Balzac was writing in what Dominique Rabaté has called the “age of happy metonymy” (48). It was a time when discourse was confident of its power to call forth, develop, and expand narrative to the extent of imagining that it might recreate a whole from a mere fragment.1 For Balzac this notion validates the claim that La Comédie humaine contains the whole of French society of the time in its scope; “happy metonymy” grounds Balzacian realism. And if metonymy has the good hand, it is because Balzac conceives of causality as justified by bringing ends out of origins, notes Rabaté. Balzac’s zoological and archeological models lay scientific foundations for the signifying chain of narrative matter that will conclude in a “triumphant metonymy” (Rabaté 49): “L’écrivain, comme l’archéologue ou le naturaliste, sait lire, à partir d’une trace, le processus entier; il fait se déplier, devant son lecteur ébahi, l’intégralité du caché, de l’enfoui. . . . Il n’empêche [contra Dällenbach] que c’est bien cette idéologie qui permet au romancier de bâtir l’édifice totalisant de La Comédie humaine” [The writer, like the archeologist or the naturalist, knows how to read the entire process from a single trace;  

1. Dällenbach proposes to reread Balzac “en tant qu’ensemble bricolé et pluriel visant à la totalité sur le mode du fragment” [as a pluralistic ensemble cobbled together, aiming for totality by way of the fragment] (La canne 60).
for his astounded reader he unfolds an integral vision of what is hidden or buried. . . . Yet it is indeed [contra Dällenbach] this ideology that allows the novelist to build the totalizing edifice of La Comédie humaine] (49). Happy metonymy, Rabaté adds, rests on the writer’s belief in the totality of his transmission: “Chez Balzac, l’opacité première du réel oblige justement l’écrivain à percer les apparences, à se faire déchiffreur. Si l’artiste est visionnaire, c’est par ce talent, et pourrait-on dire cet héroïsme herméneutique” [For Balzac, it is precisely the primary opacity of the real that obliges the writer to see beyond appearances, to turn himself into a decipherer. This talent—one could almost say this hermeneutic heroism—is what makes the artist a visionary] (51–52).

All this well describes the standard assessment of Balzacian realism, including perhaps the author’s own, but the interpretive reader, while acknowledging this age of happy metonymy, seeks nuances to avoid a naive apprehension of the idea of realism. Naive realism holds that there is a reality “out there” that Balzac’s text does a good job of reflecting in the mirrors of his novels. The reading I constantly prefer takes realism to be the creation of reality, where the prose is not the translation of a pre-existing reality but the experience of that reality itself. As Starobinski wrote in 1967: “l’écriture n’est pas le truchement douteux de l’expérience intérieure, elle est l’expérience même” [writing is not the dubious translation of intimate experience, it is this experience itself], in a formulation that applies equally well to the creativity of the novelist and the activity of the critic (18). At the end of the trajectory I have taken among Balzacian conceptions, I would like to connect these important questions of realism to the rhetoric of the Prime Movers.

The Rhetoric of Realism

The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac.

—Oscar Wilde

I have asked in this study why people say that Balzac is a realistic author, that he represents the standard of realism. What actually constitutes the realism we call Balzacian?

A good place to begin to answer is the well-known passage about Cuvier in La peau de chagrin, about the famous bleached bones: “notre immortel naturaliste a reconstruit des mondes avec des os blanchis, a rebâti comme Cadmus des cités avec des dents, a repeuplé mille forêts de tous les mystères de la zoologie avec quelques fragments de houille, a retrouvé des populations
de géants dans le pied d’un mammouth” [our immortal naturalist reconstructed worlds out of bleached bones, rebuilt cities out of teeth as Cadmus did, repopulated a thousand forests with all the mysteries of zoology from a few fragments of coal, found populations of giants in the foot of a mammoth] (10: 75). The hymn to creation that this famous passage intones prepares the mysterious Sabbath that Raphaël de Valentin is prey to an instant later, but it applies just as immediately to the creative force of Balzac’s realism. Cuvier is invoked to give scientific validity to the concept; like him, Balzac reconstructed worlds out of the mere bones, teeth, or fragments of coal that are his words. Those elements were ready to hand; the “mœurs françaises” gave Balzac the gift of an enormous variety of types, dramas, thought, and movement. In France, “tout s’y dit, tout s’y pense, tout s’y fait” [everything can be said, everything can be thought, everything can be done] (preface to Une fille d’Ève 2: 264). It took a genius to create the signifying structure that would give life to those elements. A voice cries “Voyez!” and “Soudain les marbres s’animalisent, la mort se vivifie, le monde se déroule!” [Look! Suddenly the marble turns animal, death comes to life, the world unfolds!] (10: 75). Balzacian realism builds an entire population by describing single representatives.

A similar voice in the preface to La peau de chagrin asks, rhetorically, in a sentence that remains without answer but that Balzac’s opus resoundingly assents to, “Les hommes ont-ils le pouvoir de faire venir l’univers dans leur cerveau, ou leur cerveau est-il un talisman avec lequel ils abolissent les lois du temps et de l’espace?” [Do men have the power to bring the universe into being in their minds, or are their minds the talisman with which they abolish the laws of time and space?] (10: 53). In spite of the balanced syntax, this is not an either-or alternative, for Balzac. If Balzac creates realism it is because he is fully invested in both principles. “Faire venir l’univers dans leur cerveau” points to the vast accumulation of real and real-like facts, people, cities, houses, furniture, events, and all the myriad data that constitute the raw material on which the brain as talisman works its creative energies by placing them into a system and a structure that abolish “les lois du temps et de l’espace.” The talisman enables the writing of realism; the power to conceive of the materials of this realism provides the matter of the writing. On the one hand the expression, on the other the observation (10: 52); both the ability to do and to make—the verb faire from Latin faber—and the ability to conceive and to give life to what is made and done. The duality of the structure is ineluctable in La Comédie humaine, from the moment Balzac imagined the possibility of creating a society that informs in every particular about real society. “La réunion des deux puissances fait l’homme complet” [the union
of the two powers makes man complete], the preface also says—and the key word *complete* is never insignificant in Balzac (10: 52)—but “l’homme de génie” [the man of genius] (10: 53) alone possesses as well the visionary possibility of *inventing* the real instead of or in addition to *observing* the real, the voice of the preface says.

Cuvier was a baron. Closer to the other end of the production of *La Comédie humaine*, in 1845, Balzac published a satirical article, “Entre Savants,” in which a character called baron Total represents the analytical view. Baron Total is a believer in absolute divisions, which means he is an analyst whose total intellectual effort is dedicated to explaining the “phénomènes de l’animalité, et conséquemment de la terre” [phenomena of animality and consequently of the planet] (12: 525). In spite of the satire and the tone of persiflage of this article, quite the opposite of the tone in both the preface and the text of *La peau de chagrin*, what has remained the same since 1831 is the admiration for the analytical genius whose vision embraced the entire planet. Writing in 1833, in *Théorie de la démarche*, Balzac had again raised the analytical to the highest rank: “L’observateur est incontestablement homme de génie au premier chef. Toutes les inventions humaines procèdent d’une observation analytique dans laquelle l’esprit procède avec une incroyable rapidité d’aperçus” [The observer is incontestably a man of genius of the highest order. All human inventions come from an analytical observation in which the mind proceeds with an incredible rapidity of perceptions] (12: 276). Geniuses like Cuvier, mentioned in this paragraph, are the ones who see both cause and effect and who have induced the cause from the effect.

Such is, for Balzac, the ability of the writer. It was in the novel of 1831 that Balzac developed the concept of the visionary creator of reality who possesses the phenomenon of second sight that devolves only to the poet and writer and allows them to find truth: “C’est une sorte de seconde vue qui leur permet de deviner la vérité dans toutes les situations possibles; ou, mieux encore, je ne sais quelle puissance qui les transporte là où ils doivent, où ils veulent être. Ils inventent le vrai, par analogie, ou voient l’objet à décrire, soit que l’objet vienne à eux, soit qu’ils aillent eux-mêmes vers l’objet” [It is a sort of second sight that allows them to guess the truth in all possible situations; or, better yet, some unknown power that transports them to the place where they must be, where they want to be. They invent the true by analogy, or see the object to be described, whether the object comes to them or they go themselves toward the object] (10: 52).

2. Balzac’s “second sight” has been very well studied in the critical literature; see Arlette Michel’s *Le réel et la beauté*, chapter 2.
A man of genius such as these texts proclaim was Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, whose revision of the Cuvier position in the field of zoology coupled with Balzac’s Cuvierism took Balzac’s realism to new richness and uniqueness by adding the fertile concept of the unity of composition. Balzac praises the “immense progress” to which Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire brought natural science (3: 823). The debate between the two naturalists was a dramatic conflict in the zoological world, but in Balzac’s it is more appropriate to speak of a complementary pairing: what I am calling the Cuvier tendency in La Comédie humaine takes up the analytical observation of the facts into the unity of composition posited by Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. The myriad details of real life function together with the operators that put them into action to produce the Balzacian concept of realism. These ideas are exposed in the Avant-propos. Françoise Gaillard’s analysis of the text in her article “La science: Modèle ou vérité,” as published in Balzac: L’invention du roman, remains the best and most lucid exposition of this essential Balzacian duality, which opposes matière and esprit and the synthetic and the analytic and creates the necessary liaison and système to organize the vast real matter of existence, according to the method of observation and expression that makes the raw material into what we recognize as realism in the novel.

Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s concept of the unity of composition holds that “L’organisme des animaux est soumis à un plan général, modifié dans quelques points seulement pour différencier les espèces” [The animal organism is subject to a general model, modified only in a few points to differentiate species] which he called the “principe d’unité typéale” [principle of the unity of type] (quoted by Allem 302). The principle possesses operative functionality: by explaining, interpreting, and putting into operation a set of facts, materials, or data, the man of genius realizes the creation of a composition of reality. No genius is complete without that ability to put into a system the facts it observes. Balzac put it this way in his preface to Le Cabinet des Antiques: “Cette manière de procéder doit être celle d’un historien des moeurs: sa tâche consiste à fondre les faits analogues dans un seul tableau, n’est-il pas tenu de donner plutôt l’esprit que la lettre des événements, il les synthétise” [This way of proceeding should be the one the moral historian uses. His task consists in blending analogous facts into a single picture. Isn’t it his job to provide the spirit rather than the letter of events? He synthesizes them] (4: 962). And in the preface to Une fille d’Ève, the same double task is expressed in quasi-chemical terms: “Aussi l’affaire de l’auteur est-elle principalement d’arriver à la synthèse par l’analyse, de dépeindre et de rassembler les éléments de notre vie, de poser des thèmes et de les prouver tout ensemble, de tracer enfin l’immense physionomie d’un siècle en en peignant les princi-
paux personnages” [The author’s business is therefore principally to arrive at synthesis through analysis, to depict and to assemble the elements of our lives, to propose themes and prove them at the same time, finally to trace the immense physiognomy of a century by portraying its principal characters] (2: 267–68).

The two tendencies we can call “Cuvier” and “Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire,” in shorthand fashion, explain the tension inherent in the Balzacian notion of types, one of the most important rhetorical devices in La Comédie humaine. It is the variety of types that allows Balzac to be so inventive in comparison to the paltry realisms that existed before him, as he claims in the preface to Une fille d’Ève. In the past, novels were constructed from simple elements—conflicts of class, kings, queens, and peasants, fixed characters like the merchant. Peasants were slaves, nobles were entirely free. Balzac credits l’Égalité with producing infinite nuances: “Jadis, la caste donnait à chacun une physionomie qui dominait l’individu; aujourd’hui, l’individu ne tient sa physionomie que de lui-même” [In the past, a caste gave each person a physiognomy that had dominance over the individual; today the individual takes his physiognomy entirely from himself] (2: 263). Such a notion of types creates a personal or psychological realism; the character types serve as the skeletons on which the body of La Comédie humaine is molded. Familiar examples are Gobseck the usurer; Grandet the miser; Rastignac the young malleable hero, who is also “adroit, hardi” [adroit, bold] (4: 960); Lucien de Rubempré the even younger and more malleable hero; the female heart in Une fille d’Ève or Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan; male desire with Vautrin, among many others. Juliette Grange provides a different list of examples: “Dans la mesure où il définit des figures exemplaires, ce que Balzac appelle des types, le roman fabrique une réalité sociale à partir de la fiction. Parmi bien d’autres, la Femme de Trente ans, l’Artiste, l’Épicier, le Concierge, Paris, la Ville de Province, l’Ambition, l’Amour, l’Avarice” [To the extent that it defines exemplary figures, what Balzac calls types, the novel fabricates a social reality on the basis of fiction. Among many others, The Woman of Thirty, the Artist, the Grocer, the Concierge, Paris, the Provincial City, Ambition, Love, Avarice] (37). More abstractly, Arlette Michel makes the connection of the type to the imaginary: the type is “l’équivalent poétique et beau parce qu’il porte en lui à la fois la grandeur attachée à la généralité et la singularité propre à l’imaginaire” [the poetic, beautiful equivalent because it contains within itself both the grandeur of generalities and the singularity of the imaginary] (Le réel 39).
From the type to the imaginary creation of reality, the mechanism serves the realistic narrative.

Not just the readily identifiable and denominated social types, but scores of other characters serve Balzac’s demonstration of the real world. César Birotteau’s story is particular to him and he serves not just as the type of the banqueroutier, but more importantly as the entry into the Balzacian chrono-tope of the real story of bankruptcy. In Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes, “Corentin, Peyrade et Contenson représentent l’espionnage sous ses trois faces, comme Vautrin est à lui seul toute la corruption et toute la criminalité” [Corentin, Peyrade, and Contenson represent espionage in its three forms, just as Vautrin all by himself represents all corruption and all criminality], Balzac writes in his preface (6: 426). The ability of the type to represent gives it operative functionality and drives the writing toward its ultimate goal of completion; the type approaches totality by giving a single form to a diverse accumulation; it locates the uniqueness of the diversity and the mass. Types, moreover, are not limited to people, as there are cities, streets, dwellings, furnishings, and clothing that function as types as well. In Le curé de village, for example, Véronique Sauviat’s home has archeological significance: it is the type of the dwelling that produced a character like Véronique.

But characters evolve, and so do cities, streets, and other things, so that the very definition of the type in Balzac is determined by the tension between a fixist view and an evolutionary one. The erstwhile wife of the colonel Chabert, Rose, now comtesse de Ferraud, is both a fixed type, from her origins as a fille working the alleys at the Palais Royal, and an evolved one, a countess after the return of the Bourbons, representing not only both positions in society, for women, but also the entire process by which such a change could occur: by virtue of her marriage to Chabert, she rose to the noblesse d’Empire, thence to marriage to a ci-devant count, Ferraud, thus encapsulating in her personal history an entire history of regime changes and all that stemmed from them, between the Revolution and the Restoration, not forgetting Napoleon. Yet Chabert’s return threatens to expose her “real self,” her origins as a lower-class woman, and that threat is a powerful motor of the plot. Balzac’s types resemble the real all the more for displaying this inherent tension and instability. As Silvestre de Sacy wrote, “Les variations du type humain, matière romanesque inépuisable, soulignent l’unité et la constance du plan sur lequel est construit l’homme” [The variations of the human type, an inexhaustible material for the novel, underscore the unity and the constancy of the model on which the human being is constructed] (No. 1018, 304). That pairing of variation and unity, of evolution and fixism, characterizes Balzacian realism.
La Comédie humaine gives special importance to genealogies, which can be called the creation of types on the level of families. Their complexity is legendary; they represent the messy realities of real life; and, like types, they have operative functionality. Genealogies stack the deck against the individual; I studied three such examples in Ursule Mirouët, La Rabouilleuse, and Pierrette. Jean-Hervé Donnard speaks of “envahissement familial” [invasion by families] (345) with Les paysans in mind (and Thierry Bodin produced one of the best studies of genealogies in an article about that late novel). Balzac does not mince his words, in this as in much else: the genealogy in Les paysans is a “despotique cousinage bourgeois” [despotic bourgeois cousinage] (9: 186) or a “népotisme bourgeois” (9: 187), and in Ursule Mirouët he compares the heirs of Dr. Minoret to “des chiens à la curée” [dogs going for quarry] (3: 925).

To create an entire family structure is for Balzac to invent the basis for a story to be told. In addition to representing the multiple relations within families, genealogies play a structural role in the plots and in character development, exhibiting instabilities such as conflict, defects, excess, and deceit. In all cases, they function as schematic representations of the movemented relation of love to money—even if they often point to the failures of love or family to overcome the power of attraction that money possesses. The complexities of the money relations mirror the complexities of the genealogies; in La Rabouilleuse, the failed family ties correspond to the harmful actions occurring in the name of money; in Ursule Mirouët, love arises where there is no genealogical relation, in the coterie embracing Ursule, her tutor, and the mini society of chosen friends surrounding them. As for Pierrette, the branches of the genealogy stemming from the heroine’s grandmother represent love, while anything to do with the Rogron brother and sister stands for money. Among the possible semiotic structures, these family structures based on Love and Money are powerful forces in the rhetoric of realism.

No conception of Balzac’s reinvention of realism is possible without taking into account the basic strategy that characterizes the Balzacian narrator. Balzac is the great explicator. In the 1960s, Gérard Genette had spoken of “le démon explicatif, chez Balzac” [Balzac’s explicating demon] (“Vraisemblance” 79). Jacques Neefs remarks that the analytical, in La Comédie humaine, is not limited to the Études analytiques but is also “une qualité
de visée, de ‘coup d’œil,’ répandue dans l’ensemble du narratif balzacien” [a quality of purpose, of a “gaze,” widespread throughout the Balzacian narrative world], operating wherever a description or an identification is needed (“Les trois étages” 154). Isabelle Tournier’s article about the use of the expression “voici pourquoi” [here’s why], which she inventoried using Frantext, identified nine functions: for instance, to start a narrative, show the narrator’s control, stimulate interest, simulate orality, regulate the speed or eliminate the unnecessary, and most important for this discussion, operate verisimilitude by justifying the narration. I much prefer to speak of *explications nécessaires* to designate this tic of Balzacian narrative style which seeks to reveal, display, and explain what he knows and serves to justify the very existence of the narrative at all. For the narrative tells us: not only will you understand this story better, after following Balzac through his necessary explication, but you will not understand it if you do not—hence the strength of the necessity to inform.

Not just an operator of verisimilitude by inscribing causality, the *explication nécessaire* is an operator of a more acute form of realism than had been known before. (I am well aware that one finds authorial interventions before Balzac—*Jacques le fataliste*, for instance, is rife with the author’s interruptions—but it is the coupling of this device with the scientific grounding of *La Comédie humaine* that distinguishes Balzac’s practice.) Before final corrections, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* included a chapter titled “Explications nécessaires” (6: 595). A fine article by Claire Barel-Moisan and Aude Déruelle, “Balzac et la pragmatique: Narration et lois du discours,” shows that the Grician “maxim of manner,” the injunction to be clear, occupies an excessive part: “[La maxime de modalité] apparaît comme un véritable impératif, au service duquel les autres maximes vont être sacrifiées, sans que ce soit réciproque. Le narrateur transigera sur la pertinence et la quantité pour garantir une plus grande clarté, mais pas l’inverse” [The maxim of manner appears as a veritable imperative in the service of which the other maxims are sacrificed without there being any reciprocity: the narrator will compromise on relevance and quantity to guarantee greater clarity, but not the reverse] (308). The same Aude Déruelle in her book on digressions considers the *explications nécessaires* as an instrument of “vraisemblabilisation” (91), certainly a word that deserves mentioning for the sheer pleasure of its poetic resonances. She writes that Balzac’s explications construct a thread that explains the linkages among events while also maintaining the thread visible to the reader. Everywhere, *M. de Balzac s’explique*—or his narrator does; our only task is to follow him as he takes us through the flashbacks, the family histories, the political exegeses, the anthropological sociologies, the
hidden truths and passions of all sorts that ground the stories—and primarily the passions of love and of money.

On the habitual understanding of “the Balzacian novel” as a standard of realism, consider also Fredric Jameson’s view. The premise is that Balzac stands for everything that is traditional about representation: “so that Balzac may stand for unenlightened representationality when you are concerned to bring out everything that is ‘textual’ and modern in Flaubert, but turns into something else when, with Roland Barthes in S/Z, you have decided to rewrite Balzac as Philippe Sollers, as sheer text and écriture” (18). This stance is similar to Lucien Dällenbach’s more nuanced and complete appreciation of the status of Balzacian realism in his two parallel articles published in Poétique in 1979 and 1980, “Du fragment au cosmos” and “Le tout en morceaux.” Dällenbach compares the Balzac novel to the type of the Claude Simon novel in which there is no “commentaire explicatif,” according to “Le tout en morceaux” (161). The Balzacian novel is one that explains.

Love and Money and the Rhetoric of Realism

It is my contention that all the necessary explanations, all the genealogies, all the types, ultimately lead us, in our analytical and synthetic reading, to the two Prime Movers of La Comédie humaine, the root causes of everything, which are Love and Money. As Michel Nathan writes about Ursule Mirouët, “L’argent et l’amour circulent selon les désirs du romancier catholique” [Money and love circulate according to the desires of the Catholic novelist] (95).

Jacques-David Ebguy, in a Deleuzian reading of the effect of prose, speaks of the neutrality of the Balzacian prose, the famous “objectivity” by which it is often classically categorized in opposition to the disruptions of the modern. (Barthes in Le plaisir du texte and reading Balzac in S/Z opposed in such a way the classic and the modern.) Neutral because it mixes all types of language and all registers, Balzacian prose, Ebguy writes, seems to philosophers transparent or “white,” in the sense of combining all colors, which in the French term blanc also has resonances of blankness. It is this blankness that justifies the assimilation of money and prose (specifically, Balzacian prose): “L’argent circule, dépourvu de propriétés intrinsèques, et, pareil aux phrases balzaciennes envisagées isolément, ne prend de valeur que dans l’échange ou la composition” [Money circulates, stripped of intrinsic properties, and like Balzacian sentences taken in isolation, it gains value only in exchange or in

3. Jameson also names Balzac as a marker of the emergence of realism (104).
composition] (“Balzac” 133). Like money when it is used, the signs signify when placed in composition.

But circulating paper money, according to Prendergast’s reading, indicates the emptiness of money as sign. Prendergast quotes Bonald who connected this danger to the potential harm of taking language as a system of conventional signs:

La parole est donc, dans le commerce des pensées, ce que l’argent est dans le commerce des marchandises, expression réelle des valeurs parce qu’elle est valeur elle-même. Et nos sophistes veulent en faire un signe de convention, à peu près comme le papier-monnaie, signe sans valeur, qui désigne tout ce qu’on veut, et qui n’exprime rien, qu’autant qu’il peut être échangé contre l’argent, expression réelle de toutes les valeurs. (Bonald 1: 71)

[Language, in the commerce of ideas, is therefore what real money is in the commerce of merchandise: the real expression of value because it is itself value. And yet our sophists want to make of language a conventional sign, somewhat like paper money, a sign without value, which designates whatever one wants and expresses nothing except to the extent to which it can be exchanged for real money, the real expression of all values.]

Bonald, who wished to maintain that language was given to humanity as a primitive law from which all others naturally flow, including everything that defines value, castigates the human being who would claim to have made language:

Mais si l’homme, au contraire, a fait lui-même sa parole, il a fait sa pensée, il a fait sa loi, il a fait la société, il a tout fait; il peut tout détruire: et c’est avec raison que dans le même parti qui soutient que la parole est d’institution humaine, on regarde la société comme une convention arbitraire, et qu’on a dit: “Un peuple a toujours le droit de changer ses lois, même les meilleures.” (1: 53)

[But if, on the contrary, man made his own language, then he has also made his way of thinking, he has made the law, he has made society, he has made everything; he can destroy everything. And it is true that the same opinion that holds that language was instituted by humans sees society as an arbitrary convention and says: “A society always has the right to change its laws, even the best ones.”]
But language is a system of conventional signs. As Hélène Gomart observes: “Il faut également mentionner au préalable une analogie qui, de fait encadre conceptuellement la réflexion sur les rapports de la littérature et de l’argent: de Foucault jusqu’à J.J. Goux, la circulation du sens serait analogue à la circulation de l’argent, les mots et la monnaie vivant sous le même régime du signe” [At the outset, one should also mention an analogy that conceptually frames reflection about the relationship between literature and money: from Foucault to J. J. Goux, the circulation of meaning has been described as analogous to the circulation of money; words and money live under the same regime of signs] (18). Money and speech are exposed to the risk of being empty, like the “fictive capital” Balzac speaks of in Illusions perdues (5: 595). Just as the edifices of money Balzac erects grow via verbal excretions, building capital by expanding the numbers, so his amassed signs—his semiosis, his execution—build the realistic world through verbal excess. The underlying danger for Balzac lies in this obsession for excess. “Balzac est devenu, parmi les romanciers, celui dont le réalisme est le plus complet peut-être parce qu’il ne cesse de réunir, dans la critique et dans l’amour, dans le comique et la tragédie, le dépassement extatique du réel, son exaltation et sa cruelle dérision” [Balzac among novelists is the one whose realism is the most complete, perhaps because he continually unites, in criticism and in love, in comedy and in tragedy, the ecstatic surpassing of the real with its exaltation and its cruel derision] (Michel, Le réel 12).

Balzac acts in spite of the emptiness of his fictive signs. And his action fills the signs.

Writing in 1839, a year of intense creative activity, and with the perception of the vastness he will give to his work brewing in his mind, Balzac proclaims what makes his invention of realism distinct from other writers: it is easy for any person to conceive, but few can execute. The relation between conception and execution is of the greatest significance in Balzac. This is how he puts it in the preface to Le Cabinet des Antiques:

Si tous les auteurs ont des oreilles, il paraît que tous ne savant pas entendre, ou pour être plus exact, tous n’ont pas les mêmes faculties. Presque tous savent concevoir. Qui ne promène pas sept ou huit drames sur les boulevards en fumant son cigare? qui n’invente pas les plus belles comédis? qui, dans le séral de son imagination, ne possède les plus beaux sujets? Mais entre ces
faciles conceptions et la production il est un abîme de travail, un monde de
difficultés que peu d’esprits savent franchir. (4: 963)

[While all authors have ears, it seems that not all know how to hear, or to
be more exact, they don’t all have the same faculties. Almost all know how
to conceive. Doesn’t everyone parade seven or eight dramas along the bou-
levards while smoking his cigar? Doesn’t everyone invent the most attractive
comedies? Who doesn’t possess the most beautiful subjects in the harem of
his imagination? But between these facile conceptions and actual produc-
tion, there is an abyss of work, a world of difficulties that few minds know
how to traverse.]

When one is Balzac, plunged into the abyss of work, one’s conceptions grow:
“toutes les proportions ont été dépassées à l’exécution” [all the proportions
have been surpassed in the execution] (4: 961). Massimilla Doni, the topic of
which is art as execution, illustrates this excess, this abundance in its execu-
tion. The “trop grande abondance” of the three lethal creative passions of
Love, Music, and Opium is expressed not only in the descriptions of the char-
acters and their stories but also in Balzac’s use throughout of highly figural
language. As excessive abundance is the conceptual topic of the story, so its
execution, which constitutes its forms of expression, represents abundance by
imagery of excess. Capraja is speaking in Massimilla Doni:

Quand un artiste a le malheur d’être plein de la passion qu’il veut exprimer,
il ne saurait la peindre, car il est la chose même au lieu d’en être l’image.
L’art procède du cerveau et non du cœur. Quand votre sujet vous domine,
yous en êtes l’esclave et non le maître. . . . Sentir trop vivement au moment
où il s’agit d’exécuter, c’est l’insurrection des sens contre la faculté! (10: 613)

[When an artist has the misfortune of being full of the passion he wants to
express, there is no way he is able to portray it, because he is the very thing
itself rather than its image. Art arises in the brain, not in the heart. When
your subject overpowers you, you are its slave, not its master. . . . To feel
too excessively at the moment when execution is needed is the revolt of the
senses against the faculties!]

In another novel where art is the topic, one finds a similar formulation of
the conception–execution pair. A two-page passage in La cousine Bette gives
us an extended metaphor of maternity (developing the literal meaning of con-
ception) and child rearing to describe the sculptor Wenceslas’s effort (or lack thereof), in which capitalized words abound:


[Wenceslas, born a poet and a dreamer, had passed from Conception to Execution by traversing the abyss that separates these two hemispheres of Art, without measuring its extent. To reflect, to dream, to conceive beautiful works of art is a delicious occupation. . . . The work appears then in its childlike grace, in the wild joy of generation. . . . Such is Conception and its pleasures. . . . But to produce, to give birth, to laboriously raise the child . . . that is Execution and its travails.]

That this pair lies deep in the heart of Balzacian realism is evident in the fact that the whole system I am describing was present from the start, in 1831 in the preface to *La peau de chagrin*.

The relation of conception to execution is analogous to the relation of *semiosis* to *mimesis* underlying this study. In Balzac’s novels, characteristically, the semiotic forms an alliance with the mimetic; language in and of itself symbolizes what the story will tell. *La Maison Nucingen* remains for me the shining example of this essential strategy, and I have given several other examples as well. My readings are often based on a simultaneous interpretation of narrated events and an attention to the language in which they are told, even when this relationship is not foregrounded.

The Balzacian text operates its realism by establishing this relationship. The work shows its semiotic hand, lets the reader know how its signs work; what makes the work come to us, what “operates” it, is the symbolic expression of its content in its forms; it works because there is a congruence of the semiosis with the mimesis. Stéphane Vachon observes that Balzac founded his project on “la révélation que la littérature porte en elle son pli le plus intime,
sa capacité à se représenter elle-même” [the revelation that literature carries within it its most intimate fold, its capacity to represent itself] (“Balzac théoricien” 30). Jean Starobinski put this fundamental principle of narration in these terms: “Il n’est point d’œuvre moderne qui ne porte en elle l’indice ou la justification de sa propre venue au monde” [There is not a single modern work that does not carry within itself the indication or the justification of its own birth] (24), a principle which I detour slightly to assert that the *signs* create a semiotic structure that matches the mimetic content of *story*, which bears within its forms the *signs* of its coming to us, its birth.

To the pairs of conjoined terms and patterns I have been considering in this conclusion, I would add another duplet to close. This pair of terms also comes from the preface to *Le Cabinet des Antiques*: “Aucune tête humaine ne serait assez puissante pour inventer une aussi grande quantité de récits, n’est-ce donc pas déjà beaucoup que de pouvoir les amasser” [No human head would be powerful enough to invent so large a quantity of narratives; is it not therefore already a great deal to be able to amass them?] (4: 963). *Inventer* and *amasser* appear here as if they are mutually exclusive terms, and yet both are needed—and they must function together—to achieve the objectives of *La Comédie humaine*. Balzac claimed to write true stories and put those claims repeatedly into his prefaces; the assertion of “truth” or “reality” is a powerful ingredient in his invention of realism. The very vastness of the project, what Balzac amassed, provides evidence for the demonstration of the claim, realizing the assertion of reality. Yet Balzac seems to say that it is impossible for a human mind to invent so many stories: no inventor he. But who would take Balzac at his word? We are compelled to consider Balzac’s head powerful enough to have invented, and not just amassed, such a great number of stories; and it is the vastness and the mass that so compel us, in spite of what he claims.