Problems of Closure

Realistic closure goes without saying. It normally lacks nothing and requires no complex elaboration, for when we think of narrative closure in a realistic work we usually have in mind the resolution of problems posed by the narration, producing the feeling of satisfaction that accompanies the completion of finished models. We associate such a strong sense of closure with the “grand roman réaliste ou naturaliste” [great realistic or naturalist novel], as Lucien Dällenbach correctly generalized (“Du fragment au cosmos” 420), and many are the readers who include Balzac’s novels in that definition. As Bersani wrote in Balzac to Beckett, describing the fatality of the childhoods of Félix and Henriette in Le lys dans la vallée, “[all that follows] has the superfluity characteristic of a Balzacian novel, where the dénouement often strikes us as an almost unnecessary proof of the predictive, containing powers of the exposition” (85). Sentiments such as this encourage the belief that the realistic work achieves what we may well call a norm of narrative closure.

The taxonomic achievements of studies on closure make an inventory of typical endings easy: final morals, concluding frames, death of main characters, a fate meted out to each, final tag lines, and so on; there is a plethora of such structural and rhetorical moves in La Comédie humaine. Yet the phenomena that best illustrate the norm may well be those that diverge from it. A subtle proof of this rests on the premise that any attempt to problematize closure depends on the prior recognition that we habitually submit to the
necessity of a strong and artistic ending, corresponding to the expectation raised by the text. Autre étude de femme illustrates such a strong and artistic ending with a complete mimetics and semiotics of closure, while the analyses of Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan, La Maison Nucingen, and Honoreine concern endings made ambiguous by changes in the final pages.

**Enclosure**

*Autre étude de femme*

There is no better way to apprehend the nature of narrative closure in Balzac than to follow the trace of its signs in this novella, which presents the richest possible thematic and formal material for analysis. Composed of fragments from as early as 1831, the novella was still incomplete in the 1842 volume of *La Comédie humaine*, but modern editions have long obeyed Balzac’s manuscript note in the Furne corrigé and appended to Autre étude de femme the best known, longest, and most important section, the narrative known as *La Grande Bretèche*. Autre étude de femme appeared in volume II of the Furne edition without *La Grande Bretèche*, which was published in volume IV (1845), subtitled at that time “Fin de Autre étude de femme.” On his personal copy of the Furne edition, Balzac crossed out this subtitle and wrote “Ceci doit être reporté à la suite de ‘Autre étude de femme’” [This should be transferred to the end of “Autre étude de femme”] (3: 1510). *La Grande Bretèche* had first appeared in 1832 as the second of the two parts of Le conseil in the Scènes de la vie privée, with Le message; it reappeared in 1837 and finally took its definitive place in Autre étude de femme after five other stories narrated within the frame of an intimate after-dinner conversation among several familiar recurring characters.

This tardy reassignment of *La Grande Bretèche* has its own importance for the story as a whole, but what strikes the reader at an initial reading is the wealth of clotural signs this added narrative possesses. The ending of *La Grande Bretèche* has itself a strongly marked closure in addition to bringing about the closure of Autre étude de femme, while reiterating allusively all the other anecdotes which it surpasses and outdoes. The subject of the tale is such that one could hardly find a more powerful way of closing off the novella: inside the Grande Bretèche manor, absolutely and mysteriously closed since the death of its proprietors, a lover caught by a suspicious husband has been entombed alive in a walled-up closet. This literal enclosure immediately resonates with the multiple signs of figurative closures throughout the narrative.
It is certain that the fatal cloistering of Mme de Merret’s lover, Bagos de Férédia, a noble Spanish prisoner of Napoleon, is so horrifying that it admits of no reopening of the story, as Balzac makes particularly evident. The house is literally a tomb. To this thematic closure is added the formal closure created by the carefully articulated structure of *La Grande Bretèche*, which begins with the logical ending and saves for a total dénouement the account of the walling-in. The enigmatic manor house, closed and untouchable, the concrete and durable outcome of the drama that Bianchon will uncover, is the subject of the first of the four secondary narrations that structure *La Grande Bretèche*. Wandering within its forbidden enclosure, Bianchon dreams of “de délicieux romans” [delicious romances] and “un drame assez noir” [a rather dark drama] (3: 712), in what is actually a prologue to the three further parts, narrated by the notary Regnault, the innkeeper Mme Lepas, and Rosalie, formerly Mme de Merret’s maid. Table 20.1 shows that the four parts are not in chronological order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Narrator</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Logical Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st (prologue)</td>
<td>Bianchon</td>
<td>description of the house</td>
<td>4th (epilogue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Regnault</td>
<td>death of Mme de Merret, her will</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Mme Lepas</td>
<td>introduction of characters, disappearance of Férédia</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Rosalie and Bianchon</td>
<td>Férédia buried alive</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proposing successive enigmas, this structure figures the pursuit of the secret, a pervasive effect in Balzac’s hermeneutics. Thus, in the second part Regnault explains the mystery of the manor by revealing Mme de Merret’s unusual will, which requires that the Grande Bretèche remain sealed and untouched for fifty years after her death. Of course, that partial explanation only deepens the initial enigma and whets Bianchon’s curiosity, which Mme Lepas’s account detailing the mysterious and total disappearance of Napoleon’s prisoner does nothing to dissipate (although the knowing reader might have a pretty good inkling). The accumulation of these unexplained facts and partial revelations underscores the situation of the last part, which will necessarily supply the answers. According to Rosalie’s account, Mme de Merret hides her lover in a closet built into the wall when her husband comes unannounced to her room; M. de Merret makes her swear on her crucifix that there is no one there, and then cruelly orders a mason to wall up the closet.
He then remains in her room for two weeks and, at each muffled sound that passes through the wall, he reminds her (and this is the last sentence of *La Grande Bretèche*) that she has sworn on her cross “qu’il n’y avait là personne” [that there was no one there] (3: 729). To the extent, then, that the narrative principle is that of the pursuit of a secret, the last segment furnishes a formal closure in that it finally reveals the most hidden part of the story. The last part is both solution and resolution; in supplying the answer to all riddles, it has the last word.

Clearly, the story too is “buried alive,” walled up in silence and secret. The semiotic process takes down this wall, stone by stone, to uncover and resuscitate the story for the benefit of dramatic interest, just as Mme de Merret hoped to save Férédia by offering a bribe to Rosalie for trying to persuade the mason to leave a hole. Where Mme de Merret fails, Bianchon succeeds, but not without brandishing the weaponry of love—a feigned courtship—for Rosalie is described, significantly, as “un mur” [a wall] (3: 722). The action of the narration, then, consists in breaking down the walls that surround the story, particularly its ending, so that an audience that demands powerful emotions can relive it, for narrative profit depends on the possibility of making openings. The irony of this strategy is that the impossibility of breaking down a wall was just the point of the story worth discovering.

But a contrary metaphor also governs Rosalie’s account as reported by Bianchon: it fills in the holes of an incomplete narration; it supplies “le dernier chapitre du roman” [the last chapter of the novel] (3: 723), which is placed between those of the notary and of the innkeeper “aussi exactement,” says Bianchon, “que les moyens termes d’une proportion arithmétique le sont entre leurs deux extrêmes” [as exactly as the middle terms of an arithmetical proportion are between the two extremes] (3: 724); it is “au centre même de l’intérêt et de la vérité” [at the very center of interest and of truth] (3: 723); it is “noué dans le nœud” [knotted into the knot]; it is like “la case qui se trouve au milieu d’un damier” [the square in the center of a checkerboard], a very inexact simile, as there are four squares in the center of a checkerboard, not one. It is striking that these descriptions of the last part, all stressing its centrality, are not in the least terminal and that it is the “last chapter” only in the temporality of the narration, not of the story. Imitating a possible method of laying bricks, the structure of the narration saves for last a piece out of the middle; the work of the narration will be completed only when the secret, finally revealed, fulfills the expectations of the audience, thus completing the story—and necessitating the death of the lover.

The thematics of the secret suffer from an equally paradoxical contradiction between dis-covering and closing up, to which Bianchon initially falls
prey after illegally entering the courtyard of the Grande Bretêche. His instinct to fantasize must yield to the curiosity, even the necessity, of finding out the truth, since the notary takes it as a sacred duty to uphold Mme de Merret’s testament. Trapped between illusion and truth, Bianchon both wants to know and does not, for knowledge can be both seductive and perilous (this is also true of the audience represented in the frame story, especially the women). The process of the narration may well break down walls and liberate truth, but the one who knows this truth loses a certain innocence in abandoning illusions and must submit to its effects, whatever they may be. Thus, the two series of figurative representations of this closure—making holes or filling them in, building or undoing walls, images that coexist and that supply the pattern of the tale—betray a preoccupation with the double attraction of the enigma and with its effect on the audience.

Unable to find the happy medium between saying too much and saying too little, between knowing and not knowing, Bianchon and the narrative reproduce the limits between which Mme de Merret also moves. Saying too little, she refuses to admit that a man is hidden in her closet, and her silence is fatal to Férédia; swearing on her crucifix, she says too much, and that too is fatal for Férédia. In the last paragraph, she tries to speak (“Joséphine voulait l’implorer pour l’inconnu mourant” [Josephine wanted to implore him for the sake of the dying stranger]), and her husband will not allow her “un seul mot” [a single word] (3: 729). After having been reduced to silence, Mme de Merret, like Férédia, dies in silence, of a self-imposed starvation, a kind of penance suitable to her sin. Her will imposes a further fifty years of silence on her property.

Along with this double treatment of silence and secret, the conversation of the frame recounts “des secrets bien trahis” [well revealed secrets] (3: 675) that puncture the verbal form of the wall—silence—symbolized by the cracks that have appeared in the walls of the manor. Just as the desire to know the story has a negative side, so the desire to know the truth about women in general gives rise to an irony that pervades the entire novella, the vehicle of a negative judgment on female conduct. It is this relation between the themes of the anecdotes and the thematics of the frame that lends heightened importance to the end of the frame, quoted here in full in its final 1845 version, when Balzac decided to conclude Autre étude de femme by appending La Grande Bretêche: “Après ce récit, toutes les femmes se levèrent de table, et le charme sous lequel Bianchon les avait tenues fut dissipé par ce mouvement. Néanmoins quelques-unes d’entre elles avaient eu quasi froid en entendant le dernier mot” [After this narrative, all the women rose from the table, and the charm under which Bianchon had held them was dissipated by this move-
ment. Nevertheless, some of them had felt almost chilled upon hearing the final word] (3: 729). The closures of *La Grande Bretèche* are fatal to the evening’s gathering; the story goes too far, and all the women recognize as if with a common accord that no possible sequel can follow the closure definitively encoded in that account. The claustrophobic charm had held them transfixed. Frappier-Mazur has written that the story closes on a “point d’orgue” [fermata], but I believe that can only be understood as sustaining silence rather than a phrase (“Lecture d’un texte illisible” 725). The final sentence is heavy with implications of silent accusation against the women who had lovers.

As the last instance of punished adultery, *La Grande Bretèche* depletes the central thematics of infidelity and revenge in *Autre étude de femme*. It strikes the final blow to a certain form of worldliness, as well as to facile women. Just as Rosalie’s part of the story concludes the other parts of *La Grande Bretèche* and completes its construction with an emphatic, accentuated, and central ending, *La Grande Bretèche* concludes the entire novella by concentrating in a single focal point the motifs and themes bundled together by its de facto construction. *La Grande Bretèche* brings out this unity of vision of *Autre étude de femme* in spite of the disparate origins of its constituent parts. But this ultimate unity is achieved only after a significant revision made in 1845: the reduction of the final portion of the frame to the few lines quoted above, about which there is a great deal to say before recognizing that in fact after this closure there is nothing more to say. In 1832, in *Le conseil* (whose two anecdotes were told to Mme d’Esther by M. de Villaines to advise her to remain faithful to her husband), the text of *La Grande Bretèche* was essentially the same and finished on exactly the same words as in the final version (“Vous avez juré sur la croix qu’il n’y avait là personne” [You swore on the cross that there was no one there]). However, the end of the frame in *Le conseil*, a page and a half long, did much to minimize the glacial effect of the tale by showing Mme d’Esther’s confused gratitude, by portraying the characters of the frame continuing their moralizing commentary, and by showing M. de Villaines “passionément épris de Mme d’Esther” [passionately enamored of Mme d’Esther] (2: 1373). Balzac’s decision not to neutralize the acidity of the story’s ending when adding it to *Autre étude de femme* did much to increase its powerful clotural effect.

Refusing to assimilate the events of the story, the new frame measures the distance between two forms of audience. In the fragmentary composition of the story, Frappier-Mazur has identified a kind of sliding of the dividing line

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1. The Pléiade edition of *Le message*, which remained in *La Comédie humaine* as a separate publication, gives the text of the frame of *Le conseil* from the 1832 original publication.
between what she calls the old and the new, the former identified with the oral and aristocracy, the latter with the written and the bourgeoisie (“Lecture”). Léo Mazet also places this rupture between two narrative poles, on the one hand “la littérature du XIXe siècle et son public bourgeois réel dont elle récuse l’unification” [nineteenth century literature and its actual bourgeois audience, whose unification it challenges] and on the other “un public virtuel de coteries d’initiés tel que le connut le XVIIIe siècle” [a virtual audience of coteries of the initiated like those that existed in the eighteenth century], nostalgically evoked (132). Le conseil of 1832 more than Autre étude de femme is a story in which an elite society of former times flourishes, portrayed in the frame. In one of the three or four salons that still exist in Paris, in which literature, criticism, and art—the “conversation française d’autrefois” [the French style of conversation from the past]—are still admired, there are ironic allusions to the “ruines de la France” [ruins of France] after July 1830 (2: 1369, 1370). When in the closing segment of the frame “chacun . . . cherchait des critiques à faire” [everyone . . . looked for criticisms to make] and M. de Villaines stresses the horror of the lesson in “cette affreuse tragédie . . . moins horrible . . . que le spectacle d’une jeune et jolie femme, encore pure, prête à devenir la proie d’un homme sans principes” [this ghastly tragedy . . . less horrible . . . than the spectacle of a pretty young woman, still pure, about to become prey to a man with no principles] (2: 1372), the result is that the moral point of the stories dominates, obliterating any effect of horror. The tale of the Grande Bretèche was thus appropriated and assimilated into the aristocratic conversation of times past, a conversation that, imperturbably, “prit un autre cours” [took a different direction] (2: 1372). Lacking the other anecdotes of Autre étude de femme, La Grande Bretèche did not yet enjoy its full dramatic power.

For not only does the theme of infidelity and revenge unify the capricious ensemble of the novella, in spite of its far too obvious seams, but many of the motifs of La Grande Bretèche also exist in the first five parts of Autre étude de femme. In “La maîtresse de notre colonel” the faithless wife is barricaded in a house that is then burned to the ground, introducing the motif of the sealed house in which a terrible revenge takes place, and the husband, an Italian captain, resembles M. de Merret in that both have jealous personalities hidden behind a cool façade. Merret also resembles the colonel of that anecdote, who harbors a choleric temperament that comes to the fore in critical situations. The sketch of “la femme comme il faut,” the second part of the story, could well serve as an introduction to the character of Mme de Merret, who incarnates a certain morality in spite of being a countess and an adulteress. Just like the first mistress of de Marsay, according to the first
section of the novella, Mme de Merret is able to keep her composure while lying to her husband. Her excessive emaciation and the saintly quality of her death reproduce very closely the death of the duchess recounted by Bianchon in the fifth part. Likewise, Rosina, in the fourth part, was in “un déplorable état de maigreur” [a deplorable state of emaciation] (3: 706). Even the praise of Napoleon by Canalis, in the third section (3: 700–701), throws a certain light on the emperor’s honorable treatment of Féridia, and indeed what Frappier-Mazur calls a Napoleon cycle (“Lecture” 715) links three of the episodes in a common social-historical frame. Lastly, somewhat like a parody, the three secondary narrators of La Grande Bretèche—Regnault, Mme Lepas, and Rosalie—provide a kind of narrative frame for this tale, like Autre étude de femme. These examples should suffice to demonstrate that La Grande Bretèche unites in its enclosure elements from all the rest of the novella. Balzac was right to add it to his disjointed masonry, for it fills in the holes and carries the illustration of the theme to its highest and most somber point, the maximum degree of proof.

With this new dignity, the novella can express its modern lesson alone, without the calming and reassuring closing segment of the 1832 frame; there is no flattening of the point. The new text requires the critical work of the reader to reestablish the deeper meaning revealed by the capital fact that La Grande Bretèche brings the after-dinner conversation to a close: that kind of congenial, elite, and old-fashioned society in which La Grande Bretèche had found its first illustration in 1832 (where its moral was perfectly neutralized) is drawing to a close. The anecdotes that “pétillèrent et se pressèrent sans apprêt” [sparkled and crowded upon each other without affectation] (3: 675) and that characterize a type of outmoded audience whose “literature” is not yet worthy of the name give way at the end of the story to the far too crude realities of a new genre of literature whose carefully devised structure will be the death of the old eighteenth-century–style anecdote. This opposition is explicit in the text: “Là [dans ce salon dernier asile de l’esprit français d’autrefois], nul ne pense à garder sa pensée pour un drame; et, dans un récit, personne ne voit un livre à faire. Enfin, le hideux squelette d’une littérature aux abois ne se dresse point” [There [in this salon, last refuge of the French wit of the past], no one thinks to keep his thoughts for a drama; and in a tale none sees a book to be constructed. Lastly, the hideous skeleton of literature at bay does not rise up] (3: 674). Rejecting un drame, un livre, une littérature [a drama, a book, a literature] in favor of the récit, which implies an oral narration, is a way of reclaiming the “ancien,” or the eighteenth-century audience. (The rejection of literature is a theme addressed with a different approach in La Maison Nucingen; see chapter 7.) But the definitive version of
Autre étude de femme, with the radical change of the closing segment of the frame, stresses the cloturing power of the artistic, dramatic, and architectonic structure of La Grande Bretèche, marking the end of this “eighteenth century” and the start of a new realism.

A part of this power remains to be demonstrated: it is the rich semiotics of closure, a virtual thesaurus whose terms uphold the closure fatal to witty anecdotes and futile conversations. On one side are these signs: cacher, emmurer, haie, mur, passer sous silence, imposer silence, dissimuler, ensevelir, enterrer, clôture, cloître, enclos, fermer, tirer le rideau, disparaître, barricader, secret, mystère, énigme, enceinte [to hide, to wall in, hedge, wall, to pass over in silence, to impose silence, to dissemble, to entomb, to bury, fenced-in enclosure, cloister, enclosed, to close, to draw the curtain, to disappear, to barricade, secret, mystery, enigma, walled-in enclosure], all in the story; on the other, also taken from the text, are brèche, bretèche, grille, trous, parole, récit, vérité, connaissance, révéler, mettre au jour, faire sauter des briques, briser le charme, casser la vitre, crevasse [breach, a kind of balcony with open work, iron gate, holes, utterance, narration, truth, knowledge, to reveal, to bring to light, to tear away the bricks, to break the charm, to break the window, crevice]. With the death of Férédia in the sealed-up closet, the tale results in the depletion of the signs of closure, in the totalizing sense that, following Greimas, I attribute to his term épuisement (261–62). This fatal closure depletes the possibilities of narration; it is material and metaphysical; it causes the cloture of the session giving rise to narration, after which there is nothing further to say. The stories have attained a maximum degree of finitude. Actualizing closure on the thematic, lexical, spatial, and narrative planes, La Grande Bretèche is a kind of paradigm of the whole story, and beyond that of realistic representation in general.

Forcefully at play in Autre étude de femme is a kind of closure that literally goes without saying, a vast international manner of writing in which Balzac’s participation, usually taken for granted, is actually highly problematic. For Balzac did not always strike so mortal a blow to his stories. Coexisting with a long list of closing devices and many examples of powerful realistic closures, there is a strange reluctance to complete, to untie, or to satisfy in the last sentences of many of his stories. Such closures leave a trace of a reaction against the realistic norm. Although it is sometimes difficult to unearth this hesitation to finish in the final published versions, additions and suppressions in the last pages best reveal how Balzac came to deny the text the last word. This rewriting often resulted in willful ambiguity. Is it not possible that in rereading himself—especially in the proofs to which he brought extensive changes—Balzac sometimes deplored a too strong sense of an ending, that
such ambiguous endings are the signs of a contrary movement toward opening up the text, and that their coexistence with strong definitive closures runs parallel to those tensions between fragment and whole that Dällenbach so persuasively identified in two articles in *Poétique*? It is always interesting to consider how an author has changed his plots, but never more intriguing than when these changes occur in the conclusions. Among several such cases in *La Comédie humaine*, three are discussed here, a selection that is neither arbitrary nor exhaustive, but illustrative of different strategies for subverting closure. There are others with endings made interesting by revision, but these cases are striking for reasons inherent to them. In what must be described as a negative way, they too illustrate the power of realistic closure.

**Disclosure**

*Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan*

In her preface to this story for the Club Français du Livre edition of *La Comédie humaine*, Claude-Edmonde Magny is moved to claim that most of Balzac’s short stories end with a kind of “rature” [erasure], leaving us rather uncertain as to what we should think about them, in contrast to the long novels that dispose unambiguously of their principal characters (235). What Magny calls “erasure”—“dire vraiment ce qu’il avait à dire en ne le disant pas” [to say what he actually had to say by not saying it] (260)—is very much like the definition of the perverse secret that Guy Rosolato has given in *Essais sur le symbolique* (278): “cacher pour montrer sans dire” [to hide to show without saying]. This is an apt description of the princess’s strategy. Without presenting in detail the kinds of techniques used to render endings ambiguous, Magny cites at least four examples in a highly interesting reflection prompted by Balzac’s refusal to “mettre un point final” [put a full stop] to *Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan*. This authentic reaction of one excellent reader of the story is certainly a fair indication of its problematic closure, which is not necessarily the obvious one.

The conquest of the virtuous author and genius Daniel d’Arthez by the very notorious and very impoverished princess, premeditated at length and executed as only this Balzacian *grande dame* can do it, finishes in the joint fall of the text and of the nobly chaste d’Arthez. Marking both the end of the plot and the start of the closure, this fall leads to the critical final scene and situates the last paragraph:

Depuis ce jour, il n’a plus été question de la princesse de Cadignan, ni de
d’Arthez. La princesse a hérité de sa mère quelque fortune, elle passe tous les étés à Genève dans une villa avec le grand écrivain, et revient pour quelques mois d’hiver à Paris. D’Arthez ne se montre qu’à la Chambre. Enfin, ses publications sont devenues excessivement rares. Est-ce un dénouement? Oui, pour les gens d’esprit; non, pour ceux qui veulent tout savoir. (6: 1004–5)

[From this day on, there was no further mention of the princesse de Cadignan or of d’Arthez. The princess has inherited some fortune from her mother; she spends every summer in a villa with the great writer in Geneva, and comes back to Paris for a few months in winter. D’Arthez shows himself only in the Chamber. Lastly, his publications have become excessively rare. Is this a dénouement? Yes, for intelligent people; no, for those who want to know everything.]

In a simpler strategy for denying closure, *Un prince de la bohème* also puts the notion of a dénouement explicitly into question, in terms that may clarify what Balzac did here. The narrated story itself lacks any ending, and this failing is excused by the narrator in the closing frame: “Je ne crois pas aux dénouements . . . il faut en faire quelques-uns de beaux pour montrer que l’art est aussi fort que le hasard; mais, mon cher, on ne relit une œuvre que pour ses détails” [I don’t believe in endings . . . you have to write some nice ones to show that art is as strong as chance; but, my dear fellow, one rereads a work only for its details] (7: 838). The two-part opposition between art and chance, on the one hand, and between dénouements and details, on the other, puts the parallel terms into obvious relation. Chance, the great novelist, produces details more fascinating than any artist’s imagination; but it is to art that dénouements belong. Dénouements finish or close the unfinishable, although a great creator of closed worlds pretends not to believe in them. In the domain of “le hasard” Balzac elsewhere maintains the absence of dénoue-
ments, for, as he wrote in the postface to La fille aux yeux d’or in 1835, though the story is true “dans ses détails” [in its details], “rien ne se dénoue poétiquement dans la nature” [nothing winds up poetically in nature] (5: 1111), and the end to which Paquita came was an effect of art. To the details pertains the duty to be true: “Mais le roman ne serait rien si, dans cet auguste mensonge, il n’était pas vrai dans les détails” [But the novel, this august lie, would be nothing if it were not true in its details] (Avant-propos 1: 15).

In Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan, the dénouement reserved for the “gens d’esprit” is also artistic. Rather than a banal clotural formula, the vague expression “être question de,” to which only intelligent people will be able to restore meaning, signals a refusal to furnish the details. An artistic reading will see that only the text’s silence protects this story from the risk of becoming another subject of dinner-table conversations, or another portrait to add to the princess’s already bulging album of possible and probable lovers. Nor is there any reference to another volume of La Comédie humaine in which the curious reader would find the details of this new story (so frequent a practice elsewhere). In fact, in every other case where Diane and Daniel are mentioned, up to seven years after this story, there are no details. The final paragraph of the story offers only the symptoms of happiness; let the skillful readers conclude. Just what they must conclude concerns not only the princess, but the disclosure of d’Arthez’s secrets as well, and this is why the closing summary is not a dénouement for those who want to know everything.

The silence of the ending, not unlike the women’s refusal to discuss the lesson of La Grande Bretèche in Autre étude de femme, duplicates the program the princess opposes to Parisian society, refusing to answer its insistent questions: will she devour his fortune as she has her own (and that of her previous lovers)? Can he afford to abandon the literary and political scene he has only just conquered? Refusing to satisfy the curious reader, the text in its closure is the princess’s accomplice. The fact that the ending is brought about by this (relative) silence allows the skillful reader to read into it the perfect love dreamed of by the princesse de Cadignan, thus making of such readers her accomplices as well. For the “gens d’esprit” are the good readers Balzac admires, and for whom there is a biological type for each sex: the “homme de génie” [man of genius] and the “femme supérieure” [superior woman]. (Among such good readers are the editors, who do not fail to cite a letter to Mme Hanska: “Des amants en Suisse, pour moi, c’est l’image du bonheur” [Lovers in Switzerland, for me, this is the image of happiness] [6: 1535].) But for those who want to know everything—the chroniclers of the faubourgs, the rumor-mongers and salon narrators—this story does not have a dénouement; it lacks closure.
Clearly, the most likely question such a society might ask is whether d’Arthez is happy at the price of being Diane’s dupe. The typical reader will certainly assume so, like society, and the evident success of the princess’s mendacious strategy, so finalistically summarized in the original closing paragraph, would seem to imply Daniel’s total capitulation. Herein lies certainly the most troublesome paradox of the story, for the model of the good reader, in the story itself, is obviously the man frequently described as an “homme d’esprit,” d’Arthez himself. Yet this penetrating hero of art, who has made a study of women in particular, “reads” so badly that he seems fooled by the princess’s lies, throughout their lengthy exposition. To open his eyes Mme d’Espard invites him to dine with some of the most perspicacious of Balzac’s men—Rastignac, Nathan, Maxime de Trailles, and Blondet among a host of other Balzacian personages—who gaily assassinate the character of Diane de Cadignan in fine detail. Can d’Arthez continue to be led by the nose by the arranged account the princess had given?

This account is an obvious referent of the secrets of the title, which are perverse (as in Rosolato’s definition). By manipulating certain secrets, the princess obtains the secret of happiness, an art that pertains properly to her. A good Balzacian reader will do likewise and progress from the desire to know these secrets, like those who want to know everything, to the superior skill of those who have the secret of reading, like the “gens d’esprit.” Shortly before the final paragraph, the dinner-party scene draws to a significantly ambiguous close in which the secret of the text lies hidden the better to reveal, and it is the express function of the two sentences added in 1844 to draw our attention to it and thus to d’Arthez’s apparent lack of penetration, so as to require our active decoding.

What then are d’Arthez’s secrets? His replies to Mme de Cadignan’s moral assassins provoke unrestrained admiration from those members of the new society so prodigal of killing repartee. Nathan, for example, says “Il est aussi habile que difficile de venger une femme sans la défendre” [It is just as clever as it is difficult to avenge a woman without defending her] (6: 1003), a fine distinction replete with meaning, coming as it does from the wit, the social finesse, and expertise of a Nathan. It is in these terms that d’Arthez avenged the princess: “La princesse est une des héroïnes du parti légitimiste, n’est-ce pas un devoir pour tout homme de cœur de la protéger quand même? . . . Ce qu’elle a fait pour la cause de ses maîtres excuserait la plus folle vie” [The princess is one of the heroines of the legitimist party, is it not the duty of all courageous men to protect her all the same? . . . What she has done for the cause of her rulers would excuse the most extravagant life] (6: 1003). But to defend her, by denying false or true slander, would reveal that she has indeed
fooled him, a social blunder so patent that none present would ignore such a delicious occasion for scorn. As Blondet says, “ne pas avoir pris la défense d’une femme aimée, faute qu’on attendait de vous, et qui eût fait triompher ce monde dévoré de jalousie contre les illustrations littéraires . . . Ah! permettez-moi de le dire, c’est le sublime de la politique privée” [not to have taken up the defense of a mistress, a fault that we expected from you, and which would have meant victory for this society consumed by jealousy against literary illustrations . . . Ah! Permit me to say it, that is the veritable sublime of private politics] (6: 1003). D’Arthez succeeds in taking the bait without falling into the trap. The distinction between “avenge” and “defend” is therefore of crucial connotation: it reveals Daniel’s secrets in both senses. He wins his social medals by proving that he has penetrated the princess’s secrets—namely, that she has adroitly altered the true facts—and that he will nevertheless keep his secret to himself: “Il joue serré” [He plays his cards close to his chest], says Nathan (6: 1004).

In short, after Mme d’Espard’s dinner party, Daniel cannot hold to Diane’s innocence, nor can he reveal his knowledge, and this is his secret, kept from the undiligent reader as it most certainly is from Diane de Cadignan. To all this Balzac supplied the clue in the last two sentences, enigmatic for those who do not know how to read them, but vital in preventing our possible misreading. Those who want to know everything will never arrive at this dénouement, for details are missing, and the text will remain an impenetrable secret. For the others, this closure depends on having the secret in the second sense. And it is such readers that Balzac hopes to find.

It is regrettable that not all of Balzac’s readers of this story have been “gens d’esprit” as much as d’Arthez is. Anthony Pugh, for instance, in Balzac’s Recurring Characters, summed up what is commonly said about this story, that the princess has successfully fooled the genial author and that Balzac’s mocking irony extends to d’Arthez: “a character recently idolized for his noble qualities is here gently mocked for his lack of worldly wisdom” (240). This is the anticipated final meaning, the closure that, lacking the last two sentences, the reader would come to. For the actual meaning of the story to surface, the reader must make accommodation for those added sentences; we cannot just ignore them, no more than d’Arthez can ignore the attacks on his beautiful Diane. Pasco’s fine analysis (Balzacian Montage 35–45) shows him to be a reader of wit, sensitivity, ingenuity, and cleverness (the four words by which Pasco translates esprit), as he proves that Balzac’s unshakable belief in the “paradise of completely absorbing love” overturns every other consideration in the ending (44). In rereading himself, Balzac perhaps came to the realization that the noble character he
modeled on himself would not emerge unscathed from what I have called the anticipated reading, and the final two sentences require that like Bianchon in *La Grande Bretèche* we ferret out the true story behind the façade. This means that the closure must include the complete knowledge of his secrets, not hers. In a word, I have claimed that the text is lying to those who want to know everything ("les curieux forcénés" [frenzied inquiring minds], in Magny's delightful phrase [234]), and that it will remain a cipher, perversely hiding the facts that it reveals without saying them, for any inattentive reader. By the simple addition of two sentences, Balzac addresses the final meaning of his story to the select few capable of appreciating it and leaves it unfinished for the others, who will be unable to decide if the Geneva idyll is to be taken as a reward or a punishment. Magny, no dupe herself, puts it finely: as d’Arthez is based on Balzac himself, "il ne saurait être question d’en faire une dupe" [it was out of the question to paint him as a dupe] (238).

**Foreclosure**

*La Maison Nucingen*

Published in 1838, *La Maison Nucingen* was revised more than most of the short texts of *La Comédie humaine*. Exceptionally, suppressions nearly equal additions throughout at least eight sets of proofs, in which, as Citron writes, money devours everything, beginning with love, as the “processus de modelage qui devait amener l’œuvre à sa perfection” [process of modeling that was to bring the work to its perfection] (6: 327) progresses. Essentially, the ending of the embedded story is lengthened while the frame shrinks after having been expanded. These terminal suppressions and additions are indeed capital for the interpretation of the story, but to say that they result in perfection is misleading at best.

The somewhat technical account of the intricate operations that enrich Nucingen and a few others, including Rastignac (see chapter 7), concluded in the first set of proofs with this "vérité pécuniaire" [pecuniary truth] delivered by Bixou, the primary narrator of the banker’s “puff financier”: “Le débiteur est plus fort que le créancier” [The debtor is stronger than the creditor] (6: 391). Starting with this maxim still quite close to the narrated events, at least three further statements added to the first set of proofs broaden the moral bearing of the new capitalism illustrated by the tale:

[1]—Les lois sont des toile...
grosses mouches et où restent les petites.—Où veux-tu donc en venir?
dit Finot à Blondet.

[2]—Au gouvernement absolu, le seul où les entreprises de l’Esprit contre la Loi puissent être réprimées! Oui, l’Arbitraire sauve les peuples. . . . La Légalité tue la Société moderne. . . .


[1] [“Laws are the spider webs through which large flies pass and in which the little ones remain.” “What are you getting at?” said Finot to Blondet.

[2] “Absolute government, the only one where the ventures of the Mind against the Law can be repressed! Yes, Arbitrariness saves the people. . . . Legality is killing modern Society.” . . .

[3] “Royalty is eternal: every nation of a sane mind will return to it under one form or another.”

The first of these may still apply to Nucingen, the “banqueroutier frauduleux” [fraudulent bankrupt] who thumbs his nose at the laws, but the apology of an absolute government crosses the technical borders of the financial subject matter to enter the territory of political opinions, of which the last word seems to lie in the third formula. Reflections on capitalism may well have a necessary ending in the choice of a morally sound system of government. But this royalist conclusion is at the very least surprising; it confuses the issues, leaving the reader somewhat perplexed: Balzac the absolutist contests therein Balzac the advocate of the “société moderne” and the apologist of genius (l’Esprit).

Nor does the frame solve the contradiction. At the end of the original version Balzac did not even recall the presence of the narrator, the “secretary” next door, until he was correcting the first proofs, to which he added a sentence that has been retained in the final version: “Tiens, il y avait du monde à côté, dit Finot en nous entendant sortir” [Well well, there were people next door, said Finot, hearing us go out] (6: 392). In the following proofs, the closing portion of the frame continued to grow longer. On the third proof, Balzac appended to the sentence just quoted a direct criticism of journalism, which became the fourth additional closing formula: [4] “Le journalisme est l’opération d’un chimiste [l’alchimie de l’intelligence—fourth proof] dis-je à ma voisine étonnée, vous venez d’en voir les plus beaux précipités!” [“Journalism is the operation of a chemist [the alchemy of intelligence—fourth proof],” I said to my astonished companion, “you have just seen its most
amazing precipitates!”) (6: 1307–8). Obviously, this moral concerning the four narrators is even farther from the events of the story itself than the first three. The operations of the “intimate conversations” (as this narrative is ironically called) between intelligent people are thus the subject of this last formula, rather than those of finance, and this attack against journalism is then developed at length on the fourth set of proofs, the narrator opposing it to the sentimentality of “le beau idéal” [the ideal of beauty], which produces both virtue and art.

Thus the closure of the longest version of the frame contrasted journalism (linked to esprit) and art (here tied to sentiment), so that anyone possessed of esprit could not be an artist. Denouncing intelligence and wit, Balzac clearly supported an art based on sentiment. This closure could be described as one that conveys a final meaning about the narrative style in this story but does nothing to clarify the ending of the narrated account. Closure was diverted from the muddy moralities of the narrated financial or political events to a value-laden pronouncement closer to Balzac’s preoccupation with art. But on the fifth set of proofs, a major revision suppressed everything that followed the discreet departure of the characters of the frame, hence the entire attack against journalism as “l’alchimie de l’intelligence” and all the analysis of art as the “beau idéal.” Instead, Balzac excused himself in a marginal note: “j’ai supprimé la copie de la précédente épreuve, il n’y avait pas à conclure, il faut laisser penser ce que j’y disais” [I deleted the text of the previous proof, it was not necessary to conclude, let the reader think what I was saying in it] (6: 1308). Opting thus for a silence heavy with significance, Balzac leaves the closure in the hands of the reader, refuses his own clotural power, and makes an esthetic choice for thinking, a necessity (“il faut”) on which the ultimate meaning of the story rests.

The closing section of a frame always establishes a critical distance from the inserted story, often proposes a sketch of an interpretation that orients our reading. In suppressing that frame, Balzac indicated that he no longer wanted unambiguously to dedicate his text to that particular interpretation and chose instead to rest on the contradictory ethics pronounced mostly by Blondet, a journalist. As a result, the end remains suspended, with competing results. The utter silence of the erstwhile speechifying “secretary” leaves only a trace: “Il y a toujours du monde à côté, répondit Bixiou, qui devait être aviné” [“There are always people next door,” replied Bixiou, who must have been drunk] (6: 392, last sentence in the final version), an indirect allusion to the critic.

And the critic does indeed run the risk of always being “à côté” or beside the point, for it is impossible to arrive at a final truth for this novella as it
stands. Is it an apology of modern society or of royalty? of legality or of “l’Arbitraire”? of the “Esprit” or of law? of the fat “flies” or the little ones? All efforts to come down on one side or the other fail. Magny finds that the end is lost among the inebriated remarks of the narrators; *La Maison Nucingen* “ne conclut pas du tout” [does not conclude at all] (235). Or, as Barbéris writes, though it is true that “dès 1831, Balzac s’affirme royaliste” [as early as 1831, Balzac asserts he is a royalist], there is also in this story “quelque chose qu’il est impossible de mobiliser ou de récupérer pour un finalisme” [something that is impossible to call up or retrieve for a finality] (*Une mythologie réaliste* 203, 231). What is more, it is highly doubtful that the critic would think exactly what Balzac said in the development he suppressed, since nothing in the morals of the story predicts the new direction of his thoughts. Though debate on politics may well grow out of considerations of finance, by what pathways do politics lead to art and intelligence? The artistic critic capable of following Balzac in this itinerary to the suppressed ending would have to superpose the laws of finance and those of narrative to recover that final thought, but would fall inevitably into the category of the *esprit* rather than the *sentiment*. The cynical intelligence that pervades the tale does indeed merit the moral on journalism (and one can find Balzac’s opinion on it in other places, for instance in prefaces to first editions such as the one to *Illusions perdues*), so that the suppressed moral was an appropriate closure, at least at some time. Why then did Balzac go without saying it? No doubt to prolong the reader’s reflection on the story, to make us reread the last paragraphs and seek their ultimate development, to interrogate the text.

In sum, there is no settled sense here, in part because the unusual suppressions brought foreclosure rather than closure, in part because the morals themselves are a reflection of the sliding axiology of regimes in Balzac in general, for a major threat to closure here is the difficulty of assigning a sure Balzacian value to the various modes of government between 1789 and 1838, when the story was written. The several added morals are the semiotic index of the competing ideologies that can claim to have value in a created world, but so much is thrown into the pot that no unique flavor survives. The task of closure, explicitly assigned to the “gens d’esprit” in *Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan*, is here given to the “monde à côté,” the critic who will eventually and necessarily conclude. Though these strategies are similar, and remarkably so, the subversion of the realistic closure in *La Maison Nucingen* has a different effect. Closure is simply made unrecognizable. I claimed that realistic closure goes without saying; here is a case where the author literally went without saying, and as a result the story lacks the usual closure.
A Pensive Text

Honorine

Maurice de l’Hostal, the French consul at Genoa, recounts the story of comte Octave, whose wife Honorine ran away with a lover, was abandoned, and lived for nine years as a simple worker under the secret and efficacious protection of her husband. Maurice intercedes to reunite her with Octave, but in spite of the good will of both spouses, her memories of irresistible “voluptés” [sensual pleasures] (2: 581) and her cult of the ideal love (2: 592) make the marriage impossible. Honorine languishes and dies. For his part, a very different Octave confesses to Maurice that he has her death on his conscience and that he will himself die of remorse. The characters of the frame interpret Octave’s remorse and conclude: “il pouvait rester des vertus à une femme après sa faute” [a woman who has fallen can still be virtuous] (2: 531).

The entire frame, opening and closing portions, was hastily added in February 1843 and required a major revision of the ending of the inserted story, which Balzac had written in three days at the end of December 1842. Where the definitive version is pessimistic, fatalistic, and tragic, the manuscript simply had a happy ending: the reunited couple lived in eternal happiness, and Octave had only to wish for Maurice a similar wife and an equal happiness. All disturbances laid to rest, the thoroughly wrapped-up closure returned the marriage to normality.

So dramatic a reversal in the dénouement would be interesting in itself, but it is all the more so because one can pinpoint the spot where the text bifurcates toward the new direction. The last paragraph in the manuscript consisted of this brief letter from Octave: “Maurice, je suis heureux, ce mot vous est dû, sans quoi vous pourriez croire que je ne sais pas apprécier votre générosité. J’espère que Dieu, dans sa clémence, aura fait deux femmes semblables et que vous saurez trouver la seconde. Ai-je besoin de vous dire que je suis tout à vous” [Maurice, I am happy. I owe you this note, without which you might think that I do not know how to appreciate your generosity. I hope that God, in his clemency, will have made two identical women and that you will know how to find the second one. Do I need to tell you that I am yours faithfully] (2: 1439). The letter is short, for there is never very much to say when a couple has found happiness, which does not suffer narration. But in the definitive version it is precisely at the start of this letter from Octave that the dénouement bifurcates toward the tragic ending, confirming that happiness cannot be recounted nor accounted for: “Mon cher Maurice, si j’étais heureux je ne vous écrirais point; mais j’ai recommencé
une autre vie de douleur” [My dear Maurice, if I were happy I would not be writing to you; but I have begun another life of suffering] (2: 590). And this new ending goes on for nearly three pages. In the different lengths of the two letters, in the change from “je suis heureux, ce mot vous est dû” to “si j’étais heureux je ne vous écrirais point,” I find the most striking formal proof that a well wrapped-up ending supports no commentary, just as La Grande Bretèche brought closure to the intimate after-dinner conversation. Quite to the contrary, the addition of the frame entailed the reformulation of this letter as well as a last letter from Honorine to Maurice and a visit by Octave to Maurice. While the letter from Octave recounts the enduring incompatibility between husband and wife, the letter from Honorine describes the courage she deploys in order to make her husband think she is happy: “Déchirée, je souris!” [Torn to pieces, I smile!] (2: 593); “Je suis comédienne avec mon âme, et voilà peut-être pourquoi je meurs! J’enferme le chagrin avec tant de soin qu’il n’en paraît rien au dehors, il faut bien qu’il ronge quelque chose, il s’attaque à ma vie” [I am playing a part with my soul, and perhaps that is why I am dying! I shut up the grief with such care that it cannot be seen from outside; it has to gnaw at something; it is attacking my life] (2: 594). The discreet allusions to the cause of this death are to be completed by comparing it to Mme de Mortsauf’s in Le lys dans la vallée. These letters stand in counterpoise. As for Octave’s ambiguous explanation to Maurice after Honorine’s death, it largely proves that there are still things to be said, and that one must interpret the meanings hidden in his words, or veiled by his silences, which are marked in the text by ellipses:


[In the interest of human nature, shouldn’t we seek to know what this irresistible power is that makes us sacrifice a divine creature to the most fugitive of all pleasures, in spite of our reason? . . . I heard cries in my conscience. Honorine did not cry out alone. And I wanted to! . . . I am devoured by remorse! I was dying on the rue Payenne [his home] of the pleasures that I did not have; I will die in Italy [having gone there to seek distractions] of
the pleasures that I have tasted! . . . Whence comes this misunderstanding between two equally noble natures, if I may say so?

By completing the text at each lacuna, the operation of reading will make it clear that the misunderstanding is of a sexual nature and that the count has forced his wife. And yet Octave too is a man of honor, a noble soul, an “être exceptionnel” [exceptional being]. The ending of the text maintains at the same time the grandeur of these equally noble souls and Honorine’s inability to live with Octave—the impossible contradiction that turns this novella into an exceptional story. The dramatic change of outcome has the effect of freezing the text in that impossible contradiction. And the new frame extends the tragic dénouement to Maurice.

The consul Maurice had sent his wife away before recounting Honorine’s story, for he had chastely played in it the role of the lover-friend and did not want his wife to know. Unfortunately, his wife has listened, and her name is . . . Onorina! But the frame recuperates this tragedy to prove that virtue can be found in a fallen woman, that one should honor Honorine and the “belles âmes” [beautiful souls] like her, and that “le mariage, avec un amour de cœur chez les deux époux, ce serait le Paradis” [a marriage with heartfelt love in both the spouses would be Paradise] (2: 596). In the face of these powerful values the possibility of a happy marriage must fall, as even the narrator loses his usual impunity.

The last sentence leaves the text in suspension: “Il se trouve donc encore de grandes âmes dans ce siècle! dit Camille Maupin qui demeura pensive, appuyée au quai, pendant quelques instants” [“So there are still great souls in this world!” said Camille Maupin, who remained pensive for a few moments, leaning on the pier] (2: 597). As Barthes said of Sarrasine, pensiveness has the structural function of infinite opening (S/Z 222–23). Lacunary but proof of recovered fullness, Camille Maupin’s pensiveness equals that of the creator before his creation at the moment when it is necessary to bring it to an end. It is the moment when the author wonders in fact what he had meant to say, to what ending he had meant to come. (One might also explain the note on the fifth proof of La Maison Nucingen in such a way.) The silence that follows the end of a text is that of reading, in which that thinking will take place.

But what is one to think? If it is true, as the editor thinks, that the original version with the happy ending was intended as an indirect message to Mme Hanska, gently reminding her that true love can survive in a marriage, and even after “la faute de la femme” [the woman’s misconduct], the pessimistic definitive ending is appropriated to serve the final truth pronounced by the
20: Problems of Closure

author Camille Maupin ("Il se trouve donc encore de grandes âmes dans ce siècle!"), in which it is permitted to see Balzac preferring greatness of soul to the fugitive pleasures he has already enjoyed. Sacrificing the pleasure of a happy ending to the superior finality of sustaining greatness in exceptional souls, and artists in particular, the work of the text reproduces a movement of withdrawal from too neatly wrapped-up conclusions; a happy ending was truly unthinkable, given these values. (And a third possible outcome, perhaps more common yet, has been avoided by the same recourse to pensiveness: the edifying moral lesson of the repentant adulteress divinely punished.) A well-closed and clotured ending leaves few traces; likewise, pleasures that one has enjoyed kill off the narrative, whereas pensiveness prolongs the reader’s interest. There would be little critics could write about this story if Balzac had not added the frame. Pensiveness then is yet another strategy for leaving behind an ambiguous meaning, one that maintains the impossible contradiction of noble souls and marriage. A pensive reader will reflect on the refusal of a romantic norm in favor of an artistic closure that exists only for the “gens d’esprit” capable of reflection, and that denies pleasures even to—especially to—those who narrate.

Composition builds to a closed effect, but closure can be undermined to good effect as well. Like Camille Maupin in the final words of Honorine, the reader disassembles the composition in the act of analysis, only to put it together again, but differently. Inherent in the project to write the history of French society in its entirety is the recognition of a powerful sense of closure in the world, for in the belief that one day the edifice will be finished, repeated in several prefaces, in correspondences, and in the Avant-propos, there lies the certainty that there are conclusions, if not dénouements, to which one can aspire, and in which all the constituent parts will participate, even those with problematic closures. The illusory project, for it is of necessity unrealizable, is as lacking in dénouement as are these stories for “those who want to know everything.”