

Just, Good, Friends: The Sexless Utopia of Balzac's *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*

“N’importe, nous nous serons bien aimés,” sighs Madame Arnoux, in the penultimate chapter of *L’Éducation sentimentale* (1869), before taking leave of the man she addresses at the last as “mon ami, mon cher ami” (451, 453). The next, final chapter famously finds Frédéric Moreau reminiscing with this childhood friend Charles Deslauriers about what both now take to be their finest hour: an abortive visit to a small-town brothel, as teenagers, some considerable time before the events with which the novel opened. It is significant, no doubt, that the theme of friendship should figure this prominently at the novel’s end—yet these scenes do not conduce to the sense that the theme of friendship is, itself, significant. Few readers, surely, will read the final chapter and take solace in the thought that one can always count on one’s friends. If anything, friendship here is little more than a fallback; words such as “ami” and “s’aimer bien” seem like a stop-gap vocabulary to describe relationships, the former of which ought to have been something more, the latter of which has consistently seemed rather less, than “friendly.”

Indeed, the significance of the presence of friendship at the end of *L’Éducation sentimentale* has everything to do with the novel’s subversion of narrative and generic codes, as examined by many critics, though none more influentially than Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*. These two complementary scenes mark the failure of the two primary narratives of the bourgeois novel: in the first, the sentimental-erotic narrative promised by the novel’s title fizzles out in face-saving Romantic clichés; in the second, the disastrous end of Deslauriers’ marriage to Louise Roque adds bathetic point to Frédéric’s earlier mishandling of a potential match with that selfsame heiress, the bachelor and the jilted husband appearing equally ill-served by the bourgeois marriage plot. In rejecting the two relational models—marriage and

adultery—in which the nineteenth-century novel so often appears to have wished to enclose the entirety of human experience, then, Flaubert relies on friendship. Again, however, this reliance is not at all to friendship's credit. In *L'Éducation sentimentale*, friendship has no positive value, but is simply what subsists when those two primary novelistic patterns have fallen away, the affective equivalent of the tone of irony-laced melancholy that characterizes these final chapters. It is a paradoxical state of jaded juvenility, the lot of those who have failed to reach, through love and marriage, the novelistic promised land of erotic and social maturity. As Frédéric's and Deslauriers' tales of adolescent misadventure make clear, friendship is good enough only for those who have never truly grown up.

In a sense, “Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*” would be one answer to the question I want to pose in this article: what would a nineteenth-century novel look like if it shunned erotic desire *and* marriage as the engines of plot, and adopted instead another model of relationality—friendship? Another, perhaps, would be “Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.” To be sure, any nineteenth-century French novel that attempted such a thing would be in narratological terms highly experimental, as both those novels clearly are; and would moreover risk appearing unreadable, as both those novels surely do, at least at times. It is no coincidence that so many early readers of *L'Éducation sentimentale* saw in this novel of failure merely a failure of a novel. In another sense, however, both these works' eschewal of the love-and-marriage plots makes them novels *about* those plots; as Brooks puts it, *L'Éducation sentimentale*'s “tenuous readability depends directly on its intertextual support, its presupposition of a certain standard novelistic mode which it resolutely refuses to endorse” (171). A reasonable reading of both works would moreover hold that, in suggesting the bankruptcy of these time-honored narrative patterns, and suggesting no obvious alternatives, Flaubert comes close to suggesting the bankruptcy of narrative itself.

In this article, however, I wish to consider a novel which, while self-consciously shunning the twin narrative predictabilities of love and marriage, attempts in seeming good faith to offer friendship as a viable narrative principle in their stead. This novel, also in its way an experimental one, is Balzac's last completed work, *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*, whose final section appeared in 1848. In this article, I want to read the novel as an expression of the intellectual and political ferment of the 1840s, in which potential new forms of social organization were proposed and debated—notably the vague but powerful idea of *association*. *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*, I shall suggest, engages intellectually and conceptually, which is to say, thematically, with these debates (*association* is a topic of explicit discussion in its latter part), while attempting to find a narrative mode in which the salient human relationships are not limited to—and therefore, for the sake of the demonstration, positively exclude—the erotic and the conjugal. Admittedly, Balzac attempts to perform this narrative de-eroticization while retaining the outward appearance of one of his most familiar narrative patterns: the young man's pursuit of initiation. Yet in this strange, valedictory text, the object of the protagonist's quest, and of the reader's "desire," is precisely that *absence* of desire that Balzac associates—this time positively—with friendship.

Balzac, Backwards

Few readers would deny that *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine* is an odd novel, and a difficult one to read. It is, as Jeannine Guichardet notes, "un tout en morceaux," composed of "fragments textuels nés en des temps et lieux divers puis laborieusement reliés entre eux" (229). This is true at both the genetic and the textual levels. In its final form, the novel comprises two parts, each of which contains at least one retrospective framed narrative, including one in the form of the full text of a (fictional) legal indictment, as well as citations from *L'Imitation de notre seigneur Jésus-Christ*. Genetically, the novel involves the yoking together of two

“episodes”: “Madame de La Chanterie,” which was composed and published from 1842-44, under varying titles, and in an order that differs significantly from the final book version; and “L’Initié,” which Balzac began in 1847, completed in January of the following year, and which appeared in print in August 1848. (The title *L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine* was applied by Balzac to the first part for the Furne edition of *La Comédie humaine* in 1846; his working title for the complete novel appears to have been *Les Frères de la Consolation*, but the first, more intriguing title stuck in posthumous editions.)

Of course, none of these facts is particularly unusual in the annals of the *Comédie*, yet Guichardet is surely right to view Balzac’s final novel as more fragmentary, more piecemeal than most—as if its composition were being driven by something other than its own narrative logic. One way of naming that “something” is *le prix Montyon*, that annual cash prize (in fact prizes) awarded by the Académie française to works and acts of the greatest *utilité*, by which was generally understood, those most likely to prove morally edifying or improving. As Francis Marcoin has noted, Balzac “affectait à l’égard du prix une attitude ambiguë, y revenant sans cesse avec ironie” in his published works (76), yet frequently expressing in his private correspondence a desire to produce a work that might merit the award; he appears in particular to have hoped to win the prize with *Le Médecin de campagne* (1833) and evidently resented the failure of that scheme (see Woollen 180-82). In the early 1840s, as Balzac began what would become *L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine*, it would appear that Balzac had the prize again in mind. Guichardet in her notes to the Pléiade edition draws attention to a number of letters from 1841-42 in which the new project is associated with it. To be sure, these moments are somewhat cynically turned: in June 1841, Balzac told Mme Hanska that he intended to write “un livre pour le prix Montyon qui payera le tiers de ma dette” (1322; see *Lettres*, 1: 532); while in September he wrote more explicitly that “il faut que je donne un rival au *Médecin de campagne* et que, pour avoir [les] 20,000 francs du Prix Monthyon [*sic*] en 1842, j’écrive dans

ce mois-ci *Les Frères de la Consolation*” (1322; *Lettres*, 1: 541). Though he did not keep to his own timetable, the association persisted, such that in December 1842 he could refer to “un fragment intitulé *Madame de La Chanterie* (tiré de mon ouvrage entrepris pour le prix Montyon)” (1325; *Lettres*, 1: 620). While it would certainly be possible to exaggerate the seriousness of this intention, the more tempting mistake would be to underestimate its importance, and thus evade the oddly unpalatable fact that, whether motivated by solicitude for the public good or by a perceived solution to his persistent money worries, Honoré de Balzac really did set out to write a novel in order to win a prize for morality.

What would such an intention mean for the character of the work? As the phrase “un rival au *Médecin de campagne*” suggests, the new project would apparently require that Balzac return to the utopian and didactic mode that he had only really explored in any sustained way in that work. This “rival” novel would therefore be quite unlike Balzac’s other compositions of the 1840s, the period during which he wrote some of his most cynical and pessimistic fictions, though most obviously *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, whose famous ending—in which the master-criminal Vautrin joins the secret police, to the credit of neither—effectively blurs all moral lines, including even Vautrin’s own paradoxical, amoral, anti-social creed. If anything, the Montyon-novel would have to *redeem* the pessimism and often alleged immorality of Balzac’s work to date—as the preface to the first edition of *Splendeurs* (1845) made explicit, as Guichardet notes, when Balzac claimed there that “l’auteur prépare comme contrepoids et comme opposition un ouvrage où se verra l’action de la vertu” (*Envers* 1328). The notion of this new novel as virtuous *contrepoids* to the rest of *La Comédie humaine* anticipates, no doubt deliberately, the final text’s preoccupation with the Catholic doctrine of reversibility, that celestial accountancy of grace and sin wherein one person’s suffering can redeem the soul of another. As Francesco Manzini perceptively observes, one of the novel’s central themes is book-keeping, on the face of it a classically worldly form of specialized

writing of the sort that Balzac always found fascinating, yet one which becomes vested here, seemingly in earnest, with a spiritual metaphorical value (76; on reversibility, see also Michel, 337-9). A hint of this sort of moral book-keeping in the literary domain is already to be found in the preface to *Le Père Goriot* (1835), where the author produces, presumably with a dash of irony, a literal table of “femmes vertueuses” versus “femmes criminelles” in his oeuvre to date. Ten years later, however, he seems more sincerely to recognize the need for some redemptive literary *contrepoids*, and indeed, identifies specifically the text of his that the new work will come to redeem: “En commençant les *Scènes de la vie parisienne* par *Les Treize*, l’auteur se promettait bien de les terminer par la même idée, celle de l’association faite au profit de la charité, comme l’autre au profit du plaisir” (1328).

To grasp the relationship between these two texts, it is necessary to understand the basic lineaments of the plot of *L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine*. In the first part, the protagonist, known to us only as Godefroid and aged thirty “environ” as the story opens (217), finds himself reduced to penury after the failure of a number of professional adventures and one connubial enterprise. He must now seek accommodation in Paris commensurate with his straitened circumstances. This he finds in the home of one Mme de La Chanterie, an elderly though still handsome woman, who lives in a dark, old-fashioned house on the rue Chanoinesse, an out-of-the-way alley adjacent to Notre Dame, with a number of elderly male lodgers. Godefroid soon begins to understand that there is more to this sober, deeply religious (indeed, pseudo-monastic) household than meets the eye, and in the course of the first episode, discovers two secrets. First, the most genial lodger, M. Alain, explains to him the terrible story of Mme de La Chanterie’s past, a grisly chronicle of the revolutionary troubles: the elaborate tale involves the execution of her daughter and son-in-law, and her own arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment, for their involvement in a monarchist plot against Napoleon, in around 1809. For many years during her incarceration, Alain explains, the knowledge of the daughter’s death was kept hidden from the

fragile Mme de La Chanterie, and even now, the latter cannot hear the name “Henriette” (or even “Henri”) without experiencing a devastating nervous crisis. (This tale is partly told in the form of an interpolated document, the indictment against Mme de La Chanterie, as drawn up by the pitiless Imperial Prosecutor, Bourlac, which Alain conveniently has to hand and offers to Godefroid.) The second secret is that the pious souls assembled around Mme de La Chanterie in 1835 form the core of a secret society, the *Ordre des Frères de la Consolation*, whose charitable purpose is partly to succor the destitute, but primarily to provide interest-free, open-ended loans to the deserving and industrious, who are free to repay whenever, and however much, they choose. The society possesses a vast capital, currently lodged with the Mongenod bank, and benefits from an extensive network of volunteer agents. The second part of the novel, “L’Initié,” will trace Godefroid’s apprenticeship as a member of the Order, as he first learns book-keeping in order to assist in the Society’s financial management, and is then sent on a charitable “mission,” observing and devising a means of assisting a “good”—that is, bourgeois—family, fallen on particularly hard times following the dismissal of the father, a judge, and the mysterious illness of his adult daughter. By the end of the novel, Godefroid has completed this mission, and is now a fully-fledged “brother.”

In this article, though I shall consider the two “framed” narratives (that is, Mme de La Chanterie’s past and Godefroid’s “mission”) at various moments, my primary concern is with the framing narrative—Godefroid’s entry into Mme de La Chanterie’s home, his discovery of the work of the Brotherhood, and his admission into it—and its generic peculiarity. Now in some sense, in announcing in the preface to *Splendeurs* that his projected novel would be the virtuous *contrepoids* to the *Histoire des Treize*, Balzac was equally underscoring the *similarity* between the new work and the old. Narratologically speaking, the “secret society” concept functions identically in *L’Envers* as elsewhere: “le retardement, le dévoilement du secret, l’opposition du visible et du caché” are, in Sarah Mombert’s words, “des moteurs générateurs

du récit” (22), and the novel owes what readability it has to this familiar device. It lends the novel, as Mombert notes, a superficial air of kinship with the so-called “popular” novel (26), and there is little doubt that *L’Envers*’ blend of suspenseful secrecy and moral didacticism reflects Balzac’s longstanding desire to emulate the runaway successes of Eugène Sue (see Manzini 77-8).

Yet in another, very significant sense, the novel sets out from its opening to subvert the canons of storytelling as Balzac himself had established them. Consider Godefroid’s position in the incipit, as he stands on the banks of the Seine and appears “en proie à une double contemplation: Paris et lui!” (218). Even if readers miss this allusion to Rastignac’s “A nous deux maintenant!,” what we learn of Godefroid in the following pages makes clear his relationship to the narrative pattern inaugurated by *Le Père Goriot*. In a few paragraphs, we learn that Godefroid, the son of modest petty bourgeois parents, had been dispatched to “faire son Droit” (220), and had attempted careers as a notary then as a barrister; having been unsuccessful in these, he had published a book, again without success; he next founded a newspaper, the collapse of which plunged him into his present financial straits. His mother, despairing, had attempted to broker a marriage to a bourgeois heiress, a “jeune personne . . . sans beauté” (222), but the young lady’s parents took exception to Godefroid’s poverty, and this plan also failed. “Petit, mal fait, sans esprit et sans direction soutenue” (221), Godefroid lacks all of the natural assets—good looks, determination, hereditary wealth, luck—that the Balzacian young man relies on to make his way in the world; his career before the novel opens runs the gamut of the various means of social advancement that the earlier instalments of *La Comédie humaine* have proposed to their ambitious protagonists, yet each attempt ends in unspectacular frustration. Before Flaubert came up with his anti-Rastignac Frédéric Moreau, then, Balzac had done the job for him: Godefroid is, in Guichardet’s words, “le double négatif . . . de Rastignac, son exact envers” (Guichardet 233). In characterizing his protagonist, indeed,

Balzac appears to invent *bovarysme avant la lettre*, evoking “son état si disproportionné avec les rêves de ses parents et les siens” and a “manque d’équilibre entre ses désirs et sa fortune” (220). Yet more Flaubertian still, because more self-conscious, is the narrator’s reduction of these miscellaneous thwarted ambitions to a specifically formulated and, as the italics seem to indicate, probably literary cliché: Godefroid, we are told, is “incapable de l’activité que veut ce mot terrible: *faire fortune!*” (222-3).

In short, *L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine* opens with a protagonist who is unfit to be a protagonist—unworthy, indeed, of even “la plus honorable des positions secondaires” (223)—and who has already exhausted the novelistic scripts of contemporary storytelling. This novel, then, will have to be the reverse of a contemporary story, one oriented towards the pursuit of some new narrative desideratum beyond the usual money, wealth, power, sex, and marriage. The familiar narrative devices of “retardement” and “dévoilement,” in Mombert’s words, will thus need to be understood in contrast to the very *unfamiliar* nature of what precisely is revealed, and the strange conception of the novelistic world into which Godefroid gradually penetrates. This, as we shall see, is a world in which an unusually significant role is assigned to friendship.

Sublime Friendship

Godefroid’s exhaustion of staple narratives, before the novel even begins, sets the tone for what follows. No doubt this is a novel in which, as Guichardet points out, the characters very decidedly “have a past,” usually figured as a secret to be confessed, behind them; and to be sure, the framed narratives (of Mme de La Chanterie’s traumatic revolutionary experience, of M. Alain’s rather tamer shame, to which I shall return) explain how the various characters have ended up in their present domestic arrangements in around 1835. Yet while Guichardet is undoubtedly right to speak in her introduction of “le passé, royaume des causes” (192), and

Vincent Bierce correct to call the characters “les images vivantes des séquelles de la Révolution” (235), these readings perhaps ignore the extent to which Balzac treats the characters’ traumatic past as *precondition*—even, indeed, pretext—to the unique scenario we discover in the text’s “present.” For the outcome of the various narratives of disaster, disappointment and death that constitute the characters’ individual “pasts” is that this novel features not a single pair of spouses or lovers in its topmost chronological layer. Mme de La Chanterie is widowed; all of her male pensioners are bachelors; the Mongenod banking family consists of the widow Mme Mongenod and her two sons; the family that is the subject of Godefroid’s mission in the second volume consists of a widower, M. Bernard, his widowed daughter Vanda, and her teenage son. This absence of erotic intrigue is not incidental; on the contrary, it is explicitly thematized by the text, on a couple of occasions, through the positing and immediate rejection of a romantic or conjugal possibility between Godefroid and the much older Mme de La Chanterie. Importantly, these rejections are framed in metaliterary terms. Already in visiting his new lodgings for the first time, Godefroid “douta de la vie réelle, [...] il voyait le monde fantastique des romans qu’il avait lus” (228-9). Early in their acquaintance, as Godefroid becomes aware of the huge fortune over which Mme de La Chanterie presides, we read:

Cette pensée : « Elle doit être riche ! » changeait entièrement sa manière de voir. « Quel âge peut-elle avoir ? » se demandait-il. Et il entrevit un roman dans son séjour rue Chanoinesse. [...]

A notre époque, sur mille jeunes gens dans la situation de Godefroid, neuf cent quatre-vingt-dix-neuf eussent eu la pensée d’épouser cette femme. (235)

Old narratives die hard: Godefroid is attempting to force his new, quite unfamiliar experiences into the sort of novelistic patterns that he has been ineptly attempting to emulate for more than a decade. If he is to become the “initié” of the second part, Godefroid will have to unlearn these

patterns—but what this really means, of course, is that the *reader* will need to unlearn them, as the narrator goes on to make explicit: his is an “histoire [...] à laquelle le public actuel croira difficilement, et qui débute par un fait presque ridicule: l’empire que prenait une femme de soixante ans sur un jeune homme désabusé de tout” (252). For readers of the 1840s who are presumed to be addicted to the marriage-adultery narrative binarism, Godefroid’s story will seem implausible and his behavior absurd; they will need to recalibrate their narrative expectations if they are to grasp the unfolding of what the narrator describes—and seemingly wants us to accept—as an “amour platonique” (248). As Katrina Perry notes, Godefroid’s very name (which implies a vulgar pun on his frigidity: *gode[michet] froid*) and his remarkable lack of amorous success before the narrative begins suggest that he is from the outset a good candidate for this form of relational experiment: the absolute exclusion of erotic interest from a novel (101).

What of that other great Balzacian narrative obsession—the family? In this novel, once again, “family” belongs to the past, a fact most strikingly presented in the case of Mme de La Chanterie’s beloved daughter, guillotined years ago, but even more programmatically summed up in the esteemed landlady’s cursory description of her male lodgers’ family backgrounds: “ces noms n’existent plus, ces messieurs sont sans héritiers, ils devancent l’oubli qui attend leurs familles, et ils sont tous simplement MM. Nicolas et Joseph, comme vous serez monsieur Godefroid” (241). Gone, then, is the fascination characteristic of *La Comédie humaine* with the strategies employed by families (aristocratic, bourgeois, or otherwise) to advance their dynastic interests; the demise of the family name leaves the characters on first-name terms, and in a position which, as Michael Lucey has shown, one of Balzac’s most famous contemporaneous works presented as impossible: they, unlike poor Cousin Pons in the novel that bears his name (1847), have somehow escaped from the legal-symbolic grasp of the family; they are, or have become, “seul[s] sur la terre,” the *sui generis* “champignons” that Cousin Pons’s concierge

Mme Cibot refuses to believe Pons and his friend Schmucke can be, and which to their sorrow they are not (7: 580-1; see Lucey, 149-54). Instead of a traditional family, indeed, we find in the home of Mme de La Chanterie a complex household, a sort of alternative “family” composed of seven adults (including Godefroid and the devoted maid of all work Manon), none of whom is related by blood to any of the others. On the face of it, Mme de La Chanterie is running a *pension*, that favored nineteenth-century French signifier of post-revolutionary anomie: a pseudo-private space, devoid of real intimacy, in which rootless bachelors and spinsters live out purely contingent existences. Yet in the rue Chanoinesse, the pension Vauquer of *Le Père Goriot* finds its redemptive pendant. For while the denizens of the house have most certainly been thrown together, in various ways, by the upsets of the revolutionary era, their life together is anything but contingent. On the contrary, their work as a group at the very least gives retrospective meaning to the senseless violence and death of years before—if indeed their co-presence is not, as Balzac strongly hints, providential. This, then, will be the “sens caché”—as Balzac so famously put it in the “Avant-propos” to *La Comédie humaine*—that the narrative will reveal.

Mme de La Chanterie and her lodgers are, as we have seen, the steering committee of a secret society of Catholic charity. This society and its purpose form the subject of the next section, but we can note from the outset, with Mombert, that in *L’Envers* (as in Balzac generally), “la société secrète offre une sociabilité alternative, dont les représentations romanesques nous montrent qu’elle est perçue comme ayant plus de sens que l’existence sociale ordinaire” (25). The arrangement in the rue Chanoinesse, we might say, is the domestic corollary of the alternative sociability represented by the secret society; and it is surely significant that, before the true nature of the latter is revealed to Godefroid, the primary language used to describe this arrangement should be the language of friendship. This begins banally enough, with the narrator and Mme de La Chanterie herself repeatedly describing the

four lodgers as her “quatre amis” (242, 243, 245, 249). More programmatically, the first framed episode in the text, M. Alain’s account of his ruined friendship with the future banker Mongenod, to whom he unwisely lent money during the Revolution, explores the power of money to corrupt intimate relationships (and thus supplies the grounds upon which the Order’s members relinquish all personal wealth as they enter into the association). And as Godefroid’s “amour platonique” for his landlady develops, Balzac permits himself some telling rhetorical amplification: as Godefroid falls more and more under Mme de La Chanterie’s influence, we are told, “il entrevoyait les délices de cette amitié sainte que la religion permet, à laquelle les anges sourient, [et] qui liait d’ailleurs ces cinq personnes” (250). “Il est un sentiment supérieur à tous les autres, un amour d’âme à âme,” the narrator goes on to assure us; this sentiment, “immense, infini,” is also “né de la Charité catholique” (250).

To understand how unusual this hymn to friendship is in Balzac’s work, we might consider a couple of well-known moments in *La Comédie humaine*, where friendship is trumpeted in strikingly similar terms. I mean, of course, those moments when Vautrin invokes Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d* in making overtures, first to Eugène de Rastignac, in *Le Père Goriot*: “il n’existe qu’un seul sentiment réel, une amitié d’homme à homme. Pierre et Jaffier, voilà ma passion” (3: 186); and later, while posing as Carlos Herrera in *Illusion perdues*, to Lucien de Rubempré: “as-tu médité la *Venise sauvée* d’Otway? As-tu compris cette amitié profonde, d’homme à homme, qui lie Pierre à Jaffier, qui fait pour eux d’une femme une bagatelle, et qui change entre eux tous les termes sociaux?” (5: 701). These moments are emblematic of the fact that, in *La Comédie humaine*, when the idea of friendship becomes “interesting”—that is, perhaps, when it draws rhetorical attention to itself—it often seems to be pointing to something that is, precisely, not really friendship at all. In these examples, the homoerotic implication is reasonably clear, so clear indeed that one might well read the “friendship” / *Venice Preserv’d* association as straightforwardly code for male homosexuality.

More intriguing cases exploit more seriously the ambiguity of friendship: its historically very perdurable capacity to supply a non-judgmental *and* always deniable vocabulary for designating same-sex relationships means that some of the most striking friendships in Balzac's oeuvre (between Pons and Schmucke, between Bette and Valérie) are, as Michael Lucey has memorably shown, those we suspect may be something more. Between men and women, on the other hand, Balzac's works do not suggest—any more than those of any of his contemporaries—that friendship is truly possible. When in *Le Lys dans la vallée* Mme de Mortsauf complains to Félix de Vandenesse that “je croyais à de pures amitiés, à des fraternités volontaires [...]; je voulais [...] un ami saint avec qui je n'eusse rien à craindre” (9: 1035), the mode in which she speaks already reveals that no such pure friendship can exist between a man and a woman. Sure enough, the absence of sex in this novel—whose hero describes his chaste relationship with Mme de Mortsauf as stemming from “les abusives croyances de l'amour platonique” (9: 1048)—makes of it nothing more nor less than Balzac's great novel of sexual frustration.

No wonder, then, that the passage in praise of friendship in *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*, which describes relationships between men and women (or at least, a woman), yet which in its pompous hyperbole closely resembles the seductive overkill of Vautrin's own, touchily acknowledges that such true friendship is rare, inexplicable, and difficult for the vulgar to believe in. Following the observation a couple of pages earlier that “le public actuel” will most likely find Godefroid's “amour platonique” implausible, the narrator admits that the “amitié sainte” that Godefroid is beginning to feel, and that he observes between Mme de La Chanterie and her lodgers, is “inexplicable par les lois ordinaires du monde”; and indeed, that Godefroid himself “ne pouvait pas croire par moments au spectacle qu'il avait sous les yeux, et il cherchait des raisons à l'amitié sublime de ces cinq personnes, étonnés de trouver de vrais catholiques, des chrétiens du premier temps de l'Église dans le Paris de 1835” (250-1). Sublime

friendship is incredible, that is, because it depends on piety, which is itself hard for worldly souls to imagine existing in their contemporary society. Though Godefroid's spiritual progress has already begun, and he is thus closer to understanding the real basis of the unique relationships to be found in the rue Chanoinesse, the residual skeptical instinct he displays here—his sense that such intense relationships cannot be “just” friendship, but must conceal something else—once again mimics the anticipated cynicism of readers trained to be suspicious of unmotivated affection by narratives such as, precisely, Lucien de Rubempré's; readers who, if faced with the “abbé” Herrera's sudden solicitude, would ask just as Lucien does: “Pourquoi vous intéressez-vous à moi? [...] quel est votre part?” (5: 707).

In short, then, the opening sections of *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine* attempt to create what we might call a source of narrative potential energy in which the ensuing narrative development will not depend on erotic intrigue or family dynamics, but on the collective activity of male and female friends, and Balzac goes to considerable, self-conscious rhetorical lengths to make clear that his plot emerges directly from this new source, and thereby deviates from the standard novelistic pattern. The paragraph immediately following the passage on the characters' “amitié sublime” effectively launches the next part of the narrative, the revelation of the Order's works: “Huit jours après son entrée au logis, Godefroid avait été témoin d'un tel concours de gens, il avait surpris des fragments de conversation où il s'agissait de choses si graves, qu'il entrevit une prodigieuse activité dans la vie de ces cinq personnes” (250). That “prodigieuse activité” will be to a significant extent the action of the remainder of the novel—the uniquely powerful “social work” that is made possible by the “sociabilité alternative” of Mme de La Chanterie and her friends.

Amitié and Association

The language of friendship in *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine* appears primarily in the first section, "Madame de La Chanterie," where as we have seen friendship is posited as an alternative, non-sexual form of intimacy and influence. As the second volume, "L'Initié," opens out to reveal the extraordinary scale of the Order's social endeavors, another, closely related term presents itself: *association*. The concept of association (and more specifically of *associations volontaires*) was in vogue in the French social thought of the 1840s. The idea had come to prominence most especially in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, the second volume of whose *De la démocratie en Amérique* had appeared in 1840, shortly before Balzac began work on what would become *L'Envers*, and contained a famous chapter entitled "De l'usage que les Américains font de l'association dans la vie civile." Balzac had at the very least taken note of this work, if only to resent the success it brought its author, who was elected to the Académie Française in 1841. When in 1842 Balzac lampooned the "écrivain monobible" whose solitary published work ("*De l'Allemagne est des Allemands*," as Balzac spoofingly calls it) has somehow been his ticket to "une classe quelconque de l'Institut," he clearly had Tocqueville and his *Démocratie* in mind. When in that same article, moreover, Balzac notes that, given that such an author's book is inevitably boring, "tout le monde se dispense de le lire et dit l'avoir lu," his uncharitable irony nevertheless registers the vast reach of Tocqueville's work, its familiarity even to those who had never quite bothered to read it (*Monographie* 116-17; see also Guellec 63). One small sign of this reach came in the form of an essay competition launched in 1840 by the Académie des sciences morales et politiques (of which Tocqueville had been a member since 1838), in which dissertations were invited in response to the question: *Quelles sont les applications les plus utiles qu'on puisse faire de l'association volontaire et privée au soulagement de la misère?* The competition, which was extended until 1845, received 43 entries, none of which the Académie's jury deemed worthy (see Feller 582). In reporting on the failed contest in 1845, Hippolyte Passy underscored the topical nature of the question,

which “suscit[ait] de vives controverses” and reflected “l’état momentané des esprits” (*Séances et travaux*, 5,6). Regrettably, though, the question had only produced “utopies” which could not be taken seriously.

Here, then, was a question of social utility—as the very language of the contest itself made explicit—worthy of, say, the Prix Montyon, itself intended, as we have seen, as a reward for works of great *utilité*. I do not mean to suggest that Balzac was aware of the Académie’s competition (though he may have been), still less that the second part of his novel was composed as a sort of belated submission to it. Yet one finds, early on in the second part of *L’Envers de l’histoire contemporaine*, a passage that suggests that Balzac was at least interested in the Académie’s question, and that might not have been out of place in a contest essay. Having begun to introduce the reader to the charitable work of the Ordre des Frères de la Consolation, the narrator offers the following remarks:

L’association, une des plus grandes forces sociales et qui a fait l’Europe du Moyen-Age, repose sur des sentiments qui, depuis 1792, n’existent plus en France, où l’individu a triomphé de l’État. L’association exige d’abord une nature de dévouement qui n’y est pas comprise, puis une foi candide contraire à l’esprit de la nation, enfin, une discipline contre laquelle tout regimbe, et que la Religion catholique peut seule obtenir. Dès qu’une association se forme dans notre pays, chaque membre, en rentrant chez soi d’une assemblée où les plus beaux sentiments ont éclaté, pense à faire litière de ce dévouement collectif, de cette réunion de forces, et il s’ingénie à traire à son profit la vache commune, qui, ne pouvant suffire à tant d’adresse individuelle, meurt étiée.

[...] Aussi, toute association ne peut-elle vivre que par le sentiment religieux, le seul qui dompte les rébellions de l’esprit, les calculs de l’ambition et les avidités de tout genre. Les chercheurs de mondes ignorent que l’association a des mondes à donner.

(328-9)

In a sense, Balzac's sociological observation here (and nothing suggests that the passage is to be read anything other than sociologically) echoes Tocqueville, who observed in *De la démocratie en Amérique* that associations in the United States fulfil the social functions that fall in Britain to the aristocracy and in France to the state—though Balzac takes the more pessimistic view that even state action in France is hampered by individual self-interest, leaving the nation entirely incapable of great social enterprise. In this passage, then, Balzac reveals himself to be as much of a utopian as the Académie's forty-three entrants, insisting paradoxically on the *impossibility* of the story he is telling: French society, he pronounces in that authoritative present tense, is for historical reasons incapable of sustaining true *associations volontaires*, which can therefore only be imagined as operating within some hidden, inverted version of contemporary history.

In another respect however, and even if Balzac were totally unaware of the Académie's essay competition, his treatment of the theme of association responds admirably to Hippolyte Passy and his fellow jury members' primary cause for concern as they evaluated the submitted essays. In his report, Passy remarked with regret upon "le très-petit nombre de mémoires où ne se réfléchit aucune des opinions erronées auxquelles se sont attachées les diverses écoles sorties du sein du néo-socialisme" (*Séances et travaux* 40). Such a crime cannot be imputed to Balzac's *L'Envers*, which is rather, as Pierre Barbéris has observed, "le roman de la peur sociale" (2: 1859). The passage just cited latches onto but distorts the language of *association* that thrived in leftist and labor circles in the 1840s; in Lynn R. Wilkinson's words, "Balzac's digression appropriates the language of contemporary autonomous workers' associations, but exploits their connections to the medieval guild tradition in order to turn expressions of class consciousness into reactionary dogma" (131). The novelist's attitude towards the poor is, indeed, deeply paternalist when it is not simply suspicious. Early in the first section, one of Mme de La Chanterie's friends, a priest, observes that the worst consequence of France's recent

revolutions has been to encourage “l’ambition des classes inférieures” (226), while the first substantive “mission” of the Order that appears in the novel, at the beginning of the second part, sees M. Alain going undercover as foreman “dans une grande fabrique dont tous les ouvriers sont infectés des doctrines communistes” (324). The Ordre des Frères de la Consolation may labor for the betterment of the working classes, but it does so entirely without their participation: all its members are bourgeois or, as it were, “better,” and the whole enterprise operates under the aegis of Mme de La Chanterie’s immaculate *blason*. This composition indeed only literalizes what we might call the symbolic function of the very idea of the “secret society” in Balzac, whether it be the Treize or their redemptive cousins: as Mombert puts it, “cette société choisie, exclusive du reste de l’humanité, [...] n’est pas le lieu de l’égalité mais, au contraire, réalise une sorte d’aristocratie héroïque” (26). As its pseudo-chivalric name suggests, the Order is animated not by an egalitarian but by an elitist sensibility; only that elite status sets its members sufficiently apart from the interested masses that they can fulfil the social function that Tocqueville assigns in the United States to associations, and in Great Britain to the hereditary aristocracy. Mombert is certainly right to emphasize that Balzac’s Order is a metaphorical aristocracy, in keeping with the Romantic notion of a hero who finds himself, “ne serait-ce que par sa force morale, au-dessus de sa condition” (26). For that very reason, however, Mme de La Chanterie’s presidency is symptomatic of a persistent slippage within the “aristocratic liberalism” so characteristic of elitist-conservative thought in nineteenth-century France, whereby the *metaphor* of an aristocracy of talent could not but enhance the prestige of *literal*, that is, hereditary aristocracy, whose persistence (to recall Arno Meyer) was demonstrated, and even perhaps guaranteed, by its seemingly unshakeable place within the symbolic vocabularies of nineteenth-century French politics.

What, then, does *association* have to do with *amitié*, the favored language of the first half of the novel? Has the former term simply supplanted the latter as Balzac moves on to the

serious business of social reform? In fact, Balzac situates the two as analogous to each other: friendship is to the affective realm as association is to civil society. Their crucial common features, I should like to suggest, are two. First, both imply electivity, and differ in this important respect from the unchosen bonds of family and, in particular, the imposed, implicitly tyrannical association that is revolutionary fraternity. (In this respect, the familial metaphor of *fraternité* is tellingly apt, and the Order call themselves “Frères” as a reproach, rather than as an homage, to that model.) The second shared feature of *amitié* and *association* is disinterestedness, understood as the precise opposite of what nineteenth-century French conservatism took to be the scourge of post-revolutionary society: what Balzac in the opening pages of *La Fille aux yeux d’or* calls “la tempête des intérêts” (5: 1039), that is, the free-for-all of adverse economic interests, supervised by the Civil Code, that allegedly reduced life in French society to a zero-sum game. It is as we have just seen an explicit tenet of the narrator’s excursus on *association* in *L’Envers* that this mode of social action is made impossible by “l’amour de soi” which has supposedly supplanted “l’amour du Corps collectif” among the French (329). Now a certain neo-Platonic tradition, transmitted through Montaigne as well as through Chateaubriand’s *Génie du christianisme*, held that friendship, too, was a relationship of disinterestedness, one that differed from love (however intense) in that the partners enter into it without regard for what they might “get”; and, as we have seen, the narrator also emphasizes the unlikeliness of such private disinterestedness being able to exist in modern Paris, when he registers Godefroid’s initial disbelief in the rue Chanoinesse (250-1). In analogizing friendship and association, then, Balzac’s novel effectively aligns their all-too-common opposites: the expectation of sexual satisfaction in love, with the hope of personal gain in social relations; concupiscence, with its etymological cousin, cupidity. Yet the third, vital term in this alignment is curiosity, as is suggested when the narrator tracks Godefroid’s spiritual progress as observed by Mme de La Chanterie’s friends:

Enfin sa curiosité si mondaine d'abord, excitée par tant de motifs vulgaires, se purifia ; s'il n'y renonça point, c'est qu'il était difficile de se désintéresser à l'endroit de madame de La Chanterie, mais il montra, sans le vouloir, une discrétion qui fut appréciée par ces hommes. (280)

Difficult, but necessary: "notre ami n'est pas converti," notes a member of the Order, "mais il demande à l'être" (280). His conversion, then, will be complete only when the "interestedness" that consists in the *desire to know*, that epistemophilia that the narrator has already associated with the desire—concupiscent, cupidinous, or both—to marry Mme de La Chanterie, has given way to a sublime detachment from worldly motives. Once again, the text appears to discredit the very epistemophilic impulse that is (at least, one assumes) the very essence of narrative.

This attempt to marry together the narratological, erotic, and economic in a single ascetic parable can only end paradoxically, of course—at least where the narratological is concerned. In order, that is, to prove the characters' accession to this realm of utter disinterestedness, the plot must fall back, at least partially, on the family narratives and melodramatic *rebondissements* that are Balzac's characteristic stock-in-trade. The character who will be thus tested is not Godefroid, but Mme de La Chanterie herself. Godefroid's mission takes him into a poverty-stricken middle-class home, that of M. Bernard, his daughter Vanda, and Vanda's son. The family is penniless, and Vanda is afflicted by a mysterious illness that renders her bedbound and prone to hysterical episodes. (She is also thereby apparently excluded as a romantic candidate for the *initié* Godefroid, whose motives in helping her can therefore be above suspicion.) Godefroid's mission, in which he is inevitably successful, is to find the family a source of income by obtaining a lucrative publishing contract for the legal textbook the head of the family, a retired jurist, has written in his spare hours; and by securing the services of the venal Jewish doctor Halpersohn, who alone has the expertise to cure Vanda's malady. All seems to be going well, until the flyleaf of M. Bernard's *magnum opus* reveals that

the name we know him by is an assumed one: in truth, he is none other than the baron Bourlac, the implacable Imperial prosecutor who sent Mme de La Chanterie's daughter to the scaffold and Mme de La Chanterie herself to prison. A coincidence worthy of—which is to say, as hackneyed as—any to be found in Sue, but one which neatly sets up a dilemma: how will the Order's members respond to the discovery that the object of their solicitude is the very man who tormented and traumatized their foundress? The answer, of course, is disinterestedly: when Bourlac, discovering the identity of his benefactress, arrives at the house in the rue Chanoinesse and begs her forgiveness for his past misdeeds, she overcomes another nervous episode to appear “comme un spectre” and pronounce a ponderous absolution: “Par Louis XVI et Marie-Antoinette, que je vois sur leur échafaud, par Madame Élisabeth, par ma fille, par la vôtre, par Jésus, je vous pardonne” (412). But this act of forgiveness, which yokes together the political, the personal, and the spiritual, is not to be read as the triumphant resurgence of the familial obsession, but rather, as its liquidation: Mme de La Chanterie, who is described in the previous paragraph as a ghost and in the following one as an angel (“Les anges se vengent ainsi,” Bourlac himself is heard to utter; 413) has definitively left behind the “rootedness” of human life to become an entirely free agent, liberated from interested motives and imposed bonds, and thus able to pursue a life of social *utilité*. The novel ends as Godefroid follows suit: “Ce jour-là Godefroid fut acquis à l'Ordre des Frères de la Consolation” (413).

Conclusion

“Quels romans, parmi les plus célèbres, valent ces réalités!” (355), Godefroid is heard to exclaim in the middle of the second part. The text, as we have seen, insists throughout on the inadequacy of the novel as typically conceived to account for all the sublime disinterestedness it attempts to imagine. Indeed, multiple allusions in the novel imply a sort of bankruptcy of contemporary literature: from Godefroid's own disastrous literary career, via the

banker Mongenod's calamitous attempts to make his way as a playwright (as recounted by M. Alain to Godefroid), to the two "gens de lettres" holed up in the same tenement as Bourlac and Vanda, hiding (as Balzac himself had often to do) from their "créanciers" (335), the literary trade is denigrated as a road to perdition. The two written texts that the novel does appear to respect are *L'Imitation de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, and Bourlac's *Esprit des lois modernes*, the commentary on the laws of the new regime that Godefroid helps the former prosecutor publish at a profit, thereby rescuing him and his family from poverty. Of these works—the first of which Balzac really does seem to have admired, when it was given to him by Mme Hanska (Malavié, 237)—we can note that both eschew imagination, invention and fancy, the very essence of the *romanesque*, and promote instead emulation and the respect of established authorities.

No doubt the perennial paradox of the *roman à thèse* is that it must promote a single, clear orthodoxy in a medium whose fundamental characteristics may well be polyglossia and ambiguity. Yet Balzac's "ouvrage entrepris pour le prix Montyon" reveals this paradox more acutely than most, for its constant insistence on its own generic originality seems totally at odds with the strictly retrograde utopianism it espouses. Indeed, if there is a way of making sense of the novel's aesthetic and political positions, it is only by finding that both are marked by the prior understanding of their own quixotic impossibility: Balzac knows, that is, that he has not found in friendship a new recipe for the novel, any more than he has found in association a viable alternative form of social arrangement. No wonder, then, that Barbéris concludes, grimly, that the work leads to "l'avortement (littéraire et idéologique) du thème initial" (2: 1059). To read Balzac's letters, moreover, is to understand that what *L'Envers* inverts is not so much realism, as reality: composed, as we have seen, "pour avoir 20,000 francs du Prix Monthyon [*sic*], this Catholic novel reflected a particularly compromised kind of authorial faith: "J'ai foi dans l'année prochaine," Balzac wrote to Mme Hanska in September 1841, "et

crois fermement que Dieu récompensera tant de travaux, tant de constance et tant d'ennuis supportés. [...] A fin d'octobre, et peut-être vous enverrai-je par Bellizard l'édition originale à 50 exemplaires, des *Frères de la consolation*” (*Lettres*, 1: 542). True disinterestedness, it turns out, is a luxury even the most Catholic of novelists simply cannot afford.

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