspended state of doubt, added five paragraphs containing a “moral of the story” and a new dramatic event. The paragraph containing the moral turns Clémentine Laginska into a type and a warning, by which Balzac laments the fact that many a devoted lover, like Paz, will go ignored and unrecognized; that this is an indirect message to Mme Hanska has been noted. Three-quarters of a page later, the second historical present consists of only one line; it comes at the end of a final episode Balzac added to the composed past on proofs, as he so often did (for example, in *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote* and *Albert Savarus*); this additional episode has concision, melodrama, and impact, all the best qualities to conclude a novel, as Balzac points out, and directly responds to the countess’s wondering what has become of Paz. Just as she is about to be tricked into being seduced by the callous La Palférine (the prince de la bohème), late one night after a ball, a vigorous pair of arms seizes her and puts her safely into her own carriage; the countess recognizes her secret lover and realizes he has not left Paris, and the story ends finally on this single line: “À toute heure, Clémentine espère revoir Paz” [At every moment, Clementine hopes to see Paz again]. A purgatory of hope: let all women take heed, Balzac seems to be saying, and not neglect a true lover until it is too late. The historical present gives the tale all the virtues of a lesson for all time.

*Une fille d’Ève* closes off Marie de Vandenesse’s story of adulterous temptation as something well over with, like a return to health after a disease:
“Mme de Vandenesse eut un mouvement de honte en songeant qu'elle s'était intéressée à Raoul” [Mme de Vandenesse, remembering that she had been interested in Raoul, felt a pang of shame] (2: 382). The historical present focuses instead on Raoul Nathan, who becomes thus an emblem of the enduring, continuing change in principles, government, and people since 1830, the turning point of *La Comédie humaine*. Today Nathan lives in shameful peace in the shadow of a ministerial paper, a hypocritical capitulation. “Cette conduite illogique a son origine et son autorité dans le changement de front de quelques gens qui, durant nos dernières évolutions politiques, ont agi comme Raoul” [This illogical conduct finds its origins and authority in the change of face of a few people who, during the recent political evolutions, acted like Raoul] (2: 383). Analysis thus points the reader in the direction of political explanation, the root of the depiction of Paris after 1830. In the face of the rising powers of finance and capitalism, the insufficiency of great political men in the July Monarchy reflects the weakness that threatened the marriage of Marie-Angélique and Félix de Vandenesse.

After the past of *Ursule Mirouët* brings the heroine to a well-deserved happy ending—“Trois mois après ces événements . . . Ursule épousa Savinien du consentement de Mme de Portenduère” [Three months after these events . . . Ursule married Savinien with Mme de Portenduère’s consent] (3: 986)—two more pages tour the horizon of all the destinies remaining and also provide a final, enduring image of the marriage of Ursule and her husband, of which we are told “Il n’y a pas deux ménages semblables dans Paris” [There are not two households like this one in Paris] (3: 987). While the composed past dramatized the conflict between the bourgeoisie of Nemours and Ursule’s select society, all the elements of the historical present show the malicious folk turned to good under her influence, or at least to benign neutrality. Minoret-Levrault’s reversal is the most dramatic, just as he was the most harmful to Ursule—he has become a model of charity; Goupil serves one and all, and Dionis is one of the “ornaments” of the chamber of deputies; Bombard and his son flourish in the magistrature; and Mme Crémière continues to regale all hearers with her malapropisms. This is not just tying up loose ends, however. Analysis proves that the good emanating from Ursule must inevitably flow into all the nasty crevices until the conflict resolves into unity. The historical present then gives permanence to what the past composed.

*Eugénie Grandet*’s historical present arrives mid-paragraph in a turn of the hand: “[Eugénie] fut veuve à trente-trois ans, riche de huit cent mille livres de rente, encore belle, mais comme une femme est belle à près de quarante ans. Son visage est blanc, reposé, calme” [Eugénie] was widowed at the age of thirty-three, with eight hundred thousand pounds of income, still
beautiful, but in the way that a woman is beautiful when she is close to forty years old. Her face is white, rested, calm] (3: 1198). Two detailed paragraphs continue in this vein, including the famous sentence, “Eugénie marche au ciel accompagnée d’un cortège de bienfaits” [Eugénie strides toward heaven accompanied by a retinue of good actions]. Balzac’s analysis is concise but complete and he summarizes it and the entire composition with the most direct of phrasings: “Telle est l’histoire de cette femme qui n’est pas du monde au milieu du monde, qui faite pour être magnifiquement épouse et mère n’a ni mari, ni enfants, ni famille” [Such is the story of this woman who is not from society but lives among society, who, born to be a magnificent wife and mother, has neither husband, nor children, nor family]. This was the ending in the manuscript, followed by an epilogue. In the text as it was originally published and retained in the Furne edition, nine more lines now follow the summary sentence, beginning: “Depuis quelques jours, il est question d’un nouveau mariage pour elle” [In the last few days, there is talk of a new marriage for her] (3: 1199). This sentence constitutes the bud of a new composed past, but—quickly nipped in the bud: those said to be aiding this marriage plot are not capable of understanding the corruption in the world. No, the composition will not make a new start. Instead, the epilogue, which Balzac removed for the Furne edition, reaffirmed and extended the analysis made in the present-tense passage, calling woman an intermediate creation between man and angel, while, among women, Eugénie “sera peut-être un type, celui des dévouements jetés à travers les orages du monde” [would perhaps be a type, one of self-sacrifice cast among worldly storms] (3: 1202). Arising in the composition, this quasi-anthropological analysis serves society, making a lesson of the unique story.

Joseph Bridau’s finally happy fate is the object of the brief historical present that arrives on the last page of La Rabouilleuse: “Joseph, à qui son beau-père . . . amasse tous les jours des écus, possède déjà soixante mille francs de rente. . . . Par suite d’une clause de l’érection du majorat, il se trouve comte de Brambourg, ce qui le fait souvent pouffer de rire au milieu de ses amis, dans son atelier” [Joseph, whose father-in-law . . . amasses money for him daily, already possesses sixty thousand francs of income. . . . As a result of a clause raising his property to a majorat, he has become comte de Brambourg, which often makes him burst out laughing among his friends, in his studio] (4: 540). Just about everyone else has died, and he has inherited his cruel brother Philippe’s property and his title, which means nothing to him. Extensive revisions brought the story well beyond the period of its melodramatic events, the complex intrigues of noxious characters—Jean-Jacques Rouget, Maxence Gilet, and Philippe Bridau. To achieve this happy present
tense, Balzac lengthened the ending, bringing it to 1839 and the Algerian war, during which Philippe is attacked by Arabs in a bloody combat, abandoned by his own troops, and savagely hacked to pieces. The year 1839 happens to be the year when Balzac started to write the novel, suggesting that one of the elements of its historical present would be to safely consign the story to writing. In contrast to *Pierrette*, in which the historical present eternalizes the gains made entirely at Pierrette’s expense by the political factions around her, this novel brings the composed past to the point where the only meritorious character still living is at last rewarded for his patience and virtue. Analysis here suggests that the writing had to continue Philippe’s story until it could achieve his death and Joseph’s happy destiny after 1839.

A famous arrival in the present closes *Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan* (to be discussed in detail in chapter 20): “Depuis ce jour, il n’a plus été question de la princesse de Cadignan, ni de d’Arthez” [From this day on, there was no further mention of the princesse de Cadignan or of d’Arthez] (6: 1004). Like the ending of *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote*, the historical present comes after an abrupt lapse of time, jumping from their first kiss to the months spent in that villa in Geneva which, for Balzac, seems to indicate total sexual happiness. However, the understated and inadequate phrase “il n’a plus été question de la princesse,” when it had, precisely, “been a question” of the princess for all her scandalous life, marks the refusal to continue supplying the details—the facts, the intimate stories about both characters, the very matter that had made the composed past worth telling—a juicy telling, indeed. This refusal to tell is a real turnabout. There follow the well-known lines: “Est-ce un dénouement? Oui, pour les gens d’esprit; non, pour ceux qui veulent tout savoir” [Is this a dénouement? Yes, for intelligent people; no, for those who want to know everything] (6: 1005), urging the reader to proceed with the analysis that is now needed to figure out what is going on in the villa. The “gens d’esprit” will analyze the present-tense moments—d’Arthez’s absences, the excessive rarity of his publications “depuis ce jour”—and produce the meaning to which all the composition led: it really was true love at last.

Pierre Grassou, the mediocre painter, arrives at good fortune even though he is not a genius. His success “aujourd’hui” also indicates the passage to the bourgeois commercial mentality and its robust progress after 1830, as analyzed in chapter 12. By 1839, middle class successes could have a destiny: “Pierre Grassou ne sort pas d’un cercle bourgeois où il est considéré comme un des plus grands artistes de l’époque” [Pierre Grassou remains within a bourgeois circle where he is considered one of the greatest artists of the period] (6: 1111). Reason governs this valuation, in bourgeois Paris, for
Grassou is making money. A good copy is as good as an original—or better; originality has no value or a negative value (think of Augustine’s family’s assessment of Théodore de Sommervieux). In the context of La Comédie humaine, Pierre Grassou, for all its minor status, carries a disproportionately major meaning; it gives reality to that impossible contradiction made possible by 1830, the “artiste bourgeois.” The historical present to which the story arrives initiates the analysis of this new way of being a “genius” in the new forms the world is taking. When Balzac praises Grassou in the final words, the reader is led to produce the analysis of mediocrity that constitutes the composition, which concludes with a wonderful sort of “punch line” when Grassou discovers that the Vervelles’ Rembrandts and Titians are actually his own copies, artistically aged by the dishonest art dealer Elie Magus. It is the bourgeois artist Grassou who now buys paintings from famous artists “quand ils sont gênés” [when they are short on funds] (6: 1111), so that an ingredient of this analysis must be that even “les peintres célèbres” [famous painters] are not guaranteed material happiness or success. While Le chef-d’œuvre inconnu has often been taken as an icon of Balzac’s creation, the brilliant success of the humble copier Pierre Grassou must also stand as a consolation for the “artiste bourgeois” that Balzac could not help being.

Another copier brings an end to Le cousin Pons. When the historical present arrives, Pons is dead and his collection already appropriated by his cousins, the Camusot de Marville. Like Pierrette, the historical present concerns those who endure after having immolated their victim. The example would be unremarkable were it not for its most enigmatic final line: “Excusez les fautes du copiste!” [Excuse the clerical errors!] (7: 765). While I suspect there is an intertextual allusion here that has not yet been identified, a comic line possibly from a popular play, I also think Balzac himself poses as the mere copiste in contrast to Providence, to whom the novelist is indebted for bringing about the death of the greedy Rémonencq, an event that is narrated in the historical present: “Cette fin, digne de ce scélérat, prouve en faveur de la Providence que les peintres de mœurs sont accusés d’oublier, peut-être à cause des dénouements de drames qui en abusent” [This end, worthy of this villain, proves in favor of Providence, which depicters of mores are accused of forgetting about, perhaps because of overuse by the dénouements of dramas] (7: 765).

Finally, when the marquis de Léganès is forced to execute his own family in literature’s most horrendous instance of plea-bargaining, he becomes El Verdugo, the executioner, and this identification is given in the historical present. As the paragraph that explains why the story is called El Verdugo, it is this permanent condition that endures, that dramatically eternalizes the
horror Juanito has suffered: the name sticks. In spite of his noble titles, “il est dévoré par le chagrin, il vit solitaire et se montre rarement. Accablé sous
le fardeau de son admirable forfait, il semble attendre avec impatience que
la naissance d’un second fils lui donne le droit de rejoindre les ombres qui
l’accompagnent incessamment” [he is devoured by grief, he lives a solitary
life and rarely shows himself. Weighed down under the burden of his admi-
rable offense, he seems to be waiting impatiently for the birth of a second son
to give him the right to join the shadows that accompany him ceaselessly]
(10: 1143). A past tense could not have conveyed the impatience of this sus-
pended suicide, nor especially its lack of resolution. It was a smart move on
Balzac’s part to remove El Verdugo the executioner from the composed past,
in which he too would have died the noble death of his parents and siblings,
and to leave him with the reader in the moment of analysis, where he incar-
nates a superlative of heroism, surpassing his family’s and guiding our inter-
pretation.

What observations to draw from this discussion? First, one cannot say that
the procedure is common. It is not overwhelmingly characteristic for Bal-
zac to bring the past into the present after the closure of the story’s event,
although in several other novels besides these he reaches into a future
diegesis.2 Perhaps for that very reason the procedure is remarkable—if not
for its quantity, then for the kind of reflection it can provoke. The present,
unlike the past, has only one definition: it is now. So when events are occur-
ing now—when people still aren’t talking about la princesse de Cadignan,
when Eugénie is still striding toward heaven—we as readers find ourselves
included in this frame of time. We are engaged in the process to which the
past Balzac composed has led us, when all that is left after the composition
concludes is the analysis by which we can explain it. The historical present
gives a role to the reader complementary to the heavy task the composer
assumed, to analyze and explain now. It situates the reader in that always
ideal moment of analysis.

That a composed past had to exist in relation to some kind of present
of analysis was felt by Balzac as a kind of anxiety: he feared to be misun-
derstood. Balzac was haunted by wholeness. Because of the system of recur-
ing characters, the composed past stretches over many different titles in La

2. An interesting graphic rendition of the time covered in novels, along with extensions
to the past and the future, can be seen on a website, http://hbalzac.free.fr/temps.php, showing
twenty-six works with extensions to future dates.
Comédie humaine; only after the different parts of their stories have been told, in whatever order, can a reader reassemble them into a whole. Failing that synthesis, the work will be tainted by a “capital vice” which, with surprising optimism, Balzac hopes will be viewed one day as a virtue: “Il s’applaudit de la grandeur, de la variété, de la beauté, de la fécondité de son sujet, quelque déplorable que le fassent, socialement parlant, la confusion des faits les plus opposés, l’abondance des matériaux, l’impétuosité des mouvements. Ce désordre est une source de beautés” [He congratulates himself on the grandeur, variety, beauty, and fruitfulness of his subject, however deplorable, socially speaking, the confusion of the most opposing facts, the abundance of source materials, and the impetuosity of movements may make it. Such disorder is a source of beauty] (2: 264). This persuasive argument marks the 1839 preface to Une fille d’Ève as one of the most important documents about Balzac’s ambitions. It is also in this preface that one finds the image of the mosaic, so readily applicable to La Comédie humaine as a whole. The nineteenth century gave Balzac the gift of its “disorder”; from it, Balzac forged beauty by composing its past: “Vous ne pouvez raconter chronologiquement que l’histoire du temps passé, système inapplicable à un présent qui marche” [Chronological narration applies only to the history of times past, a system that is not applicable to the ongoing present] (2: 265). The reader working in the historical present arrives at the composed past through its analysis.

Eventually, closer study may show how Balzac’s magnificent project resulted in a passé surcomposé—which would not only be a verb tense but also an overcomposed past.