

Colour matters in Balzac, from his beginnings to *Séraphîta*

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ABSTRACT: This article explores Balzac's understanding and exploitation of colour from his beginnings to *Séraphîta*, the ordinal end of *La Comédie humaine*. Beginning with his earliest philosophical writings, it considers the relative roles of the spiritual and the material, and of light and black-white binaries as absolutes versus a more nuanced evolution of colour. In section i), *Falthurne* and *Wann-Chlore* bookend a development in which *La Dernière Fée* pivotally mixes the referential and the symbolic. Section ii) considers the 1830 *Scènes de la vie privée* *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* and *La Vendetta*, stories told via colour and ways of painting, Neoclassicism and Dutch genre. Section iii) examines *Sarrasine* and *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, contrasting texts presenting a monochrome-binary patterned, white sculptural supposed ideal, and an absolute colour-based incarnation of the real. Its hands-on grappling with paint as matter takes representation beyond the colour-line dichotomy into the realm of modelling and form, and the philosophical question of the relationship between causes and effects. The article closes by comparing *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and *Séraphîta*, two coeval narratives at opposite ends of the moral and chromatic spectrum, but which both demonstrate contrasting ways of using colour in the quest for the Absolute.

KEYWORDS: Balzac, light, colour, matter, spirit, art, mimesis, transcendence

Balzac's work is a potent focus for discussion of nineteenth-century Literature and Art.¹ From the first he pushed further than any contemporary the exploration of the nature of matter,

¹Works cited are published in Paris unless otherwise indicated. Balzac's works are referenced thus: *La Comédie humaine*, ed. P-G Castex et al. (Gallimard-Pléiade, 1976-81), 12 vols (hereafter by volume and page no., e.g. 10 418); *Oeuvres diverses*, ed. R. Chollet et al., (Gallimard-Pléiade, 1990, 1996), 2 vols (OD); *Premiers romans*, ed.

its relation to the spiritual, and that of light to colour, soon positing all as points on an essentially monistic continuum. Colour is fundamental to Balzac's apprehension and expression of the world, appearing variously as philosophical cipher, psychological symbol, pathological symptom, and social signifier (the colour of clothes, locations, faces). Foreshadowed before 1830, these treatments come together in the big bang of the *Scènes de la vie privée*, which fuse theatre and visual drama, impelled by Balzac's encounters with writers, artists and painters. They read at once like a marriage and a stand-off between different media, modes of expression, art-hierarchies and styles. They and later texts confront black-and-white moral, social, gender and aesthetic absolutes with the murkier colours of reality, *Sarrasine* by pitching them against the white ideality of sculpture, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* by integrating colour into a unified philosophy of form. Material and spiritual transcendence are tested to their limits in *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and *Séraphîta*, embodying material and spiritual absolutes of colour in Balzac's opus.

i) Philosophy and Fiction: from the *Discours sur l'immortalité de l'âme* to 1824

A. Lorant (Bouquins, 1999), 2 vols (*PR*). Of major studies only few touch, fleetingly, on colour: Marc Eigeldinger, *La Philosophie de l'art chez Balzac* (Geneva: Callier, 1957), 108-111; Pierre Laubriet, *L'Intelligence de l'art chez Balzac* (Didier, 1961), 393-7; Max Andréoli, *Le Système balzacien. Essai de description synchronique* (Lille: Atelier National de reproduction des thèses, 1984), 732. These studies give the completest philosophical underpinning, along with Per Nykrog, *La Pensée de Balzac. Esquisse de quelques concepts-clé* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1965). André Vanoncini, 'Balzac et les couleurs', *L'Année balzacienne* (PUF, 2004), 355-66, concentrates on mimetic and symbolic aspects, more than the philosophical and aesthetic trajectory explored here.

The *Encyclopédie* defines colour as ‘une propriété de la lumière’ producing ‘des vibrations dans le nerf optique’; the first, 1694, Academy Dictionary describes it, not dissimilarly, as brightness. For D’Alembert, colour is uniquely a question of physics, but Diderot sees it, in a far briefer entry subtitled *Arts*, in terms of artists’ colours and emotion: ‘couleurs fantastiques ou emphatiques’.² *Coloris* and *Coloriste* appear in the Academy dictionaries early on (1762), *Coloriste* fusing its four definitions in a single paragraph to accommodate the rise of illustration in 1835, the year of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, *La Fille aux yeux d’or* and *Séraphîta*, when fiction’s marriage of literature and visual art was finally consummated.

Balzac’s first mention of the visual, in his *Discours sur l’immortalité de l’âme* (1818), begins with light, the soul as ‘un rayon de la divine essence’.³ Inclining more towards Locke and Spinoza than Descartes and Malebranche, the *Discours* envisages matter and spirit on a monistic continuum which will mark Balzac’s philosophy throughout this career. Positing the soul as a ‘substance matérielle pensante’, like ‘un lac d’eau que la moindre haleine du zéphir fasse rider’, the *Discours* is already proto-synaesthetic, thought being like the impact of tiny musk-particles on the lake or ‘une évaporation brillante’, and the soul linked to, but discreet from, the five senses.⁴

This link between the soul and different individuals’ diverse sense-perceptions of an essentially single, unified truth is at the centre of Balzac’s creation, and of his very first anecdote: ‘Deux cavaliers arrivent chacun d’un côté opposé au milieu d’une route, ils trouvent

² ‘A property of light’, ‘vibrations in the optic nerve’; ‘fantastic or expressive colours’: *Encyclopédie*, 4, 327-333; 4, 333.

³ ‘A ray of the divine essence’: *OD* 1 534.

⁴ ‘A thinking material substance’, ‘a lake rippled by the zephyr’s lightest breath’, ‘a brilliant evaporation’: *OD* I 538; *OD* 1 547.

une statue, l'un s'écrie qu'elle est noire, l'autre qu'elle est blanche, ils se battent, et après s'être battus, ils voient qu'elle est blanche d'un côté et noire de l'autre. Voilà l'opinion'.⁵ But life is not black-and-white : Balzac prefaces his example with a caveat ('Toutes les choses humaines ont autant de côtés qu'il y a de personnes qui les considèrent', before nuancing his schismatic monochrome.⁶ *La Vendetta*, *Sarrasine*, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* will do likewise, *Wann-Chlore* and *Séraphîta* the reverse, ranging from colour to light as an apparent absolute of transcendent perfection.

Colour is at the heart of subtlety in Balzac's creation, as surface notation (of class, status, nature, the colour of a characters' face, hands, place), and symbol, revealing deep forces in tension. 'Le bonheur est une bulle de savon qui change de couleur comme l'iris et qui éclate quand on la bouge' (*OD* 1 555).⁷ Colour shimmers iridescently, like the iris – rhizome, eye, or rainbow?⁸ – embodying the dichotomy of objective and subjective, perception and essence, and, in suddenly bursting, all or nothing: a recurrent dyad in Balzac's quests for the Absolute.⁹ Balzac has great faith in the world's substance, and in thought's ability to comprehend it, subsequent passages speaking repeatedly of unveiling ('déchirer les derniers voiles de la nature', 553; 'les secrets de la nature ne sont plus séparés de nous que par quelques voiles',

⁵ 'Two horsemen each ride up to the middle of a road from opposite sides, they find a statue, one exclaims that it is black, the other that it is white, they fight, and having fought, they see that it is white on one side and black on the other. Such is opinion': *OD* 1 555.

⁶ 'All human things have as many sides as there are persons who consider them': *ibid.*

⁷ 'Happiness is a soap-bubble which changes colour like the iris and which bursts when it is moved': *ibid.*

⁸ IRIS. s. f. Météore qu'on appelle vulgairement l'Arc- en ciel. *Les couleurs de l'iris* (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, 1694) : 'Meteor commonly called the rainbow'.

⁹ 10 419, section iii) below.

559), echoing Swedenborg (Frenhofer will ‘forcer les arcanes de la nature’),¹⁰ or foreshadowing Baudelaire : ‘Lorsque la pensée humaine s’exerce sur les objets apercevables par les sens, elle trouve sa pâture naturelle’,¹¹ but at root committedly Spinozan: ‘Il faut comprendre par substance, l’essence des choses elles-mêmes, ce qui fait qu’elles sont, ce qui est dessous, *sub-stans* : ainsi la substance est la partie constitutive considérée indépendamment des formes et des couleurs. La substance du monde, ce que l’on nomme aussi la matière’.¹²

Form and colour, here seen separately, as externals, what Frenhofer would later call ‘effets’ (effects), would in due course become indissociable from causes: the error, as Frenhofer says (and we can assume his view is Balzac’s), is to see effects or form as solely external.¹³ Yet relations of cause and effect, humanity and *animalité*, particular and general, are essential to Balzac’s creation; the *Discours* closes with an excited paean to its imaginative potential: ‘La faculté de faire comparaître en soi les accidents de la nature existe ; elle existe comme l’air,

¹⁰ ‘Tearing off the final veils of nature’; ‘nature’s secrets are no longer separated from us but by a few veils’, ‘forcing the arcana of nature’; *OD* 1 553, 559; 10 418.

¹¹ ‘When human thought is exerted upon objects perceptible by the senses it finds its natural pasture’: *OD* 1 550. ‘Tout l’univers visible n’est qu’un magasin d’images et de signes auxquels l’imagination donnera une place et une valeur relative ; c’est une espèce de pâture que l’imagination doit digérer et transformer’ ; ‘All the visible universe is but a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value ; it is a sort of pasture which the imagination must digest and transform’ : *Salon de 1859*, Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* [hereafter *OC*], ed. Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler (Gallimard-Pléiade, 1976), 2 vols, 2 *OC* 2 627.

¹² ‘By substance is to be understood the essence of things in themselves, that which makes them what they are, *sub-stans*: thus substance is that constitutive part considered independently of forms and colours. The substance of the world, that which is also called matter’: *OD* 1 550.

¹³ *Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*, 10 418, 419, and section iii) below.

l'eau, les acides, les fluides. N'y aurait-il donc aucun moyen de diriger cette faculté, cette force sommeil, comme la force vapeur, air, eau ?'.¹⁴

But it is colour, via various refractions of light, which will plot Balzac's work going forward. Balzac's earliest novels (*Agathise* and *Falthurne*, both 1820-1, both unfinished), *Sténie ou les erreurs philosophiques* (1819-22, the letter-novel version of the *Discours*), all explore its ideas. *Clotilde de Lusignan*, his 1821 *Ivanhoe*-emulation, is the only exception, treating colour as picturesque and mimetic; all are pivotally combined in *La Dernière Fée* (1823). This novel of Abel, a chemist's son who falls in love with a fairy – the last fairy – abandoning Catherine, the country girl who loves him, exploits easily-readable colour-coding: the chemist's hair and beard black as, and blackened by, his oven; his blonde wife, the fairy's palace, bright with light. Inspired by *Le Cabinet des Fées*, the novel soon treats us to a colour-card of the tales Abel finds most entrancing, from *Le Serpentin vert* via *L'Oiseau bleu* to *La Fée Abricotine*.¹⁵ Her name (Balzac's title: in *Le Cabinet des Fées*, Abricotine is a character in *Le Prince Lutin*) suggests colour as subtlety. For *La Dernière Fée* is not a fairy-tale, but a novel. And that means that its consummation and dénouement are not absolute, with a *merveilleux* fairy-tale ending restoring order, but nuanced, contingent upon circumstance, – like life, or realist fiction. Not *Barbe bleue*, but *barbe noire*; black not just evil, but soot. In a lengthy central passage, the genies at a ball are of every political hue:

Les enchanteurs sont tous vêtus de noir, parce qu'ils ont sagement pensé que l'absence de toute couleur leur était très profitable, en ce que les couleurs sont en ce moment un objet de trouble et de confusion dans le royaume des fées. Le rouge, le bleu et le blanc, ont été

¹⁴ 'The faculty of being able to summon up the accidents of nature within oneself does exist; it exists like air, water, acids or fluids. Is there then no way of directing this faculty, this power of sleep, like the power of steam, air, or water?': *OD* 1 559.

¹⁵ *PR* 2 28.

successivement de mode de manière que leur réunion est un sujet de scandale, en ce que le roi actuel est un génie blanc. Or, le génie bleu est l'ennemi du génie blanc, et le génie rouge est encore plus terrible.¹⁶

This Voltairian survey anticipates *Le Rouge et le noir*'s simpler colour-coding, where Julien swaps his black cassock for an aristocrat's blue coat, the ball where Mathilde asks (in Book 2, ch. 8), 'Quelle est la décoration qui distingue?',¹⁷ or the politically-charged banquet in *La Peau de chagrin*.¹⁸ *La Dernière Fée* is on a fault-line in Balzac's fiction, indeed in future Realist fiction *tout court* – the unsustainable *conte de fées* impinged on by hard facts. So the tale is set in a real place, Joigny; the fairy turns out to be a duchess playing sprite-temptress to marry Abel; and any happy ending is undercut when his lover Catherine commits suicide and her body is dragged from the Seine as they race off to their honeymoon, its teeth clenching the black necklace he had given as a token of love.

Colour is, then, a litmus-test in this novel, on the cusp of the merely referential, flippantly instanced by its motley genies, and the deeper, more visionary colour-symbolism which will inform Balzac's works from 1830. Its chemist anticipates *La Recherche de l'Absolu*'s alchemist Claës, identically colour-contrasted to Claës's angelic blonde wife; even

¹⁶ 'The enchanters are all clad in black, for they have wisely thought that the absence of any colour was of very great advantage to them, insofar as colours are currently an object of trouble and confusion in the fairy kingdom. Red, blue, and white have successively been in fashion, such that putting them back together is become a matter of scandal, insofar as the current king is a white genie. For the blue genie is the enemy of the white, and the red genie is even yet more terrible': *PR* 2 73.

¹⁷ 'Which decoration gives distinction?'

¹⁸ 10 94-120.

the moon casts ‘une écharpe de lumière’¹⁹ like later the sun in Claës’s salon.²⁰ The fairy’s circular, colonnaded ball-room, all light and fire and gold, prefigures Paquita’s boudoir in *La Fille aux yeux d’or*; the lily, associated with both the fairy and Catherine, will bloom anew in *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1836). Yet, for all that *La Dernière Fée*’s initial trigger is the visual – ‘l’apparition de la fée Abricotine’ is Abel’s favourite because hers is ‘la gravure la plus belle’ in *Le Cabinet des Fées*,²¹ – reference to visual art is largely notional, with but generalised reference to Raphael, and specific mention only of Girodet’s *Endymion*, the canvas which, reimagined as Adonis, will emblematically encapsulate *Sarrasine*.²² The real fusion of visual art and mimetic and internally-coherent symbolic significance within a single work would not come until the year of *Sarrasine*’s publication, 1830.

Until then it is at the outer limits of the spectrum (as later in *Sarrasine*), and of the period 1818-1824, that colour is most meaningful. *Falthurne* and *Wann-Chlore* (1824-5) bookend it with black and white as a key binary system of meaning, developed from the philosophy and anecdote of the *Discours*.²³ *Falthurne*’s androgynous, amazon heroine is a creature of light, ‘soit brilliant tyran, soit brillante tyrannie, ou bien la tyrannie de la lumière’,

¹⁹ ‘A scarf of light’, *PR* 2 69.

²⁰ 10 667.

²¹ ‘The appearance of Abricotine the fairy’, ‘the most beautiful engraving’. Contemporary editions of *Le Cabinet* carry no such illustration, but one in *Contes choisis de Mme d’Aulnoy*, Lefuel, 1822, corresponds exactly. Flaubert coloured this engraving as a child: http://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/bovary/bovary_6/album1/a-lutin.html accessed 26 July 2018.

²² Balzac had wished to see *Endymion* from 1819: *Correspondance*, ed. Roger Pierrot (Garnier, 1960-65,) 5 vols, 1 46-7. Cf. Diana Knight, ‘Balzac and the Model of Painting. Artist-Stories in “La Comédie humaine”’ (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), 26-7, 31 n. 26-8.

²³ *OD* 1 555.

an angelic precursor of Séraphîta, her adversary dark Le Borgino.²⁴ In *Wann-Chlore*, colour becomes a psychopathology, extending beyond the paleness evident in Wann's name or the stereotypically Gothic moonlit nights with which she is associated, to express her damaged rival for Landon, Eugénie's, volatility, ranging from 'lune nacre bronze' via the changing colours of her dress to 'combien de fois Eugénie changeait de couleur' in shock.²⁵ Contrasted colour-notation in key church-scenes (Paris, Saint-Paul and Saint-Gatien, Tours) tells the story. Comparing both protagonists to statues (Eugénie's pale face likening her to a white statue, the terrifying pallor of the marmoreal, statue-like Wann contrasting with the dazzling colour of her visage, 'une ombre légère dans sa chambre', prepare us for the ever-questionable ideality of statues, whiteness and the ideal in *Sarrasine* and *Séraphîta*.²⁶

Wann's disrupted colour is her morbid draw for Landon: 'les objets ne paraissent plus sous leurs couleurs et dans leurs dimensions véritables'; Sir Wann develops a 'couleur livide, triste présage', his eye 'sans idées et sans couleur'.²⁷ If the 'pâleur de la mort' brings an 'aspect céleste' to his face (841), his death presages a miraculous transformation, an entering into light. Annibal, Landon's rival, will 'marcher de lumière en lumière' along with 'harmonie' and 'magiques couleurs', Landon (like *Sarrasine*) desiring her as a statue, a 'vision céleste'.²⁸ Yet a red mark on Eugénie's cheek warns as she marries Landon, who really still loves Chlore: when the two ideal statue-women are finally confronted, they self-cancel as surely as Wann's

²⁴ 'Either brilliant tyrant, or brilliant tyranny, or indeed the tyranny of light': *OD* 1 698.

²⁵ 'Moon, mother-of-pearl, bronze'; 'how many times Eugénie was changing colour': *PR* 2 762, 767, 780-1.

²⁶ *PR* 2 794, 811, 826; 'a light shadow in her bedchamber': *PR* 2 837.

²⁷ 'Objects no longer appeared in their veritable colours and dimensions'; 'a livid colour, sad presage', eyes 'without ideas and without colour': *PR* 2 839.

²⁸ 'Pallor of death'; 'celestial aspect'; 'march from light to light', 'harmony', 'magic colours', 'celestial vision': *PR* 2 841, 848-9.

pleonastic name or Mariquita and Marsay in *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, where blood red will equally sully apparent purity. Here, however, is it Wann, the daughter of a bard, who will have the upper hand, her harp promising synaesthetic transcendence in a marriage of music, religion and love. Wann-Chlore is a blank sheet, a Pygmalion onto whom every desire may be projected, even if monochrome binaries, as later in *La Vendetta* ultimately undercut this transcendence. When Eugénie is abandoned for Wann, it is a case of light over mud, and black ribbon will tell her mourning as it ornaments Catherine's death in *La Dernière Fée*. At the last, the light will be too bright for Wann, whose brilliance is lunar: she and Landon die simultaneously. Balzac would himself attempt suicide shortly after. But these themes (and he) would emerge symbolically triumphant a decade later, in a symbolic firestorm which would aim to turn base metal into gold and physical passion into the angelic in *La Recherche de l'Absolu*, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and *Séraphîta*.

ii) A Synaesthetic Watershed : the 1830 *Scènes de la vie privée*, *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* and *La Vendetta*

Balzac's hitherto largely artistically-uninformed use of colour would be transformed by 1830, from the primarily mimetic or symbolic centring principally on light, into a full-blooded understanding of a complete, polyvalent and potentially transcendent system of meaning. This understanding came from artists and art, in a crucial fusion of diverse aesthetic and narrative factors: the rise of a genre of socially-critical and narrative dialogues called *Scènes*; Balzac's acquaintance with key authors and their friends, notably Mérimée, Stendhal, and Hugo, and his entrée into the élite of salons and artists: Gros, Gérard, Ingres, the Vernets, Delacroix.²⁹ This

²⁹ See Tim Farrant, *Balzac's Shorter Fictions* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 61.

rich and quasi-synaesthetic ferment would produce Balzac's first explicitly visually-tagged and artist-centred stories, whose polysemic colour-command – referential, realist, and symbolic – introduced the polyvalent narrative modes which would underpin the *Comédie humaine*. Balzac's miser Gobseck's eyes, 'jaunes comme ceux d'une fouine', sit emblematically in a 'face *lunaire*, elle ressemblait à du vermeil dédoré', recalling 'ces alchimistes [...] ces petits vieillards peints par Rembrandt ou par Metzu'; the predatory Mme d'Espard, in *L'Interdiction* (1836) will recline in a tawny boudoir, setting off 'sa blancheur factice' by 'les nuances et les tons vigoureux des étoffes dont elle s'entourait [...] le brun-rouge, le marron, le bistre à reflets d'or, lui allaient à merveille. Son boudoir, copié sur celui d'une célèbre lady alors à la mode à Londres, était en velours couleur de tan. Mais elle y avait ajouté de nombreux agréments dont les jolis dessins atténuaient la pompe excessive de cette royale couleur' (3 456-7).³⁰ Mimetic notation flows into the absolute: Gobseck's yellowness denoting the gold which is his being, Mme d'Espard's writing her red-clawed animality in tan – the keynote for 'tanière', 'lair'.

Such colour notation works on multiple levels, visual, linguistic and semantic, standing at the head of a long and complex intertwining of the literary and the visual in nineteenth-century French fictions. If the media are increasingly mixed, their combination becomes ever more potent, fusing art, drama and fiction. The dramatico-visual *Scènes* (initially *Tableaux*) de la vie privée launch *La Comédie humaine* with *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, the story of an aristocratic painter, Théodore de Sommervieux, whose ambition and infidelity break the bourgeois girl, Augustine, he marries. From *La Maison* onwards, colour tells the story, from

³⁰ 'Yellow as a weasel's'; '*lunar* visage'; 'it looked like tarnished gilt'; 'those alchemists [...] painted by Rembrandt or Metzu' (2 964); 'artificial whiteness', 'the vigorous nuances and hues of the fabrics with which she surrounded herself [...] red-brown, chestnut, gold-shimmering bistre all suited her wonderfully. Her boudoir, copied from that of a famous lady then fashionable in London, was in tan-coloured velvet. But she had added numerous ornaments whose dainty patterns mitigated the excessive pomp of that regal colour' (3 456-7).

opening Dutch genre chiaroscuro in Augustine's father's drapers' shop, to the varied colours of the salon, and Théodore's lover Mme de Carigliano's hôtel at the end.³¹ He first sees Augustine as a Madonna, a Marian white calyx framed by her father's brown fabric and *putti*-apprentices.³² Théodore's love casts sun into her prison, and he paints her calm eyes, 'immortalisés par avance dans les sublimes compositions de Raphaël' with his friend Girodet's Neoclassicism.³³ Changing colours tell her story, from her blushing cheeks when she first sees him to her terminal distress, when her colours become pale.³⁴ The real repeatedly undermines the ideal. Théodore's portrait of Augustine (= bourgeois, Dutch genre), first done as a love-token, then purloined for his mistress Mme de Carigliano (= Italianate, Neoclassical, like his jet-haired coiffure 'à la Caracalla'), is traded for social advantage.³⁵ Though almost an icon, its 'couleurs vraies [...] ne peuvent pas encore être appréciées':³⁶ it is parodied before it happens by her father's shop-sign, the House of the Cat and Racket, showing a nobleman and a cat hitting a shuttlecock which can only be called Augustine. 'Dessein, couleurs, accessoires', all suggest that 'l'artiste avait voulu se moquer du marchand et des passants';³⁷ when Théodore furiously destroys it, it is outlived by his hyperreal Dutch interior of her father's shop. Like her mother's attempted consolation with a replacement by 'un homme qui fait des portraits charmants pour cinquante écus', it is only one step back to her father, the shopkeeper, and

³¹ 1 56.

³² 1 42-3.

³³ 1 57; 'Immortalised in advance in the sublime compositions of Raphaël': 1 43.

³⁴ 1 76.

³⁵ 1 41.

³⁶ 'Its true colours cannot yet be appreciated': 1 54.

³⁷ 'Drawing, colours, props', 'the artist had set out to mock the shopkeeper and the passers-by': 1 40.

thence to the ironmonger or *marchand de couleurs*.³⁸ The artisan always lurks behind the artist, dusky Dutch paints beneath Italian clarity. The shadows of venality stretch furthest in Balzac's 1839 story *Pierre Grassou*, the narrative vestige of the only *Salon* Balzac was ever supposed to (but did not actually) write. The talentless (hence immensely successful) Grassou, originally a paint-merchant's shop-boy, churns out portraits with, revealingly, 'des tons roses excellents pour des enseignes de parfumeur'. Here indeed, as in Baudelaire's 'Correspondances', 'les couleurs et les parfums' (if not 'les sons') 'se répondent', if not quite as Baudelaire intended, in the red-faced indignation of Grassou's clients.³⁹

Politics and morals as much as art colour *La Vendetta*, the second artist-story in *La Comédie humaine*. In 1800 a Corsican fugitive, di Piombo, seeks Bonaparte's protection, having killed the Porta family in a vendetta. His little daughter Ginevra's 'longs cheveux noirs', the painterly account of di Piombo's head, 'une de ces têtes abondantes en cheveux [...] qui se sont souvent offertes au pinceau des Carrache', 'cheveux si noirs', tellingly 'mêlés d'une grande quantité de cheveux blancs', announce the black-and-white code of di Piombo's vendetta.⁴⁰ Part 2, set in 1815, nuances colour in the fictional artist Servin's studio, dramatizing the rivalry of bonapartists and resurgent aristocrats in the enmity of two groups of Servin's exclusively female pupils, headed by the now adult Ginevra and the noble Amélie de Thirion. The initially neutral studio northlight is progressively nuanced by threateningly satirical caricatures, 'têtes faites au trait, avec de la couleur ou la pointe d'un couteau', by the 'murailles peintes en gris foncé', by the 'modèles en plâtre couverts d'une blonde poussière', on 'quelques écorchés jaunis' which soon show the studio's true colours. This 'coulisse d'opéra' gradually

³⁸ 'A man who does charming portraits for fifty crowns': 1 93.

³⁹ 'Pink tones excellent for perfumiers' signs' (6 1107); 'colours and scents' (if not sounds) 'answer each other'.

⁴⁰ 'Long black hair'; 'one of those hirsute, well-furnished heads [...] which have so often offered themselves to the paintbrush of the Carrachi', 'hair so black' 'mixed with a great quantity of white hair': 1 1035.

unveils latent, sinister, visceral conflicts, ‘je ne sais quoi de grand comme la pensée’, ‘le génie et la mort’, ‘le beau et le désordre, de riches couleurs dans l’ombre, et souvent tout un drame silencieux’.⁴¹

La Vendetta brings the colours out of the shadows, gives the silent drama voice. Seemingly innocent notation – Amélie’s blond, Ginevra’s black hair – soon gets serious, the ideological rivals moving their paint-boxes around the studio like enemies on a chess-board. This coming into colour is a coming into being: the mysterious, sepia ideal-head Ginevra works on turns out to be her lover Luigi’s, hidden in the shadows until he comes brilliantly into life in his blue uniform, unleashing a bloody, monochrome dénouement when Luigi is revealed to be a Porta, di Piombo’s vendetta enemy and the couple elope to certain death. Ginevra’s attempts to live by *coloriage*, tinting engravings, is powerless against her father’s enmity, as is their would-be fusion of word and image in Luigi’s work as a scribe. The vendetta’s black-and-white moral chessboard eventually gets its own back in a transfixing final scene, when Ginevra’s hair is placed before her father, who metaphorically eliminates the fire of passion by declaring of Luigi ‘Il nous épargne un coup de feu, car il est mort’.⁴² Colour’s metaphorical and actual possibilities are thus evacuated by a black-and-white standoff whose merits are very far from clear.

iii) Sculpture and Modelling : *Sarrasine* and *Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu*

⁴¹ ‘Heads drawn, with colour or a knife-point’, ‘walls painted in dark grey’, ‘plaster models covered in blonde dust’, ‘some yellowed écorchés’, ‘wings of an opera-house’, ‘I know not what as great as thought’, ‘genius and death’, ‘beauty and disorder, rich colours in the shadows, and often a whole silent drama’: 1 1041, 1042.

⁴² ‘He has saved us a gunshot, for he is dead’: 1 1101-2.

La Vendetta's black and white patterning is developed in *Sarrasine* (also 1830) via more nuanced treatment of society and politics and overter invocation of the ideal. An unnamed narrator relates to his companion, Mme de Rochefide, the sculptor Sarrasine's doomed pursuit of an ideally-beautiful opera-singer, La Zambinella; s/he turns out to be a castrato and thus, for the apparently heterosexual Sarrasine, a void: 'Le monde est désert pour moi').⁴³ This tale is framed by an exposition in which the aged Zambinella is sighted at a *mondain* Paris ball, triggering the story of Sarrasine's affair, itself preceded by a patterning of light and dark, heat and cold, life and death, which forms the text's symbolic exposition. Outside the narrator sees moonlit snow-covered trees from the warm salon, 'spectres mal enveloppés de leurs linceuls, image gigantesque de la fameuse *danse des morts*' ; inside, 'la danse des vivants!'⁴⁴ The apparently merely descriptive oppositional opening comes to symbolise, via gold, light and diamonds, Sarrasine's quest for the ideal. The bright lights, the over-bright glances are both manifestations and, as in *Wann-Chlore*, phantasmatic projections of desire. Along with the aural⁴⁵ – the voices in the salon, the sublimity of la Zambinella's singing, of Italian opera, of the painting of Raphaël, Giorgione or Girodet – they present different, proto-synaesthetic ways of aspiring to that ideal.⁴⁶ Sculpture is ostensibly at the pinnacle of the

⁴³ 'The world is a desert for me': 6 1069. In *La Silhouette*, in October 1830, just before *Sarrasine*, Balzac had published a pair of pieces called 'Tout' and 'Zéro'. On the significance of 'rien', see Knight, 'Balzac and the Model of Painting', 8-9, and section iii) below.

⁴⁴ 'Phantoms badly wrapped in their winding-sheets, a gigantic image of the famous *Dance of the Dead*'; inside, 'the dance of the living!': 6 1043.

⁴⁵ 'Ton' crosses from the auditory to the visual in the Academy Dictionary of 1762. See also Paul Smith's essay in this issue.

⁴⁶ In fact, the *Beau idéal*, conceived by Diderot less as an eclectic assemblage of parts gathered 'ça et là' from different models, as had been the case for *Sarrasine* (6 1060), than as an idealised refinement over time. On this,

whole system: it is as a sculpture that Sarrasine sees la Zambinella and portrays her in a statue which (like Augustine's portrait) both outlives his desire and himself, serving as the model for Vien's fictional painting of Adonis, itself inspired by Girodet's *Endymion*, thereby triggering the narrator's story of reality falling short of that aspiration. The white statue, supposed embodiment of perfection, in real life draws a blank, contextualizing yet also ironizing any unproblematic conception of ideality.

Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu (1831, revised 1837, with Gautier's input⁴⁷), equally inspired by Girodet (his futile quest for perfection in his notoriously overworked *Pygmalion et Galatée*⁴⁸), takes almost the opposite tack, recounting the seventeenth-century painter Frenhofer's attempt to create an absolutely believable female figure on, and ultimately off the canvas: one who would appear totally free and three-dimensional, surrounded by space. But when *La Belle Noiseuse* is unveiled, only he can perceive her thus, the other painters, Pourbus and Poussin, seeing (apart from a perfectly-rendered foot) only a confused, illegible, layered mass of paint. Devastated, Frenhofer dies, having burnt his paintings in the night.

and the role of sculpture and painting in *Sarrasine*, see Jean Seznec, 'Diderot and *Sarrasine*', *Diderot Studies*, 1963 (4), 237-45, esp. 243-4, 239-242.

⁴⁷ See René Guise, 10 1402-7; Pierre Laubriet, *Un catéchisme esthétique. Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu de Balzac* (Didier, 1961); and, for a complete exploration of the story's philosophical underpinning, Patrick Née, 'Le Chef-d'œuvre *trop connu* (Frenhofer et nous)', *Le Genre humain* (Seuil), 2008/1 (47), 57-76.

⁴⁸ 1819. Oil on canvas, 253 x 202 cm, Château de Dampierre: Thomas Crow, *Emulation. Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), Pl. 182 and 265-278.

Frenhofer's problem is philosophical.⁴⁹ Like the horsemen in the *Discours* with their statue,⁵⁰ he can see the woman; Pourbus and Poussin cannot. But the problem has gone far beyond black and white (or subjective and objective). If he gets the theory, he cannot do the practice, which is what ultimately matters, as he paradoxically understands: 'Les peintres ne doivent méditer que les brosses à la main'.⁵¹ Cause and effect are indissociable; most artists represent only effect. Neither effect nor form are merely external, but are intimately related to the fundamental essence or nature of a person or an object, which it is art's purpose to express: 'La mission de l'art n'est pas de copier la nature, mais de l'exprimer'; 'La forme [...] est un truchement pour se communiquer des idées'.⁵²

These motto-watchwords all point to the central truth of unity in Frenhofer's disquisitions and their expression in related artist-stories, particularly the musician-

⁴⁹ The most philosophically probing exploration of colour in *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, perhaps of this story *tout court*, is Georges Didi-Huberman's *La Peinture incarnée* (Les Éditions de minuit, 1985). My discussion inevitably touches on many of the points his study explores further, and shares its central concern with the (im)possibility of art as incarnation. But it differs in reading Balzac's text not as a short-circuit leading back to fetishism or the purely 'pictural', but as an expression, however inevitably partial (and rather than a manifesto or a catechism) of *La Comédie humaine*'s developing mimetic quest, already expressed in the *Physiologie du mariage* (1829). There, poetry, music and painting are 'les trois arts qui nous aident à chercher peut-être infructueusement la vérité par analogie' – a quest in which man, like Frenhofer, or any creator, listener or spectator 'se trouve seul avec son imagination' in 'une conspiration contre le vrai' (11 957; cf. Farrant, 40 and n. 30, 31. Didi-Hubermann's broad intellectual and theoretical framework overlooks Balzac's more personal philosophical field of reference, not least in relation to the question of white, which is certainly more than 'trois fois rien' (*op.cit.*, 13).

⁵⁰ *OD* 1 555.

⁵¹ 'Painters must only meditate with their brushes in their hands': 10 427.

⁵² 'The mission of Art is not to copy nature, but to express it'; 'Form [...] is a medium for the communication of ideas': 10 418, 419.

protagonists of *Gambara* and *Massimilla Doni*, likewise aspirational but failed.⁵³ Core to unity is form, encompassing and transcending colour and line, and embodied in a concept of modelling which goes far beyond the stasis of statuary to produce the movement of life itself:⁵⁴ ‘Hier, vers le soir, dit-il, j’ai cru avoir fini. Ses yeux me semblaient humides, sa chair était agitée. Les tresses de ses cheveux remuaient. Elle respirait !’⁵⁵ Yet the ‘life’ is complexly enfolded within art, revealed by thorough study of ‘les grands maîtres du coloris’, and leads to light, physical and epiphanic: ‘j’ai analysé et soulevé couche par couche les tableaux de Titien, ce roi de la lumière’. [...] N’est-ce pas ainsi que procède le soleil, ce divin peintre de l’univers’.⁵⁶ This light is both a spiritual and a creative absolute (‘soleil’ as ‘divin peintre’), and a synaesthetic one as well: the sun recalls Apollo, and Frenhofer’s *millefeuilles* study of Titien reminds us of Delacroix, that most innovatively literary of painters, painting ‘tableaux

⁵³ Andréoli, *Le Système balzacien*, 732-6 ; cf. Farrant, 191-5, 229-33 ; Née, 67.

⁵⁴ Balzac hereby anticipates the superiority over sculpture Baudelaire saw in Delacroix, as well as his colour-line doctrine: ‘La sculpture, à qui la couleur est impossible et le mouvement difficile, n’a rien à démêler avec un artiste que préoccupent surtout le mouvement, la couleur, et l’atmosphère. Ces trois éléments demandent nécessairement un contour un peu indécis, des lignes légères et flottantes, et l’audace de la touche [...] Au point de vue de Delacroix, la ligne n’est pas [...] et pour les coloristes, qui veulent imiter les palpitations éternelles de la nature, les lignes ne sont jamais, comme dans l’arc-en-ciel, que la fusion intime de deux couleurs’ : *OC* 2 434. ‘Sculpture, in which colour is impossible and movement difficult, is of no concern to an artist preoccupied above all by movement, colour and atmosphere. Those three elements necessarily require a somewhat uncertain contour, light and floating lines, and an audacity of touch [...] In Delacroix’s view, line does not exist [...] and for colourists, who seek to imitate the eternal palpitations of nature, lines are never, as in the rainbow, but the intimate fusion of two colours’.

⁵⁵ ‘Yesterday, towards evening’, he said, ‘I thought I had finished. Her eyes seemed damp, her flesh was excited. The tresses of her hair were stirring. She was breathing!’: 10 424.

⁵⁶ ‘The great masters of colour and hue’; ‘I have analysed and raised layer by layer the pictures of Titian, that king of light ! [...] Is not this the way of the sun, that divine painter of the universe?’: 10 424-5.

avec des tableaux'.⁵⁷ Indeed, colour, like shade, like form, is a function of this light, which is not on some unchanging scale, but is, crucially, dynamic: Frenhofer's account covers the process of creation, from the lay-out to the glazes, and, tellingly, distinguishes his own work from that of others by its potential to suggest further movement: 'On sent que si leur figure changeait de position, les places ombrées ne se nettoieraient pas et ne deviendraient pas lumineuses [...] chez moi la blancheur se révèle sous l'opacité de l'ombre la plus soutenue'.⁵⁸ Frenhofer thus uses colour to propose a kind of painting which is, like Delacroix's, absolutely literary, in the sense that colour suggests movement, development, hypothesizes a kind of plot, as well as subsuming the drawn lines which might correspond, in fiction, to storytelling ('le corps humain ne finit pas par des lignes [...] Rigoureusement parlant, le dessin n'existe pas!') within a transcendent conception of form.⁵⁹

Colour is thus fundamental in *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, fashioning form to express unity, a figure or person's essential nature, and the continuum between internal and external, what Balzac calls the 'sens intime', 'intimate sense', and also 'innermost meaning'. This only colour can embody, for it does not just represent, but is, and *ex-presses*, its being. It is in this

⁵⁷ 'Pictures made from pictures' : Mehdi Korchane, 'Eugène et ses maîtres, ou comment devenir Delacroix', Delacroix, ed. Sébastien Allart and Côme Fabre, exh.cat (Louvre : Hazan éditions, 2018), 337-245, 343-4. Baudelaire, *Salon de 1846*, OC 2 432-3.

⁵⁸ 'One feels that if they moved their faces, the shaded places would not be cleansed and would not become luminous [...] with light, whiteness is revealed beneath the opacity of the densest shade': 10 424.

⁵⁹ 'The human body is not defined by lines [...] strictly speaking, the line does not exist!': 10 424. Frenhofer's doctrines recall Diderot's *Pensées détachées sur la peinture* or his *Salons* (10 424 n. 1-3, 425 n.3) and Delacroix's understanding of shadows as colour or his appreciation of the believability of Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* - in Delacroix's notebook (*Écrits I. Études esthétiques. Éditions du Sandre*, 2006, 78-80, 36-7) - unknowable to Balzac, except via Gautier, who echoes them in *La Presse* on 13 March 1837, 424 n.3.

most fundamental sense that colour *matters*; for when colour is *just* matter, it does not get beyond it, as in Rubens's much-derided *montagnes de viands flamandes*, his mountains of Flemish meat:

Qu'y manque-t-il ? un rien, mais ce rien est tout. Vous avez l'apparence de la vie, mais vous n'exprimez pas son trop-plein qui déborde, ce je ne sais quoi qui est l'âme peut-être et qui flotte nuageusement sur l'enveloppe [...] À cela près, reprit-il, cette toile vaut mieux que les peintures de ce faquin de Rubens avec ses montagnes de viandes flamandes, saupoudrées de vermillon, ses ondées de chevelures rousses, et son tapage de couleurs. Au moins, avez-vous là couleur, sentiment et dessin, les trois parties essentielles de l'Art'.⁶⁰

In Rubens, one sees the paint, but not the person; at best a body, not a being. At its best, however, colour can transcend matter to become the Absolute – here, an absolute of mimesis, creating a seemingly real entity set free from the two dimensions of the canvas. It is a central *profession de foi* by Balzac, made in the very year (1837-8) when he staked his claim, in *Illusions perdues*, for what would soon be known as Realism. Yet, like all ideals in Balzac, it is more aspiration than reality, and the paradox of this *comédien*, Frenhofer, is that like

⁶⁰ 'What do they lack? A trifle, nothing, but this nothing is all. You have the appearance of life, but do not express its overflowing surfeit, that *je ne sais quoi* which is perhaps the soul floating mistily over the surface [...] 'That aside', he continued, 'this canvas is better than the paintings of that no-good Rubens with his mountains of Flemish meat, seasoned with vermillion, his waves of long red hair, the noisy uproar of his colours. Here at least you have colour, feeling and drawing, the three essential parts of Art': 10 419-20.

Diderot's, the more he feels the less he can express.⁶¹ Aiming for *Tout*, he gains *rien*,⁶² and these dyads, recurrently paired since Balzac's beginnings, would structure his 1834 novel of failed alchemy, *La Recherche de l'Absolu*, and the two contrasting colour-novels at the heart of Balzac's career, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and *Séraphîta*.

iv) *From Colour to Light : La Fille aux yeux d'or* (1834-5) and *Séraphîta* (1835)

Frenhofer's fire is a cleansing; so is his alchemist's, Balthasar Claës's, in *La Recherche de l'Absolu*, whose quest for gold ends in devastation, like that of *La Fille aux yeux d'or*. But unlike *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, inscribed to a void, a nameless English Lord, this text, dedicated to Delacroix, ends with the triumph of colour but the defeat of the ideal by the real: *Tout*, rather than *Rien*. To a slow monochrome opening panning through successive circles of Balzac's Parisian hell, a colour-poncif from the 1832 *Contes bruns* along with *or*, gold to connote venality (as in *Gobseck* or later, *La Cousine Bette*), Balzac adds *plaisir* as the twin drivers of movement in Paris, signifying desire and a kind of ideal, not a *beau idéal*, as the narrator says, but a material ideal, born of material forces and itself an alchemical enterprise. The protagonists Marsay and Manerville pursue contrasting colour-defined female types, one blond, one dark – two ideals which can no more be united in a single individual than La

⁶¹ On Balzac and Diderot, cf. Stephen Gendzier, 'Balzac's changing attitudes towards Diderot', *French Studies*, 1965/2 (19), 125-43, esp. 129.

⁶² It seems improbable that Balzac could have seen this ending, or these dyads, as any kind of triumph, for example of the 'pictural' over the 'figural', *pace* Georges Didi-Hubermann, 122, cit. Née, 71.

Zambinella actually embody the perfections which Sarrasine ‘avait jusqu’alors cherché ça et là’.⁶³

Gathering scatterings is, however, precisely their ambition, in their quest to put together a material ideal. The opening’s grey tones are constantly lightened (if not leavened) by glints of white or gold, Paquita attended by ‘un mulâtre’, clad in ‘soie ponceau’, confronting white with red, aiming at a plenitude in fusion. *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, originally *aux yeux rouges*, is fundamentally driven by red, at heart, blood: it is blood which links, and separates, Paquita, Marsay and Mariquita; ‘or’ could itself be conceived as a mixing of blood, the embodied or the material, and the ideal; and it is the quasi-alchemical quest for combination of whiteness and redness, heat and cold, which powers de Marsay, himself a bastard amalgam of the ‘hommes du Nord’⁶⁴ the English, and the French. The yoking of North and South, Spain and Flanders runs through all Balzac’s narratives of the Absolute, from *Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu* to *La Recherche de l’Absolu* via *Jésus-Christ en Flandre* and *La Duchesse de Langeais*.⁶⁵ Here it is embodied in the confrontation of England, France and Spain in the opposition of Paquita, Marsay, and her Spanish chaperone, Mariquita, with Paquita as the hybrid realization of the pâquerette or daisy which de Maulincour/ Solesmes says he would prefer to any rose, as well as reflecting the ‘pactole’ Claës does not know he has in his *pépîte* Pépita, his wife Joséphine.

But the fusion is an illusion. Just as the woman stroking her chimera is indeed, fondling but a dream,⁶⁶ so the pursuit of this reconciled ideal turns out to be a nightmare. The blissful interiority of *La Femme au perroquet*, the reconciled exotic of *Les Femmes d’Alger*, an exotic

⁶³ ‘Had until then sought here and there’: 6 1060.

⁶⁴ ‘Men of the North’, 5 1104.

⁶⁵ Madeleine Fargeaud, *Balzac et La Recherche de l’Absolu* (PUF Quadrige, 1999), esp. 257-276 & 418-436.

⁶⁶ 5 1065.

intermittently present notated throughout *La Fille aux yeux d'or*,⁶⁷ ends in an incestuous short-circuit, as Marsay and Mariquita realize that they are half-siblings, as their echoing names suggest: their transcendence is merely internal, solipsistic, narcissistically half-realized: making love with Marsay (and/or herself and/or Mariquita), 'Paquita ne voyait rien au-delà', echoing every narcissist's ambition: 'je ne suis quelque chose au dehors de toi qu'afin d'être un Plaisir pour toi',⁶⁸ as perfectly inauthentic as her clothing of Marsay in women's dress to make him as superficially as possible like Mariquita, a *chef-d'oeuvre connu*, all *effet* and no *cause*. The boudoir 'blanc et rose' becomes a bloodbath of clashing white and red, two colours which should never be confronted, turning on itself like the horseshoe divan, ultimately congealing in *sang glacé*, freezing both Marsay and Mariquita's blood, ending all life and movement as they discover their negative identities on the final page. Colour in this story, redolent perhaps especially of *La Mort de Sardanapale* (which Balzac however never explicitly mentions) marked by red, white, orgy and bloodshed, ends with an absolute washing out of colour and the ideal from the story, as the material regains the moral low ground.

Séraphîta, in contrast, starts literally and materially from a blank. Triggered by the androgynous (and monochrome) sculpture of Théophile Bra, it begins in an imaginary Norway, a landscape Balzac never visited, symbolically patterned by height, white and green.⁶⁹ The mountain-peaks symbolise inspiration, rising to perfection, the white purity, the green the

⁶⁷ Cf. 5 1039 n. 1 ; Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, ed. Michelle Hannoosh (Corti, 2009), 2 vols, 1 578 n.43. Cf. Barthélémy Jobert, 'Delacroix chez Balzac', *L'Année balzacienne* (2011): 65-77, esp. 66 ; on Delacroix and colour in this story, see Olivier Bonard, *La Peinture dans la création balzacienne*. (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 154-164.

⁶⁸ 'Paquita could see no further'; 'I am nothing without you to be a pleasure for you': 5 1091, 1102.

⁶⁹ *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, ed. Roger Pierrot (Robert Laffont / Bouquins, 1990), 2 vols, 1 98, 20 Nov. 1833 ; cit. Yves Gagneux, 'Peut-on analyser les dessins de Théophile Bra?', *L'Artiste selon Balzac. Entre la toise du savant et le vertige du fou*, ed. Judith Meyer-Petit (Paris-Musées, 1999), 78-93, 79.

nature from which humans may ascend towards these higher stages (many try, few succeed). This symbolism derives evidently from the Bible, but the novel's particular inspiration, along with Bra, is Swedenborg, who informs its story of an androgynous hero(ine)/being, Séraphîtus/Séraphîta.⁷⁰ He/she changes from male to female as s/he descends from the striated heights of gneiss at the opening, embodying Swedenborg's para-Christian philosophy of a progression of being from the fallen earth-bound to heavenly perfection.

Séraphîta is in some ways the theory of which *La Fille aux yeux d'or* is the practice, placed at the end of the *Études philosophiques*, just before *La Comédie humaine*'s intended theoretical pinnacle, the *Études analytiques*.⁷¹ Its theory is expounded in the extensive central presentation of Swedenborg's philosophy by Pastor Becker, and embodied in its main actors: Séraphîtus/Séraphîta, Minna and Wilfred who fall in love with him/her, and the pastor. Nowhere else does Balzac use such a restricted cast (the protagonists are allegorical representatives, much more than characters) or palette. Both are spiritual distillations of fuller-bodied experiments elsewhere, in *Louis Lambert*, *Le Médecin de Campagne* or *La Recherche de l'Absolu*; this novel is Balzac's *Pilgrim's Progress*. But both cast and colour have infinite potential. The rather bloodless 'actors' lack any of the defining particularities Balzac gives his other characters and narratives; it does not even state dates, and Becker is ironically the only one described in any detail; the others are simply vessels of potential, bodies and souls on trajectories to perfection.

⁷⁰ See Henri Gauthier, *L'Image de l'homme intérieur chez Balzac* (Geneva: Droz, 1984), Pt. 1 chs 2-3, 28-91 ; on luminosity and whiteness, 275-294 ; on sculpture as the ideal, Isabelle Leroy-Jay Lemaistre, 'La Sculpture et Balzac', Meyer-Petit, *L'Artiste selon Balzac*, 150-163, 150.

⁷¹ See Geneviève Delattre, 'De Séraphîta à *La Fille aux yeux d'or*', *L'Année balzacienne* (1970): 183-226. On *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and colour, see A. Béguin, *Balzac lu et relu* (Seuil, 1965), 81-87.

Colour is essential to this story – or perhaps, rather, existential, as, like the characters, it exists chiefly as potentialities which may be variously realized. The colour-keys usually structuring Balzac's narratives are absent, apart from the minimal white-green notation at the outset. The only thing which really matters is light, and light has spiritual as well as physical significance. As *La Recherche de l'Absolu*, written the previous year, tracks the alchemist's quest for gold and the elixir of eternal life, and *La Fille aux yeux d'or* an intensely-coloured material absolute, so *Séraphîta* projects the quest for light and celestial perfection: it is the dematerializing version of its predecessors. Man and woman are successive stages on the way to the redeemed state of being an angel; so too are the novel's successive manifestations of matter, colour and light. If there is notional anchoring in, tellingly, chemistry, its colours, like its 'characters' (or its chemicals) are often struggling to become something else. Struggling colours are muddy, or uncertain, a dusky 'bistre'. But Becker's waistcoat is iridescent; at a key moment of consummation, the spectrum breaks into a rainbow.

Yet the Alpha and Omega of this trajectory is pure light. Predicting symbols along the way (blue sky, hyacinth, white, gold, purple) all tend towards this end. If the beginning and the end is light,⁷² the absolute endgame is unity, on which word, colour music and perfume all converge in a synaesthetic spectrum, a reciprocal mega-fusion of diverse sensory phenomena. At its root is Swedenborg's conception of *Correspondances*, made famous by Baudelaire's eponymous poem: 'Les parfums, les sons et les couleurs se répondent'. This solipsistic but transcendent unity, totally global and many dimensions ahead of the short-circuit which fuses *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, is the summit of Balzac's juggling with colour. The view from the top (a recurrent motif in *Séraphîta*, via mountains, birds, and eagles) sees colour as a local, circumstantial phenomenon, like any single-sense perception or expression,⁷³ a restricted, site-

⁷² Cf. Genesis 1.3-5, 14-18; Revelation 18.1, 21.11, 23-4, 22.5.

⁷³ Cf. *OD* 1 541.

specific manifestation of a potentially transcendent celestial unity, sufficient in and of itself, the consummation of the redeemed, perfected yet absolutely selfless *Homme intérieur*.

Conclusion: Colour, Light, Abjection and Transcendence

Séraphîta thus ends Balzac's exploration of perfection in *La Comédie humaine*. Subsequent works explore synaesthesia, notably *Gambara* and *Massimilla Doni*, the two art-stories which follow *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*. But their musician principals all fail to achieve synaesthetic plenitude, even if (perhaps because) they perceive it, because perception requires knowledge, knowledge is sin, and (unlike white light) colour has many manifestations on that refracted palette. Colour is thus fallen, and a fundamental factor in the expression of Balzac's human comedy. In its end is its beginning, in the first philosophical explorations of the *Discours* and *Falthurne* – itself, like *Séraphîta*, an androgynous novel of light, the lodestar of Balzac's creation, whether as Enlightenment, at its outset, or spiritual revelation at its end.

Colour is in one respect incidental to these trajectories, the circumstantial product of refraction, of the angle or perspective at or from which people, places, landscapes, things, interact with the Absolute. But in another, colour is essential: contingent on local circumstance, yet anything but aleatory, as unvarying in its outcomes as light refracted at a specific angle through a prism: conditions and incidence may change, universal laws do not. In Balzac's rule-bound order, the particular always exemplifies the general. Goriot's linen or Rastignac's gloves are contingent illustrations of a bigger story, like Gobseck's yellow eyes, Bette's lust for Adeline's yellow shawl, or Mme de Carigliano's ottoman, treacherously green.

Colour thus matters in Balzac, mattering most when most material, for it is then that, paradoxically, its spiritual potential (if not achievement) is the greatest – as *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* shows. Balzac's journey from light to light moves not from matter to spirit as enemy

entities, but between them as points on a trans-temporal monistic continuum, like the ascent from man to angel, earth to heaven, colour to light. Balzac and his characters battle with matter to the death, seeking aesthetic triumph and finding human disaster in a fallen absolute of matter, invariably as combustion, figurative and/or actual. Only Grassou escapes, too stupid to pursue the Absolute, and only finally, in *Séraphîta*, does the fire lead to light. Though at the very end of *La Comédie humaine*, *Séraphîta* is a theoretical, idealised and, crucially, white or colourless coronation of what is, in reality, a fall. Balzac's *Comédie humaine* is human because, unlike Dante's, it repeatedly narrates damnation as much as redemption, closing with *Séraphîta* reflecting the light in *Falthurne* and *Wann-Chlore* as Revelation does the openings of Genesis and John. *Séraphîta* is followed by mocking monitorings of human fallibility, the *Physiologie du mariage* and *Petites misères de la vie conjugale*, and *Traité on vie élégante, démarche and excitants*. Balzac's creation means most when its colours are most vibrant – not in the insipid white-light self-reflections of *Wann-Chlore* and *Séraphîta*, but in the dazzling, catastrophic refractions of *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* or *La Fille aux yeux d'or*. Colour matters in Balzac because he takes it further and more seriously than any other writer, using it as a tool to test the absolute and to represent the mundane, his spectrum encompassing mimesis and symbolism, unity and fragmentation, abjection and transcendence, pushing to the limits the possibilities of word and image in multifarious celebration of *la rivalité des arts*.