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Balzac and the Notion of the *vol décent*:

A Sanction of Deceit in *La Comédie humaine*

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Declaration

This is to certify that:

1. The thesis comprises only original work towards the Ph.D.
2. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.
3. The thesis is less than 100,000 words, exclusive of bibliographies and appendices.
4. The following articles on aspects of the thesis topic, either forming part of the text of the thesis or referenced in the thesis, have been published or submitted for publication.

Martin Shields, The Audience, the Aside and the Success, *French Studies Bulletin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Winter 2013), No. 129, pp. 87-90.

Martin Shields, A Theatre of Deceit in Balzac's *César Birotteau*, *French Studies Bulletin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Winter 2014), No. 133, pp. 103-107.

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Abstract

The Balzacian notion of the *vol décent* facilitates a legally legitimate but morally suspect form of theft. The process involves a deception that leaves the victim suffering loss, with a consequential benefit accruing to the perpetrator. It pushes at the limits of legality and social acceptability whilst retaining the appearance of probity; a process that successfully works to sanction deceit and avoid retribution, legal or social. It is thereby free to contribute to a culture of creative opportunism and social cynicism.

The *vol décent* offers a fresh perspective on *La Comédie humaine*, not simply as notion, process or phenomenon grounded etymologically and socio-economically, but as heuristic capable of revealing fresh insights into Balzac's position as narrator, observer and commentator on a Restoration society undergoing multiple transitions. Further, this thesis recognises the *vol décent* as a central feature of Balzac's individual contribution to *La Comédie humaine* and theatre, informing both his vision and philosophy. As core heuristic, it contributes an innovative prospect that becomes a powerful tool probing the influential milieux of commercial speculation, business, theatre, private life and government institution. Within those spheres the *vol décent* reveals, using the operative lenses of theatricality, caricature, bureaucracy, architecture, deception and the law as facilitator of theft, a close and fresh view of socially sanctioned corruption.

In the illumination of the notion of the *vol décent* and its capacity to inform of Balzac's individual vision and philosophy, this research contributes an innovative insight into the complex, fundamental relationship between narrative representation, human nature, historical and environmental determinism. The open-endedness of the oxymoron, on which the phrase *vol décent* is based, accommodates transition, paradox and self-interest operating under a mask of legality. It questions whether the notion of the *vol décent* is in fact a systemic phenomenon or a basic trait of human nature.

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Abbreviations

CH	<i>La Comédie humaine</i> 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard 1976-1981) Unless stated otherwise, all references to texts in <i>La Comédie humaine</i> are from the above edition	
AIH	<i>Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse</i>	(XII)
Be	<i>La Cousine Bette</i>	(VII)
CA	<i>Le Cabinet des Antiques</i>	(IV)
CB	<i>César Birotteau</i>	(VI)
CCS	<i>Les Comédiens sans le savoir</i>	(VII)
CM	<i>Le Contrat de mariage</i>	(III)
Col.	<i>Le Colonel Chabert</i>	(III)
CT	<i>Le Curé de Tours</i>	(IV)
DV	<i>Un début dans la vie</i>	(I)
E	<i>Les Employés</i>	(VII)
EF	<i>Étude de femme</i>	(II)
EG	<i>Eugénie Grandet</i>	(III)
Gb.	<i>Gobseck</i>	(II)
In.	<i>L'Interdiction</i>	(III)
LP	<i>Les Paysans</i>	(IX)
Ma.	<i>Les Marana</i>	(X)
MD	<i>La Muse du département</i>	(IV)
MN	<i>La Maison Nucingen</i>	(VI)
PG	<i>Le Père Goriot</i>	(III)
Ven	<i>La Vendetta</i>	(I)
VF	<i>La Vieille Fille</i>	(IV)
Corr.	<i>Correspondance</i>	
ER	<i>Ébauches rattachées à la Comédie humaine</i>	
LMH	<i>Lettres à Mme Hanska</i>	
OD	<i>Œuvres diverses</i>	

Introduction

In the entire collection of one hundred novels and twenty-five unfinished sketches included in the Pléiade edition of Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*,¹ the phrase *vol décent* appears only once.² Nevertheless, this thesis proposes that the phrase holds the key to an important but virtually unexplored aspect of Balzac's work. The *vol décent* creates a legally legitimate but morally suspect form of theft that pushes at the limits of legality whilst retaining the appearance of a socially acceptable probity: a process that successfully works to sanction deceit and avoid legal or social retribution.

The aim of this thesis is to illuminate a critically neglected phenomenon pivotal to an understanding of Balzac's own vision and philosophy, and to use the oxymoronic *vol décent* itself as a core driver of research. The notion of the *vol décent* lends Balzac's vision an originality that goes beyond circumstantial or historical determinism, presenting the *vol décent* as an inherent feature of human motivation. Whilst it is a notion grounded etymologically and socio-economically it provides an original prospect from which to consider Balzac's position as observer and commentator of a society undergoing multiple transitions.

Heuristic research requires 'a subjective process of reflecting, exploring sifting and elucidating the nature of the phenomenon under investigation',³ a process which allows the phenomenon to inform authorial purpose, positioning and narrative structures, the stored memories of the heuristic providing a critical base for analysis. Using the concept of sanctioned deceit as heuristic, the research seeks to unveil and inform Balzac's complex individual vision, his originality and philosophy. The process casts new light on the intricate and competing relationship between human nature, historical determinism and the narrative representation of society.

¹ Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1981[1976]), XII, pp. 1961-1964.

² Honoré de Balzac, *Les Marana* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979 [1976]), X, p. 1082.

³ B.G. Douglas & C. Moustakas, 'Heuristic Enquiry: The Internal Search to Know', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, No.25, p. 40.

This thesis adopts the *vol décent* for its originality as a research tool and for its capacity to search and transfer ‘meaning and essence in significant human experience’ (Ibid.) As heuristic it is further facilitated by the nature of the oxymoron itself. Balzac’s combination of *vol* and *décent* creates a figure of speech that the reader finds simultaneously perverse and enticing. Although *vol*, as a crime, implies an unethical act based on the purposeful deprivation of another and is deemed detrimental to society, *décent* suggests an ethical motivation that is beneficial and, more significantly, acceptable to society. The combined phrase *vol décent* posits the contradictory notion that theft becomes legal when the act of deprivation is socially sanctioned; a movement away from legal authority to the authority of expediency.

As literary device, the oxymoron works through a conjoining of competing value systems, a construct that often delivers an amusing, pithy opposition which sits comfortably with Balzac’s ludic style. It is a structure which reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable. Despite this apparent disconnect, the embrace of opposing forces stimulates reader reaction in the recognition of the oxymoron as a vehicle capable of exposing an extant behavioural reality. The realisation that the construct reflects a reality is often met with wry amusement, a pleasure stimulated by its ingenuity and its apparent deviation from orthodoxy. This triumph of paradox and invention very much reflects the mood of the times, where a sense of individual triumph against established order merges with a common delight in the dislocation of authority. The celebration, in which the reader often senses Balzac’s participation, is where the ludic and the self-satisfying conjoin to cloud morality. The open-endedness of the oxymoron offers an accommodation for change, unrestrained possibility, compromise and self-interest when exercised under the guise of legality. In a period characterised by multiple states of transition the *vol décent*, with its oxymoronic frame, becomes the perfect vector.

The attraction of the *vol décent*, lies in the notion of a freedom from retribution. The appeal is only restrained by the need to maintain a social approval that is often already prejudiced in its favour. The extent of that prejudice in the finance markets, is revealed at the Keller Bank, where César Birotteau and all other financial supplicants, are confronted by an institutional *vol décent* offered under the guise of probity. However, the process of the *vol décent* is revealed as both a determinant of practice and a descriptor of the cultural identity of the banking sector. Those who wish, need or hope to borrow for subsequent gain or survival endorse

the nature of the transaction. Not to do so would bar them from the money markets. The perpetrator's disinterest in the effect on the victim delivers the most devastating form of the *vol décent*. Balzac repeatedly shows the power of the *vol décent* maximised in the clinical profit/loss determinations of the market.

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* includes the following perceptive observation on the Balzacian legacy:

In his entire work, [...] Balzac feels his milieux, different though they are, as organic and indeed demonic unities, and seeks to convey this feeling to the reader. He [...] places the human beings whose destiny he is seriously relating, in their precisely defined historical and social setting, but also conceives this connection as a necessary one: to him every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historic situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux.⁴

Auerbach's emphasis on milieux as 'organic and indeed demonic unities' and history as 'a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux', provide avenues of research into the *vol décent*. This thesis, using the *vol décent* as heuristic, explores milieux arisen from the demographic movements of the period, particularly between Paris and the Provinces, the world of speculation and risk, domestic life, theatre and government institution. All are subjected to the overarching impact of present and near past history; they test and expose the ubiquity, form, scope and authorial significance of the *vol décent* and each is reflective of a 'precisely defined historical and social setting'.

This research has concentrated on selected primary texts from *La Comédie humaine*, each of which has a defined historical and social identity. In addition, one comedy for theatre, (*Mercadet/Chapter 4*), which focuses on the *vol décent* in the financial world of *La Bourse*. The *vol décent* is a ubiquitous presence; it transcends the social classifications of wealth, social status, gender, occupational and regional boundaries. The display of contrived high level financial, commercial, domestic and political deceit in *La Comédie humaine* suggests that the phenomenon is also systemic, adapting and responding to current socio-economic and political opportunity. The purpose of the *vol décent*, to achieve a benefit without the risk of retribution, is a constant, despite the fact that the nature and value of the benefits vary. The frequency and scope of the *vol décent* queries the morality of a society

⁵ Jean Baptiste Coignard et L'Académie Française, *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française Dedié au Roy, I* (Paris: Coignard et l'Académie Française, 1694), p. 306.

that embraces or leaves unquestioned the practice of deception: a common currency in human interaction. It ranges from the daily, trivial, often casual, sometimes inadvertent, false assertions of positions not truly realised, wealth and connections not yet achieved, to the purposeful, contrived web of complex deceits often performed under a mask of probity. The former is accepted as a natural, instinctive protection against vulnerability, the latter sanctioned by their legality but admired for their capacity to circumvent legal constraint.

The *vol décent* is also multi-faceted, but always retains the same basic elements of deception, deprivation, benefit/loss and sanction. The deception acts on the mind of the victim, as in fraud, and takes multiple forms that confuse appearance with reality to the benefit of the perpetrator. The deprivation is not restricted to financial loss but extends to the loss of personal or social status. Approval of the action is awarded by public, groups or even individuals whose authority offers a tacit but effective sanction. The inherent complexity and ambiguity of the *vol décent* is grounded both etymologically and socio-economically. They inform understanding of the notion of the *vol décent*, its narrative significance and representation, providing a joint underpinning to this research.

The phrase itself has not been found in dictionaries or literary texts from the seventeenth century onward, either as literary reference or as a phrase in common usage. Nevertheless, the etymological origins of *vol* and *décent* do offer important insight into an early nineteenth-century understanding of the phrase. The original text of *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie François, Dedié au Roy*⁵ of 1694 defines *vol* literally as the 'Mouvement en l'air de l'animal qui vole' and *voler as* 'se fouftenir, fe mouvoir en l'air par le moyen des ailes'.⁶ The definition and examples of its application, given in various textual contexts, offer associations with bird/insects and flight, but there is no reference whatsoever to theft. A broader, more qualified, definition is found in the 1680 edition of Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire François, Contenant Généralement Tous les Mots Tant Vieux que Nouveaux* published in Amsterdam, where *vol* is placed within a general, associated lexicon of theft. After

⁵ Jean Baptiste Coignard et L'Académie François, *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française Dedié au Roy, I* (Paris: Coignard et l'Académie François, 1694), p. 306.

⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. 657.

priority is awarded to the standard definition ‘vol des oiseaux’⁷ Richelet advises: (using original script)

Ce mot n’est pas ordinairement usité, mais il est fort significatif pour exprimer ce que nous disons plus foiblement par les mots de ruine, vol, pillage (Après la déprédation de tant de maisons régulières, les peuples se trouvèrent chargés d’impôts).⁸

Further evidence of *vol* in variable but frequent use, within a general lexicon of theft, is to be found in the *Encyclopédies*, legal manuals and philosophic writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries despite the fact that a legal definition of theft was not established until the nineteenth century. The second series of the *Collection des Lois, Ordonnances et Règlements de Police*⁹ covering the period 1667-1789 provides evidence of its use in policing manuals of the period if not in the law itself. An ‘Extrait de l’Ordonnance Août 1669’ shows a breach of public safety punishable ‘à peine d’être punis comme de vol’¹⁰ whilst under the Ordonnance de la Ville 1672:

Pour aussi empêcher le désordre qui se commet à l’arrivée des coches par aucuns des gagne-derniers, crocheteurs et autres [...] commettent souvent des *vols* et font des exactions.¹¹

and under ‘Hôtels garnis 1693’:

Plusieurs particuliers se sont ingérés de tenir auberges, chambres garnies et hôtelleries [...] sans prendre de nous aucune permission ce qui donne lieu à plusieurs abus, même à *vols*, meutes et autres désordres considérables.¹²

While the 1806 dictionary definition of *vol* acknowledges the association with deprivation, with or without intent, and a deception that could be performed under numerous guises and manners, a legal definition of *vol* as theft was still not established until Napoleon’s amended *Code pénal* of 1810. I will argue that this period of irresolution provided fertile ground for commercial, social and political opportunism that came to characterise Restoration France. Despite the fact that theft was finally defined under Article 379 of the 1810 *Code pénal*, associations with flight, the undefined common lexicon of theft and the Roman law concept of fraudulent subtraction were not wholly eclipsed. Subsequent to Art.379, *vol* did

⁷ Pierre Michelet, *Dictionnaire François, Contenant Généralement Tous les Mots Tant Vieux que Nouveaux* (Amsterdam: Chez Jean Elzevir, 1680), p. 94.

⁸ Ibid., p. 270.

⁹ M.Peuchet, *Collections des lois, ordonnances et règlements de police, Seconde Série, Police moderne de 1667 à 1695* (Paris: Chez Lottin de Saint-Germain, 1818)

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 178.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 228.

¹² Ibid., p. 519.

however take precedence over the eighteenth-century *soustraction frauduleuse* to become the universal nomenclature of the crime:

Article 379, Ce chapitre a été décrété le 19 février 1810 et promulgué le premier mars suivant. Quiconque a soustrait frauduleusement une chose qui ne lui appartient pas, est coupable de vol.¹³

The amended code, whilst bringing *vol* into the formal criminal lexicon, had the effect of moving emphasis from the nature of the crime to the legal identification of the thief.

Rosemary A. Peter's recent research into *Theft and the Author in Nineteenth-Century France* does indicate that 'this crime and its attendant definitions, evolutions and perceptions lay at the centre of a nineteenth-century French society, on the cusp of modernization and constantly subject to redefinition'.¹⁴ Her work provides significant evidence that a residual memory of theft, as a concept open to various interpretations remained in nineteenth century French society.

The etymology of *décent* and *décence* follows a clearer evolutionary pathway than that of *vol* and its significance in the oxymoronic construct is no less important. Returning to *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française, Dedié au Roy 1694*¹⁵ we find following early definitions:

Décence: Bienfiance, honnefteté extérieure. Il n'eft pas de la décence de faire telle chofe, cela n'eft pas dans la décence.
Décent: Qui est dans les termes de la décence, felon les règles de la bienfiance et de l'honneftété extérieure.

A useful comparison between the dictionary definitions of 1694 and definitions current in Balzac's own time can be made by reference to the *Abrégé du Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* of 1835:

Décence: Honnêteté extérieure; bienséance qu'on doit observer quant aux lieux, aux temps et aux personnes
Décent: Qui est selon les règles de la bienséance et de l'honnêteté extérieure [...] De ce qui est conformé à la pudeur.¹⁶

The two definitions provide a striking uniformity of expression spanning the century and a half that divides them. However, whilst the terms point to a consistency of meaning, each represents a concept that is in a constant state of re-evaluation. The

¹³ *Code Pénal de 1810* <http://ledroitcriminel.fr/la_legislation_criminelle/anciens_textes/code_penal_de_1810.htm>

¹⁴ Rosemary A. Peters, *Stealing Things: Theft and the Author in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Lexington 2013), p. 8.

¹⁵ Jean Baptiste Coignard et L'Académie française, *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française dedié au Roy*, I (Paris: Coignard et l'Académie Française, 1694), p. 306.

¹⁶ M. P. Lorain, *Abrégé du Dictionnaire de L'Académie française 1835* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1838 [1835]), p. 397.

‘bienséance’ common to both definitions suggests a moral dimension. However, that aspect is not to be judged primarily by the tenets of an established ethical or religious ideology but by the satisfaction, through external appearance, of ‘les règles de la bienséance’. Those social rules are mutable in the world of *La Comédie humaine*, subject to change according to social, political and commercial determinants in a Restoration period when those forces were themselves in the process of being re-defined.

From the etymology of the elements that combine to make the *vol décent*, the *vol* provides the primary element of a deprivation, a taking of something not belonging to the perpetrator. The taking is done by deception, an action that operates on the mind of the victim. From *décent* comes the element of acceptability, of conformity with social ethics. The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*¹⁷ of 1835 characterises ‘décence’ as ‘honnêteté extérieure’ that is commonly a visual display designed to satisfy the current rules of social propriety. This thesis therefore explores the nature of performance in the narratives and Balzac’s specific use of theatre as metaphor. With its reliance on a visible and circumscribed focus, theatre provides an appropriate context for the representation of deceit. Balzac questions the apparently fundamental, underlying opposition between appearance and reality by showing effective visual theatre and theatricality inherent in the successful performance of the ‘honnêteté extérieure’. Theatre is a recurring image in *La Comédie humaine* and evidence of its usage and effect in the selected texts appear throughout the research.

The ‘*honnêteté extérieure*’ is a tri-partite interaction between actor, audience and ‘*la mise en scène*’. It offers a socially acceptable display of moral principle, which Balzac shows often failing in the face of social reality. This thesis examines the moral ambiguity of appearance and its disengagement from principle, in social, commercial, domestic and political contexts. The important space for discussion and critical analysis, that the notion of the *vol décent* opens, partially derives from the variability of *vol* that is discovered in its etymology, the mutability of the ‘*honnêteté extérieure*’, and the stimulation of opposites that results in recognisable behavioural practices.

¹⁷ L’Académie Française, *Le Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française, dédié au Roy* (Paris: Coignard et l’Académie Française, 1694)

In a legal context, the notion of the *vol décent* poses a problem of identity. Despite the fact that it results, by deception, in a deprivation of monetary or social capital belonging to another, the process and its outcome are not illegal. The deception is sanctioned, either by anomalies and inconsistencies in the law itself, by silent acquiescence or an effective grant of approval. The *vol décent* therefore constitutes ‘ni des crimes ni des vols’ (Ma., X, 1082). Nevertheless, morally, it certainly does sit ‘sur le banc d’infamie’ (Ibid.), at home with chicanery, opportunism and cynicism. All are signals of criminality but the *vol décent* remains only reflective of a notion that seeks and manipulates benefit without consequence; hence its popularity, versatility, attraction and cultural impact.

Despite the rarity of the phrase *vol décent*, its moral ambiguity has provoked some critical enquiry. Several scholarly texts from the second half of the twentieth century refer to the notion of the *vol décent* or *vol légal* but none have fully explored its significance. H. J. Hunt in *Balzac’s ‘Comédie humaine’* of 1959 makes specific reference to the *vol décent* but his purpose in that work was recognition, rather than analysis, of recurring themes. Reference is found in a three page section within the chapter titled ‘Paris Scenes of 1837-8 Bureaucracy, Business and Banking’.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in *Les Employées*, *César Birotteau*, and *La Maison Nucingen* Hunt does identify a homogeneous group of novels from government, business, and banking that shared powerful undercurrents of malevolence and malpractice. In *Les Employés* he finds evidence of ‘its wastefulness in man-power, its inefficiency and general dilatoriness [...] the injustice and jobbery prevalent’.¹⁹ Balzac uses the chicanery of the *vol décent*, and its theft of individual freedoms in *Les Employés*, to unveil the unintended consequences, sociological, cultural and environmental, that result, exposing the *vol décent* as a dynamic force for change. Hunt observes the same sense of injustice arising from the confrontation between businessman César Birotteau’s innocence and the world of speculation. This is a new world of commerce in which moral disinterest prevails and where the *vol décent* becomes integral to the world of speculative investment represented in *La Maison Nucingen*. Despite recognising a new form of social malaise, Hunt fails to investigate its

¹⁸ Herbert J. Hunt, *Balzac’s ‘Comédie humaine’* (London: The Athlone Press, 1964 [1959]), p. 183.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

treatment, its multiple variations of practice or its fertility, all of which this research, using the *vol décent* as heuristic, pursues.

Acknowledgement of that fertility is found in an essay on Balzac by S. B. John in *French Literature and its Background*.²⁰ John understands the life of society in *La Comédie humaine* as an animating force in itself and argues that the Balzacian themes of power, corruption and evil are capable of transcending strictly socio-economic explanations. For John ‘usury, speculation, investment, alliance of private fortunes, all tend to assume the status of occult forces shaping the whole life of society’ and they ‘animate a kind of moral melodrama’.²¹ Part of that animation he sees activated through the *vol décent* which he describes as a ‘fertile Balzacian notion’, one capable of creating wealth and position based upon ‘legal spoliation of the poor[...by] acting criminally *within* the law’.²² This research explores the nature of that fertility, deepening understanding of Balzac’s concept of criminality within the law, whilst exposing its ubiquitous presence as social phenomenon. More recently, Christopher Prendergast, (without referencing the phrase), recognises that the law operates in social, financial and political circles as ‘the legal facade behind which the respectable citizen cheats and swindles’.²³ For Prendergast, ‘the lie of Contract, Code and Charter’ seeps out into wider society where ‘it presupposes [...] the ever present possibility of the swindle and the fraud, the possibility of systematic forgery behind the façade of public agreements’.²⁴ Prendergast identifies the power of masquerade, particularly when it acts behind the façade of institutional authority, and its capacity to effect social change. The *vol décent* similarly hides fraud behind the law, swindle behind probity. Pierre Barbéris’s socio-political work *Balzac et le mal du siècle* considers, within the context of alienation, the proposition that ‘la loi n’est pas celle de la *Justice*, mais celle du *fait*’.²⁵ For Barbéris, the law of *fait* is the law that serves ‘l’idée d’arrangement, l’idée de ruse, l’idée de raccourci’²⁶ rather than a law that develops and enhances human experience and possibility.

²⁰ S. B. John, ‘Balzac’, *French Literature and its Background: The Early Nineteenth Century* ed. by John Cruickshank (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²³ Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis*, p. 96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁵ Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 2002 [1970]), I, p. 700.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Scott Carpenter's recent work on the *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France*²⁷ reveals a society that was experiencing a growing social preoccupation with the notion of fraudulence. This confirmation of deception as an established phenomenon of the period adds an additional layer of historical validation to Balzac's recurring interest in the *vol décent*. However, Carpenter's work extends beyond the prevailing national interest in fraud, hoaxes and counterfeits in order to 'nudge the study of frauds toward the textual, examining how a growing occupation with falseness in nineteenth-century France results [...] in a reshaping of certain forms of literary discourse'.²⁸ This thesis seeks to extend that enquiry by considering the impact of the *vol décent* on Balzac's vision and his philosophy.

Rosemary A. Peters' *Stealing Things: Theft and the Author in Nineteenth-Century France* (2013)²⁹ keeps a sustained focus on theft, a strategy that allows her to set the action in several contexts and to view it from different perspectives. In the context of criminology she considers Balzac's 1825 *Code des gens honnêtes* and its particular contribution as a 'tongue-in-cheek' sociological treatise. The humour does not disguise for Peters the deep bourgeois anxiety over property that Balzac exposes in the Code. She finds that concern aggravated by the 'troublingly indefinable identity of the criminal who throws this whole system of ownership into question'.³⁰ The three strands, sociological perspective, bourgeois anxiety concerning ownership, the ambiguity of criminal identity, together with the disproportionate effectiveness of criminal activity in a world of social flux, provide this thesis with a sound historical context for the exploration of the notion of the *vol décent*.

Where the drafting of the Codes permits the law to be exploited in a way that was not necessarily the intention of the legislators, the law and its ambiguities become facilitators of the *vol décent*. Those drafting errors are compounded by the absence of legal authority in certain areas and the inability of the existing law to accommodate changed economic and social circumstances. Michel Lichtlé's work

²⁷ Scott Carpenter, *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009)

²⁸ Ibid. p.4.

²⁹ Rosemary A. Peters, *Stealing Things: Theft and the Author in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 2.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

on the relationship between literature, law and manners in the Balzacian œuvre, *Balzac, le texte et le loi*,³¹ published in 2012, provides an extensive compilation of studies in the field over a period of forty years. Of the numerous texts he covers, *L'Interdiction*, *Le Contrat de mariage* and *Le Colonel Chabert*, each is designated by him as a 'roman judiciaire', where the law is shown to shape the conduct of social and private life. However, Lichtlé sees the novel acting to counter the notion of the law as the lead regulator of society by introducing alternative influences that determine the conduct of social and private life. This thesis, through the lens of the *vol décent*, focusses more on the moral and social impact of laws and a legal system that serves to promote immorality, if not illegality. Specifically it looks at the legal profession and its associates to measure the effect of their own manipulation of the law and legal procedures to bring about the *vol décent*. Cases, such as the manipulation of the legal bankruptcy process and the manipulation of legal minutiae for profit by Molineux in *César Birotteau*, provide examples of the *vol décent* that hides behind social and legal status to effect deception.

The nineteenth century saw the author identified as 'the centre and the source of the meaning of his work'.³² Text, expression, ideas and events were deemed to arise from authorial experience and thereby made common ground with realism. Whilst the twentieth century has seen an erosion of that authorial primacy, particularly in Roland Barthes' notion of 'the death of the author', Sotirios Paraschas in *Reappearing Characters in Nineteenth-Century French Literature*³³ confirms the author/reality connection in Balzac's own direct involvement in strategic disconnect and deception. Paraschas uses as heuristic the 'le retour de personnages' 'to illuminate not only the phenomenon [...] but also the very notions of authorship, the fictional character, and originality'.³⁴ Balzac had involved himself in authorial deceptions early in his career, writing both pseudonymously and collaboratively. The *Contes bruns* of 1835 were published under the collective 'une tête à l'envers', a title designed to mask the contribution of all three authors. It can of course be argued that this was merely a compromise which allowed him to earn

³¹ Michel Lichtlé, *Balzac, le texte et la loi* (Paris: PUPS, 2012)

³² Sotirios Paraschas, *The Realist Author and Sympathetic Imagination* (London: Legenda, 2013), p. 1.

³³ Sotirios Paraschas, *Reappearing Characters in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2018)

³⁴ Sotirios Paraschas, *Reappearing Characters in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2018), p. 3.

money opportunistically and at the same time protect his future as a ‘serious’ writer. However, the argument for the integrity of the distinguished author is severely tested when he uses other writers to sign several pre-written prefaces to works now in *La Comédie humaine*. Using the reappearance of characters as vector, Sotirios Paraschas’s enquiry into ownership and the originality of fictional characters, unveils associations with the *vol décent*.

The eighteenth century was the period that witnessed the writer undergoing a change of status, from craftsman to genius. Within the context of a wider recognition of individualism, the author began to be viewed as an exceptional individual capable of breaking with tradition. The focus of literary criticism shifted ‘from the rules according to which a text is supposed to be constructed, [...] to the author’.³⁵ An opportunity was created for writers to manipulate the market to their own advantage. As Paraschas points out, ‘reappearing characters’ already formed part of a wider, dubious list of literary practices that cast doubt on ownership:

This ‘recycling’ of fictional characters was not a privilege reserved to their creators: the nineteenth century witnesses a proliferation of imitations, stage adaptations, sequels, and cycles of novels which were not written by the authors of the original works’.³⁶

The proliferation is indicative of the wider social embrace of opportunism, a condition promoted by socio-economic change, stimulated by both poverty and opportunity. Literary and visual aesthetics, as commodities, are subjected to the demands of the market in which they are traded. Nevertheless, the creator of the text or visual can still manipulate those markets. Paraschas pursues this market manipulation in his study of ‘Charles Rabou’s Continuation of *Le Député d’Arcis*’.

Paraschas shows the infiltrative capacity of deception dominating Rabou’s work, with the theme of false appropriation of paternity in *Le Comte de Salleneuve*, identity theft, copying and counterfeiting in *Le Député d’Arcis*, all of which indicate ‘a pronounced interest in transgressive acts which are not exactly crimes’.³⁷ This is recognition of the popular appeal of the *vol décent*. It has the ability to circumvent retribution with an imaginative talent whose audacity attracts. Whilst Paraschas shows it arising from legal anomalies he also shows chicanery at home in an era in which transitions in social and commercial values facilitate such behaviours.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

The period Balzac describes offered the rich panorama of a nation in the throes of multiple transformations. The background against which the *vol décent* works as heuristic displays the residual impact of political shifts from the *ancien régime*, still in power in 1789, and the beginning of the Restoration in 1815. Writing of that period, Henri Sée highlights the predicament of a Restoration government which ‘ne pouvait faire table rase des prodigieux événements qui s’étaient accomplis au cours du précédent quart du siècle’.³⁸ A clean sweep of the residual forces still active after those events was not possible. In a period of only twenty-six years France had witnessed several fundamental shifts in power that included the monarchy of the *ancien régime*, the French Revolution, Napoleon and Empire, all of which had brought about socio-economic change and left residual influences.

Balzac recognises and repeatedly draws upon the inter-relationships between historical event, society’s different milieux and their impact on individual and social behaviour. The lens of the *vol décent* repeatedly observes the over-arching influence of history infiltrating the various milieux and reflecting in the behavioural experience of their members. Pierre Laforgue confirms the inevitability of such a connection in his critical analysis of early nineteenth century French literature: ‘lorsque l’on travaille sur le XIX siècle il est impossible de ne pas, tout le temps, interroger la relation entre littérature et histoire’.³⁹

Amongst those historical events was the return of the *émigrés* who had fled the Revolution. It was a homecoming that created a conflict of interests with Napoleon’s returning war veterans at the close of Empire. The divide was reflected socially in a confrontation between the re-claimed privilege of the *émigrés* and the potential curtailment of opportunities only recently granted to the veterans. The conflict reflected politically in the opposition between the ultra-monarchists and the liberals. Napoleon’s centralisation policy had also served to consolidate and exaggerate social rift, this time between Paris and the provinces. Andrew Watts, in *Preserving the Provinces*, identifies the cultural and economic disconnect:

During the Restoration and July Monarchy, Paris remained a cultural centre without equal. [...] Industrialisation had reached the Seine [...] with the rest of the city basking in an atmosphere of progress and intellectual excitement. [...] Parisians were also faced with a very different image of the provinces. Between 1831 and 1846, provincial immigrants streamed into the city in numbers as high as twenty-five thousand a year,

³⁸ Henri Sée, *Histoire économique de la France vol 2* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1942), p. 107.

³⁹ Pierre Laforgue, *Balzac dans le texte* (Saint-Cyr sur Loire: Christian Pirot, 2006), p. 10.

seeking, and often failing to find, gainful employment. [...] These new arrivals had been viewed with suspicion and, more often, hostility'.⁴⁰

The depth of the antipathy between Paris and the provinces, reflected by Balzac in *La Muse du département* and constantly highlighted elsewhere, was not restricted to the demographic movements he so vividly describes in *La Maison Nucingen*. The assertion, often made by Balzac, of a Parisian cultural superiority which contrasted vividly with provincial unsophistication, served to deepen the divide, building resentment and discord. In *Un Début dans la vie* Balzac shows a hardening of that discord into antagonisms which become lasting regional characteristics. However, Paris was not the only urban example. Marseilles, with its links to Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean and Bordeaux, were cities with independent trade links and defined cultural identities that challenged the hegemony of Paris.

An increasing age gap, between young and old delivered a national demographic dilemma. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed an increase in the birth rate from '30 million in 1815 to 32.5 million in 1830 and 35.5 million in 1848'.⁴¹ The impact was that older people increasingly became a minority yet they held all the highest positions, particularly in administration and the professions. Balzac captured this phenomenon in the Ministry of Finance of *Les Employés*. The disproportionate concentration of power in the hands of the elderly that Balzac exposes in *Les Employés*, served to thwart ambition and diffuse purpose, a combination that can prove fatal for institutional and commercial efficiency. The effect was compounded by voting, property and parliamentary restriction by age and wealth; restrictions which resulted in a cultural mood dominated by a disaffected, disenfranchised youth:

La Révolution, L'Empire, et même la Restauration avaient brusquement amené dans les administrations et aux postes de commande des couches d'hommes relativement jeunes: l'avance qu'ils avaient prise devait se traduire en un retard pour ceux qui les suivaient car une fois dans la place on s'y accroche.⁴²

It was the Revolution itself that had opened opportunity 'même aux fils d'ouvriers et de paysans l'accès aux emplois, et les nobles eux-mêmes briguaient ardemment des places qu'ils eussent rougi d'occuper sous l'Ancien régime'.⁴³ However, the opening of opportunity did not deliver a potential workforce equipped to maximise

⁴⁰ Andrew Watts, *Preserving the Provinces* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 200.

⁴¹ F.W.J. Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1789-1848* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), p. 127.

⁴² G. de Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration* (Paris: Flammarion, 1955), p. 239.

⁴³ Ibid.

economic opportunity at the Restoration. Education ignored economics and commerce in favour of law, administration and the liberal professions, leaving banking, industry and business as low status occupations in the cultural hierarchy. Financial reality provided opportunities to move between classes and the careers of du Tillet, Nucingen, and Grandet provide examples of a new social hierarchy predicated upon money. Balzac's narrative period sees the bourgeoisie take centre stage. Adeline Daumard, in *Les bourgeois et la bourgeoisie en France*, makes the scope of that change clear when she writes: 'Sauf de brefs intermèdes, et encore de façon très limitée, ce sont des bourgeois qui, en France, depuis 1815, ont contrôlé et dirigé les principaux secteurs de l'activité nationale'.⁴⁴ Balzac's representation of the bourgeoisie in *La Comédie humaine* shows them driving a relentless social mobility. The rise can extend from 'la paysannerie' to the nobility, as evidenced in the life of Ferdinand du Tillet in *César Birotteau*, the fall by Baron Hulot, from Minister to destitute, in *La Cousine Bette*. Balzacian society acknowledges and reflects the forces of economic change in this movement between the classes, where money (and the appearance of money) rather than inherited social status, increasingly becomes the dominant social currency and determinant of social movement. Whilst Balzac exposes the bourgeoisie for its ignorance, naivety and lack of social sophistication, in an easy accommodation of paradox he also recognises and accepts its talents. It is as part of a meritocracy that the bourgeoisie of *La Comédie humaine* comes to dominate the professions, the worlds of politics, finance, business, industry, science, the arts, and the civil service.

The growth of capitalism itself, the most significant influence on the socio-economic character of the 1800 -1840's era, was seeded in changes made during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire. However, the Restoration business world retained much of the economic infra-structure that had served a pre-Revolution *ancien régime*. It was therefore ill equipped to exploit and maximise the new industrial and commercial opportunities that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution that were to drive modern industry world wide in the nineteenth century were scarcely felt in France at the time of the Restoration. When the transition did begin

⁴⁴ Adeline Daumard, *Les bourgeois et la bourgeoisie en France* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1987), p. 8.

in earnest the economy was still dominated by agriculture, which remained free of any technological influence. The spread of industrialization was further hampered by inadequate communication systems and, as de Bertier de Sauvigny argues, an inadequate transport system is a social restriction, as well as economic disadvantage:

Une civilisation ne se définit pas seulement par ses moyens de production, mais plus encore peut-être elle est fonction d'un rythme des échanges. Aux temps qui nous occupent, tout circule avec une lenteur et des difficultés dont nous n'avons plus idée: personnes, biens, et même les produits de l'esprit, dans la mesure où ils ont besoin d'un support matériel.⁴⁵

Napoleon had made thousands of kilometres of first-class roads, primarily for military purposes and unfit for the movement of bulky commodities, which remained a costly undertaking. The development of canals only began in the period of the Restoration after 1820 and whilst the rivers facilitated supplies to cities they again had limited use for large-scale industry. The promise of a national railway network planned in 1842, that resulted in a boom in railway promotion, did not actually deliver the first trunk lines until 1846 when 'the Chemin de Fer du Nord was completed [...] but the expected rapid conclusion of the entire primary rail system did not follow'.⁴⁶ A resurgence of central government intervention imposed technical conditions and concessions, restrictions that worked to render investment unsafe.

The Napoleonic period had also brought a new merchant capitalist to the fore, many from Jewish and Protestant backgrounds, particularly from Germany and Switzerland, who expanded and modernized 'France's commercial infrastructure, its system of banking and credit, and its transportation system'.⁴⁷ There are many examples of this particular category amongst both the fictional and real characters of *La Comédie humaine*. From the texts selected for this thesis, the baron de Nucingen (*La Maison Nucingen*) and François Keller (*Eugénie Grandet* and *César Birotteau*) provide fictional examples from this category. The Rothschilds (*Eugénie Grandet*) and Jacques Necker (*La Maison Nucingen*) provide non-fictional examples.

⁴⁵ De Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*. p, 200.

⁴⁶ Michael Stephen Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

The launch of the Banque de France in 1800 was an aid to commerce but more significantly a source of finance for government. The bank, initially limited to the issue of banknotes in Paris became the national issuing authority in 1848, absorbing the issuing rights of the provincial banks and extending the provocation between Paris and the Provinces into the financial sector. However, the Banque de France's role of short-term discounting was also undertaken by other joint-stock banks that provided commercial credit through the discounting of commercial paper. Balzac's awareness of these forces of change, many displayed in *La Maison Nucingen* and *César Birotteau*, is perceptive and profound. He recognises credit as the new pathway to wealth, taking its domination of speculative investment to the extreme in the successful comedy *Mercadet*. Control over the issue of banknotes was to some extent reduced as alternative forms of capital were to play a leading role in economic transactions. Allan H. Pascoe, speaking of Balzac and the Restoration confirms:

No thoughtful person could consider his tumultuous, industrial/commercial age without grappling with the effects of the media of exchange. [...] Whether human or material, capital was the impulsion for the most important movements of Balzac's society. Land [...] became only one component of capital, a factor of exchange or value, like gold or precious stones, or paintings, or money, or indeed, a person'.⁴⁸

The growth in forms of capital, as well as creating trading options and bringing new players into merchant capitalism, created a market that exploited the differing values between capital options. The state of rapid flux that characterised the new business world of the period did not change either the organisation or conduct of mercantile capitalism in any fundamental way. The underlying business frameworks and infrastructure remained largely unchanged from those of the previous century. The modernisation process was slow but still fundamental to future growth of capitalism. Nevertheless, these unmodified structures, covering transport, banking, credit and the commercial infrastructure itself, did not hinder a doubling of France's national product and foreign trade between 1815 and 1850, a period when the number of French merchants rose by 50%. The increase in Gross National Product was indicative of the strength of the commercial surge for growth and became emblematic of the period.

Commercial and commodity growth accompanied a growth in non-tangible products, a sector that became a focus of attention for Balzac. Arguably, Balzac uses

⁴⁸ Allan H. Pascoe, 'Balzac, Money and the Pursuit of Power', *The Cambridge Companion to Balzac* ed. by Owen Heathcote and Andrew Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 67.

the *vol décent* to expose both the workings and moral consequences of these markets more than in any other milieu. Non-tangibles were a market in speculative values traded through shares, bills of exchange, promissory notes and other financial instruments. It involved trading in the speculative, future value of shares, goods or services as opposed to the immediate exchange of material goods. This was a new kind of trade operating without direct personal involvement or control. The growth of share trading on the Bourse, the market in financial instruments, both provided a base for speculation that, in a period without effective regulation, encouraged a culture of chicanery; one that Balzac represents in *Mercadet*, *César Birotteau* and *La Maison Nucingen*. This world of opportunism and questionable morality offers artifice, deception and fraud an immediate association with the *vol décent* itself.

The most significant inequality in society, and arguably the greatest cause of cultural and social friction, remained the gulf between rich and poor. The abyss had not been bridged by the Revolution and was to be further widened by the Industrial Revolution. Thomas Piketty in *Le Capital au XXI^e siècle* joins a line of Balzac adherents and enthusiasts that stretches from de Tocqueville to the present day. Using data from as far back as the eighteenth century Piketty identifies ‘the tendency of returns on capital to exceed the rate of economic growth [and] to generate extreme inequalities’.⁴⁹ In his introduction, Piketty argues that both Balzac and Jane Austen ‘depicted the effects of inequality with a verisimilitude and evocative power that no statistical or theoretical analysis can match’. This thesis confirms the evocative power of Balzac’s work and his awareness that bankers and rich families acquire disproportionate monetary gains which result in social inequality. However, Balzac is not an economist, or monetary theorist and certainly not a critic of wealth creation, but a novelist and observer of human action and manners.

The periods that absorbed Balzac, both contemporary and near past, with their multiple transitions and residual historic influences coincided with the rise of popular interest in history. Balzac references that interest in the *Avant-propos* to *La Comédie humaine*, when he writes that ‘la société française allait être l’historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire’ (*Avant-propos*, I, 11). The use of the modest designation of ‘secrétaire’ for his own role refers to an asserted devotion to truth and objectivity,

⁴⁹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, (London: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 1.

rather than placing any limitations on his role of author and historian. Indeed, in the preface to the *Le Cabinet des antiques* he attaches the same standards to the higher status ‘historien fidèle et complet’ (CA, IV, 961). His actual aim is to ‘écrire l’histoire oubliée par tant d’historiens, celle des mœurs. [...] Je réaliserais, sur la France au dix-neuvième, ce livre’ (Avant-propos, I, 11). There is a convergence here with the new history of Villemain and Daunou, and later that of Guizot, Cousin and Thiers. Piketty identifies the nature of this new history:

Cette nouvelle histoire entend ne plus se cantonner à la chronique officielle des règnes; elle veut comprendre le passé dans toute son épaisseur et le restituer dans toute sa différence [...] Groupes sociaux, entités collectives, personnalités nationales, géographie, terroir, paysages, habitats, conditions matérielles de vie, parlers, mentalités, représentations, arts. Littérature, croyances...tout le domaine des activités humaines. [...] L’histoire des mœurs figure au premier chef dans les centres d’intérêts de cette nouvelle pratique de l’histoire.⁵⁰

The fact that Balzac was acutely aware of the variety of historical forces of change felt in his lifetime does not mean that he was able to represent them accurately or within an appropriate historical context. His awareness of historical determinism as an instrument of social change did not prevent him from using history as a creative opportunity. He was writing at a time when history was barely distinguishable from imaginative literature. His reference to past time often stimulates feelings of nostalgia in his contemporary reader, promoting unsubstantiated but persuasive belief in a stable and untroubled past. In this imagined world of *ancien régime* order Balzac fixes the stable and static poles of an idealised monarchy and monarchical regime.

Balzac had no direct experience of the *ancien régime* and therefore relied on the few questionable, historical records, but more significantly on an interpretive mood shaped by his own times. The historical records of the period were unreliable, often being tales rather than documentary evidence; delivering a fabled history that provided copy for newspapers and literary magazines. As the French historian, Michel Winock advises of early nineteenth-century France: ‘history was then fashionable, and not clearly distinguished from literary works’.⁵¹ The imaginative capacity of novelists easily absorbed historical myth and fable.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵¹ Michel Winock, *Flaubert* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2016), pp. 19-20.

The ambiguity of ‘source materials’ reflected a deeper confusion between history and literature, between fact and fiction. John Lukacs, in *The Future of History* explains:

A juxtaposition of the historian and novelist as categorical opposites is not absolute. Neither is the categorical juxtaposition of “fact” and “fiction.” Fiction means construction, whence there is some “fiction” in the statement (and even in the perception) of every “fact.”⁵²

History, as record of fact recalled, must inevitably be literary, rather than scientific, as it is expressed through words and therefore ‘unavoidably anthropocentric’.⁵³ It uses the senses, thinking and the imagination to create a fictional representation of reality. Alternatively, literary history and its juxtaposition of fact and fiction, still makes a contribution to history in the representation of contemporary social scenes which provide the historian with a fresh perspective through the prism of literary sensibility and form.

However, Lukacs does not propose a categorical unity between the historian and the novelist, but certainly does accurately recognise a historicity of fiction, whereby a consciousness of history and historical reference, with its potential as colourful and dramatic background, became part of nineteenth-century novelistic form. For Balzac, historicity of literature arises from a coincidental fusion of interests: ‘[il] s’invente romancier au moment où déferle sur la France de la Restauration une vague d’intérêt passionné pour l’histoire’.⁵⁴ The infiltration of the literary text by historicity presents the literary critic with specific problems around the authorial capture of past event, its form, nature and relationship to present time.

Presentism in both literary and historical analysis, gives an alternative distorted understanding of the past through the intrusion of current ideas, moralities or perspectives into the depiction and interpretation of history. It delivers a prejudice gained from the novelist’s relationship with present time assumptions. Nicole Mozet warns of a particular influence regarding Balzac’s relationship with his own times: ‘Balzac, comme beaucoup d’intellectuels de son temps, ne résiste pas toujours à la facilité d’interpréter le présent en termes de décadence’.⁵⁵ A counterweight to social decadence, perceived in the present or immediate past, was often sought in a bygone

⁵² John Lukacs, *The Future of History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 111.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Nicole Mozet and Paule Petitier, *Balzac dans l’histoire* (Paris: Sedes, 2001), p. 7.

⁵⁵ Nicole Mozet, *Balzac au Pluriel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), p. 18.

age cleansed of its imperfections by nostalgia. Although that process delivers a convenient contrast with current ills, nostalgia remains unreliable as a tool for accurate recall. Presentism also extends to a past recalled for its validation of current beliefs. It asserts, usually in a selective or prejudicial manner, a historical opinion offering a persuasive authority for the determination of present time dilemmas. The historical picture of the *ancien régime* is delivered by the Balzacian narrator in such an unequivocal and prescriptive narrative voice. The tone establishes the authority, if not necessarily the reality, of a reliable historical era.

The new historicism seeks to see literature in an historic context, most particularly as a reaction to the power structures in operation at the time and to see literature as a contributor to cultural understanding. Balzac's work seems to fit this definition, particularly the recognition of history as a causal phenomenon which impacts upon succeeding generations, but he also, in a typical acknowledgement of contradictory forces, observes a non-rational evolutionary process in operation. The search for a connection with history that indicates a causal process is clear in the *Avant-propos*.

Ne devais-je pas étudier les raisons ou la raison de ces effets sociaux, surprendre le sens caché. [...] Enfin, après avoir cherché, je ne dis pas trouvé, cette raison, ce moteur sociale, ne fallait-il pas méditer sur les principes naturels et voir en quoi les Sociétés s'écartent ou se rapprochent de la règle éternelle. [...] La société devait porter avec elle la raison de son mouvement. (*Avant-propos*, I, 11/12)

The phrase 'je ne dis pas trouvé' is central to the Balzacian spirit, seeing life as a constant search for truths not yet established or indeed 'truths' accepted but later discarded, one of which is the apparent ease with which historic events can be analysed through causal reasoning. Its limitations are not confined to the fact that the individual can act in atypical fashion but also that the fictional character, whose circumstance and behaviour can be both non causal and unpredictable is an imaginative presence.

Marx asserts the theory that economic structure is the determining factor of history and society, but for this thesis, the widening postmodernist view of such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Bourdieu offer fresh perspectives on the Balzac text. For example, the understanding that power and leadership draw on a variety of causes, education, church, religion, media and architecture, as readily as economic and political conflict. These are forces that this thesis identifies in the *La Comédie humaine*, with particular reference to the relationship between architecture,

buildings and the wider environmental factors that work to control and shape both society and the individual. Bourdieu's recognition of the multiple forms of social capital offer a similar exposure of the complexity and variety of powers that form part of the Balzac text. The intellectual movement from religion to rationalism and a scientific approach to understanding, a transition still in progress, underpins Balzac's philosophy and colours his observations on nineteenth-century Restoration France. Just as historical research was juxtaposed with literary imagination, the sciences, including sociology, remained hybrid disciplines that were still to find their own procedures and practices. However, the natural history tradition 'began to shift from religiously driven studies of the natural world to increasingly scientific approaches [and] further bifurcated into professionalized and amateur scientific study'.⁵⁶ Similarly, the *Journal of the History of Biology* highlights the problems of definition that still remained unresolved in the field of biology. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defined natural history as 'that science which not only gives complete descriptions of natural productions in general but also teaches the method of arranging them.' According to Gottfried Treviranus biology would study 'the [...] different forms and phenomena of life. Lamarck [...] thought of biology as a new 'theory of living organisms'.⁵⁷

The *vol décent* suggests an intrinsically theatrical perspective, resolutely entertaining in vision and tone, easily adopting exaggerated theatrical forms. The exotic characters, such as de Marsay, Gobseck, Frenhofer and Mme d'Espard form part of equally melodramatic narratives. *La Vendetta* follows the dramatic deaths, first of Ginevra and then Luigi, innocent victims of family feuds. At the sight of Luigi's dead body, a callous but theatrical 'Il nous épargne un coup de feu' (Ven, I, 1102) is delivered. The privileged, who knock 'd'une façon particulière' at the Keller Bank, do so with a gesture which relies on a minimal but memorable theatricality, a tiny, secret gesture which signals the separation of the financially 'saved' from the financially 'damned'. Bianchi's reputation relies on dramatic event to stun his audience: '[il] avait parié manger le cœur d'une sentinelle espagnole, et le mangea' (Ma, X, 1038). Grandet's house is a staging that directly reflects his life and

⁵⁶ Michael P Branch et al., 'The Natural History Tradition', *Oxford Bibliographies* (2012) <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199830060-0077.xml>> [accessed 25 December 2017]

personality, where ‘la salle est à la fois l’antichambre, le salon, le cabinet, le boudoir, la salle à manger; elle est le théâtre de la vie’ (EG, III, 1040). The concentration of effects that goes into the physicality of Grandet’s dwelling is matched by the exaggeration that accompanies the stereotyping of the Italians in *Les Marana* where ‘le débris de la légion italienne [...] dont l’existence peut devenir, [...] épouvantable à la fin d’une orgie, sous l’influence de quelque méchante réflexion échappée à leurs compagnons d’ivresse’ (Ma, X, 1037-8). Balzac reveals that reality can be found beneath, or behind, or in Grandet’s case in plain sight of his house.

Balzac shows theatre and theatricality proliferating and thriving in the unsettled society of the Restoration. Political instability, socio-economic change, demographic movement, the random intermingling of status groups driven by capitalist opportunity and necessity, provide the perfect stage and cast for a purposeful display of illusory techniques. He presents the performance against the background of arrivisme characteristic of the period. The arrivistes play the role of ambition realised, without having necessarily achieved it: ‘aimables garçons dont l’existence est problématique, à qui l’on ne connaît ni rentes ni domaines, et qui vivent bien’ (MN, VI, 330). Balzac presents a state of fluidity and turmoil urgently in need of permanence and order. However, with the established pillars of church and state, which historically characterised a settled social structure, also in transition, the arriviste’s assumption of a new identity is accepted in a willing and compliant suspension of disbelief.

The theatricality inherent in the *vol décent* is seen in *Les Marana*: ‘il pratiqua le *vol décent* auquel se sont adonnés tant d’hommes habiliment masqués ou cachés dans les coulisses du théâtre politique’ (Ma, X, 1082). Politics are portrayed as a theatrical charade in which performance becomes an integral part of government. Similarly, Mme Évangélista and Mme d’Espard are accepted as the people whose roles they portray. In a combination of dress, speech, display, performance, indeed the whole *mise-en scène*, they meet the demands of a society which becomes a consumer of illusion. The image of theatre as a legitimate forum for illusion sits easily with the *vol décent*. Its oxymoronic accommodation of light and shade, its blurring of legality and morality are mirrored in commerce where the illusion of probity is successfully used to mask the *vol décent*.

In the comedic theatre performance of *Mercadet* the theatrical arts are used to facilitate deception in the pursuit of profit. They constitute a staging whereby

manner, property, socialising, ornament and status all masquerade as wealth, an illusion that works to disguise poverty and desperation. Such a masquerade is integral to the workings of the stock exchange, where falsity, disguise and deception come to typify the market. In the minor theatrical deceptions that clutter social exchange, the *vol décent* demonstrates how morality becomes infinitely adaptable to economic and social expectations. It can be viewed as the systemic outcome of a world in flux, susceptible to, and comfortable with a performed reality. The *vol décent* functions as a common daily currency in everyday human exchange, suggesting that it is a basic instinct inherited from nature, where ‘l’Animalité se transborde dans l’Humanité’ (Avant-propos, I, 9).

Balzac shows the arriviste and opportunist as products of both historical and socio-economic conditioning and suggests circumstance as a determinant of human action. However, in a typical Balzacian paradox, he also presents characters who display behaviours entirely divorced from the influences of event. Balzac is drawn to the notion of the supreme individual where ‘les événements ne sont jamais absolus, leurs résultats dependent entièrement des individus’ (CB, VI, 54). These individuals are the exploiters of circumstance, never its victims. They look for profitable opportunity in the adversity of others, and are never weighed down by misfortune. The same Balzac who expresses ‘confidence in the possibility of discovering history’s reason [...] is paradoxically fascinated by phenomena which cannot be explained in a common causal fashion’.⁵⁸ Despite his role as the ‘secrétaire’ of French society, Balzac the novelist does not restrict himself to the mere organisation of his observational data. His text releases irreducibly plural positions. In part, that textual plurality results from the multi-faceted perspectives that inform his observations. However, whilst the totality of socio-economic, genetic and historic influences are shown to determine character, ultimate behavioural responsibility for Balzac still rests with the individual.

It is in the liberation from political, moral and social coercion that Balzac cedes operative pre-eminence to the exceptional individual. This freedom of action is the prerogative of a select group of individuals that includes, inter alia, de Marsay, Nucingen, Mme d’Espard, du Tillet, Maxime de Trailles, all of whom exercise a

⁵⁸ David F. Bell, *Circumstances: Chance in the Literary Text* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 5.

functional supremacy over the merely aspiring bourgeois. The supremacy is supported by a philosophical underpinning but grounded in a behavioural reality.

Barb ris explains:

Les lois du monde et de la politique ne sont pas consid r es comme transcendantes, mais immanentes; l'individu sup rieur – entendez ici l'aristocrate – n'y'est pas soumis, il les comprend et se les soumet [...] il se joue de lois que le vulgaire consid re comme sacr es, in vitables, mais dans lesquelles il ne voit, que r glements pour esprit bas.⁵⁹

This is recognition of the hard realities that govern the achievement of power and wealth. These immanent laws are those contained within the commission of the action. The transcendent laws are the sublime, superior universal laws believed to operate above those of a determined reality, implying an exterior and superior presence beyond the grasp of human experience. Compliance with the immanent and isolation from the transcendent, deliver a disinterest in the human as sentient being, a state of mind characteristic of the master practitioners in *La Com die humaine*.

In *La Maison Nucingen*, Balzac contrasts Nucingen's financial imperatives with those of his investors. Whilst both are in financial need, Nucingen, in total contrast to the investors, does not respond to circumstantial pressures. To Nucingen, unfavourable circumstance is something to exploit, not the abyss into which the weak fall. He is immune from the impact of the rules, penalties and apprehensions which morality imposes on its members. In contrast, the investors, aware of their own vulnerabilities and fearful of the retribution that accompanies failure, are persuaded by Nucingen's image of resolution, solidarity and wealth. Like Nucingen, du Tillet exploits the lesser spirits, such as Roquin and C sar Birotteau, whose emotional dependencies render them ineffectual. Roquin's costly reliance on female admiration, C sar's dependency on order, probity and social status, are all exploited by du Tillet. He understands that victims are unable to detach themselves from the outcome of circumstance. It is the same focus on process and isolation from sentiment that allows de Marsay to offer de Manerville freedom from the consequences of his marriage contract. However, already overwhelmed by its consequences de Manerville is helpless. This detachment, from what is assumed to be a natural, inevitable human response to event, indeed a conformity with natural

⁵⁹ Pierre Barb ris, *Le Monde de Balzac* (Paris: Arthaud, 1973), p. 192.

order, points to a Balzacian vision which separates society into those conditioned to respond to consequences and those impervious to them.

Balzac recognises that the impact of change is determined by a combination of place, time, circumstance and the innate disposition of the individual which ultimately determines outcome. In *L'Interdiction*, Mme d'Espard finds, in the salon, the perfect place in which to perform her role. Her ambitions for social prestige and political association are realised in the salon where her fashion and form create their own hard earned reality. In *La Comédie humaine* the *vol décent* reveals celebrity and appearance to be capable of creating a negotiable currency. This form of property, unlike real property, exists in a behavioural mode. Although ultimately transitory and ephemeral, the property has real value because deception can transform a chimera into a negotiable instrument. Appearance becomes a tradable reality and deception the *modus operandi* whereby value is converted into currency.

Both Mme d'Espard in *L'Interdiction* and Mme Évangélista in *Le Contrat de mariage* are revealed to have obsessive self-interest. This equips them with an immunity from the influences of time and place. Mme Évangélista's success at asserting her possession of fabulous wealth, despite a declining fortune, is not determined by either historical time or place but by self-interest. The city of Bordeaux exercises social control over the local residents but not on Mme Évangélista. It is the provincialism of the residents which fails to recognise the reality beneath her masquerade. Using the character of Mme Évangélista and the deception of her *vol décent*, Balzac is able to juxtapose two of his central interests. The exceptional, ultimately omnipotent, potential of the individual, is contrasted with his observations of the forces of historical change. Gretchen R. Besser has recognised that even Balzacian genius, without 'the vigorous self-propulsion to reach the top', fails. It is the capacity for 'financial acumen, unscrupulous tactics, and undeviating purpose'⁶⁰ that distinguishes both Nucingen, and du Tillet.

Balzac does not neglect the impact of time and place on those unable to isolate themselves from external influence. In *Les Marana* Diard is malleable in the face of changed environment and moment. There is some modification of behaviour but his innate irresolution means he will fail to take advantage when opportunity arises. He has a qualified success in the Napoleonic army, but is unable to convert this into

⁶⁰ Gretchen R. Besser, *Balzac's Concept of Genius* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1969), p. 240.

promotion and in Tarragone he is equally irresolute: even his honourable marriage to Juana proves a dilemma. In Paris he is unable to adjust to changed times and place, failing to negotiate the transition from Napoleonic Empire to the new commercial, social and political opportunism that was to characterise the Restoration. The counterpart of irresolution is often a grasp at chance, the natural resort of the gambler. Diard's loss at the tables, his murder of Montefiore, his failure to capitalise on his artistic sensitivity and even the circumstances of his own demise, confirm a disposition that instinctively responds to emotional satisfaction rather than objective assessment of opportunity.

The same incapacity to confront reality is seen in César Birotteau's business failure. His personal susceptibility to deception results from a complex mix of familial, socio-economic, political and historic influences. César's success in the retail sector entices him into the new world of speculation and risk. His innocence is matched by the certainty and pomposity that accompanies unquestioning faith in probity and position. Balzac dramatically contrasts his naive idealism with du Tillet's devotion to hard realities. The portraits of du Tillet and César are a perfect example of the relationship of perpetrator to victim. Barbéris, in a useful separation of the speculator and the entrepreneur, recognises that 'tout l'avenir du capitalisme français spéculateur et boursier plutôt qu'entrepreneur est là. Mais du Tillet est un monstre'.⁶¹ Du Tillet's education was 'une éducation inachevée', that confronted the hard realities and bred scepticism:

Par la théorie de l'intérêt personnel, il méprisait trop les hommes en les croyant tous corruptibles, il était trop peu délicat sur le choix des moyens en les trouvant tous bons, il regardait trop fixement le succès et l'argent comme l'absolution du mécanisme moral pour ne pas réussir tôt ou tard (CB, VI, 73).

Du Tillet's success is predicated upon the immanent factors that determine the outcome of financial process. It leads to an inevitable consequence, hence his disinterest in morality or sentiment. The capacity to exhibit such focus within the world of *La Comédie humaine* remains a core element of the exceptional individual, even when, as in the case of Frenhofer and Claës, its application is directed toward the unachievable.

Les Employés sees the *vol décent* undermining and diffusing government policy and administration. The two disparate groups of employees and the employer representatives tacitly agree the status quo, where both the advantages and

⁶¹ Pierre Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac* (Paris: Arthaud, 1973), p. 283.

disadvantages of each group are maintained under a joint exchange of deception. It results in an outcome whereby ‘L’État vole autant ses employés que ses employés volent le temps dû à l’État’ (E, VII, 1103). The theft here is the resultant loss of best public practice and service; the sanction arises from the compromise between group and state. The equilibrium between the two employee groups consolidates sectional interests and thwarts the operational purpose of the Ministry. At the heart of this *vol décent* construct lies the absence of any possible resolution of opposing positions and therefore the inability to pursue the Balzacian concept of ideal purpose, as proposed in *Aventures administratives d’une idée heureuse*. Balzac is inspired by a vision of the superior individual who comes to embody an ideal so exceptional that it is capable of transcending time. The *vol décent* uncovers the philosophical proposition of superior beings whose ideas must dictate social development. Where the low passions of the employees deny and thwart the inspired vision, collective inadequacy results. Balzac invites the reader to consider the bureaucratic mind-set as a force that manipulates and ultimately controls state institutions. The exercise of employee aspirations works against the purposes of the institution and the aims of the institution work against the interests of the employee; a deep, irresolvable dilemma that is reflected in society:

Les pions de l’échiquier bureaucratique [...] leur existence est un problème pour ceux-là mêmes qui les emploient, et une accusation contre l’État qui, certes, engendre ces misères en les acceptant’ (E, VII, 989).

The *vol décent* lies in the way the state aggravates misery among its employees, and engenders ‘ces misères en les acceptant’. There is inevitability in this accommodation which proposes the presence of an immutable opposition lying beneath the compromise. The oxymoronic, workable framing of this irresolution within the *vol décent*, allows the employees to determine work practices that satisfy employee self-interest at the expense of Ministry purpose. Where compromise fails to satisfy good purpose, Balzac shows diffusion to result.

In the interplay between the Finance Ministry architecture and building and its employees, Balzac reveals a cross fertilisation of manners and environment. This is reflected in the ambience of the Ministry, where a public persona, clandestine, furtive and ambiguous is captured in ‘des corridors obscures, des dégagements peu éclairés, des portes percées, comme les loges de théâtre’ (E, VII, 954). The bureaucratic, hierarchical ladder is established, defined and imposed, ‘une pièce où se tient le garçon de bureau; il en est une seconde où sont les employés inférieurs;

le cabinet d'un sous-chef [...] enfin plus loin ou plus haut, celui du chef du bureau' (Ibid.). Balzac's recognition of the forces that change social structures and the lives of those within them, reveal conflicting interests. A devotee of order and institutional permanence, he observes a degeneration in circumstances where regulation 'n'est soumis à aucune loi, à aucun stage'. conversely, he observes opportunities 'barricadés par des règlements ou défendus par des concours' (E, VII, 947).

A motivational shift amongst the staff emerges as a result of the *vol décent*. They move from the promise of financial security toward the taking of a broader perspective on work satisfaction. Balzac takes a narrative path that finds partial empathy with the *Doctrine of Saint-Simon*, a socio-economic philosophy that found popularity in nineteenth-century France. Whilst Balzac does promote 'the conservative demand for order, hierarchical organisation and aristocracy',⁶² it is less certain that he advocates, rather than recognises, the 'socialist demand for equality of opportunity, and social and economic planning in the interest of communal welfare' (Ibid.). Balzac shows the totality of socio-economic, genetic and historic influences that determine character, but for him the ultimate behavioural responsibility still rests with the individual. However, he shows acute awareness of an embodied cognition in which understanding is 'not merely a conceptual/propositional activity of thought but rather constitutes our most basic way of being in, and engaging with, our surroundings in a deep visceral manner'.(Ibid.) He pursues the connection in the exposure of ministerial power through its architecture and buildings and similarly, a year later in *César Birotteau*, he draws the same connection with environmental influence when César is subjected to the awesome Palais de Justice.

Both du Bruel and Phellion retain a secure interest in the Ministry whilst turning toward personal outside interests. Du Bruel pursues a career as writer of theatre reviews at the same time continuing to write articles for ministers, generating a joint income in a cross fertilisation of financial and artistic expediency. Anxious to attain *petit bourgeois* respectability, Phellion still holds on to his son's bursary from the Ministry, whilst he teaches at a girls' school in the evening. He adds an intellectual dimension to his life with publication of *Ces petits traités substantiels*,

⁶² George G. Iggers, *The Doctrine of Saint-Simon*, (New York: Schocken, 1972), p. 9.

seeking to replace the hegemony of money with shared standards of respectability and intellectual endeavour. He is prudent in his financial relationships and finds propinquity to governmental power a more reliable positioning than the risk of commercial venture. He plots a parallel pathway to social status and social capital that values education and bourgeois proprieties alongside wealth and position in the social hierarchy. This new form of social capital creates a social environment in which state control and *ancien régime* values give way to a new expression of value. The absence of opportunity within the Ministry results in the development of a new social grouping whose interests are partially self-determined.

In *Les Employés* Balzac uses caricature to highlight a further destabilising of social values. The caricature is analogous to the *vol décent*, with the distortion and exaggeration generating the deception. Ironically, Balzac's use of caricature serves as an attempt to confront and circumvent the increasing popularity of the caricature in its visual form and its destabilising effect on the written cultural field. The commercial assertion of undeserved artistic merit awarded to the visual caricature produces a new form of social capital under a *vol décent* exploiting the commodification of art and literature. A financial gain based on deceit but one that may well prove of sound commercial pedigree in a new market driven by technological advance. The commodification of art brings into focus the Balzacian distinction between the true artist and the merely skilled. It is a fundamental distinction for Balzac as he views the artist as the supreme, ultimate director of the course of human evolution. The commercialisation of art through the prism of the *vol décent* disadvantages both the artist and the artist's hegemony in the market because it satisfies profitable demand with an artistic act of deception. It is a process which, for Balzac, results in a deminution of aesthetic value, the artist and the social environment.

The *vol décent*'s capacity to inform narrative structure and style marks both Balzac's genius as creative novelist and the potency of the *vol décent* as heuristic. The significance of form in the realisation of Balzac's creative imagination is repeatedly made evident, never more so than in the incipit to *La Maison Nucingen*, where the narrative architecture itself captures and holds the clandestine nature of the speculative markets. Narrator becomes raconteur, betraying a criminal and petit bourgeois bias. In that conspiratorial mode he is used to bring the reader inside the zone, to become a participator in the intrigue. The narrator's disclosures however

change his position and increasingly he reveals himself in the role of arriviste. He implies high associations, cultural refinement and wealth, but his voice inadvertently betrays him.

The *vol décent* finds the Balzacian voice to be polyphonic, confirming the recent work of Éric Bordas and Nicole Mozet, ‘that Balzac’s representation of the world is by no means uniform or consistent, but that it mobilises an array of narrative voices and ideological perspectives which do not always agree with each other’.⁶³ Those multiple voices and narratorial positions are highlighted throughout this thesis, and reflect both Balzacian philosophy and authorial process. His narrative perspective is often as playful and ludic as it is dispassionate and omnipotent, displaying a complex authorial disposition that often conflicts with expectations. The narrative voice which describes the malevalence and immorality of the *vol décent* is not censorious but compliant, amused and benign: ‘l’achat des quinze voix législatives qui d’une nuit, passèrent des blancs de la Gauche aux bancs de Droite’ (Ma, X, 1082). It even stretches to the inherent injustice of an immoral process in the hands of ‘l’aristocratie du mal’. (Ibid.) However, as with humour more generally, Balzac’s observations and wit also serve to expose the underlying human condition and to question the conflict between self-interest and social responsibility.

Balzac often uses digression to focus reader attention on the human condition and to assert an ideological perspective. This break from the narrative is usually delivered in a prescriptive, authoritative style which asserts social principle or idealism to suggest conduct: ‘le malheur est un marche-pied pour le génie, une piscine pour le chrétien, un trésor pour l’homme habile, pour les faibles un abîme’ (CB, VI, 54). The same style reveals specific ills, such as the bankruptcy process in *César Birotteau*, where the narrator, as determiner of moral and social standard, exposes legal sharp practice.

The *vol décent*, with its polarised positions apparently reconciled, provides a template for philosophic debate, particularly in the field of ethics. Balzac raises the fundamental question of what ought to be done, a moral determination, in a certain situation and what is done in that situation. The *vol décent* does not actually reconcile those two positions but does allow them to co-exist as a socially expedient,

⁶³ Andrew Watts, ‘Balzac’s Voice from the Beyond’, *Balzac Review* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

if not necessarily moral, compromise. The compromise itself, poses numerous other ethical issues. The Pierrotin dilemma provides a case in point, where the support of the locals and even the local police are tantamount to aiding an illegality, which itself is a moral issue. Similarly, the research finds numerous cases in which the sanctioned *vol décent* is itself an immoral act, although not an illegal one. Balzac often shows the compromise to be a response to injustice in the wider social context, rather than just the immediate circumstance and his response is shown through narrative events rather than the application of any rationale.

This thesis explores numerous philosophical issues and dilemmas arising from the notion of the *vol décent*. Amongst them is the conflict between socio-economic necessity and ethics, individual and social supremacy, deception and expediency, the immanent and the transcendent, unfettered possibility.

Chapter 1

Social Mobility and the *vol décent*: *Les Marana*; *Un Début dans la vie*

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 *Les Marana*
 - 1.2.1 Napoleonic and Restoration Cultures
 - 1.2.2 Character, Milieu and History
 - 1.2.3 ‘Enfin, il pratiqua le *vol décent*’ (Ma, X, 1082)
- 1.3 *Un Début dans la vie*
 - 1.3.1 Critical Perspectives
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 - 1.3.4 Sérisy: Un Homme supérieur
 - 1.3.5 Deception in the Service of Family and Self
- 1.4 Conclusion

1.1 Introduction

Les Marana, a ‘shorter fiction’ first published in the *Revue de Paris* of 1832, contains Balzac’s only use in *La Comédie humaine* of the oxymoronic phrase *vol décent*. Nevertheless, the notion of the *vol décent* and its significance for the Balzacian world are signalled by this brief and early working of the idea. Despite the fact that *Les Marana* has attracted little critical analysis, the history of a ‘quartier-maître, Provençal né aux environs de Nice, et nommé Diard’ (Ma, X, 1040) contains an early portent of a major authorial concept yet to be fully developed.

This reading of *Les Marana* focuses on the provincial Pierre-François Diard and his role in what becomes an inherently dysfunctional family unit that moves from Tarragone in Spain into the wider, more sophisticated milieu of Parisian high society. It is from this fusion of character and milieu that Diard’s involvement with the *vol décent* emerges. The *vol décent*, whilst being a multi-faceted action motif, also acts to promote more general and abstract entities that inform the Balzacian world order. *Les Marana* has a hybrid structure, part novel and part short story, that Tim Farrant finds ‘still storytelling and explanatory but [...] striving towards a more comprehensive treatment of emotion’.⁶⁴ The tension between the *conte*, much requested by Pichot, director of the *Revue de Paris* in 1832, and the extended novel is clearly visible. The basic distinction is one of length, with the *contes* ideally of not more than two-and-a-half *feuilles* and the novel seeking a freedom of indeterminate length. The commercial demands of serialisation, which required the repetition of brief, dramatic events linked by storytelling and explanation, were designed to build reader anticipation. However, as Farrant points out in *Balzac’s Shorter Fictions*, Balzac ‘was in pursuit of profundity [...] the *conte*, the trifling thing Pichot saw, [...] was no longer a permanent home, but a temporary (and somewhat cramped) refuge’.⁶⁵ Whilst restricted length was a commercial necessity for Pichot, and was to prove an unacceptable artistic limitation for Balzac, the *conte* provided him with a valuable literary testing ground. Those oppositions, fought out between author and publisher with both *Les Marana* and *Ferragus*, resulted in Balzac’s leaving the *Revue de Paris*, but a residue of the conflict remained visible in the texts.

⁶⁴ Tim Farrant, *Balzac’s Shorter Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 159.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Balzac's frustrated desire 'to treat emotion seriously and at length'⁶⁶ is evidenced in a direct reference to the limitations in the form, 'n'est ce pas une histoire impossible à retracer dans toute sa vérité' (Ma, X, 1069). The frustration remains and as a result Balzac pushes at the boundaries of the *conte*. He increases the narrative scope by introducing two narrative structures. The first part entitled 'Exposition and Action' is focussed on Juana/Montefiore/Diard and the second part in a change of perspective, on Juana/Diard/Montefiore. In this way, he increases the opportunity for emotional development and narrative reflection. *Les Marana* in the form of the *nouvelle* that it takes in *La Comédie humaine*, rather than that in the *Revue de Paris* shows, as Pierre Citron points out:

Guerre, séduction, poignard dégainé, coup de théâtre dans l'un, jeu, vol, meurtres et agonie dans l'autre, ils sont constitués de scènes où les détails concrets abondent, et où les dialogues occupent une large place.⁶⁷

In the central section Balzac unveils the social and economic history in a move away from the dramatic passions and events of the *contes*.

The *conte*/novel opposition is reflected clearly in the condensed series of incidents and passions where the form of the *conte* is dominant. The dramatic Bianchi incident is followed immediately by the introduction of 'deux artistes [qui] endorment les douleurs de leur vie par les espérances de la gloire' (Ma, X, 1040). Although Diard and Montefiore bring a moment of reflection, it is quickly superseded by the presence of the fantastic *Les Marana*. The narrative then moves to the romantic situation of Juana, hidden in the upper floors of the Perez household, but discovered, seduced and abandoned in quick succession. The pace is maintained by the attempted killing of Montefiore by *La Marana*, his rescue by Diard, the subsequent marriage between Diard and Juana and their move to Paris. The formula of the *conte* 'fundamentally or vestigially oral in nature [...] repository of archetypal national wisdom [...] and often characterised by other features, unity of action, imagery and symbolism.....dominates the section'⁶⁸, being storytelling and explanation but resisting any significant move toward an in-depth, comprehensive understanding of event. Part Three follows the same melodramatic pattern with a sequence that sees Diard losing his fortune, meeting Montefiore again, plunging into debt, the murder of Montefiore, the murder of Diard by his wife and her avoidance

⁶⁶ Farrant, *Balzac's Shorter Fictions*, p. 60.

⁶⁷ Pierre Citron, 'Introduction to *Les Marana*' (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), X, pp. 1018-1019.

⁶⁸ Farrant, *Balzac's Shorter Fictions*, p. 12.

of retribution by the timely intervention of the doctor. The format of the *conte* determines its narrative content and treatment. In the central section, Balzac exerts a more novelistic approach that moves from the series of melodramatic incidents into an observation of the manners of a Parisian society moving beyond Empire and into the Restoration.

Balzac places the provincial Diard in the Parisian world of wealth and social status, and observes the process of his social exclusion. The technique exposes Diard's inadequacies but it equally exposes the shift in historical forces from the Napoleonic to the Restoration period. The accolades that flow from military glory, earned or bestowed, give way to the forces of political, social and financial change. This interaction between milieu and character, that is to be central in the Balzacian oeuvre, is not confined to financial and social failure. Juana's unequal treatment of her children goes to the heart of the domestic milieu with its own moral dilemmas. The exploration of personal and private life is limited, as is that of the social and political. The work remains stubbornly hybrid and that compromise leaves the reader with a strong sense of an inchoate text, frustrated by the unexplored.

The Bianchi atrocity offers evidence of an event held in narrative isolation. While the event dumbfounds the reader, the cynicism that accompanies the amorality demands investigation and understanding. It is in fact pursued five years later in *La Maison Nucingen*, when Nucingen, free of any threat of retribution, a state he shares with Bianchi, trades in total disregard of human consequence. The absence of retribution, applicable in both cases, informs the power of the *vol décent*, where morality as a social restraint can be ignored. However, the form of the novel is to provide scope for the impact to be measured against social response and extended by narratory intervention, as it does in *La Maison Nucingen*, whereas the *conte*, confined to the necessity of immediate impact, limits scope to the incident itself. The opposition exposes a tension between the limits of melodramatic storytelling and the expression of social realism.

Likewise, in La Marana's change of mind regarding her daughter's future, the suggestion of a religious epiphany, in one whose lifestyle falls far short of the doctrinal ideal, leaves much to be explored. Similarly, the potential of the conflation of the French, Italian and Spanish, a unique combination in *La Comédie humaine*, remains untested.

Even the primary theme of the *nouvelle*, found in the album *Pensées, sujets, fragments* of 1832, is not sustained. The theme of a woman killing her husband to save the reputation of her children is undeveloped. René Guise suggests that Balzac purposely moves away from the main theme, substituting the multiple sub-themes of a woman between two men, maternal devotion and a fatal heredity, to allow the minor themes to accommodate the demands of the *conte*. The work balances romanticism and idealism with social analysis, using two distinct plot lines within a single narrative. Juana's maternal protection of her children's honour, pushed to its melodramatic limits, is placed alongside Diard's hopeless but common quest for social status and financial success in the historic period of late and post Empire France.

Diard's involvement with the *vol décent* in *Les Marana* is only a brief stage in a narrative stream that leads to his decline and death. The combination of the three episodes however, one set in Tarragone, one in Paris and the other in Bordeaux, delivers 'un roman ancré dans l'histoire sociale et économique du temps d'un roman balzacien réaliste et bourgeois'.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Ibid.

1.2 *Les Marana*

1.2.1 Napoleonic and Restoration Cultures

In *Les Marana* Balzac juxtaposes the culture of the Restoration with that of the preceding Napoleonic period. This technique allows Balzac to cover the actual present, the near past of the Restoration and the ‘historic’ past of the Napoleonic period, and throws a common historiography over the different time frames that Lukács recognises as a ‘figuration du *présent comme histoire*’.⁷⁰ It endows the present and near past with the same settled, authoritative status of historical review without sacrificing a sense of the immediate. The historic equivalence highlights the contrast in cultures between the two periods and the diversity of cultural influences on moral values.

The incipit to *Les Marana*, with its reflections on the siege of Tarragone during the Peninsula War between the Spanish and the invading French army, forms an immediate link with the Napoleonic past. The era takes on a deeper significance when Balzac introduces a dramatic, circumscribed cultural forum operating within the French military from which emerges ‘cette espèce d’honneur chevaleresque qui, à l’armée, fait excuser les plus grands excès’. (Ma, X, 1038) The honour code provides a justification for behaviour ‘la plus détestable’ (Ibid.) and a sanctioning of pillage. This is not a deprivation that results from deception, common in the *vol décent* of the Restoration, but a deprivation that results from the direct exercise of autonomous authority. The contrast in cultures that is exposed here, between the Napoleonic and Restoration, is indicative of Balzac’s preference for Napoleonic order, certainty and decisive execution, the prerogatives of the exceptional individual.

Focusing on the Italians, Balzac shows the capacity to compromise the representation of reality for the purpose of dramatic impact, stereotyping the Mediterranean character as both fickle and susceptible:

Le débris de la légion italienne [...] dont l’existence peut devenir, ou belle au gré d’un sourire de femme qui les relève de leur brillante ornière, ou épouvantable à la fin d’une orgie, sous l’influence de quelque méchante réflexion échappée à leurs compagnons d’ivresse (Ma, X, 1037-8).

He places the ‘débris’ in a ‘régiment, souvent décimé’ where they are subject ‘aux ravages de la mort’ (Ma, X, 1038). Constant company with the imminent finality of death is shown to result in a loss of sensibility, a condition that Balzac vividly

⁷⁰ George Lukács, quoted by Damien Zanone in *Balzac dans l’Histoire* ed. by Mozet and Petitier (Paris: Sedes, 2001), p. 70.

depicts in the novel. The atrocious conduct is isolated from the mechanisms of social control, a situation that ferments its own morality. It highlights the capacity of the Napoleonic military of the period, effectively a hegemony of force, to operate outside the confines of a legal framework. This is not a manipulation but an annihilation of social controls. A regimental notoriety earns, by way of a *quid pro quo*, the sanction of unflinchingly amoral acts. The amorality puts the action beyond the scope of deception, a necessary element of the *vol décent*, which is reliant on the operative presence of a moral order.

Whilst Balzac emphasises the nature of such actions, he is clearly aware of the expedient subjectivity of moral judgements in a wider social context when he says of Bianchi ‘il eût été, dans l’autre siècle, un admirable flibustier’ (Ma, X, 1038). He simultaneously seeks to underplay any association between depravity and the Napoleonic culture. He does this by introducing a Napoleonic aspiration to change these ‘*mauvais sujets*’ but ‘les calculs de l’Empereur ne furent parfaitement justes que relativement aux ravages de la mort’ (Ma, X, 1038), an apparent failure of good intention in the face of an unpalatable reality. There is a lack of correspondence between Balzac’s literary artistry and historical reality here. Balzac seeks an ideal in the ‘heroic attitudes, always immaculate, spotless and with a highly polished Mme Tussaud’ surface’,⁷¹ that were seen in the art of Jacques-Louis David, firstly adopted for the benefit of the French Republicans and subsequently retread for Napoleon. Simon Schama refers to this as ‘servile threnody to the glories of the military Empire [...] with nothing more than *la gloire* and their own gaudy finery’.⁷² Nevertheless, it is this residual sense of glory from the Napoleonic period that Balzac will show through the lens of nostalgia, still to linger in the Restoration and colour its response to the recent past. Bernard Berenson observes that ‘it is but a step from realizing the greatness of an event to believing that the persons concerned in it were equally great’.⁷³ Although he is speaking of the renaissance period it is equally apposite to Balzac, a person who, despite his assertion of ‘la nécessité du principe monarchique’ (Avant-propos, I, 13) cannot resist the common view that the genius of Napoleon comes with a new religion of glory, the essence of which is

⁷¹ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961[1920]), p. 16.

⁷² Simon Schama, *Power of Art* (London: BBC Books, 2006), p. 231.

⁷³ Bernard Berenson, *Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon Press, 1968[1952]), p. 3.

human esteem. The heroic stature of Napoleon, stimulated by his presence and that of ‘les militaires, [et] les vertues que l’imagination leur accord’ (Ma, X, 1072).

It is interesting to note that Balzac, who chooses to re-play the startling Bianchi incident from the *Contes bruns*, strictly limits his involvement with the phenomenon, leaving this fertile ground for moral debate in favour of Montefiore ‘le premier capitaine d’habillement, officier moitié militaire, moitié civil, passait, en style soldatesque, pour *faire ses affaires*’ (Ma, X, 1039). Balzac moves away from the extreme forms of the Napoleonic military culture of the period into the social milieu. Montefiore, the Italian outsider, exploits the myths of Napoleonic military culture to feed a wider personal and commercial aspiration. It is an example of how image can triumph over substance:

Il se prétendait brave, se vanter dans le monde [...] il sentait la poudre d’une lieue, et fuyait les coups de fusil à tire-d’aile; [il] était un des plus jolis garçons de l’armée. [...] Un de ces visages mélancoliques dont les femmes sont presque toujours les dupes. [...] Le capitaine Montefiore avait donc un très bel avenir, et ne se souciait pas de le jouer contre un méchant morceau de ruban rouge. Si ce n’était pas un brave, c’était au moins un philosophe (Ma, X, 1039).

The pretence of bravery, which failed to impress his military comrades, yields to the capitalisation of good looks and military glamour by way of an opportune act of deception in private life. The propitious and purposeful nature of that deceit anticipates Balzac’s representation of Restoration commercial chicanery. Montefiore accurately reads a military culture whose social power rests in the images of heroism and the sense of glory it inspires. While Diard, in a link to the romantic dimension of Balzac’s work, ‘cherche des madones peintes’ in Tarragone, Montefiore searches for ‘des madones vivantes’, (Ma, X, 1041) a division of labour that maximises opportunities for both commercial and sexual exploitation by the victors.

F.W.J. Hemmings in *Culture and Society in France 1789-1848* makes a perceptive connection between the pillage of art during the Peninsula War, its part in *Les Marana*, and the cultural contribution it makes to the notion of theft by the state:

In *Les Marana*, a story written in 1832, Balzac introduces one such ‘art collector’, a quartermaster from Nice named Diard, who he shows robbing a convent during the sack of Tarragona (1811). Most of these marauders kept their loot only until such time as they could find purchases; adventurous dealers, French and English, drove a profitable trade.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1789-1848*, p. 81.

Diard's handling of the 'loot' follows exactly this pattern, as he sells his art collection in Paris and uses the funds to finance his stay in the capital. Art, as legitimate spoils of war, provides evidence of a precursor to the *vol décent* in operation during the Napoleonic period, where the authority of the victor legitimises an additional deprivation of the vanquished. This is an act justified by a mix of aesthetic, political and moral opportunism. While the *ancien régime* aristocracy had an admiration for works of antiquity, the anti-royalist sentiment of the Revolution led to the destruction of many statues of royalty and of those whose fame rested on association with the crown. A solution to this destruction of works of art with their pre-revolutionary association, whilst retaining their international status and value, was 'to purge the art [...] of its pernicious ideological content, leaving only the residual aesthetic element, [...] and] place it in the disinfected environment of the Musée du Louvre'.⁷⁵ The practice served Napoleon's armies throughout Europe, resulting in the 'liberation' of works of art 'from the shackles of monarchical tyranny and religious oppression. [...] by removing such works from the palaces of princes and prelates and installing them in Republican France'.⁷⁶ This 'theft' of the national assets of other nations continued into Empire, justified by an opportune idealism, legitimised by force and sanctioned by the state.

It is Restoration response to the sense of opportunism associated with the Napoleonic Empire which Diard is unable to read when he takes up residence in Paris. His paintings attract from 'les railleurs de Paris un malin sourire [...] Les chefs-d'œuvre achetés la veille furent enveloppés dans le reproche' (Ma, X, 1072). Similarly, his attempts to obtain office in the Paris Préfecture, at the end of empire, were unsuccessful because he did not realise that 'ces empires au petit pied' had already been awarded to 'des chambellans de S.M. l'empereur et roi' (Ma, X, 1074). Diard's naivety is offset to some extent by a notion of honour carried over from the Napoleonic era. He offers to marry Juana when she is abandoned; he secures the removal of Montefiore from the regiment and seeks, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish himself socially. In a reflection of the Bianchi incident there is a further return to the events in Tarragone, when Diard 'enfonce le couteau à plusieurs

⁷⁵ Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1789-1848*, p. 77.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

reprises dans le cœur, où la lame se cassa' (Ma, X, 1086). In an illegal act, 'la plus détestable de toutes dans la vie privée' (Ma, X, 1038) he kills Montefiore.

1.2.2 Character, Milieu and History

Balzac portrays Diard as neither an effective participant in, nor a shaper of, events. When seeking success or remedy he instinctively searches beyond conventional practice. The Balzacian narrator ironically highlights that inclination by introducing Montefiore and Diard, both officers in the French invasion force to Spain in 1811, as 'deux philosophes'. The reference is derisive, signalling dispositions that mistakenly incline toward a form of speculative, rather than pragmatic opportunism. The narrator establishes the fundamental Balzacian notion that success in worldly affairs only comes from an exclusive confrontation with hard reality.

Montefiore et Diard étaient deux philosophes qui se consolait de la vie par l'entente du vice, comme deux artistes endorment les douleurs de leur vie par l'espérance de la gloire. Tous deux voyaient la guerre dans ses résultats, non dans son action, et ils donnaient tout simplement aux morts le nom de niais. Le hasard en avait fait des soldats, tandis qu'ils auraient dû se trouver assis autour des tapis verts d'un congrès. [...] Tous deux étaient doués de cette organisation fébrile, mobile, à demi féminine, également forte pour le bien et pour le mal, mais dont il peut émaner, suivant le caprice de ces singuliers tempéraments, un crime aussi bien qu'une action généreuse, un acte de grandeur d'âme ou une lâcheté. Leur sort dépend à tout moment de la pression plus ou moins vive produite sur leur appareil nerveux par des passions violentes et fugitives (Ma, X, 1040).

The balancing of 'également pour le bien et pour le mal' anticipates the balance of opposites in the *vol décent*. It is a hybrid state that works without resort to resolution, a notion that Balzac is to develop. Where frustrated artists find hope in their dreams of glory rather than in their work, a fatal inclination that Balzac is to later repeatedly expose, (a compelling example is found in the exchanges between Lisbeth Fischer and Steinbock in *Cousine Bette*⁷⁷) Diard finds his consolation in 'l'entente du vice'. The two ephemeral forms of satisfaction, one based on aspirant imaginations and the other on chance, avoid direct confrontation with social reality. Diard's natural milieu is a contrived and artificial one 'autour des tapis verts d'un congrès' an 'organisation fébrile, mobile, à demi féminine', where, as gambler, he is involved in a circumscribed activity played out under fixed rules capable of delivering uncertain results.

Diard is capricious by nature and his lack of fixed resolve sees him equally satisfied 'pour le bien et pour le mal'. His easy, natural intimacies with apparently

⁷⁷ Honoré de Balzac, *Cousine Bette*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), X, p. 55.

contradictory forces provide an interesting, early association with the oxymoronic *vol décent*. In Diard's case, such acceptable, yet contradictory associations, arise because he is driven by 'passions violentes et fugitives' rather than by rational pursuit of financial gain.

In the Balzacian world order, as I propose in Chapter 2 of the thesis, those under the influence of uncontrolled sensibilities are critically hampered in the determination or manipulation of circumstances.⁷⁸ In the narrator's references to 'philosophes' and 'le creuset des diplomates', Diard is shown to be destined for a role distanced from direct involvement in social combat. The references display the disposition of the observer, rather than that of the activist, who views war in terms of 'ses résultats, non dans son action'. However, the capricious disposition of Diard is counterbalanced by a capacity that 'ne manquait ni de bravoure ni d'une sorte de générosité juvénile' (Ma, X, 1041), a kind and generous spirit that operates alongside his social and commercial limitations. However, the inclination only acts as a subsidiary influence unable to overcome a determining disposition that remains stubbornly irresolute, not 'assez fort, assez compact, assez persistant pour commander au monde de cette époque' (Ma, X, 1071).

The generous, spontaneous spirit is displayed in 's'il lui faut un mari, me voilà' (Ma, X, 1065) and he subsequently seeks to maintain that generosity. Nevertheless, even when 'il était devenu passionnément amoureux de Juana' (Ma, X, 1067) his love is never reciprocated. His frustrations, internally driven yet socially recognisable, extend beyond the family milieu. He even fails to earn the confidence of those friends who acknowledge his capability as 'un assez bon comptable' [yet...] 'aucun soldat ne lui aurait confié ni sa bourse ni son testament' (Ma, X, 1040). His irresolution is palpable, sufficiently conspicuous to inspire a similar response in comrades, who are 'fort embarrassés d'asseoir un jugement vrai sur lui' (Ma, X, 1041). His ability as accountant and as astute collector of valuable pieces of art is submerged beneath the reality that ultimately 'il était joueur, et les joueurs n'ont rien en propre' (Ma, X, 1041). The apparently positive aspects of Diard's character, instead of providing an effective equilibrium in his personality contribute, along with his capricious inclinations and irresolution, to his downfall. Balzac brings

⁷⁸ Please see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2.

together two apparent opposites to compose a single, recognisable, oxymoronic identity.

Diard's failure to bridge the space between aspiration and its satisfaction is typical of his performance in both the familial milieu and in the wider context of Parisian society. In *La Comédie humaine* Balzac proposes the notion that expectations are realised through a judiciously focused concentration of energy; a force that cannot be deviated from its purpose. In *Gobseck*, published in 1830, two years earlier than *Les Marana*, Balzac has already demonstrated in this singular person the necessity for direct, unequivocal confrontation with social reality and the capacity to act with relentless, focused power in harmony with its dictates:

Quant aux mœurs, l'homme est le même partout: partout le combat entre le pauvre et le riche est établi, partout il est inévitable; il vaut donc mieux être l'exploitant que d'être l'exploité (Gb, II, 969).

Diard's failure to confront social reality directly provides a counterpoint to the example of Gobseck despite Diard being in the thrall of 'une de ces passions qui changent momentanément les plus détestables caractères et mettent en lumière tout ce qu'il y a de beau dans une âme' (Ma, X, 1070). Again Balzac takes a particular and, in an assertion of prescriptive authority, turns it into a generalisation: He places stress on the provisional nature of such a passion in his choice of the loaded, uneasy word 'momentanément', delivering a signal of the inevitable failure of good intent. The *vol décent* attracts Diard, unlike most of its other practitioners in *La Comédie humaine*, because of his inability to convert concept into reality. His ultimate resort to deception, in his embrace of the *vol décent*, will be a move away from the demands of reality.

The narrator again establishes that a combination of irresolution and idealism is, in terms of Balzacian philosophy, (if not in his personal practice), doomed to failure. In his marital union with Juana, the provincial Diard places himself in a triadic confrontation with an acquired taste for luxury, an idealistic approach to marriage and an absence of love or esteem:

Le Provençal n'était ni beau, ni bien fait. Ses manières dépourvues de distinction se ressentaient également du mauvais ton de l'armée, des mœurs de sa province et d'une incomplète éducation. [...] Cette jeune fille toute grâce et toute élégance, mue par un invincible instinct de luxe et de bon goût, et que sa nature entraînait d'ailleurs vers la sphère des hautes classes sociales. (Ma, X, 1067).

By acquiring the reputation of a man of honour, Diard hopes to win over Juana's respect and so overcome his handicaps. He is, however, no longer a participant in the ephemeral trade of military glory that relied on 'les vertus que l'imagination leur

accord' (Ma, X, 1072) that so characterised Napoleonic culture. He becomes a member of a commercial order that is judged solely on financial result. Nevertheless, he does succeed in forcing Montefiore, seducer of Juana and father of her first child, to leave the regiment and to obtain for himself a transfer to the prestigious *Garde impériale*. In trying to 'acquérir un titre, des honneurs et une considération en rapport avec sa grande fortune' (Ma, X, 1070) his lack of judgement is again revealed. Although he fights courageously in bloody conflict and is badly wounded, he has to leave the Garde and take retirement 'sans le titre de baron, sans les récompenses qu'il avait désiré gagner, et qu'il aurait peut-être obtenues, s'il n'eût pas été Diard' (Ibid.). The limit to aspirations forged in ignorance is marked in the narrator's cynicism.

Whilst Juana has 'un invincible instinct de luxe et de bon goût', a condition that will make a constant call on financial resources, she is protected by an ideal of feminine love capable of 'traverser le désert de la vie pour arrive au ciel, tout en sachant qu'elle ne trouverait point de fleurs dans son pénible voyage' (Ma, X, 1069). Her idealism is a religious triumph that takes her above the grounded reality of the *vol décent* faced by her husband:

Quant à l'estime, elle refusait même ce sentiment à Diard, précisément parce que Diard, l'épousait. [...] Si Juana eût aimé Diard, elle l'eût estimé. L'amour crée dans la femme une femme nouvelle [...] Donc Juana, sans amour, restait la Juana trompée, humiliée, dégradée. Juana ne pouvait pas honorer l'homme qui l'acceptait ainsi. Elle sentait, dans toute la consciencieuse pureté du jeune âge, cette distinction, subtile en apparence, mais d'une vérité sacrée, légale selon le cœur. [...] Libre, elle savait jusqu'où irait son malheur; mariée, elle ignorait jusqu'où il devait aller. La religion triompha (Ma, X, 1067-1069).

The succour afforded by religious ideals, no matter that 'la religion [...était] une vie entière de souffrances', was still a persuasive notion at the beginning of the nineteenth century, being established as both a literary and aesthetic norm.

The confrontation between a present hope and a distant spiritual consolation is placed inside a Parisian society that was experiencing a decline in religious reference and authority. Nicole Mozet, in *Balzac et le temps*, emphasises the transition from a religious to a secular order:

Les bases du christianisme deviennent de plus en plus difficiles à concevoir. Les limites du temps se pensent désormais à l'échelle des individus et des sociétés, si bien que le temps balzacien est plus humain que divin, plus historique que cosmique.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Nicole Mozet, *Balzac et le temps* (Paris: Christian Pirot, 2005), p. 31.

Paris is also no longer the capital of an ordered, fixed, pre-Revolution *ancien régime* in which power, wealth and indulgence were the natural prerogatives of the aristocracy and the church. Balzac places Diard and Juana in an environment in which the institutionalised moral values of the church are being replaced with the ethics of a society increasingly dominated by social mobility and the dictates of wealth creation. Paris is now a city that presents a new order of challenge where ‘ceux qui se mettent en évidence à Paris doivent ou dompter Paris ou subir Paris’ (Ma, X, 1071). Balzac uses this arena, where success demands submission to social and financial imperatives, to test Diard.

The examination is one that Diard fails. He is a stranger to the Parisian culture, unable to counteract its pressures or to gauge the true nature of its authority. He becomes a victim of the *vol décent* by the loss of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as *symbolic capital*. Of no direct economic value, such capital refers to a ‘degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour [...] founded on knowledge and recognition’.⁸⁰ As art dealer, Diard also relies on *cultural capital* as art expert and suffers a double loss. The power of social capital, one primarily based on wealth and social position, is recognised in the level of social acceptance and the compliance its authority inspires. Balzac uses the relentless susurrus of the social élite to expose that authority. The malicious gossip results in a deprivation, sanctioned by Parisian high society, of Diard’s aspirant cultural capital held in the art works he brings to Paris. The fashionable elite purposefully misrepresent their provenance and Diard’s status is thereby diminished, assuring his social exclusion. Balzac introduces into this scene a *vol décent* that does not result from weaknesses in the Code Légal, an alternative source of acceptable deprivation that he will develop later in detail. The theft by the gossips is not of money but of social capital, arguably an equally potent loss. The reader finds here an early glimpse into the scope and fertility of the *vol décent*, seeing it functioning to secure a social rather than commercial benefit.

Diard is unable to resist ‘la vengeance des amours-propres que [sa] fortune offensait’ (Ma, X, 1072) and in responding to those pressures, he acknowledges their power. Under pressure from his wife and as a hopeless sop to ‘le reproche muet que chacun adressait à ceux qui avaient été pris en Espagne’ (Ibid.) he returns most of his

⁸⁰ Randal Johnson, (ed.), *The Field of Cultural Production*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 7.

art works to Tarragone. Diard's inability to confront this pressure is further exposed when the absence of the works attracts the same level of vitriol as their presence: 'de bonnes gens continuèrent à croire que les toiles qui restèrent dans ses salons n'étaient pas loyalement acquises' (Ibid.). The exercise of this type of social power by his Parisian neighbours unremitting. 'De là, des commentaires, des railleries sans fin, comme on sait les faire à Paris' (Ibid.).

In this Parisian scene of 'd'envie et de courtoisnerie' Balzac displays values that are to accompany the growth of the *vol décent* in the period of the Restoration and beyond. Balzac positions the narrator as social commentator, observing the deceptions and duplicities common to the *vol décent*. The scene offers a delightful exposure of trivial pursuit in a purposeful parody. The light but telling comedic style offers a contrast to the dictatorial, prescriptive delivery, a reminder of Balzac's ludic disposition.

À Paris [...] tout ce qui s'habille et babille, s'habille pour sortir et sort pour babiller, tout ce monde de petits et de grands airs, ce monde vêtu d'impertinence et double d'humbles désirs, d'envie et de courtoisnerie, tout ce qui est doré et dédoré, jeune et vieux, noble d'hier ou noble du quatrième siècle, tout ce qui se moque d'un parvenu, tout ce qui a peur de se compromettre, tout ce qui veut démolir un pouvoir, sauf à l'adorer s'il résiste (Ma, X,1072-3).

Paris is represented as a place of contrast and contradiction in which impertinence and humility parade side by side with envy and sycophancy. Superficiality is matched by a chaotic social mobility. Young and old, the revered and the discarded, the valuable and the worthless, all play on an unstructured social stage. In the urge for social and financial progress, Balzac recognises an historic period of major social significance. It is a moment when 'chacun voulait s'élever' (Ma, X, 1071) inside a society that is without established values or structures. Ironically, although Diard is placed in a culture whose potent superficiality he cannot understand, as a product of the times, his instincts are still shown to reflect the contemporary mood of transition. 'Diard était un de ces hommes instinctivement forcé à repartir aussitôt qu'ils sont arrivés, et donc le but vital semble être d'aller et de venir sans cesse' (Ma, X, 1076).

This is the period in Paris when Napoleon's Empire moves towards its close and the Restoration begins. It is a time of social disorganisation characterised by the scramble toward a new commercial, social and political opportunism under a Constitutional Monarchy. It is a city that Adeline Daumard, in her *La Bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1848*, describes as 'un monde formé de la juxtaposition de

groups en perpétuelle gestation, au sein desquels se fondent les cas individuels'.⁸¹ Balzac sees this world as the fertile ground from which deceit will emerge as an integral and acceptable behavioural norm. He observes the harnessing of deceit, in pursuit of self-interest, as a practice propelled by the arrival of an increasingly rampant capitalism.

1.2.3 'Enfin, il pratiqua le *vol décent*' (Ma, X 1082)

Introducing the *vol décent* in *Les Marana*, Balzac presents examples of malevolence already in operation. It becomes a contagion that is characteristic of early nineteenth-century France and spreads beyond national boundaries to 'les États européens, barbaresques ou américains' (Ma, X, 1081). Balzac's introduction of the *vol décent* adds a specific form of moral corruption capable of accelerating and dispersing the contagion, without encountering resistance.

Having dissipated three-quarters of his fortune, Diard tries to recover it in the dubious company of nineteenth-century rakes:

Ces roués de la Bourse, avec ces hommes qui, depuis la révolution, ont érigé en principe qu'un vol fait en grand, n'est plus qu'une *noirceur*', transportant ainsi dans les coffres-forts les maximes effrontées adoptées en amour par le dix-huitième siècle (Ma, X, 1081).

The maximes refer to a class of shady aphorism that has the *vol décent* as a member. Their adoption of an easy national embrace of chicanery, is a disposition that Balzac also recognises as an integral and expanding part of a nineteenth-century France now experiencing a dramatic surge in unregulated commercial, political and social activity. The Restoration business world that Guy Palmade characterises as 'a fast changing society in which wealth, ideas and elites were in rapid flux'⁸² still retained much of the economic infrastructure that had served a pre-Revolution *ancien régime*. That infrastructure had been largely, but not exclusively, representative of a 'society of the landed nobility based on a rigid rural economy'⁸³ and was therefore ill equipped to harness and exploit the new commercial opportunities that followed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. These residual economic influences, together with those from the economic reforms of Revolution and Empire between 1789 and 1815, continued to inform the nature of commercial growth during the Restoration period of 1814 to 1830. However, the increase in the

⁸¹ Adeline Daumard, *La Bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1848* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996 [1963]), p. 5.

⁸² Palmade, *French Capitalism in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 34.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

merchant population and volume of trade ‘did not seem to alter the organisation and conduct of merchant capitalism in any fundamental way’⁸⁴. Therefore the underlying business frameworks and infra-structure remained largely unchanged from those of the previous century. Balzac shows Diard in league with the scurrilous elements from the commercial and political spheres, who exploit the structural vulnerability of the times.

The safe ground for large-scale commercial and political deception is captured in the maxim ‘un vol en grand, n’est plus qu’une *noirceur*’ (Ma, X, 1081) which conveys the notion that deceptions practised on a grand scale leave behind no more than a shadow of their malevolence. ‘En grand’ anticipates that such actions are to be found at institutional, national and international levels. Thus, when the deprivation of others takes place on a grand scale, both politically and commercially, it is more likely to resist moral censure and avoid criminal retribution than small-scale theft. The conversion of this audacity into ‘les coffres-forts’ of hard currency offers an additional, mischievous and profitable attraction, drawing commercial and political aspiration into a working alliance with immorality. The quiet social sanction of such practices ensures the progression of deceit; an infiltration that leaves the social and legal structures undisturbed.

Immediately prior to his introduction of the *vol décent*, the narrator reveals the analogous cluster of four ‘affaires nommées *véreuses*’ (Ma, X, 1081) that confirm the spread of chicanery in society. The performance of these commercial transactions is not detailed in the text. They are listed without narratorial comment, but nevertheless, a number of shared, identifiable traits that display close kinship with the *vol décent* are evident. The individual acts that form the cluster are all common forms of commercial opportunism. They share a false representation of integrity that is designed to deliver a financial return for the perpetrator at the expense of the duped. The display of a false ‘*décence*’, acting on the mind of the victims, is essential to the success of the transactions. Thus, the ignorance of the ‘pauvres diables, qui ne connaissaient pas les bureaux’ is exploited. The misfortunes of the insolvent, whose residual assets are distributed between the liquidators and the person placing them into liquidation, is a common and legal connivance later

⁸⁴ Michael Stephen Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 33.

detailed in *César Birotteau* by way of narrative digression.⁸⁵ It is an ethically dubious action benefitting the liquidator at the expense of the insolvent and the creditors. The involvement of such opportunists in the apparent revival of floating debt made in foreign investments and the allocation of commissions earned on loans to finance infrastructure development and commercial enterprises, is legally and commercially common practice but morally reprehensible.

In the explication of the *vol décent* the reader senses that Balzac as narrator recognises the notion as an innovative and important prospect with which to probe the world of *La Comédie humaine*. In a carefully constructed composition, the practice of the *vol décent*, its essence and fertility as concept are captured. Theatricality, quasi-legality, studies in commercial chicanery, power and potential are all manifest, reaching into ‘l’aristocracie du mal’. Balzac reveals himself as master exponent of enticement and expectation, the ‘jeu dramatisé’. He positions himself, ‘god-like’ above the fray, observing with amused detachment the play of deception beneath. It is a positioning from which ludic tolerance is able to reduce immorality to spectacle:

Enfin, il pratiqua *le vol décent*⁸⁶ auquel se sont adonnés tant d’hommes habilement masqués, ou cachés dans les coulisses du théâtre politique; vol qui, fait dans la rue à la lueur d’un réverbère, enverrait au bain un malheureux, mais que sanctionne l’or des moulures et des candélabres. Diard accaparait et revendait les sucres, il vendait des places, il eût la gloire d’inventer l’*homme de paille* pour les emplois lucratifs qu’il était nécessaire de garder pendant un certain temps, avant d’en avoir d’autres. Puis il méditait les primes, il étudiait le défaut des lois, il faisait une contrebande légale. Pour peindre d’un seul mot ce haut négoce, il demanda *tant pour cent* sur l’achat des quinze voix législatives qui, dans l’espace d’une nuit, passèrent des bancs de la Gauche aux bancs de la Droite. Ces actions ne sont plus ni des crimes ni des vols, c’est faire du gouvernement, commanditer l’industrie, d’être une tête financière. Diard fut assis par l’opinion publique sur le banc d’infamie, où siégeait déjà plus d’un homme habile. Là, se trouve l’aristocratie du mal (Ma, X, 1082).

The *vol décent* attracts the melodramatic ‘hommes habilement masqués’, practitioners who bring to the action an essential competence in the dark arts of disguise and deception, who have the capacity to blur or dispel the distinction between appearance and reality. The nature of the *vol* is such that it does not attract penalty, unlike the ‘vol qui, fait dans la rue [...] enverrait au bain un malheureux’. The shedding of any moral responsibility, already associated with Diard, is expressed in the cynical disinterest of the perpetrator ‘que sanctionne l’or des moulures et des candélabres’.

⁸⁵ Please see Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ My italics.

The range of actions itemised includes the withholding of goods from the market to increase their value and then re-selling when the price is artificially boosted. This manipulation of circumstances for surreptitious profit at the expense of the purchaser is further extended in the manipulation of people for profit when the perpetrator of the *vol décent* ‘vendait des places [et] il eût la gloire d’inventer *l’homme de paille*’, a conversion of people into commodity. The purchase of political influence undermines the integrity of the political system. At the same time, it subjects the political process to the dictates of the financial markets. Unknown to investors, the man of straw is a person without financial substance who, being appointed as head of a financial institution, takes on the financial and legal responsibility for the funds it attracts. Investment funds are then diverted from the investment vehicle by the ‘homme de paille’ for the benefit of the perpetrators of the *vol décent*. Those investors suffering loss seek remedy from the ‘homme de paille’ who is legally responsible but is without financial substance, as he holds none of the diverted funds. Any successful legal action is thereby rendered ‘hollow’. The ruse operates without risk of penal retribution at an advanced, sophisticated level where circumstances are contrived in order to exploit weaknesses in the law. When Diard ‘méditait les primes, il étudiait le défaut des lois, il faisait une contrebande légale’ he pursues a purposeful, yet legitimate, commercial exploitation of anomalies in the law.

For Balzac, the Restoration financial markets are integral to the world of politics.⁸⁷ The movements ‘des bancs de la Gauche aux bancs de la Droite’ facilitate a bonding of the power of money and the power of political office. The players from both worlds display pretence and deception as behavioural norms. The pretence is ubiquitous and accomplished, with Balzac establishing a deliberate link to theatre, extending from the ‘hommes habiliment masqués’ to those ‘cachés dans les coulisses du théâtre politique’.

In his reference to the practitioners of the *vol décent*, as ‘l’aristocratie du mal’ Balzac invites the reader to consider a redefinition of moral and social values. Simultaneously, he suggests ‘l’opinion publique’ finds itself at least acquiescent, if not actually in harmony with the manipulation of established order. He displays

⁸⁷ Please see Chapter 2.

proponents of the *vol décent* as celebrated in public opinion, an association that asserts a ludic triumph for financial expediency over ethics.

The social significance of the *vol décent* for Balzac is re-enforced in the subsequent repetition, distribution and development of the notion within in the world of *La Comédie humaine*. Its multiple appearances function as a recurring behavioural motif capable of adapting its form, image and practice in that world in order to contribute to an undermining and re-defining of society and its values. The seeding of the notion of the *vol décent* in *Les Marana* reveals an authorial intention to develop both the behavioural pattern and the wider notion of acceptable deceit as a thematic strand. Balzac introduces the metaphor of theatre, with its visual capacity to confuse appearance and reality to expose similar behavioural practices operating in the multiple interest groups of Restoration and post-Restoration society. In the specific references to speculation, the manipulation of stock market share values, together with the study and exploitation of ‘le défaut des lois’, Balzac encourages the reader to anticipate that the *vol décent* will become the property of the professions, groups equipped to exploit ‘le contrebande légale’. The professions will make the exercise of the *vol décent* a common practice operating at the heart of the bourgeoisie.

Balzac awards the courtisans known as ‘Les Marana’ a singular social identity. They live through ‘un tissu d’aventures romanesques et de vicissitudes étranges’ (Ma, X, 1046) whilst indulging in ‘cette insouciance de tout, ces passions furieuses, cette religieuse croyance’ [...] ces chances du joueur transportées à l’âme, à l’existence entière’ (Ibid.). Despite the excesses, the group has the capacity to resist social criticism with a defence of indifference. This ‘insouciance à tout’ is an immunity against the effects of social vilification, a protection buttressed by female exclusivity and the power to exercise ‘cette alchimie où le vice attisait le feu du creuset [...] un génie particulier, fidèlement transmis de mère en fille depuis le Moyen Âge’ (Ma, X, 1047).

Whilst *Les Marana* enjoyed a certain social prestige and intermittent wealth over the centuries, bringing ‘chez elles la soutane, la robe et l’épée’ (Ibid.) they were subject to the whim of powerful men. Each ‘fille de joie’ was ultimately reliant ‘au caprice d’un seigneur frappé de sa beauté extraordinaire’ (Ma, X, 1045). Their apparent capacity to withstand the adverse outcomes of that caprice disguised their vulnerability but could not prevent the historic flow of social change. Increasingly

dependent on religion, 'la Marana', as the mother of Juana was known, decided that her daughter must follow a new path in order to 'faire de sa fille une créature vertueuse, une sainte, afin de donner, à cette longue suite de crimes amoureux et de femmes perdues, un ange, pour elles toutes, dans le ciel' (Ma, X, 1047-1048). She leaves her daughter, who now takes, by way of disassociation from Les Marana and prostitution, her father's name and she becomes Juana de Mancini. Juana is left in the care of Perez de Lagounia and his wife in Tarragone, where she is prey to the debauched Montefiore. Balzac does not identify the reasons for this change of direction, merely implying the influence of female intuition and the lure of a salvation offered by the church. Despite this irresolution he creates a dynamic situation in which Juana, now seeking social and religious sanction rather than familial acceptance, becomes subjected to the rules of society and church, and no longer those of a romanticised notion of love, female bonding, maternal and religious devotion that distinguished Les Marana. Retaining 'sa toute puissante beauté' (Ma, X, 1046), she is still subject to the effect of 'cette alchimie où le vice attisait le feu' (Ma, X, 1047) but is now unprotected, no longer being 'sans aucun souci du passé, du présent, ni de l'avenir' (Ma, X, 1046) that her mother had relied upon. The freedoms that characterised and strengthened this celebrated family are sacrificed.

Catching a glimpse of this young woman of extraordinary beauty through the blinds above a draper's shop in Tarragone, Montefiore leaves Diard to the pillaging of property in order to pursue a different target of value. Ingratiating himself to the draper Perez and his wife he takes lodging in the house to seek out his quarry hidden in the building. By speaking disparagingly of Napoleon and exerting his Italian pedigree, he deceives the Spanish draper as to his true purpose and is able to discover the girl.

Montefiore's seduction and abandonment of Juana exposes her to the pitiless rigidity of Parisian social manners. Having a child out of wedlock would render her virtually unable to make an advantageous marriage and to have a family in circumstances that would be socially acceptable. Social criteria and judgement had not troubled Les Marana as they had their own domestic structure, one that operated beyond the controls of social manners. The loss of this unique form of social capital forces Juana into a marriage with Diard whom she does not love and does not want to marry. The penalty of living in such a relationship is aggravated by the fact that

she must deceive Diard about the child's paternity and likewise deceive the child. Her singular maternal instincts, inherited from the long line of Les Marana, become severely tested. When Diard kills Montefiore and is at risk of the scaffold, Juana murders him in order to protect her children against the social stigma that would have resulted from a trial.

Despite the fact that *Les Marana* has attracted little critical attention, due to its hybrid form and designation as *nouvelle*, it carries particular significance in *La Comédie humaine*. There are two plot lines: Juana's maternal instinct to avoid dishonour for her children and Diard's struggle to establish himself in the Parisian society of the period. The former has a significance initially confirmed in Balzac's first allocation of the text to the projected collection of '*Études de femmes*'. In terms of its wider significance however, the later elevation in 1846 to the *Études philosophiques* signals Balzac's recognition of the importance of the work. Pierre Citron recognises the basic duality of the piece. 'Le lecteur des *Marana* ne lira pas tout à fait la même œuvre, selon qu'il la regardera comme une scène de mœurs ou comme une étude philosophique' (Ma, X, 1036). Despite the clear bifurcation that Citron observes the thesis proposes a duality that delivers the notion of the *vol décent* as a contribution to both the 'jeu dramatisé' and also to the 'peinture métaphysique'.

1.3 *Un début dans la vie*

The assumption that *Les Marana* provides a precursor to a notion of the *vol décent* later developed in form, scope and frequency, finds support in the 1842 publication of *Un début dans la vie*. First published in *La Législature* under the title *Le Danger des mystifications* it was subsequently, without notable modification, published in 1844 by Dumont under the definitive title. The novel contains a number of motifs of the *vol décent* that contribute to a major theme of sanctioned deceit in the Balzacian world. The narrative chronology of the novel begins in 1822 and ends in 1838, coterminous with all but the early years of the narrative of *Les Marana* and shares with *Les Marana* in a dramatic context of provincial social mobility. Diard is a provincial who moves to Paris, and the characters in *Un début dans la vie*, based in rural proximity to Paris, move between there and the capital. The theme of transition, often evident in the world of *La Comédie humaine*, is a reflection of the social mobility that came to characterise nineteenth-century France. F.W.J. Hemmings, referencing Balzac, confirms the social background of the period. ‘The population of Paris expanded [...] from 713,000 in 1817 to 785,000 in 1831 and this growth was due much more to immigration than to natural increase. Families drifted into the capital from the neighbouring *départements* in the north, the east and south east.’⁸⁸

Transition in the world of *La Comédie humaine* takes two distinct forms: the movement of people between the provinces and Paris and the movement of people up and down the social scale. Diard participates in both aspects when he comes to Paris and falls down the social scale. In *Un début dans la vie* Balzac introduces Pierrotin, a provincial petit bourgeois seeking financial and social advancement, who lives in the country and operates his coach business between his home in Lisle-Adam and Paris. Moreau, representative of a new bourgeois class, manages the estates of the comte de Sérisey, and is moving up the social scale. The roles of Pierrotin, Moreau and Cardot, all perpetrators of the *vol décent*, are closely examined and counter-balanced by the comte de Sérisey, landowner and Minister of State whose social status, relationship with his employees and the wider society is undergoing a forced re-evaluation.

⁸⁸ Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1789-1848*, p. 125.

1.3.1 Critical Perspectives

Pierre Laforgue in *Balzac dans le texte* argues that the change in title is significant, as it directs the reader's focus onto 'le seuil que le jeune homme doit franchir pour cesser d'être un jeune homme et devenir un membre à part entière de la société'.⁸⁹ Hava Sussman's research into adolescence in Balzac⁹⁰ also focuses on Oscar Husson's troubled passage into adulthood, placing it in the social context of the period and considering the psychological characteristics Balzac attributes to adolescence. However, Balzac's mood of incessant imaginative exploration does not confine the work within those interests, a recognition that Philippe Mustière explores in his article 'Sur *Un début dans la vie*'. He observes 'une histoire sur une idée hybride qui tient à la fois du plus logique et du incongru: à savoir l'idée de hasard'.⁹¹ It is through the theme of chance that Mustière finds Balzac testing the laws that govern events and that ensure the achievement of the end purpose for which they are designed. This is a world in which 'le hasard a partie liée avec l'illusion, et cette soudaineté n'est qu'apparence, parce que l'on nous fait croire que l'accessoire avait autant d'importance que l'essentiel'.⁹² Mustière sees 'les caprices de l'imagination' operating through the social processes which expose Oscar's weaknesses but ensure the inevitable 'passage d'une médiocrité individuelle à une médiocrité sociale'.⁹³ Neither Sussman's research into adolescence in *La Comédie humaine* nor Mustière's recognition of chance as Balzac's mode for interrogating the relationship between the forces that control society and the passage of adolescence, exhaust the authorial purpose in *Un début dans la vie* or exclusively dominate the narrative. Where chance is the exploratory force that exposes the passage of adolescence, similarly the examination of practiced deceit through the lens of the *vol décent* operates to deepen understanding of Pierrotin, Cardot, Moreau and Sérisy. While all have some effect on the direction of passage that Oscar Husson takes from adolescence to adulthood, for them that progress is incidental to their own primary concerns. Balzac uses these characters to explore the role of deceit in

⁸⁹ Pierre Laforgue, *Balzac dans le texte* (Paris: Groupe international de recherches balzaciennes, 2006), p. 85.

⁹⁰ Hava Sussman, *Balzac et 'les débuts dans la vie: étude sur l'adolescence dans La Comédie humaine'* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1978)

⁹¹ Philippe Mustière, 'Sur *Un début dans la vie*', *L'Année balzacienne* (Paris: Garnier, 1982), p.195.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.196.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.197.

the fashioning of a new social and economic order. Referring to the relationship between *Le voyage en coucou*, a short-story by Balzac's sister Laure Surville and its development by Balzac in *Un début dans la vie*, Tim Farrant observes that 'Balzac creates morally mixed messages from elements *Le voyage en coucou* keeps apart'.⁹⁴ It is from these 'morally mixed messages' in *Un début dans la vie* that the *vol décent* emerges as an action predicated upon deceit but morally ambiguous when viewed in the context of historical and socio-economic change. Farrant has identified a structural development in *Un début dans la vie* that renders the *nouvelle* capable of accommodating novelistic effects by 'lessening its emphasis on event, enhancing the novelistic sense of process, undermining the univocal morality of its model'⁹⁵ and revealing Balzac as a polyphonic writer. In recognising the polyphonic nature of Balzac's text Farrant provides justification for a new exploration of social immorality in the context of profound socio-economic changes. The significance of those changes has been emphasized by Pierre Laforgue in his chapter headed 'Par où commencer et comment finir'⁹⁶ where he argues that Balzac creates an overarching historic perspective by situating the narrative on two historic moments, the beginning of the Restoration and the installation of the July Monarchy:

Ce dispositif consiste à mettre en perspective et sous tension deux époques, [...] et à donner à voir les mutations de l'une à l'autre en la personne d'un ci-devant jeune homme. [...] Différentiellement deux mondes sont représentés et les contrastes sont bien visibles, aussi bien en ce qui concerne les structures que les hommes. Ceux-ci en l'espace d'une quinzaine d'années ont profité du mouvement général d'enrichissement et ont vu leur situation sociale totalement changée'. C'est ce que l'on appelle le mouvement de l'histoire.⁹⁷

The connection between historic change and behavioural practice that Laforgue highlights provides the background for research into Balzac's focus on deceit and the *vol décent* in the novel. The '*révélés intercalés* which explain the main action' in *Un début dans la vie* provide both a series of frames for this area of research and a point of comparison with Balzac's exposé of the *vol décent* in *Les Marana*.

⁹⁴ Farrant, *Balzac's Shorter Fictions*, p. 295.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Laforgue, *Balzac dans le texte: études de génétique et de sociocritique*, p. 85.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 92.

1.3.2 The *vol décent* as Socio-Economic Corrective

The opening *récit* concerns Pierrotin, a business man in public and parcel transport in 1822. Balzac links the neighbouring countryside of Lisle-Adam with Paris through the frequent and returning passage of Pierrotin's modified coach between the two locations. The reader is offered a recurring contrast between the commercial centres of town and country within 'une France que commence à remodeler la révolution industrielle'.⁹⁸ However, the action is set in 1822 and this represents both 'une époque en voie de disparition'⁹⁹ and the early stages of commercial and technical development. Significantly, the diligence, known locally as a '*coucou*', itself provides evidence of the period. 'La Restauration ne s'est guère occupée des routes. Elles continuaient à être médiocrement entretenues et il y eut peu de nouveaux travaux' writes Henri Sée in *Histoire économique de France: Les temps modernes*. It was not until the government of Louis-Philippe and the passing of the law of 1836 on the roads that 'une des conséquences, c'est le progrès des messageries. De nouvelles catégories de voitures publiques apparaissent'.¹⁰⁰

The socio-economic impact of the inadequate transport infrastructure was a very real burden on the rural communities. In the 'Lettre sur la province' published in the *Le Voleur* of 15th December 1830, Andrew Watts finds that 'Le Observateur' 'makes a plea for greater understanding of the socio-economic problems impacting upon large areas of the country [...] indicating a serious, rather than satirical engagement with the socio-economic problems of rural France';¹⁰¹ a concern that Balzac shares in *Un Début dans la vie*.

Jean Marcel Groget notes that some nineteen years prior to the law of 1836 'les Messageries royales perdent le monopole dont elles bénéficiaient depuis 1805'.¹⁰² The abandonment of monopoly rights by the crown in 1817 resulted in a commercial liberation that had the immediate effect of stimulating competition and attracting investment in urban transport. Balzac was obviously aware of this development as he uses it for legal and commercial validation of the narrative events of 1822 concerning Pierrotin's transport operations:

⁹⁸ Pierre Barbéris, 'Introduction to *Un Debut dans la vie*' (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) I, p. 723

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 721.

¹⁰⁰ Henri Sée, *Histoire Économique de La France: Les temps modernes* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1942), II, p. 210.

¹⁰¹ Andrew Watts, *Preserving the Provinces* (Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 106-107

¹⁰² Jean Marcel Groget, 'Le temps de la route exclusive en France 1780-1850', *Histoire, Économie et Société*, (1992), Vol. II. Issue 11-4, pp. 597-618.

À cette époque le succès des Touchard stimula les spéculateurs. Pour les moindres localités des environs de Paris, il se s'élevait alors des entreprises de voitures belles, rapides et commodes, partant de Paris et y revenant à heures fixes, qui, sur tous les points, et dans un rayon de dix lieues, produisirent une concurrence acharnée (DV, I, 734).

The opposition between the transport operators and the laws and regulations that seek to control their activities provide Balzac with the grounds for Pierrotin's brushes with authority. When the law confers rights on the individual it simultaneously imposes obligations on others regarding those rights. Thus, when the law awards passengers in public transport certain rights it imposes a legal obligation on the service provider to satisfy those rights. The opposition between competing interests often results in either a manipulation of the laws themselves or actions that seek to circumvent the law. Research has shown that the nature of such conflicts in the Restoration period and their resolution under the legal process were matters of copious and available record. An example taken from those resources is the *Journal des lois et des arrêts de commerce*,¹⁰³ a commercial publication that began in 1808 and contained 'en un mot, tous les monuments de la Legislation et de la Jurisprudence sur les matières commerciales'. Amongst the publication's 'extraits du Journal de Jurisprudence de la Cour de Cassation' are references to the relevant Code, cases, and judgements concerning the '*Petites-Messageries*' and '*Grandes-Messageries*'. Such is the volume of legal record, analysis, and compilation of materials on public transport, its regulatory controls and operational digressions from 1808 onward, that the contemporaneous voice of law and commerce in this field and its later echoes would have been heard by the well-travelled, legally and commercially experienced Balzac.

The narrative events of *Un début dans la vie* provide more compelling evidence of Balzac's acquaintance with legal conflicts in this field and their dramatic potential. Research into legal and related publications from 1822 to 1837, the period of the novel's events, reveal that the areas of conflict that Balzac selects as dramatic resource have a sound and detailed base in both law and fact. Amongst the records is a *Code des Maîtres de Poste, des Entrepreneurs de Diligence et de Roulage et des Voitures En Général Par Terre et Par Eau*,¹⁰⁴ published by Roret

¹⁰³ *Journal des lois et des arrêts de commerce*, (1808)

<<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5439607j/f8.image.r>> [accessed 12 November 2013]

¹⁰⁴ A. Lanoë, *Code des Maîtres de Poste, des Entrepreneurs de Diligence et de Roulage et des Voitures En Général Par Terre et Par Eau* (Paris: Royet Librairie, 1827).

Librairie of Paris in 1827. The work, compiled by A. Lanoë, includes the laws, judgements and regulations in force from 1789-1827 and therefore covers the laws relative to the 1822 narrative period of the first *récit*. A reading of those regulatory powers reveals a legislative authority with detailed knowledge of working practices in the field, with a determination to retain central control over those practices and with state enforcement powers at its disposal. The underlying opposition between rights and obligations is thereby joined with a political opposition between market and government forces, a combination that provides a realistic historic and socio-economic backcloth to the narrative.

The reader sees Pierrotin placed in confrontation with the transport regulations by commercial necessity. He gets round the enforcement authorities by manipulating start times, pricing, routes, parcel distribution, passenger numbers, even vehicle construction. A selection from the operational rules and penalties gives a measure of the opposition he faces:

1. (Titre 111 Art. 50) Les diligences auront leurs départs fixés à jour et heure réglés et annoncés au public, ainsi que les jours d'arrivée aux lieux de leur destination.¹⁰⁵
2. (Titre 111 Art. 54). Les ballots et paquets seront enregistrés après avoir été pesés et numérotés en présence de ceux qui les apporteront.¹⁰⁶
3. (Titre 111, Art.54). Les Entrepreneurs sont tenus d'une indemnité envers les voyageurs.¹⁰⁷
4. (Titre 111, Art. 72[3]). L'Entrepreneur de voitures publiques qui, d'après la déclaration qu'il a faite, a assigné à ses voitures un nombre de places inférieur à celui des voyageurs qui y sont trouvés, ne peut être excusé sur le fondement que ses voitures ont été estampillées d'après ses déclarations.¹⁰⁸
5. (Titre 11 Art.3) La gendarmerie nationale sont autorisés à faire ou faire faire toutes perquisitions et saisies sur les messagers, piétons chargés de porter les dépêches, voitures de messageries et autres de même espèce, afin de constater les contreventions: à l'effet de quoi, ils pourront, s'ils le jugent nécessaire, se faire assister de la force armée.¹⁰⁹
6. (Titre 111 Art. 72) Tout Entrepreneur convaincu d'avoir omis de faire sa déclaration ou d'en avoir fait une fausse, sera condamné à la confiscation des voitures, harnais, et à une amende.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

7. (Titre 11 Art. 9) Les Entrepreneurs de voitures libres et messageries sont *personnellement* responsables des contraventions de leurs postillons, conducteurs, porteurs et courriers.¹¹¹

Balzac does not detail the actual laws and regulations that influence Pierrotin's commercial conduct. Rather, he describes the observable actions that result and places them in a socio-economic context. The reader recognises the underlying legal presence and its authority from the familiar behavioural patterns they provoke although the laws themselves remain known only to Pierrotin and the Police. Reader recognition of those latent powers is partially glimpsed through the 'annonces au public'. Balzac also presents Pierrotin's working practices alongside the reaction they attract from the passengers and the local community. This provides the reader with additional evidence of the tension between law and commerce that stimulates such responses. Whilst cause is commonly, but not necessarily reliably, deduced from observed effects, Balzac offers the reader a series of actions that has an undisclosed but very real connection with specific and existing legal obligations.

The introduction to Pierrotin sees him, in a purposeful deprivation of passenger rights, delaying his departure from Saint Denis in order to maximise his passenger income. In doing so, he acts in contravention of passengers' rights to a service with 'départs fixés à jour et heure réglés'. Those rights and the others described in the extracts are all evidenced in the narrative events of *Un début de la vie* and offer the reader a justification for Pierrotin's working practices. The legal controls are such that they act in restraint of trade whilst simultaneously imposing additional costs on operators. A grant of rights to the passengers, one that includes protection for their property while it is in transit, imposes indirect costs to meet procedural obligations that are designed to protect those rights, where 'les ballots et paquets seront enregistrés après avoir été pesés et numérotés'. Those costs are increased by the additional financial burden of mandatory insurance cover to protect through 'une indemnité envers les voyageurs' imposed on 'les entrepreneurs'. The restriction of passenger numbers to ensure safe passage also restricts income. That restriction is further exacerbated by the costly obligation of keeping ongoing records of occupancy rates.

It is clear from the extracts that the commercial temptation to falsify those records is also anticipated by the law, as are the mitigating circumstances that will

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 19.

be claimed by the offending operator. The law is shown to both impose obligation and to seek to prevent breach where ‘après la déclaration [...] un nombre de places inférieur à celui des voyageurs qui y sont trouvés, ne peut être excusé’. The final legal authority is the imposition of penalty, such as ‘la confiscation des voitures, harnais, et à une amende’. These are formidable sanctions, enforceable by ‘la gendarmerie nationale’ and ‘la force armée’ and potentially ruinous. Titre 11 (Art. 9) is an early example of strict liability, where ‘les entrepreneurs de voitures libres et messageries sont *personnellement* responsables’ for the actions of others involved in the carriage process. This is a burden almost impossible to control or alleviate and, together with the other obligations and penalties imposed, provides the fundamental tension between Pierrotin’s commercial enterprise and political initiative in addition to the commercial competition already felt by ‘les petites entreprises, manacées par des spéculateurs’ (DV, I, 734). It is the two oppositions, between rights and obligations, necessities and boundaries, that Balzac adapts in the opening récit and invites the reader to question the morality of deceit and its development in the *vol décent*.

Pierrotin’s position and his development of the *coucou* reflect a period in French provincial public transport when technical and financial innovation were to create new opportunities for development. However, the potential for commercial exploitation of transport was not fulfilled during the period of the narrative events in *Un début dans la vie*, but was still, as were the railways, ‘dans un avenir aujourd’hui peu éloigné’ (DV, I, 733). Balzac does however provide the reader with early evidence of change and of the deeper apprehensions that arise from the anticipation of imminent and fundamental social and commercial restructuring.

Appropriately, he does not confine the narrative to the impact of technical innovation and capital distribution, the two post-industrial revolution forces that will drive commercial development. Instead, his narrative concentrates on Pierrotin’s relationship with his local community and its effect upon his business practices. These practices indicate the presence and influence of a distinct brand of socio-cultural resource that is non-monetary. The narrator highlights the parochial nature of this resource, with its reliance upon local knowledge and personal relationships, when he writes, ‘l’entrepreneur, à la fois conducteur et propriétaire de la voiture, [...] était un aubergiste du pays dont les êtres, les choses et les intérêts lui étaient familiers’ (DV, I, 734).

Whilst local knowledge and personal contacts support the development of Pierrotin's business, providing him with a form of capital that emerges from shared communal circumstances and regional affiliation, they also create a parochial environment in which a blurring of moral boundaries is nurtured. In a direct address to the reader, the narrator mirrors the alliance between Pierrotin and 'le pays entier'. Balzac reveals his position as gate-keeper between the determinist forces of economic change and the ethical moral force of his view of humanity.

Pierrotin et son collègue régnaient donc de Paris à L'Isle-Adam, aimés par le pays entier. [...] Quand Pierrotin partait de L'Isle-Adam son camarade revenait de Paris, [...] et *vice versa*. Il est inutile de parler du concurrent. Pierrotin possédait les sympathies du pays. [...] Qu'il vous suffise donc de savoir que les deux voituriers vivaient en bonne intelligence, se faisant une loyale guerre se disputant les habitants par de bons procédés (DV, I, 736).

Balzac captures the tension here between the economic forces of change and moral social imperatives. The mutually beneficial business alliance finds itself running alongside a newly formed sharing of information between the narrator and reader in 'qu'il vous suffise donc de savoir'. Nourished locally in shared time, place and culture, between Pierrotin and his co-transporter, the alliance can be justified on purely commercial grounds. It is a sound business practice that maximises available resources and interests without incurring additional costs. However, whilst this is primarily a business association it is also a form of class association. Within financial circles, that type of association was designed to safeguard monetary privilege. Here, Balzac shows the same type of exclusive association arising from the financial deprivation of the petit bourgeois. We see, in both responses, a shared, instinctive resort to 'peer protection' in the face of danger. This type of action is redolent of a natural world order where a basic instinct for security harnesses forces of common interest to its cause. Balzac sees the same instinctive forces still active, but modified in style, within the new social order of the Restoration; and this evolutionary process becomes a recurring theme in the world of *La Comédie humaine*.

The social capital of 'les sympathies du pays', being 'aimés par le pays entier' and the 'loyale guerre' against "les Messageries Touchard" are not responses that are confined to commercial competition. They are also representative of a class conflict between an emergent rural and provincial social class that is petit bourgeois, and a recently established commercial bourgeoisie from Paris. For Pierrotin, the denial of access to investment capital marks the commercial limitations of his local

business milieu. He looks to self, then to extended family and friends for the purchase of his new transport: ‘l’ambitieux messenger avait épuisé toutes ses ressources et tout son crédit. Sa femme, son beau-père et ses amis s’étaient saignés. [...] Faute de mille francs, il s’exposait à perdre les deux mille francs’ (DV, I, 743). This exposure to loss provides a motive for the *vol décent*. Social injustice triggers a remedial action that the reader easily accommodates through a movement toward a morality based on socio-economic reality, rather than one reliant upon religious ethics.

The narrator’s moral perspective sanctions this corrective measure with silence. The absence of a direct judgement, by either narrator or author, on the morality of Pierrotin’s actions, invites the reader to draw a conclusion from the evidence provided in the narrative. That evidence, with its emphasis on the burden of family responsibility coupled with a clear duty to discharge that responsibility, implies the narrator’s silent sanction of deceit in those circumstances. Balzac’s voice is one that adopts and asserts many theoretical positions but, as Barbéris confirms, it also assures that ‘le roman produit sa propre philosophie et dégage ses propres conclusions. Il déclasse une aristocratie gangrenée. Il démasque la démocratie libérale [...] et une bourgeoisie engagée sur la voie de la trahison’.¹¹² This authorial integrity coaxes the reader toward recognition of a new social reality. Pierrotin’s remedial measures are actions morally sanctioned within L’Isle-Adam, a pardonable and expedient correction of an uneven and unjustified distribution of capital. Tolerance is made manifest in ‘l’affection des gens du pays’ (DV, I, 736). However, as Pierrotin moves to the manipulation of starting times for ‘cette voiture, moitié diligence, moitié coucou’ (Ibid.) he moves closer to a direct confrontation with ‘la loi des départs’ (DV, I, 737) and the opposition between commercial and legal interest.

Cette méthode offrait à Pierrotin la possibilité d’empocher le prix de deux places pour une, quand un habitant du pays venait de bonne heure demander une place appartenant à un *oiseau de passage* qui, par malheur, était en retard. Cette élasticité ne trouverait certes pas grâce aux yeux des puristes en morale; mais Pierrotin et son collègue la justifiaient par la *dureté des temps*, par leurs pertes pendant la saison d’hiver, par la nécessité d’avoir bientôt de meilleures voitures, et enfin par l’exacte observation de la loi écrite sur les bulletins dont les exemplaires excessivement rares ne se donnaient qu’aux voyageurs de passage assez obstinés pour en exiger (DV, I, 737).

¹¹² Pierre Barbéris, *Mythes Balzaciens* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972), p. 13.

In ‘cette élasticité’, the narrator offers the reader a moveable notion of morality, one capable of responding to the new world order of constant change. He softens the hard reality of circumstances under the euphemisms of misfortune and ‘*la dureté des temps*’ (DV, I, 737) whilst at the same time inviting an accommodation with ‘les yeux des puristes en morale’.¹¹³

However, ‘la possibilité d’empocher le prix de deux places pour une’ (Ibid.), when exercised, is a purposeful financial gain taken against both the moral and the legal code. Its silent sanction by the narrator and his sustained sympathy for Pierrotin, are indicative of a moral relativism that accommodates financial expediency in the face of financial necessity. The narrator has already secured sympathy for this strategy by making the reader an acquiescent partner in Pierrotin’s dilemma, pointing to a Balzacian primacy for pragmatism over ideology.

The financial necessity to maximise income is brought directly into conflict with the invocation of business realities that deepen the moral dilemma: ‘*la dureté des temps*’ (DV, I, 737) the ‘*pertes pendant la saison d’hiver*’ (Ibid.) and the economic ‘*nécessité d’avoir bientôt de meilleures voitures*’ (Ibid.). Ultimately, the legal validity of the *vol décent* lies in its exploitation of a weakness in the law and Pierrotin here uses a literal interpretation of the regulations to ensure that there is a ‘*conformité des actions extérieures avec les lois*’.¹¹⁴ His conformity is expedient, as it ensures that there is no legal redress, but it does not avoid the reality of an evasion of legislative intent. Indeed, it can be argued against Pierrotin that the purposeful and contrived nature of the deceit increases his level of moral responsibility.

In Pierrotin’s development of the *coucou*, with its provision of an excess of seating designed to maximise his income without incurring the additional tax due from larger vehicles, Balzac places him at the outer limits of tax avoidance. Those limits are crossed when Pierrotin moves from avoidance to evasion, in making ‘*ces habitants du poulailler [...] descendre avant chaque village de la route où se trouvait un poste de gendarmerie*’ (DV, 1, 739). This is an evasive action ostensibly ‘*concernant la sûreté des voyageurs*’ (Ibid.), one that even a compliant local police force cannot condone: ‘*la surcharge interdite par les ordonnances [...] était trop flagrante pour que le gendarme, essentiellement ami de Pierrotin, pût se dispenser*

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Charles Nodier, ‘La décence’ in *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française*, (Paris: Lebigre Frères, 1832).

de dresser procès-verbal de cette contravention' (Ibid.). The series of events that led up to evasion, events viewed by the locals as artful and cunning, even amusing, also expose a local, isolationist mentality. Avoidance recognises the law, but seeks to sidestep its obligations by relying on anomalies in the drafting of the law, whereas evasion seeks to by-pass the law altogether. Despite Balzac's avowed allegiance to the 'deux vérités éternelles: la Religion, La Monarchie' (Avant-propos, I, 13), in other words a religious moral order and an established legislative authority, he does suggest there is a point at which deceit can be accommodated. This is a moral position of compromise where, under the pressure of social reality, the use of deceit can be justified. The narrator however again makes no direct moral judgement, but the silence allows the reader to acquiesce in Pierrotin's actions unimpeded.

Balzac does not confine Pierrotin to the role of competent coach driver. He also shows him to be an aspiring entrepreneur with the capacity to act beyond the limitations of both physicality and convention. 'Leste, décidé, Pierrotin [...] imprimait, par la mobilité de sa physionomie, à sa figure rougeaude et faite aux intempéries, une expression narquoise qui ressemblait à un air spirituel' (DV, I, 737). This is the portrait of a skilled, agile, self contained man who also displays a reflective capacity that goes beyond physicality. Yet he remains a man grounded in his work. His clothing, 'comme celui des messagers du second ordre, consistait en de bonnes grosses bottes pesantes de clous, faites à L'Isle-Adam' (Ibid.) the inference being that the locally based petit bourgeois is loyal, solid and reliable. Balzac juxtaposes Pierrotin's physical appearance with disclosures from his surrounding family, historic and socio-economic influences. Such influences, according to Auerbach, determine and shape individual character in *La Comédie humaine*. From the family milieu the narrator discloses that Pierrotin is already burdened with obligations: 'Pierrotin, homme de quarante ans, était déjà père de famille'. Family responsibility will also be offered by Moreau in mitigation of his deceit, a defence that will be accepted by Sérisy. The strength of the mitigation suggests that, for Balzac, a level of deceit used in the service of family deserves recognition of instinctual parental response. The nature of that affiliation, shown when 'ce brave garçon avait succédé à son père' (Ibid.) brings with it responsibility for the financial welfare of the family. The significance of these domestic ties and that of class allegiance is also recognised in Pierrotin's marriage, made within his own class and his own small business sector; a sharing of values and means. It is no surprise to the

reader, already made sympathetic towards Pierrotin, that he meets his obligations when ‘après avoir épousé la fille d’un petit aubergiste, il donna de l’extension au service de L’Isle-Adam’ (DV, I, 737).

Subjected to historic forces, Pierrotin is forced to leave the cavalry in 1815, ‘à l’époque du licenciement’ (Ibid.), and brings from his military training a capacity to apply ‘une exactitude militaire’ (Ibid.) to his business dealings. It also brings an acceptance and reinforcement of class distinctions: ‘L’état militaire avait laissé dans les mœurs de Pierrotin un grand respect pour les supériorités sociales, et l’habitude de l’obéissance aux gens des hautes classes’ (DV, I, 738). But Pierrotin balances this respect for class superiority with a sentimental logic, such that ‘s’il se familiarisait volontiers avec les petits bourgeois, il respectait toujours les femmes, à quelque classe sociale qu’elles appartenissent’ (Ibid.). Acceptance of class differentiation combined with a sentimental all-embracing respect for womankind, are characteristic of both military and petit bourgeois *doxa*. This is a faith that can easily replace reason with unjustified certainty. A similar conflict, between reason and morality arises when the ‘exactitude militaire’ allows Pierrotin to recognise passengers as commodities, or ‘comme des paquets qui marchaient, et qui dès lors exigeaient moins de soins que les autres, l’objet essentiel de la messagerie’ (DV, I, 738). It could certainly be argued that this is a sound business practice, one that prioritises income and distances emotion from the commercial process. Nevertheless, in L’Isle-Adam and environs, we have seen that the inhabitants, in their dealings with Pierrotin, share in a class culture nourished by sensibilities, rather than by rationalism, thereby limiting their own commercial opportunities.

In an acute observation of social manners Balzac enriches this representation of a particular social and class milieu with repeated use of colloquial words and phrases. They have the effect of reinforcing a sense of communal identity that distinguishes the people of L’Isle-Adam and surrounding villages from those of the Parisian metropolis. The communal personification of his coach indicates a personal and situational familiarity in ‘*La voiture à Pierrotin*’ (DV, I, 736), with its ‘construction bizarre, appelée *la voiture à quatre roues*’ (DV, I, 739), a construction whose purpose was known locally and that delivered ‘un bruit si considérable, que souvent à L’Isle-Adam on disait “Voilà Pierrotin!”’ (DV, I, 740) This is a familiarity that implies an active comradeship amongst the locals and ‘selon l’expression du peuple, de *bonnes pâtes d’hommes*’ (DV, I, 736). The narrator also evokes the

parochial bonding represented by the colloquialisms derived from the native rural environment: ‘*un oiseau de passage*’ for the passenger, the ‘*nom de lapins*’ (DV, I, 739) for passengers sitting up beside the driver, the ‘*habitants du poulailler*’ (Ibid.) who had to leave the coach before it reached the police post.

Néanmoins, à force de *brouetter le monde*, pour employer une de ses expressions, il avait fini par regarder ses voyageurs comme des paquets qui marchaient, et qui dès lors exigeaient moins de soins que les autres, l’objet essentiel de la messagerie (DV, I, 738).

The phrase ‘*brouetter le monde*’ offers a visually emphatic, yet ludic image of the commodification of humanity that accompanies the new socio-economic order of post-Industrial Revolution France. It represents the transition from ‘*ses voyageurs*’ to ‘*des paquets qui marchaient*’, the personal to the inanimate. In such a movement Balzac demonstrates that a morality designed to serve human interest is being superseded by the processes of financial interest, where the deceit and deprivation of the *vol décent* operate as functional tools of capitalism at the small business level.

Whilst Pierrotin will see his customers ‘*serrés comme des harengs dans une tonne*’ (DV, I, 738) he still retains another form of exchange with ‘*insiders*’ which boosts a sense of comradeship and defines a personal and regional identity that creates a form of social capital. The *vol décent* teases out a form of capital that results from a consolidation of class and regional marginality. The social nature of this form of capital indicates a class rather than an individual interest and conforms to Bourdieu’s understanding that ‘*individuals who share a position in social space are just individuals. To exist as a class they must ‘form’ as such, acting and identifying collectively*’.¹¹⁵ In the class support for Pierrotin collective sentiment is shown overpowering morality and the reader senses a group identity characterised and limited by its regionalism. The support comes from a peripheral, disadvantaged class that establishes its status by ‘ *nibbling at the edges*’ of Parisian opportunity and the notion of Parisian superiority. This is a group that consolidates its disadvantages with small victories that bring a sense of self-satisfaction but are ultimately the signs of an inability to overturn commercial disadvantage. Balzac shows the social positioning of the local police ‘*essentiellement ami de Pierrotin*’ (DV, I, 739) as illustrative of this ineffectiveness. Unable to confront the law themselves, for fear of retribution from their employer institution and thus placing their livelihoods in danger, the police content themselves with gestures of support, avoiding

¹¹⁵ Michael Grenfell, (ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2008), p. 93.

unequivocal supportive action and ‘turning a blind eye’ when it is propitious for them to do so. However, there is a purposeful attempt at success but, as in the *vol décent*, it relies on a cunning settlement with compromise. For Pierrotin, change is a tinkering with established positions but in the conflict between the comte de Sérisy and his steward Moreau, the reader recognises change operating at a deeper level.

1.3.3 Moreau and the Bourgeois *vol décent*

Balzac portrays Pierrotin as a man of family and class loyalty who is diligent, opportunistic and inventive in his business dealings. However, he is placed in a circumscribed market of opportunity, one in which restrictions of class are joined with the inability to raise capital. Pierrotin and Moreau operate in the same rural, provincial setting and both, albeit relying on different grounds for justification, utilise the *vol décent*. However, they provide a significant contrast in modus operandi and potential for social and financial advance. Moreau is a member of the emergent ‘professional’ middle classes who seek advancement in a market open to capital accumulation and speculation. He aspires to membership of a class that ‘reposait sur la conviction que cette bourgeoisie était ouverte à tous les talents, à tous les mérites, à toutes les initiatives’.¹¹⁶ The steward holds a pivotal position in the historic, moral and social shift from entitlement by birth to entitlement by merit. His potential for financial gain arises from his access to the market and his capacity to exploit that position. In Moreau the reader observes professional status employed in the exploitation of land and property management.

The Sérisy/Moreau relationship in *Un début dans la vie* directly confronts the inherent moral dilemma captured in the *vol décent* and contextualises the activity within the changing financial and social relationships of the Restoration period. In the passage below the new bourgeois professional steward Moreau is seen using his position to actively participate in commercial chicanery:

Dès que le régisseur [Moreau] eut goûté au fruit délicieux de la Propriété, sa conduite resta toujours la plus probe du monde en apparence; mais il ne perdit plus une seule occasion d’augmenter sa fortune clandestine, et l’intérêt de ses trois enfants lui servit d’émollient pour éteindre les ardeurs de sa probité. Néanmoins, il faut lui rendre cette justice, que s’il accepta des pots-de-vins, s’il eut soin de lui dans les marchés, s’il poussa ses droits jusqu’à l’abus, aux termes du Code il restait honnête homme, et aucune preuve n’eût pu justifier une accusation portée contre lui. Selon la jurisprudence des moins voleuses cuisinières de Paris, il partageait entre le comte et lui les profits dus à son savoir-faire. Cette manière d’arrondir sa fortune était un cas de conscience, voilà tout. Actif, entendant bien plus de soin les occasions de procurer de bonnes acquisitions, qu’il y gagnait toujours un large présent. Presles rapportait

¹¹⁶ Adeline Daumard, *Les Bourgeois et La Bourgeoisie en France depuis 1815*, p. 45.

soixante-douze mille francs en sac. Aussi le mot du pays, à dix lieues à la ronde, était-il: "M. de Sérisy a dans Moreau un second lui-même!" (DV, I, 752-3)

The importance of wealth in the new world of the bourgeoisie is established in the opening phrase: 'Dès que le régisseur eut goûté au fruit délicieux de la Propriété' with its biblical association implying a new god of wealth whose enticing pleasures are sweet. In the absence of any notion of sin and retribution there is a silent implication of satisfaction in the here and now, a new capitalist heaven created by wealth and now open to all. The *vol décent* illustrates a significant shift in the distribution of wealth, accompanied by a moral re-alignment already presaged in *Les Marana*.

It is a commonly held belief, in the world of *La Comédie humaine*, one shared by the fictional Constance Birotteau, that wealth can buy immunity from life's vicissitudes. A financially secure retirement spent in unchanging peace and quiet is imagined. In fact, the Balzacian world also reveals that financial success breeds a devotion to the accumulation of more wealth, such that Moreau 'ne perdit plus une seule occasion d'augmenter sa fortune clandestine'. In turn, the law of money requires that accumulated wealth be protected. Part of that process lies in its legal identity and the social sanction that authorises its status and power. Thus, for wealth questionably obtained, the *vol décent*, with its inherent legal and social sanction of deceit, offers the commercial world a sound vehicle for the transfer of wealth. In Moreau's theft from Sérisy's estate 'il restait honnête homme, et aucune preuve n'eût pu justifier une accusation portée contre lui'. Moreau's probity 'la plus probe du monde' is 'en apparence' only. It is the acceptable form of his deception that protects him and allows 'd'augmenter sa fortune clandestine'.

In the phrase 'il partageait entre le comte et lui les profits dus à son savoir-faire', the Balzacian narrator asserts a bourgeois justification for change. He reverses the roles of master and servant, with the servant determining the allocation of profit. This allocation is on the basis of profit accrued due to the commercial expertise of the servant and not because of ownership. This type of profit share rewards the bourgeois parvenu with a transferable asset. In Balzac's Post-Revolution order, by operating within the restrictions of the *vol décent*, profit is re-assigned according to the contribution made towards its accrual and not according to ownership.

Having obtained some wealth, Moreau, like his predecessors in wealth, works to keep what he has and to invest further in order to increase his capital and assets. To do this he requires a social, commercial and legal environment whose stability he can rely upon. Like César Birotteau he asserts his probity to safeguard his new social and financial status but unlike Birotteau he uses probity as a device to facilitate deceit, rather than one that ensures conformity with established legal and social obligation. Thus, ‘sa conduite resta toujours la plus probe du monde en apparence’ and in this deception Balzac exposes something of the demands that are required to be met in order to satisfy business reality; that the law of money, for the victor as well as for the victim in the war of wealth creation, is without moral obligation.

Balzac deepens and complicates the simple binary opposition between monetary acquisition and morality by revealing the background to the Moreau/Sérisy relationship in which mutual obligations are shown to have arisen from a different moral, socio-economic and historic climate. Moreau’s father is ‘un procureur de province, devenu à la Révolution procureur-syndic à Versailles. En cette qualité, Moreau père avait presque sauvé les biens et la vie de MM. de Sérisy père et fils’ (DV, I, 751). Moreau himself had been condemned to death for actions against Napoleon and Sérisy secured his freedom, subsequently offering him the post of private secretary. The significance of these interactions is that they incur for Sérisy an *ancien régime* notion of a debt of honour that had to be repaid, whereas for Moreau they come to create opportunities for financial gain. In *La Comédie humaine* in general and in *Un début dans la vie* in particular, such oppositions arise as a result of individuals being exposed to different formative influences. Nevertheless, for Balzac the notion of the potential superiority of the individual still prevails for those capable of transcending the powers of circumstance.

The appointment of Moreau as steward of Sérisy’s estate was an action of *ancien régime* paternalism. ‘Vous ne ferez pas fortune [...] mais vous serez heureux, car je me charge de votre bonheur’ (DV, I, 751), says Sérisy. The ‘je me charge de votre bonheur’ associates ultimate authority with a concept of honour. However, Balzac has already planted the seeds that will undermine this aristocratic privilege. Moreau’s father has provided his son with an example of how to progress in society from a lowly position, (Balzac’s own father in this regard is immediately recalled), and it has already born fruit in his success as Sérisy’s private secretary. ‘Depuis trois

ou quatre ans, Moreau possédait la clef de ses affaires, il était intelligent; car, avant la Révolution, il avait étudié la chicane dans l'étude de son père' (DV, I, 751). After eight years of diligent service and a wife and three children to take care of, Moreau accepted 'd'un marchand de bois une somme de vingt-cinq mille francs pour lui faire conclure, avec augmentation d'ailleurs, un bail d'exploitation des bois dependant de la terre de Presles, pour douze ans' (DV, I, 752). The yield from this illegal appropriation of rights, together with sixty thousand francs of savings allows Moreau to buy a farm. He prudently places the property in his wife's name, representing the funds socially as an inheritance from his wife's great aunt. His justification for the action is that 'il n'aurait pas de retraite, il était père de famille, le comte lui devait bien cette somme pour dix ans bientôt d'administration' (DV, I, 752). These reasons reflect a call upon socio-economic necessity, duty and fairness; they are not mitigating factors offered in acknowledgement of an illegality. The element of fairness seeks due reward for personal expertise rather than for service. Duty is the total acceptance of individual responsibility for family welfare and the necessity is financial. This is a picture of bourgeois values meeting bourgeois aspiration and bypassing the established order.

Moreau's calls on money expand at a rate required to meet his increased aspirations. He places 'ses bénéfices sur le Grand-Livre en arrondissant sa pelote dans le plus profond secret' whilst at the same time 'il faisait si bien le pauvre auprès du comte, qu'il avait obtenu deux bourses entières pour ses enfants au collège Henri IV' (DV, I, 753). These deceits fulfil two needs, the obtaining of funds to consolidate his wealth and a social consolidation of his gains in the form of status. They are also made in a manner that makes the deceit invisible and therefore without need of social or legal sanction. With his increased financial power from the *vol décent*, income from the farm and further acquisitions, he has a fortune of around two hundred and eighty thousand francs that yields an annual income of sixteen thousand francs. Moreau now demands respect and admiration of a type previously awarded to the landed aristocracy. It is a response to monetary power felt by potential and actual beneficiaries: 'Brave homme' says Pierrotin of Moreau. 'Il vient souvent à Paris, il prend toujours ma voiture, il me donne un bon pourboire, et il vous a toujours un tas de commissions pour Paris'. The admiration for Moreau is a sentiment that is also acknowledged by the valet. In 'J'espère pour Moreau qu'il a fait son beurre' (DV, I, 745). Balzac shows again that wealth brings with it an often

unearned respect and attraction because its acquisition offers hope to those in its proximity. The impact of Nucingen's reputation for wealth on his investors¹¹⁷ recalls exactly such an attraction, one so great that the appearance of wealth is seen as a reality.

The unqualified social acceptance of Moreau's wealth, his and his wife's adoption of a new social manner whereby 'ils avaient d'autant plus l'air de gens riches gérant pour leur plaisir la propriété d'un ami' (DV, I, 810), act to further consolidate belief in their probity and status. The value of Moreau's *vol décent* is that it effects a financial and social change while retaining the necessary external appearance of integrity and stability. But the true test of Moreau's capacity to act successfully in the world of business is made when his deceit is exposed and he is dismissed. Moreau's actions reflect historic and social forces that also provide him with a justification for deceit. Conversely, Sérisy asserts a moral and intellectual authority in support of his actions, one which purports to operate above the limitations of circumstance.

1.3.4 Sérisy: Un homme supérieur

In the character of Sérisy, Balzac creates an exceptional individual who potentially appears capable of acting outside the socio-economic conditioning that directs Pierrotin and Moreau. Sérisy is an aristocrat by the privilege of birth, with an additional authority that is founded in his estates and political status, where 'sans faste personnel, sans ambition même, il possédait une grande influence dans les affaires publiques. Rien ne se faisait d'important en politique sans qu'il fût consulté' (DV, I, 748). However, the significant aristocratic perspective that he represents in the narrative is of quite a different type from that of political power and ownership. Speaking of La Rochefoucauld, Lytton Strachey captures this form of the aristocratic when he identifies the author of *Maximes et Réflexions* as displaying a 'supreme detachment which gives him a place either above or below humanity'.¹¹⁸ La Rochefoucauld's work shows a supreme detachment in the epigrammatic form that allowed his talent to flourish on 'the flawless surface of his workmanship [...] an infinite ingenuity and a very bitter love of truth',¹¹⁹ but it was his independence

¹¹⁷ Please see Chapter 2.

¹¹⁸ Lytton Strachey, *Literary Essays* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p.101.

¹¹⁹ Lytton Strachey, *Landmarks in French Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962[1912]), p. 88.

from socio-economic influences that permitted its exclusive development. In *La Comédie humaine* the exceptional in human behaviour arises from a combination of influences, inherent, social and historic, yet it succeeds by the individual's capacity to disengage from external influence: 'On comprend que les honneurs, le tapage de la faveur, les succès du monde, étaient indifférents à un homme de cette trempe' (DV, I, 748).

The apparent neutrality toward any particular political persuasion suggests that Sérisy's ability to retain high office is due to a talent that stands above the current political aim. He is a social and literary sophisticate: 'à l'âge de vingt-deux ans, il s'y fit remarquer par de très beaux rapports sur des affaires délicates' (DV, I, 747). This precocious intelligence is played out in the highest political forums where Voltairean reason appears to dominate emotion and necessitates the keeping of an appropriate distance from direct socio-economic entanglements. Sérisy's intellectual prowess is evidenced in the detail of his continued appointment to high office despite changes of governments: 'Il fut élu [...] au Conseil des Cinq-Cents' at the time of the Revolution, then the 'Premier Consul [...] le plaça dans le Conseil d'État et lui donna l'une des administrations les plus désorganisées à reconstituer' (Ibid.), subsequently appointing him as Minister of State. As Emperor, Napoleon made him 'comte et sénateur [et] successivement le proconsulat de deux différents royaumes'. (DV, I, 747) And 'quand les Bourbons revinrent' [...] après la seconde chute de l'Empereur, il redevint naturellement membre du Conseil privé, fut nommé vice-président du Conseil d'État' (DV, I, 748). Sérisy's talent is supported by his capacity for work and focus in what might well be a moment of admonishment of Balzac himself!

Cette noble existence, vouée d'abord au travail, avait fini par devenir un travail continu. Le comte se levait dès quatre heures du matin en toute saison, travaillait jusqu'à midi, vaquait à ses fonctions de pair de France ou vice-président du Conseil d'État, et se couchait à neuf heures (DV, I, 748).

From this background of purposeful detachment, a weakness emerges when 'en 1814, fatigué de travaux constants, M. de Sérisy, dont la santé délabrée exigeait du repos, résigna tous ses emplois'. Balzac places alongside this revelation a comparison with Napoleon, one of his 'êtres d'exception', whom he describes as 'ce maître infatigable'. The comparison immediately reduces Sérisy to the second Balzacian rank but also raises for the reader the anticipation of other disclosures that may further modify his status. Such an apprehension is seen to be well founded

when the narrator immediately discloses the nature of his marriage. Sérisy has married a rich widow and Balzac describes the union as ‘convenable comme noblesse’ with its attachment to fortune and the consolidation of social status: ‘Ce mariage [...] doubla la fortune déjà considérable du comte de Sérisy, qui devint beau-frère du ci-devant marquis de Rouvre’ (DV, I, 747). Although the narrator initially shows the union as a pragmatic bonding, the reality for Sérisy is that it is an emotional attachment:

Amoureux de sa femme avant de l’épouser, cette passion avait résisté chez le comte à tous les malheurs intimes de son mariage avec une veuve, toujours maîtresse d’elle-même avant comme après sa seconde union, et qui jouissait d’autant plus de sa liberté, que M. de Sérisy avait pour elle l’indulgence d’une mère pour un enfant gâté (DV, I, 748).

His work takes on a different perspective when the reader learns that ‘ses constants travaux lui servaient de bouclier contre des chagrins de cœur’, a clear indication that the intellectual reasoning that is so characteristic of his political life cannot ease his domestic pain. He also becomes aware that his wife’s extra-marital activity and his private sadness have been exposed. ‘Il comprenait d’ailleurs combien eût été ridicule sa jalousie aux yeux du monde qui n’eût guère admis une passion conjugale chez un vieil administrateur’ (DV, I, 748). He has suffered the deprivation of a social capital designed to protect both his public and domestic reputation against the glare of reality.

The nature of Sérisy’s intellectual detachment, applied in this private/public context, is captured by Christopher Prendergast. Writing of *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* he says:

The ‘judicial oath’ and its counterpart, the commercial ‘contract’, are for Balzac the characteristic forms of human negotiation and exchange in the modern world, displacing and despoiling the more informal and natural network of bonds and mutualities (such as those invested in the ‘law of hospitality’) perceived as belonging to a lost pre-Revolutionary world, and more precisely, in the immediate historical juxtaposition that always returns in Balzac, to what he sees as the ease and poise of the culture of the *ancien régime*.¹²⁰

Comte Sérisy enjoys an aristocratic, pre-Revolution, *ancien régime* inheritance with its ‘ease and poise’, ‘en ligne directe du fameux président Hugret anobli sous François 1^{er}’ (DV, I, 746). This status has consolidated by his father, ‘premier président d’un parlement avant la Révolution’ (DV, I, 747). Indeed this background provides the source of much of his power of detachment, bearing in mind that both

¹²⁰ Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1986]), p. 83.

his wealth and position exert forces capable of isolating the individual from society. However, in the contrast between the ‘law of hospitality’ and ‘commercial contract’ Balzac shows that detachment to be compromised. In the turmoil of the new world order, he recognises that personal, social and financial interests are played out in a vortex of competition. Those competing interests, in terms of the values of ‘the lost pre-Revolutionary world’, and those of the ‘modern world’, are reflected in the confrontation between Sérisy and Moreau.

When the former reveals that he knows of Moreau’s misdeeds, he says to him: ‘C’est impardonnable. Blesser un homme dans ses intérêts, ce n’est rien; mais l’attaquer dans son cœur! Oh! vous ne savez pas ce que vous avez fait!’ (DV, I, 823) Sérisy is drawing the line here between questions of financial practice and matters of honour. For him honour is superior to finance. The line he draws reflects a hierarchy of values. Monetary values are shown as lower-order matters when measured against the primacy of Prendergast’s notion of Balzac’s ‘natural network of bonds and realities’. Business is reduced to mere practicalities that can be dismissed, Sérisy can say to Moreau of his *vol décent*:

Eh bien, monsieur, je vous pardonnais d’avoir deux cent cinquante mille francs de fortune, gagnés en dix-sept ans. Je comprends cela. Vous m’eussiez chaque fois demandé ce que vous me preniez, ou ce qui vous était offert, je vous l’aurais donné [...] Je vous laisse ce que vous avez [...] et je vous oublierai (DV, I, 822-823).

The relegation of the monetary order in favour of a ‘higher’ order of association is emphasised by giving Moreau both the funds he has misappropriated and the ultimate form of dismissal in ‘je vous oublierai’. The offender henceforth effectively ceases to exist. Further, this breach of financial trust is eclipsed, in Sérisy’s mind, by what he sees as Moreau’s betrayal of trust in the disclosure of his private and personal circumstances:

Écoutez, *monsieur* Moreau! Vous avez sans doute parlé de mes infirmités chez Mme Clapart, et vous avez ri chez elle, avec elle, de mon amour pour la comtesse de Sérisy; [...] vous qui connaissez combien j’aime Mme de Sérisy, avoir bavardé là-dessus devant un enfant, avoir livré mes secrets, mes affections à la risée d’une Mme Husson (DV, I, 822-823).

In this admonition, Sérisy expresses his belief in the sanctity of marital relationship. He demands an acknowledgment of his importance and individual superiority when he rebukes Moreau with a failure of deference ‘Mais vous qui savez mes travaux accomplis pour le pays, pour la France’ (DV, I, 822), This is a dubious call by Sérisy on patriotism here, a call which expects unquestioning approval.

Balzac has already expressed, with publication of *Eugénie Grandet* in 1833, the primacy of money in the modern world ‘où plus qu’en aucun autre temps, l’argent domine les lois, la politique et les mœurs’ (EG, III, 1101). He recognises that the process and manner of its acquisition influences the nature of human exchange and creates a cultural identity that is based on monetary values:

La figure de Grandet exploitant le faux attachement des deux familles, en tirant d’énormes profits, dominait ce drame et l’éclairait. N’était-ce pas le seul dieu moderne auquel on ait foi, l’Argent dans toute sa puissance, exprimé par une seule physionomie (EG, III, 1052).

The notion of ‘l’argent dans toute sa puissance’ has not overpowered Sérisy and he seeks to keep the money and honour separate while his awareness of communal needs accepts the necessity of both. He is not a man divorced from reality and he recognises how the ‘lower’ orders are responsive to appearance rather than substance. Before his meeting with Moreau and his subsequent meeting with Margueron, he also dresses to impress and intimidate, adopting an appearance that speaks of a superiority and a power that remains impervious to change. At the same time he colludes in the deception that privilege confers a stable social status. The success of that deception deprives the recipient of social opportunity.

Le comte avait mis un pantalon blanc et des bottes fines, un gilet blanc et un habit noir sur lequel brillait, à droite, le crachat des grand-croix de la Légion d’honneur; à gauche, à une boutonnière, pendait la Toison-d’Or au bout d’une chaîne d’or. Le cordon bleu ressortait vivement sur le gilet. Il avait lui-même arrangé ses cheveux, et s’était sans doute harnaché ainsi pour faire à Margueron les honneurs de Presles, et peut-être pour faire agir sur ce bonhomme le prestige de la grandeur (DV, I, 821).

For Sérisy the role of appearance and that of manner are essential tools in the maintenance of social order. They are signs that indicate stability and structure but also function to disguise reality. Their significance is felt when Sérisy instructs Moreau on social form:

Par dignité, pour moi, pour votre propre honneur, nous nous quitterons décentement, car je me souviens en ce moment de ce que votre père a fait pour le mien. [...] Soyez comme moi, calme. Ne vous donnez pas en spectacle aux sots. Surtout pas de galvaudages ni de chipoteries. Si vous n’avez plus ma confiance, tâchez de garder le decorum des gens riches (DV, I, 823).

‘Nous nous quitterons décentement’ requests a socially acceptable form of departure. The acceptable, in the social forum, is a form that does not disturb, that consolidates faith in a continuing stability. However, such behavioural forms create a *vol décent*. What is stolen from the victim is open access to a search for truth, an access denied by the social legitimisation of deceit. The purposeful nature of that deceit, in its adoption for the retention of the status quo, is captured in, ‘Ne vous donnez pas en

spectacle aux sots'. The need for Sérissy to maintain that status quo is signalled in 'tâchez de garder le decorum des gens riches' where Moreau is invited to perform in tune with his own aspirations. The instruction 'surtout pas de galvaudages ni de chipoteries' is given to protect individual detachment, a distancing from popular engagement. The use of manners, as a means of control that masquerades as courtesy, is arguably endemic in all societies. However, the social normalisation of deceit ensures a proliferation of the *vol décent*.

1.3.5 Deception in the Service of Family and Self

The compassion Moreau shows toward the former Mme Husson (now Mme Clapart), in an apparent deviation from type, prompts a narratorial digression that reflects on the relationship between the criminal and crime. It proposes that the connection between a criminal disposition and a criminal act is not necessarily an inevitable one.

Il n'existe pas, ou plutôt il existe rarement de criminel qui soit complètement criminel [...] En se constituant un capital par des voies plus ou moins licites, il est peu d'hommes qui ne se permettent quelques bonnes actions. [...] Par curiosité, par amour-propre, comme contraste, par hasard, tout homme a eu son moment de bienfaisance (DV, I, 760).

Behavioural practices are subject to circumstance and chance as well as self-interest. The observation implies that even apparently successful, questionable but sanctioned actions are not necessarily repeated but can be changed in form and intent by the forces that shape manners and morality. In Balzac's subsequent creation of an ambivalent deception, practised by Père Cardot, le premier commis, within his immediate family milieu, he displays deceit acting in the service of competing interests; a scenario in which unresolved and arguably unresolvable moral dilemmas arise. Irresolution questions the very notion of a fixed moral order, inviting the reader to consider the merit of moral judgements defined by competing social forces.

Oscar's hopes of succeeding Moreau at Presles being dashed, his mother Mme Clapart (formerly Mme Husson) seeks to secure Oscar's future through the good offices of his uncle, M. Jean-Jérôme Séverin Cardot, the widowed husband of Mlle Husson, sister of Oscar's deceased father. Cardot has had a successful business career founded on endeavour, chance and sound financial judgement:

Cardot, le premier commis du Cocon-d'Or, une des plus vieilles maisons de Paris avait acheté cet établissement en 1793, au moment où ses patrons étaient ruinés par le Maximum; et l'argent de la dot de Mlle Husson lui avait permis de faire une fortune presque colossale en dix ans (DV, I, 834).

The increased taxation and the curtailing of speculation caused by the imposition of 'le Maximum' results in the ruin of the owners of the Cocun-d'Or and melodramatically creates an opening for Cardot. The former chief clerk grasps his opportunity, with the additional benefit of his wife's dowry, buys the business and converts it into one of substantial fortune. Approaching his seventies, he considers the dispersal of his wealth:

Pour établir richement ses enfants, il avait eu l'idée ingénieuse de placer en viager une somme de trois cent mille francs sur la tête de sa femme et sur la sienne, ce qui lui produisait trente mille livres de rente. Quant à ses capitaux, il les avait partagés en trois dots de chacune quatre cent mille francs pour ses enfants (DV, I, 834-835).

Having divided his capital amongst his children he takes a joint life annuity on himself and his wife but does not disclose to his children either the investment or its yield. His reticence serves to disguise 'une vieillesse uniquement occupé de plaisir'. He acts behind a mask 'grave et poli, passait pour être presque froid, tant qu'il affichait de decorum, et une dévote l'eût appelé hypocrite' (DV, I, 836). The moral dilemma is raised by the suggestion of Cardot's hypocrisy but qualified by its attachment to the 'dévote' and the pious perspective of faith. The impersonality of 'presque froid', on the other hand, reflects a Voltairian rationale that accepts reason above emotion. The reasoning is effective:

Ce sage vieillard n'avait pas parlé de ses rentes viagères à ses enfants, qui, le voyant vivre si mesquinement songeaient tous qu'il s'était dépouillé de sa fortune pour eux, et redoublaient de soins et de tendresse. Aussi, parfois disait-il à ses fils «Ne perdez pas votre fortune, car je n'en ai point à vous laisser» (DV, I, 836).

The deceit acts on the minds of the children, with the effect that they increase care for their father. Whether that increased solicitude by the 'victims' can be seen to arise from a deprivation of choice or from a maximisation of inherent goodness must remain unresolved as the deceit is such that it contributes to both. Looking to the deception, rather than its outcome, it is employed in the service of a freedom to act in a manner that, if known, would adversely effect the position of his children who might have 'suivant une expression populaire, tombés de leur haut' (DV, I, 836). The deception satisfies a triadic purpose, to retain the finances necessary for 'une vieillesse uniquement occupée de plaisir', maintain his social standing and to secure the social status of his offspring. The conflict between moral, social and familial interests is resolved by the deception.

The only person who knows of Cardot's life 'occupé de plaisir' is his son-in-law and now owner of the Cocon-d'Or, Camusot. Not only does Camusot know of Cardot's evening activities in Paris, he participates in similar practices. His approval

of his father-in-law's conduct is reciprocated, as Cardot 'n'avait pas trouvé mauvais que son gendre Camusot fit la cour à la charmante actrice Coralie car lui-même était secrètement le Mécène de Mlle Florentine, première danseuse du théâtre de la Gaité' (DV, I, 836). Both men are engaged in sexual and social activity that operates, at a bourgeois level, beyond the 'décence' of social acceptability. However, they justify their conduct on a discriminatory basis that acts in their favour:

Camusot approuvait fort la philosophie du bonhomme, qui, selon lui, après avoir fait le bonheur de ses enfants et si noblement rempli ses devoirs, pouvait bien finir joyeusement la vie. [...] Camusot proclamait, dans le père Cardot, le sens le plus exquis de la famille; il le regardait comme un beau-père accompli. «Il sait, disait-il, concilier l'intérêt de ses enfants avec les plaisirs qu'il est bien naturel de goûter dans la vieillesse, après avoir subi tous les tracasseries du commerce» (DV, I, 836-837).

Camusot's justification mirrors that of Cardot, reflecting both a sexual discrimination that acts in their favour and an ethical primacy founded on the social status awarded to financial security. The gender discrimination hidden in 'les plaisirs qu'il est bien naturel de goûter dans la vieillesse' is fully exposed in the closeted 'entre hommes il professait hardiment l'épicurisme et se permettait des gaudrioles un peu fortes'. However, the discrimination is more than matched by the moral primacy awarded to financial and social stability; an award that raises the current forces of convention above the established dictates of religion. While Cardot 'haïssait particulièrement les prêtres' (DV, I, 836), in sympathy with the liberal, anti-clerical movement of the Restoration, he embraces the deeper, more effective understanding that money, not church, is the new arbiter of ethical values. As Cardot has satisfied 'l'intérêt de ses enfants' through the 'tracas de commerce' he builds a disposable 'ethical profit', sanctioned by social silence and transferrable into unsanctioned pleasures. The competing interests of family, society and self are thereby resolved in a silent trade-off between familial financial duties fulfilled, self-interests satisfied and social interests appeased.

Cardot enjoys a quiet certainty in his dealings with events. His confidence arises from a commercial and social success founded on the rules of pragmatic realism. The rules serve to confine the complex workings of human emotions within a commercial model. Terry Eagleton's epigram, 'the flipside of the hard-nosed operator is the gullible dreamer',¹²¹ captures something of that dilemma. Mme Clapart's 'sentiment de la maternité' (DV, I, 838) is not in fact the call upon emotional

¹²¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Guardian Review*, 06 June 2015 p. 9.

empathy that she seems to seek. Her call on Cardot is for financial and social stability for her son. Her maternal instinct can only be satisfied through Oscar's achievement of status and reliable money rather than compassion.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter finds the notion of the *vol décent* introduced, defined and functioning within the world of *Les Marana* and *Un début dans la vie*. Its presence is recognised in both the Napoleonic era and the post-Empire Restoration period, pictured against the demographic movements and class mobility that characterised post-Industrial Revolution France. The historic transition was from a militaristic dictatorship with authority based on merit rather than birth, which facilitated the progressive exploitation of commercial opportunities. Balzac shows us how this feeds the growth of the *vol décent*. He recognises that the progress of commercial adventure, together with a diffusion of political power, combined to drive commercial and political invention.

While the scope of that invention is not fully explored in *Les Marana* or *Un début dans la vie*, the nature of the *vol décent*, its mood and manner, is established. The ambiguous, twilight glow of ‘la lueur d’un réverbère’, captures the mood in a shifting chiaroscuro which defies definition but signals the presence of an ambiguous force. The furtiveness of the mood is compounded in manner and habitat, ‘habilement masqué’, ‘caché dans les coulisses’ and Balzac captures the inherent duplicity of the notion in his use of the oxymoronic form. The construct provides him with an apparent resolution of the apparently irresolvable, an irresistible attraction.

Balzac’s delineation of the constituent parts of the *vol décent* provides a paradigm that directs research into the world of *La Comédie humaine*. The ‘vol’ defines an action which deprives another of value, whilst ‘l’opinion publique’ ratifies the deceptive exploitation of ‘le défaut des lois’ converting it into ‘une contrebande légale’, the actions ‘ne sont plus ni des crimes ni des vols’, which makes them socially and legally acceptable. Something of the potential of the *vol décent*, as a means of manipulating socio/political values and status, is also found, captured in the melodramatic promise that it ‘se trouve l’aristocratie du mal’.

Whilst the examples of this level of immorality operate in *Les Marana* and *Un début dans la vie*, they leave the wider context of *La Comédie humaine* to be explored. However, these early works demonstrate fertility of the notion, not only as literary device but also as an immoral but acceptable form of human behaviour. The *vol décent* triggers multiple forms of deception, questions the relationship

between the perpetrator and circumstances, the susceptibility of the victim, the impact of social and economic imperatives on social and commercial practice, the influences of history on instant behaviours, all of which create unresolved moral ambiguities. These initial texts touch on all such outcomes stimulating multiple reader understandings and reactions.

The position of victim in relation to the *vol décent* is found in the disposition of Diard. His lack of fixed resolve, driven by ‘passions violentes et fugitive’ result in a capricious nature that abandons reason in favour of speculation. His natural intimacies with apparently contradictory forces, unlike those of the successful *vol décent* that relies on the resolution of contradictory forces, remain hopelessly unresolved. It is Diard's irresolution that inadvertently makes the perpetrators’ contrived gossip effective, ensuring his loss of capital.

Any moral judgement of the *vol décent*, particularly in case of Pierrotin, is subject to the social and economic circumstances in which it operates. He runs a business in economic circumstances that deprive him of access to investment capital, a situation that demands that he finds alternative methods of increasing revenue. His efforts, relying on non-financial cultural resources, use the *vol décent* as a socio-economic corrective that benefits himself and the community in a reversal of established values. Moreau, in a more subtle moral justification for his actions, argues that proceeds from the *vol décent*, being legal, deliver funds that allow retention of profit and the transfer of funds.

The social mobility that sees Moreau in a position to defraud his master, Sérisy, further complicates the moral position. His exploitation of opportunities arising from the Sérisy estates delivers profit that Sérisy has never been able to create. It relies on Moreau’s bourgeois expertise and talent, his entrepreneurial vision, previously untapped, but badly needed in the post-Industrial Revolution period. The tradition that all benefits accruing from the land belonged to the land owner now come into question.

This introductory chapter has revealed a paradigm for the *vol décent* that will be further explored in subsequent chapters. The interaction of the multiple forms of deception with victims and society and the impact on what has been found to be moveable moral positions is a rich seam for development.

Chapter 2

The *vol décent* in the Parisian World of Speculation and Risk:
*Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau, La
 Maison Nucingen*

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Making of a Perpetrator and a Victim of the *vol décent*
- 2.3 The ‘Spéculation [...] autour de La Madeleine’ in *César
 Birotteau*
 - 2.3.1 The Prey
 - 2.3.2 The Predator
- 2.4 The Theatre of Deceit
- 2.5 The *vol décent* Infiltrates the Legal Process
- 2.6 Nucingen: ‘Il n’y a que des apparences d’honnête homme’
 (MN, VI, 331)
 - 2.6.1 A Clandestine Culture
 - 2.6.2 ‘Homme carré de base comme de hauteur’
 - 2.6.3 ‘L’Omnipotence, l’omniscience, l’omniconvenance
 de l’argent’
- 2.7 Conclusion

2.1 Introduction

Trading products proliferated during the Bourbon Restoration. They included non-tangible products such as shares, bills of exchange, promissory notes, bearer orders, commercial paper and other financial instruments. Trading in such products operated in the unstable markets of the period and was speculative, representing an investment in what might or might not happen in contrast to the traditional exchange of material goods. The market for such products was stimulated by a shortage of hard currency and by a limited issue of bank notes by a Banque de France ‘soucieuse de maintenir un rapport sévère entre les réserves métalliques et les billets’.¹²² The value of France’s national product and foreign trade doubled between 1815 and 1850’.¹²³ Growth and investment were consolidated and expanded.

A comparison between M. Guillaume of *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* published in 1830 and set in the Empire around 1810 and the eponymous *César Birotteau* published in 1837 and set in 1819-1823, provides good evidence of Balzac’s recognition of change in commercial practice and aspiration. M. Guillaume’s business practice is traditional. ‘Commerçant avisé, mais prudent, habile à accroître ses gains par une large pratique de l’escompte, il doit sa prospérité à son expérience, et non à des initiatives novatrices’.¹²⁴ This is in contrast to the ‘initiatives novatrices’ that come to increasingly characterise the post-Empire commercial world in France and in particular the commercial world of Paris. Claparon, the fake banker in *César Birotteau*, epitomises the new commercial Zeitgeist, recognising the non-tangible ‘espérance’ as an exploitable commercial opportunity that can metamorphose into a marketable good and is capable of attracting speculative capital investment. He describes it to Birotteau as ‘le commerce abstrait [...] une conception gigantesque, une façon de mettre l’espérance en coupes réglées’ (CB, VI, 241). Transactions in non-tangible products create a new market in which the value of the investment at any particular moment is determined by the market’s perception of its potential level of financial gain.

¹²² René Bouvier, *Balzac, Homme d’affaires* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1930), p. 27.

¹²³ Michael Stephen Smith, *The Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France, 1800-1930* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 33.

¹²⁴ René Guise, ‘Introduction to *César Birotteau*’, *La Comédie humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), VI, p. 4.

Proof of investment therefore becomes a tradable asset whose market value fluctuates in response to speculative demand

Lucienne Frappier-Mazur recognises that this new market is determined by the relationship between investment and yield.

Si, sur le plan de l'histoire, les pertes sont aussi éclatantes et aussi nombreuses que les gains, les seconds l'emportent sur le plan métaphorique. Cette attitude optimiste ne va pas sans rappeler celle qui caractérise la métaphore de jeu. Mais la ressemblance s'arrête là. L'image de spéculation s'appuie sur la notion de rapport et non sur celle de réussite'.¹²⁵

Whether the investment is financial or one of personal endeavour, the outcome can be measured only in financial terms. This calculation has the effect of reducing the human contribution to one of monetary value, where 'l'argent ne connaît personne; il n'a pas d'oreilles, l'argent; il n'a pas de cœur, l'argent' (CB, VI, 224). This is a form of commercial exchange that re-defines the relationship between the individual and the process of wealth creation. Financial opportunities arising from speculative ventures, where outcomes are by definition unknown, provide a natural veil of uncertainty that facilitates the artifice and deceit of the *vol décent*. It is in this commercial milieu of speculation and its counterpart of risk that Balzac chooses to show the *vol décent* in its multiple guises.

The two novels that are the main focus for research in this chapter provide important examples of acceptable theft in the transient milieu of speculative business exchange. The *vol décent*, which will be revealed as a pervasive and recurring course of action throughout *La Comédie humaine*, works as part of a narrative structure that 'informs our understanding of the preoccupations of a particular time and place'.¹²⁶ Alongside the influences of milieux and the overarching infiltration of history into society, Balzac repeatedly offers an alternative, idealistic notion in which, irrespective of external influence, certain individuals are detached from the consequence of event: 'les événements ne sont jamais absolus, leurs résultats dependent entièrement des individus' (CB, VI, 54).

The narrative voice is prescriptive and authoritative in declaring that the impact of circumstance on the individual is paramount in the determination of

¹²⁵ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, *L'Expression métaphorique dans la Comédie humaine* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1976), p. 213.

¹²⁶ Scott Carpenter, *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 1.

commercial success and failure. Balzac establishes the notion of the sovereignty of the individual, a position he is to sustain.

En éclairant la profondeur de son caractère et les ressorts de sa grandeur, on pourra comprendre comment les accidents commerciaux que surmontent les têtes fortes deviennent d'irréparables catastrophes pour de petits esprits. Les événements ne sont jamais absolus: le malheur est un marche-pied pour le génie, une piscine pour le chrétien, un trésor pour l'homme habile, pour les faibles un abîme (CB, VI, 54).

Balzac places the 'génie' and 'l'homme habile' in opposition to the 'chrétien' and 'les faibles', both seen by Balzac as acquiescent in the face of adverse circumstance. The first pairing recognises circumstance as opportunity and the second as threat. The genius's 'marche-pied' provides him with an assured passage above misfortune while the weak are submerged. The two essential elements of Balzac's concept of genius are detachment from the daily minutiae that grasp, control and ultimately submerge the ordinary person, and exclusive focus, 'a projection of energy irresistible to others',¹²⁷ on the satisfaction of goals. Balzac's 'homme habile', is representative of the successful opportunist, a bourgeois business man who sees misfortune as a 'trésor'. The word implies discovery of value and opportunity to be held and nurtured pending the arrival of the right moment for exploitation. The bourgeois is thereby shown to be opportunistic and accomplished, but without the superiority of genius.

Both the 'chrétien' and the 'faibles' become victims of circumstance. The image of the Christian in 'une piscine' of his emotions is one of immersion, a wallowing in misfortune, if not actually a submersion. The analogy with the Judaeo-Christian reconciliation with circumstance in this world is clear; an observation confirmed by François Birotteau in his letter of condolence to his brother César: 'cette vie est une vie d'épreuves et de passage'. Analogous to Judaeo-Christian doctrine, 'les faibles' fear a casting down into the eternal 'abîme'; a point again reinforced by François: 'ne regarde pas la terre, au contraire lève toujours les yeux au ciel: de là viennent des consolations pour les faibles' (CB, VI, 254). The theological positions rely on a seemingly auspicious acquiescence to adverse circumstance. This is a position of faith based upon the promise of reward in the hereafter. Balzac uses François to introduce the possibility of transcending earthly material values and posits the existence of a non-physical domain in anticipation and support of César's sublimity. Alternatively, through the prism of the *vol décent*, the victim of

¹²⁷ Gretchen R. Besser, *Balzac's Concept of Genius* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1969), p. 109.

current circumstances may also be a victim of deception, under which opportunity is discounted in favour of future, speculative gain. A gain of ‘le plus grand élément d’Ordre Social’ (Avant-propos, I, 12) which is institutional control by the twin authorities of church and state. François, as disciple of the faith, together with fellow believers, would also be its victim.

Balzac’s opposition of acceptance and rejection is mirrored in the underlying social shift from the now destabilised order of the *ancien régime* to a fluid social dynamic in the course of purposeful re-definition by the rising bourgeoisie of the early nineteenth century. His use of this opposition challenges the role of a morality that embraces resignation rather than freedom in an era of opportunity.

In *César Birotteau* Balzac examines the dilemma between social ethics and private gain, which is perfectly captured in the notion of the *vol décent*.

Underlying these perspectives, from which Balzac examines the new world of speculation and risk, are the unknown forces of nature that act outside human control. These forces are revealed through what Charles Affron describes as:

The relationship between the human [...], governed by the intelligence, and the unyielding matter of reality constituted by the forces that lie beyond man’s control; the constants that must be reckoned with rather than defied or ignored¹²⁸.

The strength of that assertion is tested in both *César Birotteau* and *La Maison Nucingen* when action and circumstance fail to coalesce.

Balzac shows that the failure of the law to provide protection for the investor in property speculation provides opportunity for the *vol décent*. He also recognises that César Birotteau’s business failure and his personal susceptibility to deception result from a complex mix of familial, socio-economic, political and historic influences which deliver a tension between realism, determinism and romanticism. The narrative of *César Birotteau* follows the rise and fall of César, a successful ‘Marchand Parfumeur’, manufacturer and Deputy Mayor of his district. César’s success entices him into the world of speculation beyond his own area of expertise. His innocence is matched by the certainty and pomposity that accompanies an unquestioning faith in probity. Impressed by the images of social and political status he invests heavily in a speculative investment promoted by his lawyer Roguin, in lands around the Madeleine in Paris. Unknown to César, Roguin is insolvent and is himself being exploited by Ferdinand du Tillet, former shop assistant of César’s,

¹²⁸ Charles Affron, *Patterns of Failure in La Comédie humaine* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 5.

now upwardly mobile entrepreneur and banker. At the same time as making this investment César invests in the development and refurbishment of his home, takes a new lease on adjoining property, markets a new range of perfumes and oils and holds an expensive ball to which he invites the social and financial hierarchy of the district. The land speculation and the surrounding financial measures created by du Tillet, coupled with César's personal expenditure, lead to his bankruptcy and social disgrace. His fortunes are restored by the support of his wife, daughter and extended family together with Anselme Popinot, who develops another successful business in perfumes and oils, pays off César's creditors and marries his daughter Césarine. César, released from bankruptcy and in a state of sublimity, dies.

2.2 The Making of a Perpetrator and a Victim of the *vol décent*.

Balzac's portrait of du Tillet in *César Birotteau* was progressively modified during the writing of the novel. It is only in the final draft completed in 1837 that du Tillet's narrative importance as the agent of Birotteau's ruin is matched by his own significance as business 'génie'. The portraits of du Tillet and Birotteau provide a clear delineation between perpetrator and victim of the *vol décent* and offer insight into the complex authorial reasoning that lies behind the workings of the speculative world of business.

Despite the portrait of du Tillet that draws on both nature and nurture, he remains for the reader a detached and shadowy figure who is ultimately defined by his deeds. Barbéris, in a useful separation of the speculator and the entrepreneur, recognises that 'tout l'avenir du capitalisme français spéculateur et boursier plutôt qu'entrepreneur est là. Mais du Tillet est un monstre'.¹²⁹ As exemplar of *terribilita*, awe inspiring power in action, du Tillet provokes a dual response. He induces a sense of trepidation that fails to attract on a humanitarian level but excites the reader with glimpses into a world of unrestrained possibility, a very Balzacian vision.

Chronologically the narrative events follow Birotteau's cycle of rise and fall in the business world and du Tillet's rise and consolidation in that world. The movements contrast Birotteau's vulnerability with du Tillet's effectiveness in the market. The sketches of both du Tillet and Birotteau are firmly grounded in time and place, a technique that Balzac adopts to establish fictional characters within the real world. Ferdinand du Tillet, born in 1793 in 'un petit endroit situé près des Andelys' (CB, VI, 72), Birotteau born 'des environs de Chinon' from where, at the age of fourteen, he arrives in Paris in 1792. Both come to Paris from the country, as part of the demographic shifts of the period.¹³⁰

Research into census data shows that in 1790 Paris had a population of only 524,186 but by 1817 (when both du Tillet and Birotteau were young men in Paris) it had grown to 713,966, an increase of 36% and indicative of the pace of demographic change so vividly and accurately represented by Balzac in *La Maison Nucingen*. By 1836 the population of Paris had reached 909,126, rising to 1,053,297

¹²⁹ Pierre Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac* (Paris: Arthaud, 1973), p. 283.

¹³⁰ Please see Chapter 1.

in 1846.¹³¹ The demographic movements feed the elements of chance, irresolution and fluidity that characterised the commercial, political and social shifts of the period. Chance plays a decisive role in du Tillet's birth and early years: 'il était cependant né quelque part, par le fait de quelque cruelle et voluptueuse fantaisie' (CB, VI, 72), a whim of fate that caused him to be the child of a poor girl who gave birth to him alone in the local priest's garden. His mother took her own life after leaving him at the priest's door.

This melodramatic entry into life was not necessarily an improbable one for the period. Examination of the findings of the *Travaux de la commission des Enfants-Trouvés*,¹³² set up 22 August 1849 and published in 1850, provides data referring back to the early years of the century. In 1815 the number of 'Enfants trouvés' recorded was 82,748 and 101,158 in 1820. 'Les Expositions et abandons d'Enfants' in 1815 were 28,429 and 32,197 in 1820. These figures give historic credence to du Tillet's dramatic entry into life. However, his abandonment also serves to emphasise du Tillet's isolation from family, an experience that insulates him from controlling influences in the wider world.

The early years also reveal subtle but significant influences. By chance, du Tillet's education is in the hands of the good priest who brought him up as his own child. The implication here is that his education at the hands of the priest would have been beneficial but the priest's death in 1804, when Ferdinand would have been aged eleven, delivers a detrimental counter blow. However, Balzac has given du Tillet a growing acquaintance with chance, a growth that normalises sudden and catastrophic changes of circumstance. The distancing of emotion from event that reduces the apparently cataclysmic to the commonplace will equip du Tillet with an indifference that will serve him well in the Parisian world of speculation and risk. The balance of his education is not formal but comes from early experience of the outside world, living in Paris a life 'de flibustier dont *les hasards* pouvaient le mener à l'échafaud ou à la fortune' (CB, VI, 72). Again, Balzac puts stress on chance as a major factor in the course of human development, one that reflects the unknown forces that ultimately determine events and offer the novelist melodramatic

¹³¹ Ville de Paris, 'Population and Density from 1600', *Demographia*, <<http://demographia.com/dm-par90.htm>> [accessed 26 July 2012]

¹³² Ministère de L'Intérieur, *Travaux de la commission des Enfants-Trouvés* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1850)

opportunity. Unlike Birotteau, whose education results only in being able to read, write and count, du Tillet's education, although 'une éducation inachevée', is an education in hard realities that breeds scepticism regarding the human condition, a key component of Balzac's philosophy. He successfully applies this philosophy to financial enterprise:

Par la théorie de l'intérêt personnel, il méprisait trop les hommes en les croyant tous corruptibles, il était trop peu délicat sur le choix des moyens en les trouvant tous bons, il regardait trop fixement le succès et l'argent comme l'absolution du mécanisme moral pour ne pas réussir tôt ou tard (CB, VI, 73).

Du Tillet returns to Paris 'après avoir parcouru la France, étudié le monde, et pris son parti d'y réussir à tout prix' (Ibid.). This indicates experience in dealing with the hard realities of circumstance.

The emphasis that Balzac places on education as an important formative influence on character is not only reflected in Birotteau's and du Tillet's subsequent business and social lives but has also a wider significance in the rise of the bourgeoisie in general. Theodore Zeldin says of the aspiring bourgeois of the period: 'He cultivated *distinction*, which involved a special kind of politeness, laying stress on giving a good impression [...and therefore] education and family were two of the principal concerns of the bourgeois'.¹³³ Zeldin forewarns, in the phrase 'laying stress on giving a good impression' of a broad social movement toward hypocrisy, one which will accommodate the deception inherent in the *vol décent*. Balzac also anticipates here, in the formative influence of education, the growth of a new and very significant form of social capital. Education as capital is a key concept that Balzac is to highlight throughout *La Comédie humaine*. Limited in learning and unable to free himself from the restrictions imposed on his class, Birotteau fails to establish this form of social capital, his limited social awareness and sophistication constantly betraying his social naivety. Du Tillet by contrast, with 'son esprit d'un grand seigneur libertin' (CB, VI, 73) is shown capable of building the social capital that comes as a counterpart to monetary wealth.

The circumstances of birth and early years are reflected in a disposition which, in the case of Birotteau, is defined by his emotional dependency and, in the case of du Tillet, by an absence of both emotional and familial dependency. The narrator

¹³³ Theodore Zeldin, *A History of French Passions* (Oxford: University Press, 1993 [1973]), p. 15.

draws a key connection here between du Tillet's orphan-hood and his subsequent conduct:

Sans père ni mère, sans autre tuteur que le procureur impérial, seul dans le monde, ne devant de comptes à personne, il traita la Société de Turc à More en la trouvant marâtre: il ne connut d'autre guide que son intérêt, et tous les moyens de fortune lui semblèrent bons. Ce Normand, armé de capacités dangereuses, joignait à son envie de parvenir les âpres défauts reprochés à tort ou à raisons aux natifs de sa province (CB, VI, 72).

The pre-dominance of self-interest has partially resulted from parental absence but the narrator adds an hereditary influence: 'un métis social qui tirait son esprit d'un grand seigneur libertin, sa bassesse d'une paysanne séduite, ses connaissances d'une éducation inachevée, et ses vices de son état d'abandon' (CB, VI, 73). These capacities, allied to 'une activité passionnée' and his awareness of a culture that understands the value of expediency, fulfils the Balzacian criteria for commercial success. Du Tillet finds society to be fundamentally dishonest and reacts against it without conscience, finding all methods of making a fortune acceptable. In embracing an amoral position, he is free to focus exclusively on the process of monetary gain. His purpose is to arm himself with financial status and its counterpart of social distinction, the basis of success in the new world order. He uses deceit as a functional tool, unencumbered by conventional morality. The freedom from moral restraint is set against du Tillet's belief that all are corruptible. He thereby breaks the christian moral code when 'il contestait audacieusement le droit d'autrui, il ne cédaient rien sur le sien' (Ibid.). For him, breach of contract is justified on the grounds that all men are corruptible: to respond to religious precept only distorts reality. Du Tillet shares this important recognition with Vautrin who, in terms of his capacity to expose human deceit, without fear of consequence, is arguably the most exceptional character in *La Comédie humaine*. Pierre Barbéris explains something of Vautrin's genius:

Il comprend les événements, il reconstitue les histoires. Ce qui n'a pas de sens aux yeux des autres en a aux siens. Il est celui qui sait «coudre deux idées» qui sait retrouver l'unité des choses'.¹³⁴

We first meet Vautrin in *Le Père Goriot*, written in 1834, and covering the period 1819-20. *César Birotteau* was written in 1837 and covers the period 1819-1823. As the narrative chronology of the two novels overlap, it is not surprising that du Tillet echoes the same interpretation of society as that espoused by Vautrin. It confirms the extent and the inevitability of corruption in society: 'Il a toujours été ainsi. Les

¹³⁴ Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac*, p. 365.

moralistes ne le changeront jamais’, he says. ‘L’homme est imparfait’ (PG, III, 141). However, it is important to note that Balzac does not discard morality, or the function of religion, in his exposure of its frailty. Although society’s ethical fallibility is established, family, law and religion remain potent forces in the Balzacian world.

In Césaire we see a man whose innocence and ignorance are allied with probity, defined in Larousse’s 1856 *Nouveau Dictionnaire de la langue française* as ‘l’observation rigoureuse des devoirs de la justice et de la morale’. Balzac places it in its social context:

Néanmoins, César ne pouvait jamais être entièrement sot ni bête: la probité, la bonté jetaient sur les actes de sa vie un reflet qui les rendait respectables, car une belle action fait accepter toutes les ignorances possibles. Son constant succès lui donna de l’assurance. À Paris, l’assurance est acceptée pour le pouvoir dont elle est le signe (CB, VI, 70).

Birotteau sees a connection between probity and his early business success, an unreliable connection that provides him with false confidence. His early success is due to his ability to recognise market opportunity and convert it to profit. This is commercial acumen, not probity. He is unable to recognise that probity, as an appearance of decent practice, can just as easily act as a mask for deceit and unwittingly becomes part of a system that ensures his financial downfall. However, Césaire’s wife Constance displays ‘cette délicate probité naturelle aux femmes’ and shows a perspicacity and aversion to risk denied to her husband. ‘[Elle] ne conçoit que les idées les plus simples, la petite monnaie de l’esprit, raisonne sur tout, a peur de tout, calcule tout et pense toujours à l’avenir’ (CB, VI, 61-62). Apprehension sums up the Balzacian bourgeois mentality that often makes the bourgeois the eager upholder of law and order.

Balzac mediates the character of Césaire Birotteau through two recurring motifs. The sustained interplay of innocence and ignorance is matched with his probity and his faith in probity’s moral, social, and business efficacy. His lack of sophistication appears to support Bardèche’s assertion that ‘Balzac voulait peindre des bourgeois; ces bourgeois luisant de bêtise qu’il avait si bien connus’,¹³⁵ However, Balzac does not confine Césaire within such emotional and cerebral limitations. In Césaire’s idealism, Balzac bestows upon him a sublimity that is capable of raising him above bourgeois limitation.

¹³⁵ Maurice Bardèche, *Une Lecture de Balzac* (Paris: Les Sept Couleurs, 1964), p. 86.

As potential financial and social victim of the *vol décent*, César Birotteau is foreshadowed in a psychological sketch of the three Birotteau brothers. The sketch describes their different career developments but also reflects back onto the commonality of their early parental loss and their familial inheritance. François Birotteau, the eldest brother, who appears in the 1832 publication of *Le Curé de Tours*, was ‘ordonné prêtre [et] se cacha pendant la révolution et mena la vie errante des prêtres non assermentés’ (CB, VI, 54). There is disorientation in ‘la vie errante’ and a resistance to change in ‘les prêtres non assermentés’ which is consolidated and deepened with a sense of spiritual certainty. The second son, Jean Birotteau, is similarly grounded:

À la bataille de la Trébia, Macdonald demanda des hommes de bonne volonté pour emporter une batterie, le capitaine Jean Birotteau s’avança avec sa compagnie et fut tué. La destinée des Birotteau voulait sans doute qu’ils fussent opprimés par les hommes ou par les événements partout où ils se planteraient’ (CB, VI, 54).

The shared innocence, sense of duty and vulnerability to circumstances, clearly form a family trait that César inherits. The blind response to duty, even in the face of death, hints of a transcendent innocence and a dependency on familial association. The reader’s subsequent focus is directed towards the interaction between narrative events and those behavioural norms.

Having established the psychological primacy of familial inheritance and childhood experience in the development of César as victim Balzac tests both of these formative influences in a socio-business environment. This is a milieu which demands from César a different behavioural response from that inspired by his inherited conditioning. However, his disposition is such that his capacity to change, create or interpret circumstances is severely curtailed. In an appropriate call upon destiny, one that highlights Birotteau’s vulnerability, Balzac emphasizes the sense of inevitability. ‘La destinée des Birotteau voulait sans doute qu’ils fussent opprimés par les hommes ou par les événements partout où ils se planteraient’ (CB, VI, 54).

The formative contribution of education to character, firstly recognised in the narrator’s disclosure that ‘lorsqu’a l’âge de quatorze ans César sut lire, écrire et compter, il quitta le pays’ (CB, VI, 55) is significant. This educational level, one that has limited him to the functions of basic literacy and numeracy, confines César to prosaic certainties. Despite the fact that ‘il manquait d’esprit et d’instruction, il avait une rectitude instinctive’ (Ibid.) and that instinct, combined with energy, focused

application provide the solid basis for his early success as a shopkeeper. The ‘rectitude instinctive’ is central to an understanding of César as it provides him with a moral compass that sets his behavioural limits. It is interesting to note that Balzac turns an apparent lack of education into a positive asset for Félix Grandet in the 1833 publication of *Eugénie Grandet*, where ‘son manqué apparent de logique attribués à un défaut d’éducation étaient affectés’ (EG, III, 1035). The ‘handicap’ becomes a tool of deception in a repeating *vol décent* that taps into the compassion and embarrassment of the victim, to Grandet’s financial advantage. For César, the ethical authority of probity is sufficiently powerful to render him incapable of contravening or questioning its imperatives. It is César’s isolation from purposeful deceit that enables the dramatic confrontation between moral value and expediency to be staged. The combination of desire, focus and duty act as counterweights to César’s innocent beliefs. This is certainly the case when it comes to his faith in religion, nationalism and monarchy. The ‘marchand parfumeur’ becomes a royalist ‘sans savoir pourquoi’ (CB, VI, 39).

Listening to his first employer and being comforted by the domestic setting in which he finds himself, with its privacy and shared confidences, César is temporarily wrapped inside a cocoon of ease and tranquillity, his apprehensions calmed, his emotional needs satisfied by simple certainties:

Cette confiance fut une des circonstances capitales de la vie de César. Les conversations du soir, quand la boutique était close, la rue calme et la caisse faite, fanatisèrent le Tourangeau qui, en devenant royaliste, obéissait à ses sentiments innés. Le narré des vertueuses actions de Louis XVI, les anecdotes par lesquelles les deux époux exaltaient les mérites de la reine, échauffèrent l’imagination de César. L’horrible sort de ces deux têtes couronnées, tranchées à quelques pas de la boutique, révolta son cœur sensible et lui donna de la haine pour un système de gouvernement à qui le sang innocent ne coûtait rien à répandre. L’intérêt commercial lui montrait la mort du négoce dans le maximum et dans les orages politiques, toujours ennemis des affaires. En vrai parfumeur, il haïssait d’ailleurs une révolution qui mettait tout le monde à la Titus et supprimait la poudre. La tranquillité que procure le pouvoir absolu pouvant seule donner la vie à l’argent, il se fanatisa pour la royauté (CB, VI, 57-58).

César is confident in an ordered, protected environment that allows him to feel isolated from risk. Indeed, he only feels ‘ses sentiments innés’ satisfied when his exposure to the potential traumas of the day are safely distanced, when ‘la boutique était close, la rue calme et la caisse faite’. From a business perspective, in closing off the internal (la boutique), external (la rue) and financial (la caisse) channels, Balzac nullifies a triad of risks, a selection that collectively block the avenues through which commercial catastrophe flow. A social security is also sought in César’s devotion to royalty, one upon which he relies, without question but with

much satisfaction, on the anecdotes of the Ragons. These, innocent, fanciful, practiced anecdotes, referring to the former Louis XVI and his wife, are punctuated with visions of ‘l’horrible sort de ces deux têtes couronnées, tranchées à quelques pas de la boutique’ (Ibid.). For César, the image of the royal couple is one of martyrdom at the hands of ‘un système de gouvernement à qui le sang innocent ne coûtait rien à répandre’. The unquestioning, idealistic understanding of political circumstance is one that becomes increasingly characteristic of César. His diligent and pragmatic control over the minutiae of business is contrasted with a visionary impulse that attaches him to circumstances beyond his understanding. He perceives Louis XVIII as a stable, virtuous, reliable idol capable of keeping the political discord that characterised Revolution and Empire at bay and of providing stability. Having established a fixed and reliable order in monarchy César easily extends it to nationalism: ‘Crois-tu que je n’aime pas mon pays? Je veux montrer aux libéraux, à mes ennemis, qu’aimer le Roi, c’est aimer la France!’ (CB, VI, 41) He perceives monarchy, nationalism and government through the prism of emotional security.

However, César finds himself in the right place at the right time due to historic circumstance rather than by design. Chance event is the dominant factor in his early promotion to second assistant. ‘Le jour où la terrible réquisition de l’an II fit maison nette chez le citoyen Ragon, César Birotteau, promu second commis, profita de la circonstance pour obtenir cinquante livres d’appointements par mois’ (CB, VI, 56-57). In the common Balzacian combination of chance and historic circumstance, Balzac creates a melodramatic opportunity that allows the narrator’s wit to reflect the improbability of César’s gallantry:

César eut l’honneur de lutter contre Napoléon sur les marches de Saint-Roch, et fut blessé dès le commencement de l’affaire. Chacun sait l’issue de cette tentative. Si l’aide de camp de Barras sortit de son obscurité, Birotteau fut sauvé par la sienne. [...] S’il resta royaliste, il résolut d’être purement et simplement un parfumeur royaliste, sans jamais plus se compromettre, et s’adonna corps et âme à sa partie (CB, VI, 58).

The unlikely contrast of Birotteau, saved by ‘son obscurité’, with Napoleon’s rise from obscurity (Napoléon was ‘l’aide de camp de Barras’ at Saint Roche) humorously identifies Birotteau as a young man who finds himself in strange circumstances that he misinterprets. Ironically, it is the element of chance that establishes his royalist credentials and his social status as ‘Adjoint au Maire’ and ‘Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur’. Having a limited capacity for objective analysis, César remains hostage to the emotional need evidenced in his childhood.

For César, order and hierarchy will fail to protect him in the erratic, unstructured era of speculation and risk.

2.3 The ‘Spéculation [...] autour de La Madeleine’ in *César Birotteau*

2.3.1 The Prey

In *César Birotteau* Balzac shows the *vol décent* to be either a purposeful manipulation of existing circumstance or an opportunistic reaction to circumstances suitable for exploitation. Ferdinand du Tillet engages in both and Roguin displays ‘ces indomptables passions qui envahissent les hommes’ (CB, VI, 86). Uncontrollable passions place the demands of emotion above those of reason, subvert rational judgement and become a common characteristic of du Tillet’s victims in *César Birotteau*.

Roguin’s emotional dependency on ‘la belle Hollandaise’ (CB, VI, 88) and his accompanying financial recklessness form a pattern of self destruction: from marriage to marital servitude; from ‘des grisettes très heureuses de sa protection’ (CB, VI, 86) at a bearable cost, to the uncontrollable costs of taking Sarah Gobseck for his mistress. ‘Le notaire avait acheté pour sa belle une petite maison aux Champs-Élysées et s’était laissé entraîner à satisfaire les coûteux caprices de cette femme, dont les profusions absorbèrent sa fortune’ (Ibid.). The progression signals a growing imbalance in his nature: ‘on entrevoyait chez lui l’impureté d’un sang fouetté par des efforts contre lesquels regimbe le corps’ (CB, VI, 85). This internal conflict is reflected in a lifestyle and a physical appearance that delivers the circumstances ripe for exploitation.

In a seemingly inevitable progression toward professional failure Roguin finds himself in a marital situation that conflates his financial and emotional fragility. The wealthy Mme Roguin’s insurmountable antipathy toward him and her desire for early divorce is only assuaged by Roguin ‘la laissant libre et se soumettant à toutes les conséquences d’un pareil pacte’ (CB, VI, 86). He exacerbates those consequences when ‘comme beaucoup de maris parisiens, il eut un second ménage en ville’ (Ibid.). The expenditure involved in the upkeep of that household, together with the heavy costs of his wife’s maintenance, is such that his financial position reaches crisis proportions. In an effort to disguise the shortfall between his personal income and expenditure Roguin takes money from funds that have been deposited with him for safe keeping by his clients. Zeldin gives historical support for Balzac’s representation of such practices when he points out, regarding ‘notaires’, that ‘since

there was no serious control [...] many absconded with their client's funds'.¹³⁶ Amongst those funds is César's investment deposit in property speculation. Roguin's position as lawyer carries, for César, a social cachet of unquestioned reliability and probity. The strength of that belief is such that César takes no precautions against loss. Roguin predictably divulges his position to du Tillet 'après un souper très aviné' and du Tillet immediately 'aperçut une fortune rapide et sûre qui brilla comme un éclair dans la nuit de l'ivresse' (CB, VI, 87). The situation that renders Roguin victim of his own weakness provides du Tillet with financial opportunity in a social replay of prey and predator.

Du Tillet's *vol décent* concerning land speculation around la Madeleine necessitates a straw man, 'l'un de ces mannequins vivants nommés dans la langue commerciale *hommes de paille*' (CB, VI, 90). This is a nominee, in this case Claparon, who will ultimately take the legal, financial and social consequences of financial disaster. The function of the straw man for du Tillet is that it frees him from any connection with the theft, leaving him free of legal liability. Claparon is aware of his potential fate, and this invites the question as to what sort of character accepts such a position. A question that the narrator himself answers by unveiling the nature of the relationship between du Tillet and his prey. Balzac re-enforces his position as advocate of focus and exclusion. The monetary pathway, increasingly characteristic of the period, excludes emotional dependency, leaving the likes of Claparon without power or hope, having to say '*amen à tout*':

Mais pour un pauvre diable qui se promenait mélancoliquement sur les boulevards avec un avenir de quarante sous dans sa poche quand son camarade du Tillet le rencontra, les petites parts qui devaient lui être abandonnées dans chaque affaire furent un Eldorado. Ainsi son amitié, son dévouement pour du Tillet, corroborés d'une reconnaissance irréfléchie, excités par les besoins d'une vie libertine et décousue, lui faisaient dire *amen à tout* (CB, VI, 90-91).

'Une vie libertine', a common element amongst the Roguin coterie, indicates an lack of emotional equilibrium and results in Claparon being too easily satisfied by 'les petites parts' and 'un avenir de quarante sous dans la poche'. In the urgent recognition of du Tillet as a 'camarade' who earns 'amitié' and 'dévouement', Claparon, like Roguin, Mme Roguin and Sarah Gobseck, signals the presence of a deeper misfortune than that of penury: impotence in the face of adverse circumstances.

¹³⁶ Bardèche, *Une Lecture de Balzac*, p. 45.

Like Victor Grandet in *Eugénie Grandet*, ‘l’infortuné Roguin se brûlerait la cervelle, car il croyait diminuer l’horreur de la faillite en imposant la pitié publique’. The suicide contemplated is a sacrifice to the power of public exposure but du Tillet views Roguin’s circumstances unclouded by such social or moral pressures. He ignores the notion of moral vilification to concentrate exclusively on the financial opportunities still to be exploited. In a sphere isolated from ethical concerns, he pursues a monetary strategy regarding client funds that is careless of reference to public castigation:

Il lui conseilla de prendre dès à présent une forte somme, de la lui confier pour être jouée avec audace dans une partie quelconque, à la Bourse, ou dans quelque speculation choisie entre les mille qui s’entreprenaient alors. En cas de gain, ils fonderaient à eux deux une maison de banque où l’on tirerait parti des dépôts, et dont les bénéfices lui serviraient à contenter sa passion. Si la chance tournait contre eux, Roguin irait vivre à l’étranger au lieu de se tuer, parce que [...] du Tillet lui serait fidèle jusqu’au dernier sou (CB, VI, 87).

Du Tillet offers Roguin some kind of financial salvation, continuing indulgence in his passions and freedom from criminal or social retribution. In return the operative control of available funds, including César’s investments, is placed into his own hands. The money withdrawn from the remaining capital, held in Roguin’s client accounts, is used to fund du Tillet’s speculative venture in banking rather than providing protection against further loss. Similarly, Mme Roguin’s ‘prévenue d’un désastre’ leaves her prey to du Tillet’s blandishments and she yields control of her finances to him in return for consolidation of her wealth and indulgence in ‘la plus violente passion’. An accommodation between willing partners also operates between du Tillet and Sarah Gobseck: ‘il n’eut pas de peine à convaincre la maîtresse de risquer une somme, afin de ne jamais être obligée de recourir à la prostitution’ (CB, VI, 87). All three are easy targets for du Tillet, as he knows how to satisfy the urgent emotional demands of his victims. This is a *vol décent* that delivers additional funding for du Tillet himself and deprives Roguin, Mme Roguin, Sarah Gobseck, Roguin’s clients and investors.

2.3.2 The Predator

Du Tillet’s ‘prey’ intuitively seek to protect and prolong satisfaction of their desires but they also recognise in him the impassive objectivity of the predator. Balzac suggests here, as elsewhere, a psychological dimension that results in an unwitting complicity between prey and predator. This idea will be explored more fully in my analysis of Nucingen. The narrator provides the reader with early evidence of the

power of personal and social disinterestedness when, unsatisfied with the return from the monies received from ‘ses trois commanditaires’, du Tillet arranges an account of fictitious losses sustained on the Bourse and invests the funds for his own benefit, raising his return to 50,000 francs. He re-invests this capital sum and by careful analysis of political movements buys at the bottom and sells at the top of the market to raise his capital to 100,000 ecus.

When he manipulates the speculation around the Madeleine du Tillet designs a scheme under which ‘il voulait si bien cacher son bras tout en conduisant l’affaire, qu’il pût recueillir les profits du vol sans en avoir la honte’. (CB, VI, 90) In distancing himself from the transaction with the invention of the ‘straw man’, and from any associated legal obligations, he evades any legality, his deeds being sanctioned by loopholes in the legal code. Taking investors’ funds, he commits a *vol décent*, that leaves him impervious to legal retribution or public reckoning that could reduce his social capital.

Du Tillet creates circumstances in which actions are determined solely according to their capacity to work effectively in speculative markets. He looks for successful financial outcome by seeking an alignment with the underlying laws that govern profit. To discover these laws Balzac examines an event, its moment in history, its causes and its circumstance in search of the universal truths that determine events. In the ‘Avant-propos’ to *La Comédie humaine* he confirms both the task and its purpose within a creative context:

Pour mériter les éloges que doit ambitionner tout artiste, ne devais-je pas étudier les raisons ou la raison de ces effets sociaux, surprendre le sens caché dans cet immense assemblage de figures, de passions et d’événements. Enfin, après avoir cherché, je ne dis pas trouvé, cette raison, ce moteur social, ne fallait-il pas méditer sur les principes naturels et voir en quoi les Sociétés s’écartent ou se rapprochent de la règle éternelle, du vrai, du beau. (Avant-propos, I, 11-12)

To be successful in a world whose laws are hidden, it is necessary to face the hard reality of unpredictable event. Vautrin has already made what he sees as the necessity of that fundamental confrontation clear in *Le Père Goriot*, three years prior to the publication of *César Birotteau*:

Un homme qui se vante de ne jamais changer d’opinion est un homme qui se charge d’aller toujours en ligne droite, un niais qui croit à l’infailibilité. Il n’y a pas de principes, il n’y a que des événements; il n’y a pas de lois, il n’y a que des circonstances: l’homme supérieur épouse les événements et les circonstances pour les conduire (PG, III, 144).

The anarchy inherent in ‘il n’y a pas de principes’ ‘il n’y a pas de lois’ is actually played out in César’s visit to the Keller Bank in search of funds to save himself from

bankruptcy. What he does not know is that the Keller Brothers, with the complicity of Nucingen and du Tillet, have no intention of lending him funds. Their purpose is not financial gain but a secondary *vol décent* that will deliver the ultimate deprivation. César is stripped of all self-worth in a wanton, malevolent destruction of his identity. A game of 'cat and mouse' leaves him totally demoralised, exposed to the hopelessness of his situation. For his predators, this is a frolic in power for its own sake, with no fear of either legal or moral retribution. The frolic is part of an immanent game of self-satisfaction which needs no external reference: it represents the ultimate form of social disinterest. A basic instinct to indulge in domination is satisfied, even though no other benefit accrues under the *vol décent*. The authority of the bank has already been sanctioned and Balzac shows such institutional power to extend beyond financial transactions. The deception, an essential element of the *vol décent*, relies on the bank's sustained appearance of probity and financial acumen.

2.4 The Theatre of Deceit

In *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac represents the Parisian Restoration financial markets, which are integral to the world of Balzacian politics, as the heirs to the monarchical courts. This transfer of power from the sovereignty of monarchy, with its central power of benefaction, to the sovereignty of ‘la panacée universelle, le crédit’ (CB, VI, 208) is manifest in *César Birotteau*. The Keller Bank provides an illustration of the ‘staging’ of the new ‘court of money’ in which theatre and theatricality operate visually and aesthetically to assert and confirm the new power of credit. Balzac’s use of imagery, in what may be termed a theatrical interpolation, tests the relationships between appearance and reality, culture and contrivance.

The forums of theatre and theatricality are familiar spaces in the Balzac novel generally, and as Agathe Novak-Lechevalier has comprehensively demonstrated,¹³⁷ they take multiple forms. This section focusses on just four key ‘scenes’ set in the Keller Bank and demonstrates how Balzac uses theatrical techniques to display inter-related aspects of transferable power. This visual representation of power is a theatrical production that Balzac shows predicated on the effectiveness and acceptability of deceit.

When César Birotteau seeks funds to stem a reversal in his financial fortunes, he unwittingly becomes a player in the ‘tragi-comédie jouée par la Gauche’ (CB, VI, 208) when he enters the Keller Bank in search of credit. The stage is the new ‘royal court of money’ where the king is now the banker François Keller, ‘l’homme célèbre à tant de titres’ (CB, VI, 207) whose ‘courtiers’ are in the service of a ‘machine’ dedicated to maximising financial yield from the bank’s investments. In the opening scene Balzac presents a moving theatrical tableau ‘composée de députés, écrivains, journalistes, agents de change, hauts commerçants, gens d’affaires, ingénieurs, surtout de familiers qui traversaient les groupes’ (CB, VI, 208) that reflects the power nexus between politics and money. The elements of theatre and court are conjoined in the ‘troupe des courtisans, des amis, des intéressés’ (Ibid.) with their air of ‘affluence quasi-royale qui distinguait l’audience de ce banquier’ (Ibid.). The tableau, set in the reception salon, reveals the subjects seeking propinquity and association with the new sovereignty. Whilst Balzac does not directly refer to religious

¹³⁷ Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, ‘La Référence au théâtre dans *La Comédie Humaine*’, *L’Année balzacienne* (2011), p. 199.

fellowship, he suggests the apparatus of religion in the picture where supplicants, suspended between financial rejection and invitation, seek audience and approval from the contemporary god of money through the intercession of the ‘familiers’.

The financial supplicants are subjected to a theatrical triage by the ‘familiers’ whereby they are objectified in a process that measures their capacity to generate profit. Nicole Mozet finds this monetary delineation to be the telling characteristic of a Balzacian world order that she recognises as ‘désormais sous le signe du multiple et soumis au règne de la monnaie’.¹³⁸ The ‘familiers’ knock at the door in ‘une façon particulière’, a gesture that relies on a minimal but memorable theatricality, as does the secret convention on du Tillet’s signature,¹³⁹ signifying that sense of authority and self-esteem often displayed by participants in secret ritual.

In confirmation of his lowly financial grading, César is made to wait while the higher financial orders are granted the actual, albeit fleeting, presence of the ‘king’. These ‘hommes considérables’ however are themselves subjected to a further visual, silent appraisal that is marked by the distance from his office that François Keller is prepared to walk in order to welcome them. It offers an unspoken, public acknowledgement of status designed to raise the prestige of the chosen and lower that of the mere aspirant.

Durant deux heures d’attente, Birotteau aperçut trois fois le banquier politique, reconduisant à trois pas au-delà de son cabinet des hommes considérables. François Keller alla jusqu’à l’antichambre pour le dernier, le général Foy (CB, VI, 208).

The desperate, vulnerable signs of financial necessity are primitive emotions often shown by Balzac to reflect the survival instinct in the natural world. They are captured in the image of the pack which ‘l’assaillait comme des chiens qui poursuivent une jolie chienne’ (Ibid.), while the financial outcomes are made visible in the demeanour of the individual petitioners: ‘les uns s’en allaient contrits, les autres affichaient un air satisfait ou prenaient des airs importants’ (Ibid.). The manner of the petitioners suggests they are privy to the Keller ‘script’, a position denied to César and similarly to other observers of this court/church ritual where true meaning is hidden beneath display.

¹³⁸ Nicole Mozet, *Balzac et le temps* (Paris: Christian Pirot, 2005), p. 27.

¹³⁹ Florence Terrasse-Riou, *Balzac: le roman de la communication* (Paris: SEDES, 2000), pp 96-97.

The ‘machine’ intensifies César’s sense of vulnerability and demoralisation by taking control of his freedom of movement. Loss of identity is added to the disorientation caused by arbitrary and unexplained delays:

Personne ne faisait la moindre attention à cette douleur cachée [...] César pensait douloureusement qu’il avait été un moment chez lui roi, comme cet homme était roi tous les matins, et il mesurait la profondeur de l’abîme où il était tombé (CB, VI, 208).

This objectification of individuals, a recurring theme in the portrayal of capitalism in *La Comédie humaine*, is one that Christopher Prendergast sees as part of Balzac’s view of ‘an exchange in the modern world, displacing and despoiling the [...] ease and poise of the culture of the *ancien régime*’.¹⁴⁰ It can be further argued that Balzac recognises more subtly that the ‘ease and poise’ of the old regime royal court is a practised disguise, rather than symptom of a superior culture. It hides a purposeful deceit behind its theatrical graciousness and grandeur, in exactly the same way as does the new court of money. François Keller’s limited ‘script’ mimics the graciousness of royalty. The polite epithets, seemingly indulgent and beneficent, form part of a theatrical play of courtesy designed to seduce its victims into the illusion of a momentary sharing of status and power. Balzac displays the inherent deceit in François’s practised manner of graciousness:

La physionomie de François Keller devint accorte, il voulut évidemment être amiable. [...] François Keller, qui signait toujours et lisait, sans avoir l’air d’écouter César, tourna la tête et lui fit un signe d’adhésion qui l’encouragea. Birotteau crut son affaire en bon chemin. [...] “Allez, je vous entends” lui dit Keller avec bonhomie (CB, VI, 209).

The insertion of ‘évidemment’ into the text qualifies and questions the veracity of the banker’s manner. Throughout the interview Keller continues working at his papers, reinforcing the notion of his dedication and high purpose whilst leaving César subject to ‘royal’ gesture. This graciousness of manner is reinforced in the verbal exchange:

Monsieur, à quoi dois-je l’honneur de votre visite [...] Oui, j’ai entendu parler chez Nucingen de cette immense affaire [...] la chose peut s’arranger, ne doutez pas de mon désir de vous être agréable [...] Nous serons heureux et fiers d’avoir obtenu votre confiance, vous êtes un de ces royalistes conséquents dont on peut être l’ennemi politique, mais dont l’estime est flatteuse... [...] Oui, reprit le banquier, la réputation dont vous jouissez est un passeport, monsieur Birotteau (CB, VI, 209-211).

The false praise purposely feeds César’s doomed political and business aspirations, working towards an ill-founded resurgence in his sense of self-importance. The cycle of rise and fall that structures the whole novel is shown in microcosm here, in

¹⁴⁰ Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis*, p. 83.

a theatre of deceit that functions overtly and serves to raise and lower César's hopes of financial salvation when in fact his case has already been decided.

In the second 'scene', which opens as César finally enters the office of François Keller, the backdrop is a physical display of wealth and high political association. Although never referred to by François (thereby intensifying their potency) these signs indicate deep financial resources and the capacity to exploit them profitably. In a performance of practised disinterest with a hint of otherworldliness, François Keller completes the picture of a 'royal presence' reminiscent of the court of the 'Sun King', in which 'le soleil de la supériorité scintillait' (CB, VI, 209).

Sur une immense table il apercevait le budget, les milles imprimés de la Chambre, les volumes du *Moniteur* ouverts, consultés et marqués [...] Sur une autre table, des cartons entassés, les mémoires, les projets, les mille renseignements confiés à un homme dans la caisse duquel toutes les industries naissantes essayaient de puiser. Le luxe royal de ce cabinet plein de tableaux, de statues, d'œuvres d'art. [...] Sur le bureau de François Keller gisaient des liasses d'effets, de lettres de change, de circulaires commerciales (CB, VI, 209).

This stage set brings together the theatre of government, a performance scripted from the records of the Chambre 'pour jeter à la tête d'un ministre ses précédentes paroles oubliées', with 'le budget' that lists government income and expenditure. No distinction between the documents is made, government and commerce being presented as two sides of the same theatrical coin. The display of government expenditure that attracts enterprise is matched by 'les mille renseignements' of 'toutes les industries naissantes', a combination of commercial information that feeds the banker with insider knowledge. Hard evidence of that knowledge being transposed into profit is visible in the 'liasses d'effets, de lettres de change, de circulaires commerciales'. Social and marital capital is added into the mise-en-scène with the entrance of 'Mme Keller, une des deux filles du comte de Gondreville, pair de France' (CB, VI, 211). The signs of social status, high association and wealth complement the sight of 'ce cabinet plein de tableaux, de statues, d'œuvres d'art' (CB, VI, 209) an added confirmation of wealth and an implied aesthetic taste that functions to both inspire and demoralise from above and beyond the prosaic world of business.

The theatrical nature of such signs invites the audience to consider whether the scene pictures a real commercial, social and political strength or merely the illusion of it. More subtly and without direct reference, it suggests to the reader that

either one is equally effective, that appearance can become exchangeable with reality. This works well to indicate François' character and the value (in every sense of the word) of appearance as reality. More brutally, in the scenes with his brother Adolphe, the relationship between appearance and reality, is ruthlessly redefined.

The third scene takes place when François passes César over to his brother Adolphe. It is here that the calculated misanthropic purpose behind the performance of the Keller brothers, that Pierre L. Horn describes as 'un jeu cruel, voire meme sadique, du chat et de la souris',¹⁴¹ is played out. The manipulation by the Keller brothers of César's emotional rise and fall reveals a capricious indulgence in power, a testing and a confirmation of superiority that Balzac recognises as a commonality operating in society at all levels of power. A pattern of domination, he reminds his reader, exercised by César himself and one 'comme tous les Parisiens, Molineux éprouvait un besoin' (CB, VI, 106).

The scene is set in the office of Adolphe Keller, a pitiless spirit who works in a contrasting setting devoid of the grandeur and artifice that characterises François' office. The office and Adolphe himself display a disinterest that liberates him from any social or personal sanction: 'un cabinet froid, meublé de deux secrétaires à cylindre de mesquins fauteuils, orné de rideaux très négligés et d'un maigre tapis' (CB, VI, 212). Its occupier is described as 'le plus fin des deux frères, un vrai loup-cervier, à l'œil aigu, aux lèvres minces, au teint aigre' (CB, VI, 212-213), his appearance reflecting his focused, socially indifferent disposition. Adolphe seeks profit 'sans honte' and therefore without the burden of social constraint. His application of the triple 'coups audacieux' is evidence of an amoral commercial logic that works without public or personal reference. Behind the door of Adolphe's office 'les défauts de la législation' (CB, VI, 212) can be exploited for profit without acting illegally and therefore without the risk of legal retribution, are under scrutiny. This *vol légal* allows an immoral act of deprivation to still wear the protective, sanctioned masque of legality.

The final scene again takes place in Adolphe's office where he applies the objective truths of financial reality to César's situation. These calculations, operating where 'les affaires ne reposent pas sur des sentiments', annihilate César's

¹⁴¹ Pierre L. Horn, 'L'Épisode des banquiers dans *César Birotteau et Jérôme Paturot*', *L'Année balzacienne* (1978), pp. 247-278.

hopes and his credentials as a speculator. Where his brother François uses appearance to disguise reality, Adolphe makes no such compromise and in his office appearance and reality become as one. Acting without artifice or disguise Adolphe exposes the authentic face of commercial finance. We are on familiar ground here, Balzac suggesting a firm and stable relationship between the office milieu and the character (between appearance and reality) whereas in the scenes with François, the Bank is indeed a theatre of deceit.

The commercial deceit operating in the ‘court’ at the Keller Bank is not designed to disguise a financial fraud, (the actions are legal), but in the context of human exchange it serves to disguise the impersonal processes of profit creation. The theatrical masque is used to both hide and invite exploration of a commercial reality that is socially unpalatable. The performance demonstrates that power, irrespective of lineage, has behavioural and visual characteristics that are transferable between the established and the new orders. The inexorable demand for profit is the new financial imperative in Balzac’s Restoration France. Imagery and masque, once characteristic of the royal court, and already recognised in post-modern French society, are now applied to the world of money and speculation revealing the many levels and manipulations of deceit and fraud.

2.5 The *vol décent* Infiltrates the Legal Process

Under the title *Histoire générale des faillites*, in ‘une sorte de parenthèse dans le récit’, Balzac responds to ‘la mode naissante du roman publié en feuilleton [qui] encourageait les romanciers à des digressions à caractère didactique’.¹⁴² He accurately describes and interprets the 1807 insolvency and bankruptcy legislation still in operation in 1819. He uses it as material for a polemic in which legal process invites and supports deceptions that subvert legal intention, providing fertile ground for a *vol décent*. In the *Histoire générale des faillites* he exposes the chicanery surrounding the legal action of bankruptcy which creates circumstances in which deception within the institution of the law can flourish. This forum of deceit, which nurtures the *vol décent* is occupied by the parties to the action in bankruptcy, ‘le failli et son agréé, l’avoué des commerçants, les syndics et l’agent, enfin le juge-commissaire’ (CB, VI, 272) who, together with the creditors, fulfil the roles played in what Balzac pictures as a theatre of law. He exposes the bankruptcy process, one predicated on the loss of private fortune, as a procedure guaranteed to stimulate an opposition between the bankrupt and the legal system, activating in the bankrupt ‘les fourberies de l’esprit’:

Il se promène en parlementaire dans le camp ennemi, non par curiosité, mais pour déjouer les mauvaises intentions de la loi relativement aux faillis. L’effet de toute loi qui touche à la fortune privée est de développer prodigieusement les fourberies de l’esprit. La pensée des faillis, comme de tous ceux dont les intérêts sont contrecarrés par une loi quelconque, est de l’annuler à leur égard (CB, VI, 271).

The debtor’s need to seek respite drawn from the rigours of jurisdiction is represented as a basic instinct for survival against external forces. This is an instinct from the natural world that, for Balzac, still exerts a primal force in society; more powerful than a sophisticated moral compliance with authority. The notion shared with Saint-Hilaire that humans and animals both remain at the mercy of basic instinct provides the conflict that characterises ‘le drame d’une faillite’, and ‘il constitue à Paris une des monstreuses plaisanteries légales’. As we have seen earlier in our analysis of the Keller Bank,¹⁴³ Balzac again uses the theatrical metaphor, this time to provide an introductory narrative frame:

Ce beau drame commercial a trois actes distincts: l’acte de l’argent, l’acte des syndics, l’acte du concordat. Comme toutes les pièces du théâtre, il offre un double spectacle: il a sa mise en scène pour le public et ses moyens cachés, il y a la représentation vue du parterre et la représentation vue des coulisses (CB, VI, 272).

¹⁴² Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), VI, p.1235

¹⁴³ Please see Section 2.4.

The appearance/reality dilemma, fundamental to the *vol décent*, is firmly anchored in the ‘mise en scène pour le public et ses moyens cachés [...] vue du parterre et la représentation vue des coulisses’. The *vol décent* triggers a deeper, recurring Balzacian question concerning the reliability of representation itself, historic, political, social as well as theatrical. The multiple perspectives of theatre are again used to explore the disparity of interest between the parties. In a series of oppositions, between party interest and legal process, Balzac shows how deception is used to resolve dispute. He provides us with hard evidence of how artifice plays a sanctioned, permanent role in the legal process. The part of Juge-Commissaire to the Tribunal of Commerce, whose duty it is to oversee the bankruptcy process in the interests of both parties, was bestowed upon someone from the business community deemed familiar with the commercial circumstances. In an operative oversight and despite its equitable intention, it was commonly awarded to a business man still active in business. The appointment gave rise to a conflict of interest between the Juge-Commissaire’s commitment to his own business and his commitment to his legal duties. Balzac points to the potential for disaster that resides in such a conflict of interests, for both debtors and creditors and even for the judge. ‘Paris a vu président de son tribunal de commerce être forcé de déposer son bilan’ (CB, VI, 272-3). Resolution of this dilemma was sought in the delegation of powers to ‘un agent de droit de mettre la main sur les fonds, les valeurs, les marchandises, en vérifiant l’actif porté dans le bilan’ (CB, VI, 271) a devolution of power that weakens the focus of the legislative process. Monetary greed, represented in the judge’s own business interests, began the process of separating the law from the achievement of its aims. Balzac shows this gap widening exponentially when fed by a combination of unintended consequences and purposeful deceit: ‘la Législation, faite à la hâte, qui régit la matière, a lié les mains au juge-commissaire, et dans plusieurs circonstances il consacre des fraudes sans les pouvoir empêcher comme vous l’allez voir’ (CB, VI, 273).

The deceit and its consequence are illustrated when the agent becomes an active participant in the financial situation that results from the insolvency. Ostensibly acting in the interests of the creditors, the agent can find himself in a situation where, determined by the financial imperatives of his brief, he acts in favour of the debtor. This reversal is driven by the duty to maximise the funds obtained from the bankrupt’s assets; a duty acquitted against the established

assumption that the insolvent party must still be retaining ‘des trésors cachés’. In that assumption the narrator establishes deceit as a common normative social condition in which self-protection overrides principle. The normalising of deceit, gives the action a moral legitimacy when the law accepts and participates in the deception: ‘Souvent un agent habile a fait rapporter le jugement en rachetant les créances et en relevant le négociant, qui rebondit alors comme une balle élastique’ (CB, VI, 273/4). In an auspicious prioritisation of funds, the agent and counsel, acting together, only take their on their roles when it is guaranteed that their fees will be met.

The gap between intention and consequence is further aggravated by the appointment of the provisional receivers who will replace the agent. The receivers are appointed by the creditors but the law awards each creditor, irrespective of their level of exposure, only one vote. An unintended consequence results when the bankrupt purposefully lists sufficient false creditors to nominate the receivers in the interest of the insolvent party. The notion of an equitable balance between the interests of the debtor and the creditors is thereby eroded, sacrificed by the deception, in this case, of the bankrupt himself. ‘Le juge-commissaire prend presque toujours de la main du faillite les syndics qu’il lui convient d’avoir’. Balzac cannot but emphasise the irony of the practice: ‘l’homme honorable tombé dans le malheur, maître du terrain, *légalise alors le vol*¹⁴⁴ qu’il a médité’ (CB, VI, 274). The ‘marriage of convenience’ between the law, its operatives and subjects establishes a place within the legal system for the *vol décent*.

In what becomes a market of opportunity, the major creditors are able to exercise a corrective strategy designed to remedy advantages manipulated by the debtor. Needing their votes to authorise the concordat ‘qui remet au négociant une partie de sa dette et lui rend ses affaires soit voté par une certaine majorité de sommes et de personnes’ (CB, VI, 274-5). They resolve the dilemma of multiple cross-interests between the parties in their own favour by voting through the concordat in exchange for secret payments made to themselves by the debtor outside the terms of the concordat and omitted from the statement of affaires that records assets and liabilities. From the initial manipulation of a vulnerable legal process this deception, practised by the major creditors, moves the insolvency process beyond the

¹⁴⁴ My italics.

jurisdiction of the court. The group of major creditors effects an illegal commercial transaction that purposely deprives the other creditors financially whilst simultaneously depriving the court of jurisdiction. In the face of a relentless and purposeful deceit Balzac reveals the law to be ultimately rendered impotent.

Les juges espèrent moraliser ainsi la faillite, mais ils arriveront à la rendre encore plus immorale: les créanciers inventeront quelques actes encore plus coquins, que les juges flétriront comme juges, et dont ils profiteront comme négociants (CB, VI, 275).

The quasi theatrical performance continues with the opposition between the '*créancier sérieux et légitime*' and the '*créanciers gais et illégitimes*'. The former legally receive dividends from the bankruptcy, of which du Tillet's foundation of a banking house provides an example: an avoidance of, rather than an illegal evasion of, obligations. The '*créancier sérieux et légitime*' can also serve as a front to hide the ongoing activity of the bankrupt who operates behind this cover to reduce dividends available and payable to the bona fide creditors. The bankrupt retains the surplus funds for future investment whilst still satisfying the terms of the winding-up order. The *créanciers gais et illégitimes*, on the other hand are false creditors who take voting rights over the distribution of the assets. What emerges from the presence of these two conflicting bodies is a process under which the *créanciers sérieux et légitimes* manipulate the exit from the stage of the *créanciers gais et illégitimes*. Both groups subvert the legal process but the *créanciers sérieux et légitimes* then use it to deprive their competitors of their capacity to control the distribution of funds.

The disappearance of the *créanciers gais et illégitimes* is drawn from Balzac's intimate knowledge of business and legal practice. This dual familiarity allows him to reliably assume that if business activity is scrutinised over a long enough period, evidence of illegality will be found. He knows that discovery, the legally authorised external examination of records, is detailed and burdensome but also authoritative and therefore able 'obtenir par autorité de justice l'apport de ceux du faux créancier, découvrir l'in vraisemblance de la fiction' (CB, VI, 275). Similarly, disclosure of the funds employed in a business invites question as to their source. The nature of that enquiry, successful or not in terms of illegality, uses the law, not as a process, but as an instrument with which to threaten the claimant.

Well versed in insolvency law and experienced in its practice Balzac represents the institution of justice not only as theatre but also as a game of chance that tests the capacity of the litigant to render the law ineffective or subject to

manipulation. Even ‘le grand Gobseck’, arguably the supreme business operator in the world of *La Comédie humaine*, is left to admire the audacious and imaginative play of his debtor who ‘avait signé les effets illicites de sa raison sociale en faillite, et il put appliquer à ces effets la déduction de soixante-quinze pour cent. Gobseck [...] saluait toujours son débiteur avec un respect ironique’ (CB, VI, 276). This respect is an acknowledgement of the period’s prioritisation of duplicity above probity, and its recognition of the imperative of financial gain.

Balzac uses the textual digression to follow a process of moral disintegration. The nature of deprivation itself is shown stretching into outright theft, where ‘Heureux le négociant [...] qui prend un sac et grossit sa part’ (CB, VI, 278). Direct deprivation of value by theft of assets is matched by a commercial creativity capable of establishing a market in debt. The players in that market are ruthless in deceit and imaginative in seeking advantageous positions. The creditor, unable to recover his losses seeks to avoid the system altogether and comes to accept ‘la faillite comme un sinistre sans assureurs’ (CB, VI, 277). Balzac acknowledges the absence of an ordered and equitable solution in the business milieu, where ‘il y a donc deux faillites: la faillite du négociant qui veut ressaisir les affaires, et la faillite du négociant qui, tombé dans l’eau, se contente d’aller au fond de la rivière’ (CB, VI, 278).

Balzac’s polemical treatment of the *Histoire générale des faillites* reveals the social and moral controversies that arise when deceit successfully subverts the equitable and moral intention of the law. César’s insolvency is played out in such a milieu and exposes a social reality now operative in Restoration Paris, untouched by the imposition of political controls. ‘Un homme est admiré s’il *se couvre*. Se couvrir est s’emparer de quelques valeurs au détriment des autres créanciers’. (CB, VI, 277) A financially efficacious practice that operates without moral constraint attracts the investor for both its unfettered opportunities and its potential return. Consequently, the investors sanction immoral practice which is endorsed by the legal process itself. The *histoire* is pertinent evidence of how the *vol décent* can infiltrate the legal process to the detriment of both parties to the action and create a market for legal manipulation.

2.6 Nucingen: ‘Il n’y a que des apparences d’honnête homme’

Balzac writes to the dedicatee of *La Maison Nucingen*, Zulma Carraud, ‘Vous et quelques âmes, belles comme la vôtre, comprendront ma pensée en lisant *La Maison Nucingen* accolée à *César Birotteau*. Dans ce contraste n’y a-t-il pas tout un enseignement social?’ (MN, VI, 329) The lesson lies in the contrast between Birotteau, ‘l’image de la probité’ and Nucingen, ‘un homme bien trempé à se mettre au dessus des lois de la probité.’¹⁴⁵ Although both characters are drawn from the business world of the Parisian Restoration the difference is profound. Balzac shows Birotteau’s business practice adhering to the commercial orthodoxies of the period, in his conformity to the notion of probity. Nucingen's business practice on the other hand works outside those orthodoxies. *La Maison Nucingen* casts light on the commercial contracts in the 1826¹⁴⁶ Parisian world of financial speculation, where the growth market in negotiable securities reveals a particularly virulent form of the *vol décent*.

2.6.1 A Clandestine Culture

In his introduction to *La Maison Nucingen* Pierre Citron confirms that ‘l’architecture [...] d’un récit central issue d’un dialogue cadre’¹⁴⁷ is not a new technique for Balzac, as he had already adopted it earlier for *Sarrasine*, *Le Conseil*, and *Gobseck*.¹⁴⁸ The significance of form in the realisation of Balzac’s creative imagination is emphasised by Gaëton Picon:

The moment at which there appears a technique in tune with a ghostly ensemble of imaginings and thoughts is the very moment at which the phantoms materialize; it is in the creative process that thought changes into vision.¹⁴⁹

The framed dialogue of the incipit in *La Maison Nucingen* provides a narrative architecture of two distinct but interrelated zones. This allows the four interlocutors freedom of exchange amongst themselves whilst unknowingly overheard by the anonymous narrator and reader. This structure effectively unveils the often hidden layers of meaning attached to the commercial contract, which Balzac sees motivated by self-interest and transacted through deception. The clandestine nature of the market is captured in the *mise en scène* itself:

¹⁴⁵ Letter to Hippolyte Castille 1846, quoted by Herbert J. Hunt, *Balzac’s Comédie humaine* (London: Athlone Press, 1964 [1959]), p. 199.

¹⁴⁶ Félicien Marceau, *Balzac et Son Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986, [1970]), pp. 12-16.

¹⁴⁷ Pierre Citron, ‘Introduction to *La Maison Nucingen*’ (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 317.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Gaëton Picon, *La Gazette des lettres* 20 mai 1949, p 15, trans. by Madame Gaëton Picon

Chez Véry, par exemple, le plus grand salon est coupé en deux par une cloison qui s'ôte et se remet à volonté La scène n'était pas là, mais dans un bon endroit qu'il ne me convient pas de nommer' (MN, VI, 329).

The partition that opens and closes at will provides a metaphor for the apprehension of sudden intervention so characteristic of clandestine assembly. This apprehension is strengthened by the advice that Véry's was not the actual venue; the storyteller declares that a disclosure of the scene's true whereabouts would leave him in an uncomfortable position, a discomfort and secrecy now shared with the reader.

Balzac proceeds to deepen the narrator-reader relationship with the direct address of 'vous' to the reader by the raconteur, who remains physically detached, literally partitioned from the action. The raconteur does not disclose his presence and surreptitiously remains hidden, overhearing the interlocutors while enjoying a unique (and private) relationship with the reader, both as commentator and as presenter of the *mise en scène*: 'En reconnaissant les voix, je sus à quels personnages nous avons affaire' (MN, VI, 329). He then introduces Bixiou, Blondet, Couture and Finot. His inclusive 'nous' and his direct exchange with the reader render the latter a complicit partner in his clandestine position. The nature of any actual acquaintance between the raconteur and the interlocutors remains undisclosed, adding a further sense of intrigue and irresolution. The furtive alliance between narrator and reader is strengthened by the narrator's assumption of shared experiences that infer a commonality of taste and social position. The reader's own high social experience is implied in 'vous savez combien sont minces les cloisons [...] dans les plus élégants cabarets de Paris' (MN, VI, 329) and a shared familiarity with the desirable social venues of Paris such as the celebrated 'Chez Véry' of the Palais-Royal. Reference to Chez Véry brings an authenticity to the contemporaneous Parisian reader who would also be aware of the Palais Royal as a centre of prostitution and gambling in the Restoration Paris of 1826.¹⁵⁰ As well as seeking to establish his place in sophisticated society, the anonymous commentator looks to consolidate his position with an assertion of good taste. His 'friandes d'un dîner exquis à plusieurs titres' suggest culinary sophistication but his use of 'nous caressions' regarding the desserts speaks more of pretention than refinement. Likewise the quotation from Henri Monnier, 'je ne voudrais pas la compromettre' in supposed defence of a lady's reputation, together with his implied reticence in 'il ne me convient pas de nommer'

¹⁵⁰ Colin Jones, *Paris: Biography of a City* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 257.

betray the arriviste who offers unsolicited information designed to impress rather than to inform. The narrative structure evokes half glimpsed images and possibilities that further suggest the surreptitious, clandestine nature of the gathering.

Balzac's staging of the opening scene of *La Maison Nucingen*, with its strategically placed partition that encourages the covert, suggesting the presence of a subculture that accepts pretence and duplicity as the common currency of commercial exchange. The narrator, rather than distinguishing himself from those he is about to introduce is a collaborator in commercial deception. There is no direct mention of money, contract or speculation in this opening, although the social setting and the disposition of the narrator anticipate a world of dubious money and shady opportunism. The dramatic, or even melodramatic, hold on the reader is sustained by the silent yet seductive promise of covert listening, secret revelations and a safe, anonymous seat in a culture of conspiracy. Balzac has prepared the fertile ground of the *vol décent*.

Having structured a scene where deception and self-interest can flourish Balzac deepens reader understanding of the culture of speculation in an introduction to the four interlocutors. He begins with a direct metaphorical assertion: 'C'était quatre des plus hardis cormorans éclos dans l'écume qui couronne les flots incessamment renouvelés de la génération présente' (MN, VI, 330). The cormorant is the image of the speculator as predator, hovering above the fray, detached but ever watchful, waiting to pounce on any passing opportunity, its black coat and ancient silhouette adding a hint of evil. 'Des plus hardis' adds something of the strut of youth and the fellowship of adolescent certainty. The 'éclos dans l'écume' gives the squalid, unformed environment from which they emerge, the 'flots incessamment renouvelés de la génération présente' the period's constant turbulence and change ceaselessly renewed. The metaphor provides a fluid picture of the elements which contribute to the creation of the commercial contract. The image is not without historical underpinning.

These 'hardis cormorans' as 'aimables garçons dont l'existence est problématique, à qui l'on connaît ni rentes ni domaines, et qui vivent bien' (MN, VI, 330) exploit the emergence of credit, a potential form of collateral without actual substance, whereby property can be obtained and lifestyle supported against the promise of future payment. Balzac matches these new forms of speculation with the personal attributes he sees are needed to exploit them: 'Ces spirituels *condottieri* de

l'Industrie moderne [...] laissent les inquiétudes à leurs créanciers, gardent les plaisirs pour eux, et n'ont de souci que de leur costume' (MN, VI, 330). The reference to the *condottieri*, mercenaries of the 13th and 14th centuries employed by the Italian City States, is a significant one. The *condottieri* enjoyed fame for their capacity to breach binding, contractual undertakings at the first sight of a more profitable opportunity. The extent of such unscrupulousness was even evident in battle, where they might change sides during the engagement, in exchange for a higher financial return from the enemy. Such an analogy, between *condottieri* and 'cormorans', is apt. The similarity is based on an immorality in which notions of commitment and integrity are sacrificed to gain. This practice, not necessarily illegal, becomes the *vol décent* of the Balzacian world of speculation. Morality is here seen mortgaged against self-interest and risk, with a disdain and mockery of convention penetrating a society in which the end justifies the means.

The four 'cormorans' display for Balzac the basic competences behind the commercial contract, moral disinterest, recognition of opportunity, exploitation of opportunity and an indifference to commitment. The fact that each practice is performed 'pleine de l'âcre ironie', underlines Balzac's nostalgia for 'la loi de l'hospitalité'.¹⁵¹ The setting for the interlocutors, cocooned within the forum of a private dinner party, ensures a narrative exchange 'founded on a ritual of exclusion and solidarity' as Prendergast¹⁵² says of Mlle des Touches's salon in *Autre étude de femme*, but equally valid here. Such an environment of conviviality, exclusively peopled by four who share a common interest in speculation, does not promote objective enquiry but rather allows them to bask in shared experience and to consolidate reputations and experiences in the easy company of like minds. The dialogue is necessarily self-congratulatory, anecdotal in the service of certainties, designed to reflect and endorse the world they represent. The self-serving banter, the competitive narration of experiences, is the common currency of 'club' membership, where the impulse is to circumscribe their world rather than to invite inclusion. This is a cocoon of closed familiarity for the pompous and certain, invariably reducing life to commodity and exchange: 'les hommes bien gantés et

¹⁵¹ Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis*, p. 86.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

bien cravatés qui ne rougissent pas d'épouser une femme pour sa fortune [...] les autres sont des fous qui aiment'. (MN, VI, 336)

Balzac reinforces the clandestine nature of the speculative markets in the structuring of the *mise en scène*. He locks together, within the confines of the café, the observed and the observer. The architecture and close confinement offer an apparently safe place for disclosure of information and intrigue but at the same time offers space to the observer, who becomes the 'insider' dealer. It is a point of view that provides equally for the hatching of deception and a clouding of reality: the forum for the *vol décent*.

2.6.2 'Homme carré de base comme de hauteur'

This description of Nucingen (MN, VI, 333) provides a physical image of permanence, solidarity and power that reduces the complexity of personality to its core elements. Balzac's image of Nucingen as a solid block, static and impervious has a 'spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art [in which] primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear'.¹⁵³ Such a threat is captured in the shape and mass of the image. Roger Fry, writing in 1961 explains the relationship between a specific form and the reactions it stimulates:

When an object is so represented that we recognize it as having inertia, we feel its power of resisting movement, or communicating its own movement to other bodies, and our imaginative reaction to such an image is governed by our experience of mass in actual life'.¹⁵⁴

The 'homme carré de base comme de hauteur' is a Nucingen impervious to the dreams of the potential investors amongst 'les flots incessamment renouvelés' that pour into Restoration Paris. The same sense of immunity provides the aspiring speculator with an irresistible image of certainty in the mutable world of speculation. When Bixiou places Nucingen in conversation with Napoleon, the Emperor of France and the Emperor of Finance on a level of implied familiarity, he conflates a basic, primitive image of power with the more sophisticated, socially seductive icons of Empire. The pictures of Napoleon from the Imperial era, those created by Antoine Jean Gros¹⁵⁵ and Jaques Louis David¹⁵⁶ in particular, deliver notions of grandeur through a flagrant but alluring transfiguration of reality. This

¹⁵³ Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001[1990]), p. 163.

¹⁵⁴ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Penguin Books, 1961[1920]), p. 36

¹⁵⁵ Marcel Brion, *Art of the Romantic Era* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), pp. 137-138.

¹⁵⁶ Simon Schama, *Power of Art*, pp. 231-235.

triumph for appearance over reality depicts a Napoleon who mythically becomes the personification of idealism, patriotism and heroism. Distortions in the service of reputation draw on recognisable external images of people, place, objects and events to present them in a manner which promotes the desired emotional response. Conversely, yet serving the same purpose, the ‘*homme carré de base comme de hauteur*’ emerges from a search for a truth stripped bare of artifice. In an unveiling of the character of Nucingen, one that captures him in the exclusive exercise of his self-interest, Nucingen displays a disinterest which is isolated from ethical influence.

As we have seen, Nucingen is revealed through the dialogue of the four interlocuteurs, Couture, Bixiou, Finot and Blondet. He remains distanced and silent, and Balzac compares him with three other characters representative of the age, Rastignac; du Tillet, and Henri de Marsay. The sketch of du Tillet by Androche Finot reveals speculation as a means of achieving wealth and its counterpart of a speedy upward social mobility: ‘*ce gars qui n’avait pas un liard en 1814, est devenue ce que vous le voyez*’ (MN, VI, 339). An important means of achieving rapid social success is the capacity to treat relationships as integral parts of the financial transaction, people as opportunity and objects to be traded as commodity. Thus, du Tillet’s climb up the social ladder is brought about by the same careful and objective planning allied to the capacity to respond through deception to changed circumstance: ‘*Il a si bien caché ses antécédents, qu’il a fallu fouiller des égouts pour les trouver*’ (MN, VI, 339). The vulgarity of the phrase is interesting because, shocking to a Restoration readership that may have been nurtured on neo-classicism, it is reliable as an exchange between the ‘*quatre cormorans éclos dans l’écume*’ and successful in reflecting the indulgences of a shared camaraderie.

Bixiou then takes over the narrative to distinguish Nucingen and du Tillet by physiognomic comparison, a popular Balzacian device. Du Tillet is described as a ‘*petit carotteur*’ (Ibid.) whilst Nucingen ‘*est cubique, il est gras, il est lourd*’ (Ibid.) echoing the ‘*homme carré de base comme de hauteur*’. The contrast continues with a combination of simile and physical description. Du Tillet ‘*a la mène aigue des chats, il est maigre, élancé*’ (Ibid.) while Nucingen is ‘*immobile comme un diplomate*’ (Ibid.) with ‘*la main épaisse et un regard de loup-cervier qui s’anime jamais*’ (Ibid.). In his use of animal imagery Balzac refers to a still operative natural world order and, in Nucingen’s case, enjoying scant association with society. Balzac

strips away evolutionary influences and manners, reverting to an unfettered freedom cleansed of social restraint. Nucingen's isolation from social coercion allows him to take a position at the head of a natural hierarchy that renders society ineffective. The distinction is between Nucingen's purpose, power and resolution on a large scale: 'sa profondeur n'est pas en avant, mais en arriere: il est impénétrable, on ne le voit jamais venir'(Ibid.) and du Tillet's scavenging, brittle, and comparatively small scale operations: 'un chacal qui réussit par son odorat, qui devine les cadavres et arrive le premier'(Ibid.). This world of prandial banter is delivered with a flippancy reflective of youth and speculation but ironically, as *César Birotteau* and *Une Fille d'Eve* reveal, du Tillet will become one of the richest bankers in Paris, eventually marrying the daughter of the comte de Granville.

The comparison between Nucingen and du Tillet does still serve to highlight an exceptional divorce from social constraint. Blondet, the third interlocutor to contribute, compares the social awareness of the two speculators and finds that Nucingen has 'le bon sens de deviner qu'un financier ne doit être que baron' (Ibid.) indicating the awareness that high social status attracts investment. Du Tillet fails to make the connection and merely aspires to 'se faire nommer comte en Italie' (Ibid.).

It is Couture, the final contributor, who reveals the hard core of functional reality in Nucingen's understanding of society, his *modus operandi*, alliances and ethics:

D'abord Nucingen a osé dire qu'il n'y a que des apparences d'honnête homme; puis, pour le bien connaître, il faut être dans les affaires. Chez lui, la banque est un très petit département; il y a les fournitures du gouvernement, les vins, les laines, les indigos, enfin tout ce qui donne matière à un gain quelconque. Son génie embrasse tout. Cet éléphant de la Finance vendrait des députés au Ministère, et les Grecs aux Turcs. Pour lui le commerce est, dirait Cousin, la totalité des variétés, l'unité des spécialités. La Banque envisagée ainsi devient toute une politique, elle exige une tête puissante, et porte alors un homme bien trempé à se mettre au-dessus des lois de la probité, dans laquelle il se trouve à l'étroit (MN, VI, 339).

Nucingen posits that 'il n'y a que des apparences d'honnête homme', a theory of behaviour in which deceit is the common currency and acts of deception are expressions of a behavioural norm. The fact that the norm is not yet universally acknowledged in the world of *La Comédie humaine* merely provides Nucingen with additional proof of the social assimilation of deception. Whether or not deceit is acknowledged as an acceptable working practice has no effect on Nucingen as he deals exclusively in matters as they are and does not work from an ideological

position. However, the notion of the *vol décent* provides a label for the silent acquiescence in which deceit is so easily tolerated.

Nucingen's search for effective strategies that minimise risk to himself, while maximising financial opportunity, see him trading through 'la totalité des variétés, l'unité des spécialités' and the bank becoming 'toute une politique'. He amalgamates the widest commercial opportunities with the political connections that offer the greatest and most reliable opportunities for lending. Those two connections, allied to his exploitation of the legal code, ensure that he can act without probity but within the law.

On disclosing the connection between Rastignac and Nucingen, Blondet offers the following aside on Nucingen: 'il avait en horreur de Marsay qui n'était pas maniable'. The observation is brief but telling. Henri de Marsay displays an aristocratic disdain and indifference to social constraint and his presence, along with that of Maxime de Trailles, draws an indelible line through *La Comédie humaine*. Pierre Barbéris gives a useful character sketch of de Marsay:

L'homme supérieur frappe à la tête; il ne perd pas son temps à cheminer; il connaît les voies de traverse; il a vu et jugé l'ensemble. Qu'est-ce à dire, sinon que cet homme supérieur n'est pas de ce monde, qu'il vient d'ailleurs, comme d'une autre planète, et qu'il se joue de lois que le vulgaire considère comme sacrées, inévitables, mais dans lesquelles il ne voit, lui, que règlements pour esprit bas? Ne participant pas à l'élaboration de ce monde, de Marsay le méprise et s'en sert.¹⁵⁷

Unsurprisingly, Nucingen fails to find de Marsay 'maniable'. However, de Marsay's disinterest and detachment from the commercial contract does not prevent him from becoming Prime Minister. As he 'veut le pouvoir pour le pouvoir, non pour appliquer un programme',¹⁵⁸ he is above the quotidian, monetary impulses, which Nucingen needs to effect financial growth. De Marsay marks a limit of influence for Nucingen and restricts the reach of the commercial 'contract'.

While du Tillet may differ from Nucingen in style and scope, he is from the same commercial sector and shares the lust for profit. The aristocratic de Marsay is above this financial fray but the narrative shows Eugène de Rastignac as a hybrid, providing a bridge between the new commercial world and the old aristocracy. Rastignac's relationship with Nucingen is instructive of both characters. Blondet points out the limitation of de Marsay for Nucingen, but recognises a dependency in Rastignac 'mais Rastignac lui a plu beaucoup et l'a exploité sans que Rastignac

¹⁵⁷ Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac*, p. 192.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

s'en doutât' (MN, VI, 333). Rastignac is from the impoverished aristocracy, 'en 1819 [] sa famille mangeait des hannetons rôtis et buvait le vin du cru, pour pouvoir lui envoyer cent francs par mois; le domaine de son père ne valait pas mille écus; il avait deux soeurs et un frère sur les bras' (MN, VI, 332). His need to resurrect his financial and social fortunes provides an opportunity for Nucingen, who uses his innocence to sell shares of dubious value to his social connections. In return, Rastignac receives 'quarante mille livres de rentes' (Ibid.) which finances his move into politics. He has attached himself to Delphine, Nucingen's wife, in an attempt to secure financial advantage through proximity to wealth. Above all, he is 'l'héritier direct du feu de Marsay' (Ibid.) and that flame distances him from Nucingen. His pedigree and intellect make him into someone who can understand the game and act accordingly.

Rastignac shares with de Marsay the capacity to distance and contextualize social movements, recognising that his social skills equip him for success. However, he must also be distinguished from de Marsay, as he feels and fulfils family obligations, 'chacune de ses soeurs a été richement dotée, noblement mariée, et il a laissé l'usufruit du domaine à sa mère'. He is caring of Père Goriot and Delphine, despite the fact that he 'a eu le bon esprit de s'attacher à une femme riche'. While he temporarily has to exist within the world of the commercial 'contract' his instinct is ultimately to use his intelligence to exploit that field from above, 'Rastignac se concentre, se ramasse, étudie le point où il faut charger, et il charge à fond de train' (MN, VI, 334). This is the action of the dispassionate manipulator, the politician. Ultimately, Rastignac seeks what he feels to be his rightful place, above the noisy fray of commerce, controlling such a world from the higher plane of government and so we find him 'en passe de devenir ministre, pair de France et tout ce qu'il voudra être!' As he reaches this status he moves outside of Nucingen's immediate sphere of influence. Rastignac reflects the residual 'aristocratic value system that denigrated business activity and relegated businessmen to second-class status'.¹⁵⁹ However, he has to deal with the money markets in order to re-establish himself as part of the new commercial aristocracy.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Stephen Smith, *Emergence of Modern Business Enterprise in France 1800-1930* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006)

In using the framed dialogue and limiting our view to that of the interlocutors, Balzac allows Nucingen to remain hidden behind an aura of silence. In this way, he acquires a mysterious persona, which can easily attract an exaggerated adulation. Nucingen therefore remains a primitive, powerful presence for the reader and the ‘quatre cormorans’. As aspirants, they see Nucingen as proof that their hopes of wealth can also be achieved. Subsequently, they seek to exaggerate their acquaintance, treat his appalling conduct with wry amusement, generally bask in his success and thereby promote the notion of financial ‘omnipotence’.

2.6.3 ‘L’Omnipotence, l’omniscience, l’omniconvenance de l’argent’
(MN, VI, 331)

The extraordinary events that constitute ‘des phénomènes les plus extraordinaires de notre époque’ (MN, VI, 338) are executed by Nucingen. According to Emmanuel Faillettaz he is ‘le plus puissant personnage de *La Comédie humaine* par sa fortune. [...] Il symbolise en effet la puissance, il l’incarne’.¹⁶⁰ He is driven by his will ‘à se convaincre de sa supériorité’,¹⁶¹ a behavioural necessity apparent from his early years in the employ of the banker d’Aldrigger in Strasbourg where ‘en 1804 Nucingen était peu connu. [...] Ce grand financier sent alors son infériorité. Comment se faire connaître?’ (MN, VI, 338) To satisfy a thwarted sense of pre-eminence, his superiority as yet unproved and unrecognised, he sets out to become what Jean-Pierre Richard has termed ‘un individu monomaniacque, et donc superlativement un, focalement simplifié, entièrement concentré, et résumé autour d’une passion rayonnante’.¹⁶² This concentration of energy and its indifference toward society generates adulation.

The three suspensions of payments in *La Maison Nucingen*, technically acts of implied insolvency, form a serial *vol décent* that provides important evidence of the banker's disinterest in his investors and his magnetic quality for the investor. Ironically, the suspensions contribute to the expansion and wealth of Nucingen's bank, in direct relationship to the exponential growth in his notoriety. However, Balzac reveals Nucingen's financial attractiveness to result as much from investor's rapacity as it does from his own financial expertise. In this relationship Balzac uncovers a silent complicity between the investor, unable to directly confront

¹⁶⁰ Faillettaz, *Balzac et le monde des affaires*, p. 42.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁶² Jean-Pierre Richard, *Études sur le romantisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 94.

uncongenial circumstances, and the banker who ‘a la main épaisse et un regard de loup-cervier qui ne s’anime jamais’ (MN, VI, 339).

Fame is a currency that Balzac shows to serve a dual purpose for Nucingen. It asserts a popular recognition of his financial acumen as a banker and entices the speculator to seek direct association with the financial powers he displays. The promise of financial kinship and a sharing in opportunity appear to offer the speculator a safe haven for high risk/high yield investment. However, the limit of fame and its counterpart of expectation, whilst aspiring and seductive, are not tests for judging the reliability of projected profit. Nucingen is aware of these limitations and consequently acts to consolidate the immediate, spontaneous notoriety gained from suspension of his payments:

Il désintéresse son monde avec des valeurs mortes, et reprend ses paiements; aussitôt son papier se fait dans toute la France. Par une circonstance inouïe, les valeurs revivent, reprennent faveur, donnent des bénéfices. Le Nucingen est très recherché (MN, VI, 338).

Having displayed his audacity, he guards his reputation with a distribution of shares (that he believes to be valueless) and then calms any immediate feelings of panic by restarting payments. The success of that process and the continuing accumulation of acolytes, despite the dubious suspension of payments, suggest that Nucingen is in fact tapping into basic, natural instincts that lie deeper than immediate financial gain. Balzac shows Nucingen’s deception to lie in the offsetting of his liabilities against ‘valeurs mortes’ but that action also disguises the fact that Nucingen has no interest whatsoever in securing a return for the shareholders. His sole interest is to provide a conduit for their funds; a strategy increasingly exposed in the following two suspensions. The fact that his paper is now traded ‘dans toute la France’ and that ‘le Nucingen est très recherché’ point to an uncritical acceptance of the cessation of payments. Acquiescence by investors in two representations of insolvency condones a commercial practice that displays signs of chicanery. Only the subsequent financial returns provide acceptable grounds for continuing involvement in his schemes; any notion of criminality having been appeased with profit. The early suggestion, heavily implied in Nucingen’s inscrutable silence, is that for the investor morality is expendable in the face of financial gain. In these events Balzac confirms that successful financiers, no matter that their achievements may be unethical, will attract disciples.

In 1815, the year of Waterloo, Nucingen brings together his capital and purchases a spread of funds before the battle. At the moment of crisis he stops his payments again. He appeases the creditors with shares in the Wortschin mines that he had purchased at twenty percent below their sale value. In further demonstration of his wider entrepreneurial expertise, Nucingen hedges against loss with the perceptive purchase of 300,000 bottles of wine at 30 sous that he is to sell later at 6 francs in 1817-1819 to the allies at the Palais Royal:

Le papier de la maison Nucingen et son nom deviennent européens. Cet illustre baron s'est élevé sur l'abîme où d'autres auraient sombré. Deux fois, sa liquidation a produit d'immenses avantages à ses créanciers: il a voulu les rouer, impossible! Il passe pour le plus honnête homme du monde (MN, VI, 338).

The pattern here is the same as that of the first suspension. However, on this occasion the true nature of Nucingen's power is partially revealed to the reader. Blondet discloses, regarding the creditors, that 'il a voulu les rouer'. Nucingen's character remains concealed behind the 'immenses avantages à ses créanciers' and he earns from them the title of 'le plus honnête homme du monde'. The notion of honesty, eagerly credited to Nucingen by those from whom he will eventually steal, is delivered against the background of a declaration of insolvency. This is a tacit approval of deceit characteristic of the *vol décent*. It is also a factor that contributes to the rise in Nucingen's ever growing number of new 'disciples' by providing them with a socially acceptable mask that legitimises dealings with La Maison Nucingen. Nucingen's reputation as financial magician and honest dealer keeps rising on a frenzy of speculative hopes:

Cet illustre baron s'est élevé sur l'abîme où d'autres auraient sombré. [...] À la troisième suspension, le papier de la maison Nucingen se fera en Asie, au Mexique, en Australasie, chez les Sauvages. Ouvrard est le seul qui ait deviné cet Alsacien, fils de quelque juif converti par ambition: «Quand Nucingen lâche son or, disait-il, croyez qu'il saisit des diamants» (MN, VI, 338).

Nucingen's fame has now grown from the 'quartier Poissonnière' in Strasbourg to all of France, Europe, Asia, Mexico and Australia whilst he simultaneously establishes appropriate links to other high-flying bankers with shared interests. In Nucingen's rise above the abyss into which others would have fallen Balzac firmly places him as 'génie' describing him with the images and circumstance used in *César Birotteau*: 'le malheur est un marche-pied pour le génie [...] pour les faibles un abîme' (CB, VI, 54). Balzac proposes that ultimately humanity operates under a hierarchical structure that is determined by the capacity to respond effectively to circumstances. It is an understanding which accepts that outcome must ultimately

dominate morality; survival in the natural world transposed into the chaos of nineteenth-century commercial society. The notion of the weak, of necessity seeking the protection of the supreme individual, is evidenced in the speculator's frenzy to invest in Nucingen. It provides further evidence of a silent complicity between the weak and the strong.

The Balzacian notion of genius concerns the relentless pursuit of purpose, irrespective of circumstantial adversity, social, private or moral consequence. It is driven by a psychological compulsion whose outcome has no need of external acclaim, although it is often lauded for delivering social, financial or creative capital recognised to be the proceeds of exceptional practice. In *The Realist Author and Sympathetic Imagination*, Sotirios Paraschas considers the notion of genius in the context of nineteenth-century literary publications, including Balzac's work. He sees the external application of literary property laws and copyright as a determinant in 'the recognition of genius and originality'¹⁶³ In the commodification of aesthetics external influences can also act as 'ambiguous concepts which undermine [...] uniqueness and originality and equate all authors' (Ibid.), designating genius, not as conformity with an internal process, but as a variable factor determined by commercial expediency.

In the extraordinary growth of Nucingen's fame, Balzac again reveals that the urge to speculation includes self-interest and social disinterest common to both the speculator and the provider of financial services. The attraction may be exercised silently, partitioned from direct involvement. It suggests silent acceptance of deceit when it delivers a financial return without legal and social penalty. The urge for association with established financial power, the frantic, instinctive rush to feed on the flow of wealth is a phenomenon that finds legal respite in the observation that, 'les lois sont des toiles d'araignées à travers lesquelles passent les grosses mouches et où restent les petites' (MN, VI, 391). Nucingen's process of wealth creation is an unfettered, calculated, concentration of purpose that acts in sole pursuit of personal financial interest. This consummate commercial practitioner, unacquainted with moral restraint, is in perfect union with the dictates of speculative endeavour. In preparation for his third venture, Nucingen firstly invests

¹⁶³ Sotirios Paraschas, *The Realist Author and Sympathetic Imagination* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), p. 72.

his remaining liquid funds of five million outside the jurisdiction and into a venture in America. To stay within the law while executing the deprivation of investor's funds he forms 'une société anonyme par actions' rather than the more usual company formation of 'une commandite'. The formation requires 'l'Ordonnance Royale' that effectively confers on the company a political guarantee. The timing of the company formation, at a moment when supply of liquid funds exceeds investment vehicles, ensures a rise in the value of the shares. Nucingen seeks and obtains for himself the additional protection of holding his ownership as a third party by offering nominal ownership of the company to du Tillet who, sensing the same element of risk as Nucingen, puts the nominal ownership in the name of Claparon the 'homme de paille'. The company, with a nominal capital of 10 million actually attracts 7 million and he uses these funds to invest in the purchase of a Parisian mansion. The choice is commercially astute and typical of Nucingen's capacity for offsetting personal risk. In the event of failure, the property value would remain constant and he would be able to buy it back in the event of corporate failure at a substantially reduced price.

Having guarded against personal financial loss he moves to the exploitation of human vulnerability. Nucingen persuades Rastignac that he is about to go under and promptly leaves Paris for Bruxelles. Rastignac innocently advises the creditors of the danger and they demand that their funds are converted into shares of the Banque Claparon, which is still thriving. The transfer is made and when the investors seek additional alternative holdings in other businesses Nucingen is delighted to offload them. The panic at the Bourse is further exacerbated when du Tillet buys in Nucingen's debts at a discount. Nucingen returns from Bruxelles to declare that he has completed a joint venture with a famous Belgium industrialist to exploit old carbon mines. The newspapers then announce the arrival of two ships from America carrying metal to the value of 7 million for La Maison Nucingen. We will see that the last minute arrival of financial salvation is a technique Balzac is to use again in his dramatic comedy *Le Faiseur*.¹⁶⁴

As in the two earlier suspensions, no-one at this stage has suffered loss. Shares in the Banque Claparon have in fact risen from 1000 francs per share to 1250 francs and Nucingen's reputation has reached even greater heights. However, there is

¹⁶⁴ Please see Chapter 4.

further potential for financial gain for Nucingen and in an act of calculated social disinterest, he sells his own shares in the bank. The consequence of the sale, together with the crises of 1837, is to collapse the share price from 1250 francs to 400 francs. Knowing that the true asset based value of the shares is in fact 600 francs, Nucingen buys back the shares and simultaneously retains his reputation for honesty but ruins the investors. Included amongst them is the widow of the baron d'Aldrigger whose husband had given Nucingen his start in banking.

How Nucingen emerges as banker, from his position of assistant to Baron D'Aldrigger, provides a contrast in commercial practice with that of his mentor. D'Aldrigger, successful from the Revolution, with a fortune of 3 million francs, doubles his assets by marrying the heiress of another banking fortune, 'par ambition et par inclination' (MN, VI, 359). Devotee of Napoleon, he 'se passionna pour le grand homme qui l'avait titré' and unwisely invests in the Emperor's administration in 1814-15, with the inevitable result that, 'il se ruina pour avoir pris au sérieux le soleil d'Austerlitz' (Ibid.). The lesson is instructive and Balzac does not hide the causes. D'Aldrigger's emotionalism is immediately recognised. His marriage is part based upon 'inclination' and only half based on 'ambition'. In monetary terms this means that a compromise with emotion will play a part in decisions that necessitate objective assessment. The same sentimentality goes into his devotion to Napoleon. He invests emotionally, self-satisfaction masquerading as loyalty, contrary to rational judgement. The risks in supporting Napoleon were high and he fails to offset the exposure. The notion of probity and reputation prevent him from minimising his losses and he carries on making his payments. He thereby reduces his capital base to five hundred thousand francs. 'Honnête homme mais bête' (Ibid.) says Nucingen in recognition of d'Aldrigger's lack of market knowledge, failure to minimise risk or to find commercial opportunity. Their difference in temperament is exploited by Nucingen. He takes d'Aldrigger's remaining capital, giving him a return of 8%, and buys his Empire paper, apparently worthless, at 40% of its notional value. While Nucingen understands the market in government funding, d'Aldrigger does not. Nucingen's pragmatism allows him to recognise that the new government will need to honour the debts of the former government. To default would deprive governments of the funding lifelines upon which they all depended, irrespective of political persuasion. Through Nucingen's contact with the Secretary

General des Lupeaulx, he obtains 100% of their value: a further alliance of financial and political forces.

2.7 Conclusion

Balzac shows the historic link between post Industrial Revolution growth in trade, particularly in the field of speculative, non-tangible trading products and a new conflation of speculation and trading style, a combination that takes delusion and deprivation to a new level. He fixes the world of *La Comédie humaine* at a point where order and probity, the public pillars for commerce and the profession, begin to give way to financial return and depersonalisation. This process, with its personal and social costs, is represented in *César Birotteau* and *La Maison Nucingen*.

Balzac investigates the commercial and associated professional world during the Restoration through a variety of characters and circumstances. Their interaction reveals certain types ill-equipped to exploit commercial opportunity and others hopelessly ill equipped for such a task, destined to become victims of circumstance. Balzac shows character as a chance compilation of birth, education, experience and environmental influences. Between the poles of predator and victim he seeks an accommodation with the new commercial forces in his introduction of the Popinots. Anselme successfully pursues a commercial career without resort to deception. Similarly, Judge Popinot pursues a legal career dedicated solely to justice. Balzac thereby avoids an inevitable connection between commerce and chicanery, the law and opportunism.

The *vol décent* is a behavioural pattern that easily exploits both old and new orders, but finds increased opportunity in the new commercial and professional culture which is as evasive and indeterminate as the products it has created. Theft, in the simple form of taking goods belonging to another, has now acquired an unfettered licence to deceive in the *vol décent*, where deception and chicanery enjoys fresh opportunity in an ambiguous, ephemeral market of acceptable theft. The embrace of that market culture is felt in the ‘spirituels *condottieri*’ (MN, VI, 330) who show a youthful lust for ‘success’ at any price. They proclaim a world where morality is determined by its satisfaction of wealth and power.

The transition from traditional trade to speculative trade is displayed in du Tillet’s exploitation of emotional and commercial vulnerability. César unwittingly retains faith in the appearance of probity, rather than its actuality. In the social and political hierarchy he finds an unquestioned legitimacy. It is his acceptance of appearance as reality that results in catastrophic financial and personal loss.

Roquin's sexual and social vulnerabilities are exploited in the grant of freedom from responsibility, a solution that permits a continued fleecing of his associations. The methodology that du Tillet adopts breaks inventive new ground with the transfer of funds to a bank headed by a 'straw man'; a device that absolves the true thief of legal liability. The loss of funds is made irrecoverable by a silent coterie of vested interests.

In *La Maison Nucingen*, Balzac exposes a new world in which the imperatives of wealth and power are driven by an association between investors and those who display the attributes of success. In this distancing from direct involvement in the process of wealth creation, the investors are ultimately the servants of the new aristocracy and victims of wealth. The positioning implies a distancing from process but also an abdication of responsibility.

The world of speculation and risk is characterised by deception and chicanery, but Balzac introduces two characters, Judge Popinot and Anselme Popinot, whose exemplary behaviour is in stark contrast to the world around them. The judge upholds the best traditions of legal integrity and the pursuit of justice, whilst the young Popinot, reliant solely on good and fair practice, restores the fortunes of the extended Birotteau family. The extended family is loyal to the traditions of hard work, probity and fellowship and Balzac uses them as a counterweight to sharp practice. He offers evidence of a complex, residual world that still seeks a moral dimension. In contrast, Nucingen's unfettered pursuit of wealth results in his dehumanised, estrangement from any normal notion of human fellowship. Barbéris cites Nucingen's search for Esther in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* 'pour lui rendre des dimensions ordinaires'.¹⁶⁵ In fact, his night with her is more a deal concluded than a dream fulfilled. Nucingen remains beyond social manners and restraints, a character who works in the commercial and social milieu but is not an intimate part of it. Balzac shows Nucingen as dehumanised, even his pursuit of Esther in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, is only successful as the temporary purchase of another, never a human bonding. Nucingen and to a lesser extent du Tillet, are the supreme achievers in the milieu of speculation who use the *vol décent* is an act of self-interest perpetrated against a defenceless society. Balzac shows

¹⁶⁵ Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac*, p. 252.

society's members to be the victims of emotional need, to be incapable of confronting the reality of circumstance.

The exploitation of that dependency results in a social isolation for the perpetrator, who increasingly becomes a stranger to human interaction. This is not a condition limited to wealth acquisition. It is also to be found in domestic, cultural and institutional life.

Chapter 3

The vol décent in Scènes de la vie privée

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Family Milieu
- 3.3. The Social Milieu
- 3.4 Historic Influences
- 3.5 The Will to Power
 - 3.5.1 Power, Focus and Adaptability
 - 3.5.2 Suitable Victims
- 3.6 Conclusion

3.1 Introduction

Whilst this thesis shows the *vol décent* to be a significant and recurring motif in *La Comédie humaine* it also acts as an essential catalyst. It stimulates and directs narrative purpose, form and authorial direction, a force that also permeates the domestic milieu, where it is observed to redefine the relationship between appearance and reality. Balzac observes the forces of change within the different milieux of society and shows how the *vol décent* permeates domestic, social, commercial and political life. In the shorter fictions of *Le Contrat de mariage* and *L'Interdiction* the narrative focus is on the domestic milieu. Here the *vol décent* is a response to the economic, legal, social, moral and historical influences of Restoration society. As Moïse Le Yaouanc describes *L'Interdiction* (and this is equally applicable to *Le Contrat de mariage*), '[c'est] une œuvre relativement peu étudiée mais dont plusieurs critiques ont signalé la richesse, la densité'.¹⁶⁶

In 1832, Balzac planned an extension of the *Études de femme*. It was designed to bring together a number of psychological sketches 'où la femme offrirait les reflets de son caractère changeant et déplierait quelques-uns des secrets anneaux de son âme' (CM, III, 500). The collection was not realised but the studies were added into the *Études de mœurs*.¹⁶⁷ A number of those studies, now contained in the *Scènes de la vie privée*, unveil a category of *vol décent* that takes place within the domestic milieu 'et plus particulièrement de la vie conjugale, à la bataille juridique.'¹⁶⁸ The group includes *La Vendetta* (1830), *Le Colonel Chabert* (1832), *Le Contrat de mariage* (1835), and *L'Interdiction* (1836).

This chapter will focus critically on *Le Contrat de mariage* and *L'Interdiction*, two novels published within a year of each other, in which Balzac portrays dominant female protagonists executing a *vol décent* within 'la vie conjugale'. The women are in the milieu of private and social life during 'l'époque où les femmes n'ont plus d'autre rôle à prendre dans la vie que celui de mère' (CM, III, 544) and their actions provide a startling contrast to established marital and social practice. In the melodramatic exploitation of the respective family patriarchs, the two women, Mme Évangélista and Mme d'Espard, sever legal and social ties that have traditionally

¹⁶⁶ Moïse Yaouanc, Sur 'L'Interdiction', *L'Année balzacienne* (1971), p. 253.

¹⁶⁷ Henri Gautier, 'Le Projet du Recueil *Études de femme*', *L'Année balzacienne* (1967), pp. 115-146.

¹⁶⁸ Henri Gautier, 'Introduction to *Le Contrat de mariage*' (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), VIII, p. 500.

limited and defined the role, activity and status of married women in early nineteenth-century France. The recurring dominant female role invites a comparative treatment of the two main characters. However, critical analysis reveals differences in character and circumstance that indicates Balzac's wider authorial purpose.

In his seminal work, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* Eric Auerbach finds the influences of milieux fundamental to an understanding of Balzacian character:

To him every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux.¹⁶⁹

Auerbach's readings resulted in a change of critical focus on Balzac's work, being 'instrumental in shifting discussion of realism away from subject matter and declared authorial purpose to the words on the page'.¹⁷⁰ For Auerbach, the author's style reflected his historical context and provided evidence of his understanding of reality as well as revealing his representational technique. However, Tilby argues that atmospheric realism did not do justice to 'the linguistic complexity of Balzac's descriptions and that the latter require [analysis of] their figural or rhetorical nature'.¹⁷¹ The alliance of abnormal impulse and immoral action, common to both Mme Évangélista and Mme d'Espard, suggests that such actions may not result directly or wholly from the domestic, social or historical milieux. This calls into question the extent to which Eric Auerbach's demonic 'moral and physical atmospheres', result from those environments. However, Auerbach's interpretation of Balzacian character through milieu and historic positioning, together with close attention to the figural, rhetoric aspects of the text provide an important and relevant critical starting point for research into the natures of Mme Évangélista and Mme d'Espard.

¹⁶⁹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 417.

¹⁷⁰ Tilby, *Balzac*, p. 94.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

3.2 The Family Milieu

Mme Évangélista's position, as widow and guardian of an ever-decreasing capital, immediately suggests the necessity for financial prudence regarding expenditure. However, unable to think in terms of restraint or even to act in accordance with conventional wisdom, she remains profligate in satisfaction of her emotional needs. Her wanton expenditure and her ruthlessness in satisfaction of those passions points to a nature without discrimination or apprehension. In the absence of such restraints, Balzac gives Mme Évangélista the capacity to stand beyond normative social values and the will to resist any perpetrator of a perceived threat. The same facility is true of la marquise d'Espard in *L'Interdiction*. However, when Mme Évangélista acts from an eruption of passions, Bianchon reliably informs Rastignac that Mme d'Espard is, 'le type le plus achevé de l'égoïsme', (In., III, 423) has 'tous les symptômes de sa monstruosité, elle a bec de l'oiseau de proie, l'œil clair et froid, la parole douce; elle est polie comme l'acier d'une mécanique, elle émeut tout, moins le cœur' (In., III, 424-5).

Le Contrat de mariage explores the complex reasons for Mme Évangélista's temperament. The narrator says of her that she 'ignorait la valeur de l'argent et ne réprimait aucune de ses fantaisies, même les plus dispendieuses, en les trouvant toujours satisfaites' (CM, III, 538). The 'toujours' hints at an exceptional and perhaps obsessive need, an interpretation that finds support in the disclosure that her husband was 'heureux de la voir se plaire à Bordeaux' (CM, III, 538). His resigned tone denotes a husband with settled expectations, a condition that has perhaps arisen from his marital experience. The seed of doubt regarding her disposition provokes a sense of ambiguity in the reader that will continue to accompany Mme Évangélista through the narrative. The narrator further informs the reader that aspects of socio-economic reality also lie beyond the understanding of Mme Évangélista's daughter Natalie, who believes that 'chaque maison avait ses cuisiniers, ses cochers, ses femmes de chambre et ses gens' (CM, III, 540). Whilst the Évangélistas' action against Paul de Manerville, Natalie's future husband and partner in the marriage contract, suggests an acute financial awareness, Balzac shows it also to be driven by an impassioned response to an erroneous belief.

The family milieu provides an enclave against society, nurturing, enclosing and protecting both Mme and Mlle Évangélista. It also encourages a lack of

intellectual curiosity. The recurring contrast between people in society and the order of the natural world, shows the *Évangélistas* in a social apartheid, where servants are still seen as part of an inferior natural order ‘comme les près ont foins et les arbres leurs fruits’, (CM, III, 540) and the *Évangélistas* occupy the hierarchical summit. The collective reification of the servants strengthens the notion that the *Évangélistas* share an unquestioning conviction that a natural order of superiority exists in society, where ‘il y a des gens pour qui le monde semble avoir été fait’ (CM, III, 541). This certainty, with its exclusion of the wider human condition, is reinforced when the narrator says of Natalie, ‘pour elle, des mendiants et des pauvres, des arbres tombés et des terrains ingrats étaient même chose’ (CM, III, 540). This suggests to the reader, in the light of the *Évangélistas*’ social standing, that an unquestioning mind sits easily with faith in a natural world ordered by an unchanging formula.

The narrator marks the scope and nature of education within the upper class Spanish family milieu: ‘Natalie n’avait reçu comme toute femme espagnole qu’une instruction purement religieuse et quelque enseignements de mère à fille, utiles au rôle qu’elle devait jouer (CM, III, 548). The skills acquired by Natalie are those designed for exclusive exercise in a social forum where the masking of reality, the heart of the *vol décent*, is normative and pervasive. The narrator discloses Mme *Évangélista*’s pedigree in this regard.

Ignorante en fait, elle avait connu les cours d’Espagne et de Naples, les gens célèbres des deux Amériques, plusieurs familles illustres de l’Angleterre et du continent; ce qui lui prêtait une instruction si étendue en superficie, qu’elle semblait immense’ (CM, III, 543).

In the social world in which Mme and Mlle *Évangélista* operate, superficiality, privilege, hierarchy and wealth are seen as part of their ‘curriculum vitae’. Indeed they are characteristics nurtured in the family and bolstered in value by their acquaintance with celebrity and glamour. It is a domestic milieu that protects against reality, promotes religious belief and denies intellectual or moral intervention. It cultivates an unjustified and unquestioned sense of superiority, which owes little to reason. However, the sense of superiority becomes an important currency in its own right, a marketable asset of social status in a world where ‘ce goût, cette grandeur qui ne s’apprennent pas’ where ‘certaines âmes nativement belles peuvent se faire une seconde nature en assimilant les bonnes choses partout où elles les rencontrent’ (CM, III, 543).

Evidence of Mme Évangélista's disposition is revealed itself on the morning she is due to sign the marriage contract. In a typical, direct address to the reader, the Balzacian narrator asks:

Mais à qui n'est-il pas arrivé, quand la vie est d'un cours si rapide, d'être soudainement interpellé par la voix d'un souvenir qui se dresse souvent trop tard, et vous rappelle un fait important, un danger prochain? Dans la matinée du jour où devait se signer le contrat de Paul et de Natalie, un de ces feux follets de l'âme brilla chez Mme Évangélista pendant les somnolescences de son réveil. Cette phrase: *Questa coda non é di questo gatto!* dite par elle à l'instant où Mathias accédait aux conditions de Solonet, lui fut criée par une voix (CM, III, 594).

The form of revelation, through the semi-conscious state, is presented by the narrator as a common occurrence, recognisable to all. Ineed, Balzac attributes the same revelatory experience to Mme Birotteau. The reader is also invited to accept two ethereal notions, 'la voix d'un souvenir' and 'un de ces feux follets de l'âme', as reliable sources. Despite the absence of any verifiable proof, Mme Évangélista regards the visitations as warnings of danger. An irrational fear of the unknown is revealed when the narrator discloses, in reference to Natalie, (but an equally valid judgement of Mme Évangélista) that her 'esprit sans intelligence' (CM, III, 549) can confirm 'sa foi superstitieuse en elle-même' (CM, III, 544). When she senses her social position called into question Mme Évangélista seeks remedy in 'la devise de Catherine de Médicis: *Odiat e aspettate, Haissez et attendez*'. (CM, III, 543) As 'elle ne pardonnait jamais' (CM, III, 544) the remedy is only wholly achieved when her victim is ruined and rendered harmless. As Mme Évangélista believes that her power relies on society's recognition of her status her resolve to maintain that status is total. 'En ce moment Mme Évangélista vouait effectivement à son gendre une de ces haines insatiabiles' (CM, III, 598).

Where Mme Évangélista anticipates threats to her superiority, la Marquise d'Espard on the other hand consolidates her position with self-interest:

Cette femme frêle, blanche, aux cheveux châains, et qui se plaint pour se faire plaindre, jouit d'une santé de fer, possède un appétit de loup, une force et une lâcheté de tigre. Jamais ni la gaze, ni la soie, ni mousseline, n'ont été plus habilement entortillés autour d'un mensonge! *Ecco* (In., III, 423).

In a conversation devoted to Mme d'Espard and more widely 'les femmes à la mode', Bianchon and Rastignac test appearance against reality. Mme d'Espard's appearance is in the service of her own self-interest, as are her relationships. 'Elle a plus de tête que de cœur, elle sacrifie à son triomphe les passions vraies et les amis, comme un général envoie au feu ses plus dévoués' (In., III, 424). This is a woman

ultimately disinterested in all but self. In her inevitable play with society she acts for her sole cause in a triumph for individual interest over legal restriction.

Mme Évangélista harbours an explosive disposition, one happily accommodated within her family milieu, whereas Mme d'Espard is cold and calculating, living without close family. Mme d'Espard has separated from her husband, due to her refusal to move to more modest, less expensive accommodation in the country. The move would have freed funds for her husband to repay a debt of honour incurred by his predecessors. Her refusal results in marital separation and loss of her sons, who go to live with her estranged husband. After three years in domestic exile she re-enters Parisian society.

Mme d'Espard's family milieu is an environment defined, not by maternal or familial instinct, but by 'une profonde indifférence pour aucun qui n'était pas elle' (In., III, 452). Balzac, unusually even for his shorter fiction awards Mme d'Espard only 'une légère esquisse de la vie' (In., III, 451) that includes a mere eight words on the influence of her parents: 'ses parents lui conseillèrent de vivre en famille'. (In., III, 453) However, for the reader, this paucity of detail serves to heighten and prioritise her isolation. Born into high society as a Blamont-Chauvry, she has a fortune of twenty-six thousand livres, owns 'une des maisons les plus considérables et les plus illustres du faubourg Saint-Germain' (In., III, 422) and marries to become the marquise d'Espard. Her urge to feed her vanity with social and political ambitions requires more funds and leads her to seek an interdiction against her husband, citing his alleged mental incapacity, in order to prevent him disposing of his surplus income outside the family. The *vol décent* lies in her success in preventing him from exercising his legal rights.

'Inspirée par sa passion dominante, la vanité' (In., III, 454), her preparations are made privately but exercised socially. In being 'à la mode' she displays, as does Mme Évangélista, an appearance that disguises reality. Balzac's recurring reference to 'la mode' alludes as much to the fluidity and temporality of the condition, as to its physical presence. In resistance to that ebb and flow Mme d'Espard strives for a permanency and stability through the mask of her physical deception which society accepts as reality. Ultimately however, she has a price to pay.

La mode élève et abaisse tour à tour des personnages qui, tantôt grands, tantôt petits, c'est-à-dire tour à tour en vue et oubliés, deviennent plus tard des personnages insupportables comme le sont tous les ministres disgraciés et toutes les majestés déchues. Incommodes par leur prétentions fanées, ces flatteurs du passé savent tout,

médisent de tout, et, comme les dissipateurs ruinés, sont les amis de tout le monde (In., III, 451).

The ‘ministres disgraciés’ and ‘les dissipateurs ruinés’ out of favour or ruined, also seek to maintain the memory of their past authority. However, although the aging process cannot be stopped, Balzac shows it able to be delayed and an illusion of youthfulness to be extended.

Mme d’Espard’s positioning to maintain political influence and social hierarchy, as head of a matriarchal Parisian salon, is destined for ultimate failure. Further, as a woman who makes herself ‘à la mode’, her life has to be a permanent theatrical performance. Bianchon, the socially aware doctor, acting as narrator delivers an analysis that would be expected, both in structure and argument, from the analytic, psychological approach of the character. Bianchon’s view accommodates Balzac’s position regarding the exceptional woman. The doctor advances the notion that success for a woman involves the negation of her femininity, necessitating that she becomes ‘un sexe dans le cerveau’ only. Alternatively the success of a man involves the mere extension of natural male prowess, implying a natural male hierarchy. However, it only partially reflects Balzac’s social observations of women, a view that finds the natural feminine impulse and attractions to determine success.

Une femme à la mode et un homme au pouvoir sont deux analogies; mais à cette différence près, que les qualités par lesquelles un homme s’élève au-dessus des autres le grandissent et font sa gloire; tandis que les qualités par lesquelles une femme arrive à son empire d’un jour sont d’effroyables vices: elle se dénature pour cacher son caractère; elle doit, pour mener la vie militante du monde, avoir une santé de fer sous une apparence frêle [...] Ta femme à la mode ne sent rien, sa fureur de plaisir a sa cause dans une envie de réchauffer sa nature froide, elle veut des émotions et des jouissances, comme un vieillard se met en espalier à la rampe de l’Opéra. [...] La femme à la mode n’est plus une femme: elle n’est ni mère, ni épouse, ni amante: elle est un sexe dans le cerveau (In., III, 424).

Mme d’Espard’s ability to look twenty-two at the age of thirty-three, with perfect skin and hair and no evidence of ageing has been hard earned. She bathes in cold water, eats little, drinks water, stores energy, all with ‘une exactitude monastique dans les moindres actes de la vie (In., III, 451). She possesses all the basic elements of the Balzacian superior being; purpose, energy, focused application and disinterest in all but self. For Mme d’Espard these are natural, instinctive attributes, ‘effroyables vices’ that run counter to the image of femininity she seeks to portray. Her attributes, which in a man would be lauded, must be hidden in a woman, particularly in one who seeks to seduce by traditional feminine magnetism. The

deception, to gain political and social status, forms part of a living *vol décent* that ultimately she cannot sustain.

3.3 The Social Milieu

Balzac makes a connection between fashion and social politics. Whilst he finds ‘la mode’ an inherently capricious medium, he recognises its contemporary role in nineteenth-century Parisian society and its social politics. The combination results in physical appearance acting for political purpose, where ‘la mode eût pris des allures constitutionnelles en adoptant la *présidence d’âge*’ (In., III, 451). It demands a transition in which fashion and form create a new physical ‘reality’. The new form is in fact only a change in appearance but is taken and accepted as a ‘reality’: ‘la mode avait fait comme tout le monde, elle acceptait Mme d’Espard pour une jeune femme’ (Ibid.).

Mme d’Espard’s transformation results from a superhuman power of *volonté* exercised in the service of her vanity. Her determination places her in the rare company of other exceptional women and Balzac, by way of confirmation, draws into the text Diane de Poitiers, Marion de Larme, De Varsovie and Mme Zayonseck of Poland, all women who have defied the ageing process and established national celebrity. The association with Balzac’s favoured notion, explored in *La Peau de chagrin* of 1830, that each person has a limited amount of energy which can be dispensed in various ways, or can be husbanded, is clearly re-visited in *L’Interdiction*. Mme d’Espard’s capacity for such a task, her ability to contradict accepted limits and display ‘une profonde indifférence pour tout’, facilitates the interdiction process.

In 1820 Mme d’Espard takes her place in Parisian society and makes her mark by entertaining on a grand scale, displaying her taste and fashion and ‘elle s’assit bientôt sur le trône’ (In., III, 453) of high society. Whilst she displays herself and her home à la mode, she is able to perpetrate a subtle but lasting deception on the reality of social and political life. Mme d’Espard is an expert at the *vol décent* having the discipline to create, vary and sustain illusion in diverse circumstances. She ingratiates herself with the salon guests with political advice and apparent discretion:

La marquise avait plusieurs fois donné, soit à des députés soit des pairs, des mots et des idées qui de la tribune avaient retenti en Eurpoe. Elle avait souvent bien jugé de quelques événements sur lesquels ses habitués n’osaient émettre un avis. [...] Elle passait pour être discrète et l’était. Son amitié paraissait être à toute épreuve. [...] Elle voulait vivre sur tous les points du plus grand cercle que puisse décrire la vie (In., III, 454).

This woman lives in society but outside the social interdependencies habitually shared by its members. Her skill, with its daily deceptions whereby ‘elle passait pour être discrète et l’était’ (In., III, 454), is one honed without care or conscience. Balzac shows the role of the social deceiver easy to play for someone whose only concern is her self-interest. It is in protection of that isolation that Mme d’Espard seeks advantage and distance in all her relationships. ‘Elle avait si bien étudié le fort et le faible de la vie parisienne, qu’elle s’était toujours conduite de façon à ne laisser à aucun homme le moindre avantage sur elle’ (In., III, 455). She maintains an appropriate distance from others, building credit and reputation in preference to partnership, serving ‘ses protégés avec une persistance qui prouvait qu’elle tenait moins à se faire des créatures qu’à augmenter son crédit’ (In., III, 454).

The world of the political salon provides Mme d’Espard with a perfect stage, on which her mansion, fashion and décor impress with their images of beauty, wealth and power. These are complemented by an aristocratic disdain that distances her from unwanted attention but confirms a social superiority, attractive to the already well established and those aspiring to high office. She consolidates and expands her powerful connections, a course that ultimately equips her to execute the *vol décent* that deprives her husband of his legal rights. The pathway toward that end begins at her meeting with judge Popinot where her social affectations are immediately subjected to rational examination. Her opening display of frailty, in confirmation of her inability to visit Popinot’s office, is embellished with exaggerated courtesies that the judge interprets literally, rendering them absurd. In the exchange, between Mme d’Espard and Popinot, Balzac brings her reliance on appearance and affectation into direct confrontation with Popinot’s search for truth. In response to Mme d’Espard’s ‘monsieur, je vous dois un million de remerciements [et] pour la peine que vous daignez’ (In., III, 458) Popinot replies,

Madame, [...] vous ne me devez rien. Quoique ma démarche ne soit pas dans les habitudes du Tribunal, nous ne devons rien épargner pour arriver à la vérité dans ces sortes d’affaires. Nos jugements sont alors déterminés moins par le texte de la loi que par les inspirations de notre conscience. Que je cherche la vérité dans mon cabinet ou ici, pourvu que je la trouve, tout sera bien (Ibid.).

Popinot’s integrity shines through, and in the subsequent questioning of the marquise, he is impervious to persuasion or seduction. Balzac sets up a competition between the two protagonists, where Popinot exercises intellectual enquiry in the cause of truth and Mme d’Espard delivers emotional satisfactions in the cause of

self. The different talents succeed in different social contexts, according to the social milieu they are designed to satisfy. Popinot serves the legal process by exposing inaccuracies and deceptions that could thwart good judgement. He develops a style of enquiry with her:

Aussitôt que Popinot eut, pour ainsi dire, toisé le terrain sur lequel il se trouvait, il jugea qu'il était nécessaire d'avoir recours aux finesses les plus habiles, les mieux déguisées et les mieux entortillées, en usage au Palais pour surprendre la vérité' (In., III, 459).

Where Popinot seeks to unveil the truth using a perfected methodology, Mme d'Espard does the same in order to disguise the truth. Her method involves her physical charms but more particularly her use of language. Her inventiveness, ambiguity, implication, emphasis, omission, enunciation and innuendo, are designed to deceive her interlocutor. It is an 'à la mode' embellishment of language. However all her assertions, including 'des soupçons sur la rectitude de son esprit' (In., III, 460) and the implied kidnap of her children are destroyed after Popinot has met the marquis, a man of scrupulous honesty and integrity, whose idealism cannot be misinterpreted. The judge prepares his report accordingly. Whilst Mme d'Espard's deceptions cannot get past Popinot's interrogation, her higher social reputation and contacts can. Popinot is the master of legal preparation and upholder of legal integrity but the rest of his profession is not. The higher call on self-interest, amongst the profession's hierarchy, is the dominant force. The interests of le Garde des Sceaux and the Président du Tribunal, under the guise of legal propriety, take the case away from Popinot. Mme d'Espard's *vol décent* succeeds when le Garde des Sceaux and the président of the court combine to secure their own interests:

Il suffit que le garde des Sceaux en ait parlé, que l'on puisse causer de vous, pour que le Tribunal évite une discussion à ce sujet. Tout conflit avec l'opinion publique est toujours dangereux pour un Corps constitué, même quand il a raison contre elle parce que les armes ne sont pas égales. [...] C'est une chose arrangée en famille (In., III, 492).

Popinot is not the victim. He is not an idealist but rather a realist, indicated by his 'sourire ironique' upon events. He knows that the law, like other powers, is subject to self-interest. The true victim is the idealistic M. d'Espard.¹⁷²

Balzac often represents society as a controlling force that determines, at least in part, the individual and social moral order. In *Le Contrat de mariage* he unveils a society capable of invading personal and family space with its power of

¹⁷² Please see Section 3.5.2.

expectation and its mood of general malevolence: ‘le monde qui n’est cause d’aucun bien, est complice de beaucoup de malheurs; puis, quand il voit éclore le mal qu’il a couvé maternellement, il le renie et s’en venge’ (CM, III, 541). He sees social values maintained in reciprocal arrangements between society and the individual. The arrangement even operates in the recognition of a social gesture, which tacitly identifies class membership viz. Paul’s reaction: ‘quand il se rencontrait avec la calèche de Mme Évangélista, il était fier de la distinction particulière que la mère et la fille mettaient dans le salut qui lui était adressé’ (CM, III, 541). ‘La distinction particulière’ is, using the legal term, the consideration for a contractual exchange of exclusivity between the parties. Mme and Mlle Évangélista perfect and offer the gesture, an acknowledgement of its power as sign, and Paul accepts in silent recognition. Mme Évangélista’s social appearance masquerades as social reality.

Elle avait connu les cours d’Espagne et de Naples, les gens célèbres des deux Amériques, plusieurs familles illustres de l’Angleterre et du continent; ce qui lui prêtait une instruction si étendue en superficie, qu’elle semblait immense (CM, III, 543).

Mme Évangélista perfects appearance so that it maximises her social impact and she adopts a high form of social artifice in the marriage negotiations. Under Solonet’s admiring glance:

Elle avait agi constamment comme si le comte de Manerville lui était inférieur, comme s’il y avait pour lui de l’honneur à épouser Mlle Évangélista; ni elle ni sa fille ne pouvaient être soupçonnées d’avoir des vues intéressées; leurs sentiments paraissaient purs de toute mesquinerie’ (CM, III, 556).

There is at work here a mastery of self-presentation and a profound understanding of the power of appearance and manners within the social forum.

Support for the view of Mme Évangélista as manipulator and participant in political and financial exchange is found from Arlette Michel, in her article on ‘Le pouvoir féminin dans *La Comédie humaine*’, where she argues:

Madame Evangelista, la Bordelaise, comprend que le pouvoir passe par la politique et l’argent: si, dans *Le Contrat de mariage*, elle parvient à capter pour sa fille Natalie un mari aristocrate [...] c’est avec l’aide de son notaire, Solonet, jeune loup aux prétentions libérales.¹⁷³

Mme Évangélista’s capacity to traverse the two cultures is key to the execution of the marriage contract and the subsequent destruction, both financial and social, of Paul de Manerville. The cultural poles of the *ancien régime* and the bourgeoisie are represented by the lawyers Mathias and Solonet. Negotiating the two extremes is a

¹⁷³ Arlette Michel, ‘Le Pouvoir féminin dans *La Comédie humaine*,’ *L’Année balzacienne* (1991), p. 189.

role for which Balzac has made Mme Évangélista singularly gifted. Whilst she lives within the aristocratic circle in Bordeaux and ‘appartenait aux Casa-Réal, illustre famille de la monarchie espagnole’ (CM, III, 538) Balzac has allowed the reader to anticipate the presence of bourgeois instincts despite Mme Évangélista’s protestations of an aristocratic pedigree. Her acceptance within the aristocratic circle of Bordeaux was authorised by that group only ‘pour piquer la société du second ordre’. However, Balzac shows that Mme Évangélista has an instinctive association with the lower orders in her need to keep her husband ‘en bonne odeur au milieu de cette aristocratie’. She has a bourgeois need for social approval and a bourgeois awareness of financial need and opportunity.

Although the novel is set amongst the old world provincial aristocracy, it becomes increasingly representative of the modern era. Gisèle Séginger confirms this juxtaposition when writing of Paul’s confrontation with the new world order:

Les événements lui révéleront en effet cette conséquence de 1789:[...] Il y a donc une fatalité sociale, à laquelle Henri de Marsay, dans le costume de l’oracle moderne, prête sa voix. Il y a aussi une faute antérieure, l’*hybris* moderne: c’est 1789 qui a voulu renverser l’ordre social.¹⁷⁴

The narrator’s disclosures never leave financial realities far behind the emotional and social rituals. ‘Quand elles entendaient un épouseur disant avec une admiration extatique, à l’arrivée de Natalie dans un bal: Mon Dieu, comme elle est belle! – Oui, répondaient les mamans, mais elle est chère’ (CM, III, 539). For the reader, these observations can provide amusing and familiar anecdote on a quotidian level but Mme Évangélista understands that a hard negotiable social value can be established by creating, with a relentless display of wealth, a financial confidence in her position. This is an example of where appearance is accepted as a reality. The power of this metamorphosis is of immense importance to the successful execution of the *vol décent*, being the ultimate form of deception where appearance actually becomes reality in the mind of the deceived and in the mind of the wider society.

Mme Évangélista is highly aware that deceit can be sustained by public belief: ‘des fêtes brillantes et la continuation d’un train royal entretenaient le public dans la croyance où il était des richesses de la maison Évangélista’ (CM, III, 539). Likewise, the appearance of wealth as a pervasive and insidious force within the social milieu is confirmed through its residual impact on the aristocratic Manerville, when ‘la

¹⁷⁴ Gisèle Séginger, ‘De *La Fleur des pois* au *Contrat de mariage*’, *L’Année balzacienne* (2002), p. 174.

fortune des Évangélista, devenue proverbiale à Bordeaux, était restée dans la mémoire de Paul comme un préjugé d'enfance, de tous les préjugés le plus indélébile' (CM, III, 540). This combination of image and celebrity is capable of both compounding a deceit and negating common sense:

Mlle Natalie Évangélista était une personne remarquablement belle et en apparence le plus riche parti de Bordeaux, où l'on ignorait la progressive diminution des capitaux de la mère (CM, III, 539).

The 'personne remarquablement belle' provides the seductive image; 'en apparence' signals the deceit to the reader, while 'le plus riche parti' asserts substantial wealth. A sense of permanence is established by association with place, in the words 'de Bordeaux'. The final phrase, 'où l'on ignorait la progressive diminution des capitaux' suggests that the effect of image, if sufficiently seductive, can develop in the observer a collusion that maintains the illusion. In this way, an immoral act becomes a socially acceptable one as long as it remains unexposed as such. This silent acquiescence in deceit is an essential element of the *vol décent*.

The need for distance and disguise is representative of the spirit of the *vol décent* and finds expression in a narratorial disclosure of Mathias' state of mind. This narrator captures Mathias' moment of epiphany:

En découvrant dans l'âme de cette femme des intentions qui, sans tenir à la scélératesse, au crime, au vol, à la supercherie, à l'escroquerie, à aucun sentiment mauvais ni à rien de blâmable, comportaient toutes les criminalités en germe (CM, III, 75).

Looked at from a perspective informed by the *vol décent*, the 'rien de blâmable' defines the criteria for social acceptance.

Celebrity and appearance in *La Comédie humaine* are capable of creating a negotiable currency. This form of property, unlike real property, exists in a behavioural mode, a person or circumstance. Although transitory and ephemeral in nature the property has real value because deceit can transform a chimera into a negotiable asset. Appearance can become reality and deceit becomes the *modus operandi* whereby value is hardened ready for exchange.

In the world of *La Comédie humaine* social acquiescence in deceit is not only recognised as social practice, on a wide scale, but is also observed to have acquired an exchangeable value. The stability of this particular currency is dependent upon the deception not being openly exposed and not being challenged as a purposeful deceit. The failure to challenge undergoes a reversal in *Le Colonel Chabert* where Chabert does confront his wife with her treachery. However, her deception is still

sustained, not because of an incapacity by Chabert to confront but because of an equally culpable failure to sustain the confrontation. Mme Évangélista's status depends upon the appearance of fabulous wealth and not upon its reality, knowing that the sustained appearance of wealth is sufficient for a social belief in its actuality. The effect of appearance can be the same as the effect of reality or a faith in reality. It is interesting to note in *La Maison Nucingen* that the anxiety to fund the fraudulent banker provides further evidence that the actual existence of wealth is not a prerequisite for investment.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Please see Chapter 2.

3.4. Historical Influences

The historical situation, that Auerbach sees ‘as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux’,¹⁷⁶ is present in *Le Contrat de mariage* and *L’Interdiction*, albeit lightly and peripherally. Balzac marks its limitations in the private lives of of the Evangélistas and Mme d’Espard.

However, Balzac does draw on recent history in his use of the interdiction. Guy Sagnes, in his introduction to the Pléiade edition of *L’Interdiction* notes that Balzac ‘savait que la situation était fréquent sur la scène de la vie parisienne’,¹⁷⁷ multiple cases being found in *Gazette des tribunaux*. The legal actions reflect an Empire style which saw an increase in the separation of married couples. Sagnes points to the *Biographie des dames de la Cour et du faubourg Saint-Germain* published in 1826 as literary and historic witness to that change amongst the upper classes. The separation provided scope for female action and expression and an increasing acceptance of the notion of ‘marriage of inclination’ instead of marriage as a business arrangement, a shift that Patricia Mainardi saw as ‘encouraged by both the new Enlightenment emphasis on individual happiness and the concomitant weakening of familial, especially paternal, authority’.¹⁷⁸ Whilst Mme d’Espard was no seeker of love, in or out of marriage, women at court had become a familiar presence in early nineteenth-century Paris, one noted in the *Gazette des tribunaux* of 1826:

Ou les dames de Paris deviennent plus infidèles que jamais, ou les maris parisiens deviennent plus ennemis de l’adultère et plus amis de scandale. Ce qu’il y a de certain, c’est que, depuis quelque temps, nous voyons juger une foule d’infractions au pacte conjugal.¹⁷⁹

The Restoration does not see the expected demise of the eighteenth-century salon where ‘Parisian women opened their homes for weekly meetings of literary men, socialites and foreign visitors [...] creating an environment crucial to debating Enlightenment ideas’.¹⁸⁰ Rather, former *ancien régime* members of the salons were now joined by the new social and political elite.

¹⁷⁶ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 417.

¹⁷⁷ Guy Sagnes, ‘Introduction to *L’Interdiction*’ (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), III, p. 413.

¹⁷⁸ Patricia Mainardi, *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 213.

¹⁷⁹ *Gazette des tribunaux*, Paris, le 31 mai 1826, p. 3.

¹⁸⁰ Jolanta T. Peckacz, ‘The Making of Enlightenment Salons in Nineteenth-century France’, *The George Rudé Society* (2017)

<http://hfrance.net/rude/wpcontent/uploads/2017/08/vol5_05_Peckacz_Making_salons_final.pdf> [accessed 13 October 2017]

The salon as a form of sociability not only survived but actually flourished after the Revolution.[...] It happened not only because some members of the Old Regime elite who survived the revolution kept open houses but also because salons represented an aristocratic sociability which became attractive to the post-Revolutionary upper and middle class in France. Thus, the salon 'persisted' throughout the Revolution, along with other remnants of the old regime, and was embraced by post-Revolutionary French society.¹⁸¹

In Mme d'Espard's association with the salon Balzac makes a reliable connection with contemporary social history. The salon is a political reality whereas 'à la mode' is a transient image. 'Mme d'Espard se préparait ainsi à faire succéder une sourde, mais réelle influence au règne public et frivole qu'elle devait à la mode (In., III, 454). In a bonding of fictional female leaders of Parisian society from the world of *La Comédie humaine*, la vicomtesse de Beauséant, la duchesse de Langeais and Mme Firmiani, with the real political figures of the period, la duchesse de Dino, la princesse de Liéven, and Mme Flahaut, Balzac disguises the distinction. Guy Sagnes finds a confirmation of their historic presence, if not their power, in the *Chronique de Paris* of 11 February 1836 where, at a time of ministerial crises, a list of potential replacement ministers, composed entirely of women, was published. Mme Flahaut, Mme Liévin and Mme de Dino were on the list. The social 'queens' of Parisian society from Balzac's world form a line of succession now joined by Mme d'Espard.

The influence of the wider historical context, the decline of the *ancien régime* class, and the rise of the bourgeoisie to positions of power, see the residual forces of the *ancien régime* re-forming, in close association, within the salons of post-Empire Paris. It is those connections, with their pre-Revolution faith in natural superiority and residual socio-economic powers, together with the interests of high office that will permit Mme d'Espard to override the legal rationale and jurisdiction of Judge Popinot.

The economic, political and social upheavals that are characteristic of the Restoration period are recognised in the narrative of *Le Contrat de mariage* but the relationship between those larger forces and Mme and Mlle Évangélista indicates a problematic and complex liaison. Historical change is recognised by Mme Évangélista as a tool she can use for her own benefit. Her relationship with external forces therefore oscillates between resistance and engagement according to the dictate of personal desire. The narrator fixes Mme Évangélista in historic context

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

when he says, ‘la Restauration altéra sa position; le parti royaliste s’épura, quelques familles quittèrent Bordeaux’ but he also establishes her resistance to change: ‘elle ne voulut rien changer à sa manière de vivre’ (CM, III, 539). With regard to Natalie Évangélista, the narrator clearly indicates to the reader her obliviousness toward the new commercial climate and its social accommodation: ‘[elle] vivait au milieu d’un luxe qui effrayait les spéculateurs, dans un pays et à une époque où les enfants calculent aussi bien que leurs parents’ (CM, III, 539). Balzac allows the individualism of Mlle Évangélista to contrast with others who both respond to and represent the forces of historical change. The lawyers Mathias and Solonet provide a strong example.

Balzac’s use of *condottieri* for Mathias and Solonet in ‘ces *condottieri* matrimoniaux’ has already raised opportunism and profit to a position ahead of principle within the new legal profession of the Restoration; a position to be shared with the bankers, businessmen and other opportunists of *La Comédie humaine*. The adaptation, by the legal profession, to a world of speculation and commercial enterprise is signalled in the confrontational approach of the Restoration lawyer: ‘ces *condottieri* matrimoniaux qui s’alliaient battre pour leurs clients, et dont les forces personnelles devenaient si décisives en cette solennelle rencontre, les deux notaires représentaient les anciennes et les nouvelles mœurs, l’ancien et le nouveau notariat’ (CM, III, 559).

The old world order is represented by Maître Mathias: ‘un noble et respectable débris de ces notaires, grands hommes obscurs, [...] qui exécutaient à la lettre les fidéicommiss, dressaient déceimment les inventaires, s’intéressaient comme de seconds pères aux intérêts de leurs clients’ (CM, III, 560). This is in strong contrast to the new world practices of Solonet. The historical shift from the *ancien régime* into an era of capitalist expansion brings Maître Mathias and his old world values inside the new world order. We see a plurality in the character of Mathias that facilitates this transfer. He readily perceives the new values in the character of Mme Évangélista ‘en découvrant dans l’âme de cette femme [...] toutes les criminalités en germe’. He also finds that his skills, acquired as ‘un vieux notaire, habitué par son métier aux adroits calculs des gens du monde’ are transferable and equip him to operate in the new circumstances. However, this transfer of skills does not indicate that historic change delivers change in the human condition. Mathias retains his ‘old fashioned’ values and practices. In Section 3.2 it was argued that behavioural

practices, such as the ‘adroits calculs des gens du monde’, may adapt to changed circumstances, but nevertheless the adaptation remains in the service of a basic and constant instinct for survival. The sophisticated manners of society, as Balzac repeatedly exposes, fail to disguise the deeper imperatives of a natural world order where survival of the fittest (not yet established by Darwin) and its counterpart of a natural hierarchical structure dominate. As the present day scientist Jordan Peterson confirms ‘dominance hierarchies have been an essentially permanent feature of the environment to which all complex life has adapted’.¹⁸² In the face of the inevitability of historical changes Maître Mathias wisely adapts to the new reality and ‘n’ éprouva ni douleur, ni généreuse indignation” (CM, III, 575).

Solonet, on the other hand, is a lawyer of a new generation that sees the law as commercial opportunity: ‘le notaire qui marche avec son époque et risque les capitaux en placements douteux, spéculé et veut se retirer riche de trente mille livres de rente après dix ans de notariat’ (CM, III, 561). Balzac lays bare the movement from the ease and poise of the *ancien régime*, to the speculation and self-interest of the capitalist era. The change signals the inevitable effect of the forces of historical change on social and individual conduct by. The impact of the historical milieu on the individual is subsequently consolidated in Solonet’s direct involvement with Paul de Manerville’s financial downfall and Mathias’ resigned acceptance of changed values. Gisèle Séginger has recognised that ‘L’homme de Loi est devenu un homme sans foi. Me Solonet participe à un mouvement de bouleversement social permanent par ses propres ambitions et en stimulant les désirs des autres: il fait alors du Code civil une arme révolutionnaire.’¹⁸³

Balzac’s awareness of historical change is firmly established in the incipit of *Le Contrat de mariage*, where the narrator directly links collective aristocratic evolution to historical change. Speaking of ‘la noblesse parlementaire’ and ‘la noblesse d’épée’ the narrator advises the reader that:

Réunies depuis la Révolution pour résister à l’influence impériale, ces deux noblesses s’étaient transformées en une aristocratie territoriale. Écrasé par les hautes et mouvantes fortunes des villes maritimes, ce faubourg Saint-Germain de Bordeaux répondait par son dédain au faste qu’étaient alors le commerce, les administrations et les militaires” (CM, III, 528).

¹⁸² Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), p. 11.

¹⁸³ Séginger, ‘De *La Fleur des pois* au *Contrat de mariage*’, *L’Année balzacienne* (2002), p. 177.

The narrator shows a three-stage reaction; to the Revolution, the period of Empire and now the "les hautes et mouvantes fortunes" of the Restoration. The bourgeoisie of the Restoration earns early aristocratic contempt, but will inevitably force an accommodation from the aristocracy with the new forces of wealth.

In *La Vieille Fille* and *Eugénie Grandet* Balzac breaks up settled provincial life with the 'invasion' of strangers. M. Troisville provokes Mlle Cormon's marriage, Charles Grandet the marriage of Eugénie. The first causes marital disaster inadvertently, the latter by direct involvement. In the *Le Contrat de mariage*, the strangers in Bordeaux and instigators of disaster are Mme and Mlle Evangélista themselves, who purposefully ruin M. de Mannerville. The change is characteristic of Mme Evangélista who does not conform to the feminine role of the times. The role of women in the period of *Le Contrat de mariage*, in contrast to that of the twentieth/twenty-first century, is defined thus:

l'époque où les femmes n'ont plus d'autre rôle à prendre dans la vie que celui de mère, en se sacrifiant à leurs filles, en transportant tous leurs intérêts, en dehors d'elles-mêmes, sur les têtes d'un ménage, dernier placement des affections humaines (CM, III, 544).

Balzac prioritises his capacity to extend the melodramatic beyond its normal dramatic effects. He delivers complex, nuanced sensitivities toward the human condition. Prevailing practices and cultural norms, whilst acknowledged, often fail to dictate his narrative direction. Rose Cormon in *La Vieille Fille* and the eponymous Eugénie Grandet reveal disposition and circumstance capable of breaking social trend. Similarly, the pressure to uphold maternal and domestic duties imposed by the age is not felt by Mme Évangélista. While she wishes to see Natalie advantageously married, it is only on her terms: release from her obligations as guardian, sanction of her financial profligacy and recognition of her aspirations to political power. These terms may change, should she find them in conflict with her emotional susceptibilities. 'Une fortune politique, la seule à laquelle les femmes du monde puissent décentement coopérer' (CM, III, 544) is planned with Paul de Manerville but later subsumed into her greater need for an immoral and unjustified revenge. Where Mme Évangélista does absorb social influence, it is only a pragmatic association designed to satisfy her emotional needs. Her association with Solonet's modern opportunism is not an embracing of influence but always an act of pure expediency.

Using the character of Mme Évangélista, Balzac is able to juxtapose two of his central interests. The exceptional, ultimately omnipotent, potential of the individual, is contrasted with his observations of the embracing forces of historical change. Gretchen R. Besser has recognised that even Balzacian genius, without ‘the vigorous self-propulsion to reach the top’ fails. It is the capacity for ‘financial acumen, unscrupulous tactics, and undeviating purpose’¹⁸⁴ that distinguishes Nucingen, du Tillet, Gobseck and de Marsay and I argue, in Section 3.4, that women from *Scenes de la vie privée* join that group as practitioners in the execution of the *vol décent*. Balzac provides partial exclusion from milieu forces for the exceptional individual, who exploits the environment but is not controlled by it.

¹⁸⁴ Gretchen R. Besser, *Balzac's Concept of Genius* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1969), p. 240.¹⁸⁵ Henry James quoted in *Balzac* ed. by Michael Tilby (London and New York: Longman, 1995), p. 57.

3.5 The Will to Power

‘Strength of purpose seems the supremely admirable thing’¹⁸⁵ says Henry James. Regarding the successful movement from aim to achievement in *La Comédie humaine* he adds: ‘in human nature, viewed in relation to this end, it is force only that is desirable’. However, force does not act in a vacuum but requires application in a world driven by psychological or socio-economic needs. Georges Poulet has recognised both the primacy of motivational force and its relationship to relentless focus, when he writes of *La Comédie humaine*: ‘If [...that] world is in fact a collection of forces, and if the property of power is to lead to ends, amongst all the possible combinations there is none more efficacious than that in which the different forces find their effort directed toward the same end’.¹⁸⁶

Power and focus, are essential elements, but they need to be adaptable to the changing reality of socio-economic and historic circumstance. In *Patterns of Failure in La Comédie humaine*, Charles Affron recognises this third dimension of Balzacian success when he says: ‘The failure of the Balzacian character depends upon an imperfect interpretation of the forces that control his life, on an unwillingness to make the compromises necessary for conforming to them, or an inability to fashion his life according to them’.¹⁸⁷ This next section examines the nature of these three elements and the narrative outcomes they combine to achieve in the texts from *Scènes de la vie privée*.

3.5.1 Power, Focus, and Adaptability

Female motivation in *La Comédie humaine* matches its male counterpart in intensity, but is limited in its field of operation. Open access to all sectors in society and a lack of mobility between sectors, is denied to women and this is a defining factor. Once married, the Balzacian heroine is limited to the social status conferred by marriage. Unlike Rastignac, who moves from student to cabinet minister in fifteen years, or du Tillet who rises from shop assistant to a successful banker married into the aristocratic Grandlieu family, none of our heroines, despite their capacity to act, can move directly into the emergent financial, commercial or

¹⁸⁵ Henry James quoted in *Balzac* ed. by Michael Tilby (London and New York: Longman, 1995), p. 57.

¹⁸⁶ Georges Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, trans. by Carly Dawson and Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), pp. 137-55.

¹⁸⁷ Charles Affron, *Patterns of Failure in La Comédie humaine*, p. 5.

political power bases. Arlette Michel has identified such female restriction: ‘la servitude est inscrite dans la législation: elle ne reconnaît aucun pouvoir à la femme, lui assigne beaucoup de devoirs et peu de droits [...] mariée, elle est sans autonomie financière; il lui est impossible de reprendre sa liberté’.¹⁸⁸ In the aristocratic world however, Michel recognises that ‘la souveraineté est concédée aux femmes par la société masculine; encore s’agit-il plutôt de reconnaître leur prestige que leurs pouvoirs’.¹⁸⁹ It is within this structure that the actions of our aristocratic heroines are placed and defined. The disposition of la marquise d’Espard is instructive:

La marquise était douée d’une profonde indifférence pour tout ce qui n’était pas elle; les hommes l’amusaient, mais aucun d’eux ne lui avait causé ces grandes excitations qui remuent profondément les deux natures et brisent l’une par l’autre. Elle n’avait ni haine ni amour. Offensée, elle se vengeait froidement et tranquillement, à son aise, en attendant l’occasion de satisfaire la mauvaise pensée qu’elle conservait sur quiconque s’était mal posé dans son souvenir. Elle ne se remuait pas, ne s’agitait point; elle parlait, car elle savait qu’en disant deux mots une femme peut faire tuer trois hommes (In., III, 452).

The marquise is a woman detached and calculating while Mme Évangélista is a woman emotional and volatile. A deeper comparison between the characters highlights the social limits placed upon them and their attempts to exploit and even subvert them. Mme d’Espard’s capacity to respond ‘froidement et tranquillement’ seems shared with Mme Évangélista’s mantra ‘attendez’. However, the concomitant of that mantra ‘Hâissez’ is not shared, as Mme d’Espard ‘n’avait ni haine ni amour’. Mme Évangélista is capable of love, if only for her daughter, but Mme d’Espard replaces love with indifference, a more powerful social weapon.

Mme d’Espard enjoys an additional power in her ability to withstand loneliness. Usually, loneliness is a debilitating factor, which reduces an individual’s ability to act. However, in Mme d’Espard’s sphere of self-interest, it enhances her power. As she can withstand familial or social isolation, she welcomes a detachment from human influence that takes her beyond individual and social influence. Her isolation also enhances her capacity to suspend emotional response, to preserve rather than dissipate energy. ‘Offensée, elle se vengeait froidement et tranquillement, à son aise, en attendant l’occasion de satisfaire la mauvaise pensée’ (In., III, 452). In the separation from her husband and children she shows pleasure, a release from extraneous associations and their irritations. The narrator speculates on

¹⁸⁸ Michel, ‘Le Pouvoir féminin dans *La Comédie Humaine*’, *L’Année balzacienne* (1991), pp. 185-186.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 186.

the extent of her self-interest, finding it capable of eclipsing all familial interest. ‘Elle s’était vue quittée par M. d’Espard avec un singulier plaisir: n’emmenait-il pas deux enfants qui, pour le moment l’ennuyaient, et qui, plus tard pouvaient nuire à ses prétensions?’ (In., III, 452-3) Both women retain the memory of offence and nurture it. Mme Évangélista’s ‘haines insatiables’ are triggered when the ‘offence’ goes to the heart of her paranoia and egoism. The protection and enhancement of self-interest, central to both characters, provides them with a common purpose. The satisfaction of egoism through a behavioural abnormality is not gender restricted and is seen in *La Comédie humaine* to take several forms. The mood in which self-interest is protected, calm and studied in the case of Mme d’Espard, sudden and violent in response by Mme Évangélista, is certainly a reflection of temperament rather than strategy. However, Mme Évangélista’s ‘attendez’ is an instruction to calculate when the advantageous moment for action is come: only then should action be sudden and devastating.

Balzac sees focused application of the will as an essential resource for success in the world of *La Comédie humaine* and Mme d’Espard provides evidence of feminine mastery of this discipline. Her application of will is predicated on her social position, which in turn is supported by her fashionable physical appearance and the association with political power offered by membership of her salon. It is through the manipulation of these social currencies that she seeks to by-pass the integrity of judge Popinot.

The effectiveness of the Balzacian woman in Restoration France is dependent on her capacity not only to focus her strength of purpose, but to overcome the imposed limitations of her legal, social and domestic circumstances. Balzac creates narrative structures that distance protagonist and victim. He thereby focusses reader attention on the woman as a single entity. The marquis d’Espard and his wife are separated, with the husband having custody of their children, leaving the wife free of direct control and apparently acting as a free agent. Similarly, Paul de Manerville is effectively banished to the Indies without legal or social status. The technique throws the spotlight onto the female protagonist whose purpose requires her to adapt her feminine talents to the manipulation of circumstances. For Bardèche, that adaptation means

Ses moyens doivent être invisibles, son empire est silencieux et apparemment dérobé aux orages. Elle se maintient par profondeur, par instinct, par ruse: il y a toujours un

calcul au fond de tout cela, et par conséquent une leçon qu'il est facile de faire ressortir.¹⁹⁰

The 'il y a toujours un calcul' moves the skills of the heroine from the domestic milieu into the new world of commercial speculation. The use of the *vol décent* is the appropriation of an effective right, regardless of morality, as part of the stratagem or the *ruse* in action. Moving beyond the satisfaction of domestic rights Mme d'Espard and Mme Évangélista respond to the attraction of political power as an alternative force to command. Denied direct involvement, Mme d'Espard uses her 'in vogue' appearance and social status to exert political influence: 'Mme d'Espard se préparait ainsi à faire succéder une sourde, mais réelle influence au règne public [...] Son salon prenait une consistance politique' (In., III, 454). Mme Évangélista plans a similar political power base using Paul de Manerville as her public representative.

3.5.2 Suitable Victims

It is in the confrontation with socio/economic reality that Balzac measures individual success and therefore, power and focus are forces that must respond to the dictates of circumstance. In the opposition between individuals, an imbalance in opposing strengths becomes effective only in relation to the circumstances in which the action unfolds. In this way, even where conflicting powers are equal in force, they are judged not by their strength but by their effectiveness.

In the marquis and marquise d'Espard, *L'Interdiction* provides the reader with two exceptional characters in opposition to each other. Mme d'Espard's egoism and search for a sustained social supremacy, are matched by her husband's desire to rectify a perceived injustice. If we accept the narrative outcome of *L'Interdiction*, (rather than the subsequent disclosures in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*), Mme d'Espard is successful in her manipulation of prevailing social and legal structures. M d'Espard on the other hand is incapable of such actions, and this renders him vulnerable to her.

Balzac creates a fundamental moral dilemma when he places the altruistic M. d'Espard in conflict with the self-interested Mme d'Espard. The dilemma is irresolvable because it arises from the totality of the marquis's moral integrity, a condition that prevents him from recognising self-interest in society. His moral

¹⁹⁰ Bardèche, *Une Lecture de Balzac*, pp. 177-78.

integrity isolates him from the social forces working against him. Balzac shows M. d'Espard, a stranger amongst the society in which he lives, where the 'petits passions, des sentiments dont la niaiserie n'est comparable qu'à leur bassesse' (In., III, 473). Balzac reveals an intellectual chasm between the locals and the marquis, where 'les locataires arrivèrent insensiblement à taxer de folie une foule de choses observées chez M. d'Espard et passées au tamis de leurs appréciations sans qu'ils y trouvassent des motifs raisonnables' (Ibid.).

The marquis prioritizes the care of others, retaining the use of his garden to protect the health of his children, locating his home where he can oversee their education. Care for others is not restricted to his children but extends to his tenants. His compassion for them, practical as well as ethical, extends to low rents, repair and maintenance of their accommodation. He maintains an apartment on the ground floor where his family is cared for by a kitchen maid, a family help of many years standing and a valet. This behaviour displays

Les soins minutieux dont témoignait le tenue de l'appartement annonçaient l'esprit d'ordre, le maternel amour que cette femme déployait pour les intérêts de son maître dans la conduite de sa maison et dans le gouvernement des enfants (In., III, 473).

The household harmony is a clear reflection of the moral ideals that guide M. d'Espard. His conduct determines their response to him at a level where 'ces trois braves gens semblaient avoir compris la pensée qui dirigeait la vie intérieure du marquis' (Ibid.). The understanding of d'Espard's singularity of thought, is qualified by Balzac's use of 'semblaient avoir compris', which suggests that a true understanding of his idealism cannot exist.

M. d'Espard, free of the notion of personal financial gain, seeks a harmony in human affairs that is reflected in the interior design of his property, a space in which beauty and balance impact on the lives of all who enter. The narrator distinguishes architecture from style, an important distinction for Balzac that highlights taste above size:

Quiconque entrait dans cette demeure ne pouvait se défendre d'un sentiment doux et paisible, inspiré par le calme profond, par le silence qui y régnait, par la modestie et par l'unité de la couleur (In., III, 472).

The contrast with the Ministry of Finance in *Les Employés* and the *Palais du Justice* of César Biroteau, both of which strive to create trepidation and submission, is stark. This is a private, internal respite from communal architecture, an individual expression of taste and calm which the designer creates to isolate the individual

from public anonymity; a typically Balzacian triumph for both the superiority of the artist and the individual. The harmony of the paintings and furnishings create an aura of peace and calm, an environment in which the individual is in peaceful union with his surroundings. This is an oasis, gifted by the creative artist to society, which Balzac shows to exist in a world distanced from financial and social stress, an ideal that cannot in fact be sustained in the real world. The same need for separation is found in M. d'Espard's print room and his offices on the third floor. They provide him with the solitude needed to realise his life's work on *Histoire pittoresque de la Chine* but at the same time illustrate a further isolation from the world which increases his vulnerability to the role of victim.

Michel Lichtlé, in his detailed legal assessment of the novel in 'Sur *L'Interdiction*' has confirmed, despite recognition of some literary indulgences, that 'l'information juridique de Balzac apparaît donc considérable, et sur très grand nombre de points fidèle'.¹⁹¹ In the narrative, Judge Popinot confirms that 'la législation permet à M. le marquis de disposer de ses revenus à titre gratuit, sans qu'il puisse être accusé de dissipation' (In., III, 490). However interesting the clarification of the legalities in *L'Interdiction*, they do not explain the character of the marquis. It is his background, disposition and moral stance, which ultimately determines his conduct and vulnerability. M. d'Espard's background is aristocratic and in conflict with the contemporaneous movements towards class mobility and distribution of wealth. The Balzacian narrator sees the aristocrats thus:

[Ils] reposent sur des idées primitives, sur des croyances pour ainsi dire innées, sur des habitudes prises dès l'enfance et qui n'existent plus. Pour croire au sang pur, à une race privilégiée, pour se mettre par la pensée au dessus des autres hommes' (In., III, 475).

The narrator develops the historic reference, showing that although respect for the aristocracy is lost, the obligations they undertook remain, as witnessed in the moral conduct of the marquis:

Considéré comme un débris de ce grand corps nommé la féodalité, M. d'Espard méritait une admiration respectueuse. S'il se croyait par le sang au dessus des autres hommes, il croyait également à toutes les obligations de la noblesse; il possédait les vertues et la force qu'elle exige (In., III, 475).

Historical change informs the contemporary scene. The values that d'Espard reveals in his financial correction of the injustices inflicted by his forbears, stands as example of a bygone chivalry still active in the present. That striving for an ideal is

¹⁹¹ Michel Lichtlé, 'Sur *L'Interdiction*', *L'Année balzacienne* (1988), p. 149.

equally present in his writing and publishing of the *Histoire picaresque de la Chine*. In the world of the Restoration Balzac shows such ideals as anomalous, not recognised or accepted as rational standards of contemporary behaviour. In the new world order, they pose a threat to commercial exchange as well as to self-interest. However, M. d'Espard, in the pursuit of his ideal, which has a practical underlying strategy and methodology, distinguishes himself in *Les Cabinet des antiques* from Victurnien d'Esgrigon. Victurnien is a victim of other people's virtue, a recipient of thoughtless praise and good intention which renders him unfit to act successfully in the real world.

D'Espard's singularity of purpose and its counterpart of social isolation attract unsolicited attention. The tenants, creditors, and property owner determine that 'le fou était le marquis' (In., III, 473) and, like a wounded animal, he becomes a target for attack. They are only able to understand him on their own intellectual level and therefore interpret his actions according to their own experience. As M. d'Espard does not choose to display the common signs of wealth and is prudent with his expenditure he is assumed not to be wealthy. Despite the fact that the marquis is not in arrears, instinct and limited experience tell them that he must be in debt. Balzac here reverses the generally accepted notion that the signs of wealth provide reliable proof of its substance. He offers the alternative reality that an absence of the signs results in a belief in the absence of funds. Both propositions Balzac shows to be unreliable, Mme Évangélista, Nucingen, Gobseck and Grandet providing the evidence. However, both propositions do posit a reality that is not necessarily dependant on truth. For Balzac, society responds to appearances as if they were realities, justifiably or otherwise. As evidenced in the *vol décent* they create a value that is socially effective and marketable.

It is more difficult to isolate Judge Popinot in a cocoon of integrity and high morality because he is involved daily in the process of litigation. This places him in direct confrontation with disparate interests, where worldly necessity is often in conflict with legal nicety. Balzac recognises that the dilemma for the law is aligning justice with fact. This is a conflict that Popinot recognises but can only attempt to resolve by exactitude in his preparation and open mindedness toward circumstances. As Balzac explains 'entre la conscience et le fait, il est un abîme de raisons déterminantes qui sont inconnues au juge, et qui condamnent ou légitiment un fait' (In., III, 432). Popinot's goodness attempts to resolve the irresolvable; it has no self-

interest other than the satisfaction of knowing that he has discharged his moral duty in the best interest of others:

Comme son génie d'appréciation était frappant, que son jugement était lucide et sa pénétration profonde, il fut regardé comme possédant une aptitude spéciale pour les pénibles fonctions de juge d'instruction. [...] La bonté de son cœur le mettait constamment à la torture, et il était pris entre sa conscience et sa pitié comme dans un étau (In., III, 433).

His handling of Mme d'Espard and her action against her husband is wholly reflective of this behavioural pattern. It is his accommodation with reality that suggests Judge Popinot is not an idealist and not a victim; he accepts that after a hundred and fifty years 'il se trouverait en France peu de propriétés légitimes' (In., III, 490) and he accepts the intervention of higher legal authority and its interests. Andrew J. Counter accepts both M. d'Espard and Popinot as idealists but limited by their morality. 'Idealism – the judges, the husbands, Balzac's contemporary novelists – is simply impossible and must always yield to the demands of reality'.¹⁹² However, it is the case that Balzac does accept the yield to reality. We see it in Popinot's smile of resignation faced with institutional self interest. 'Il ne put à prendre retenir un sourire ironique'.

In the conflict between Mme Évangélista and Paul de Manerville, a contest of wholly unequal forces, it is Paul's incapacity to face reality, even under de Marsay's guidance, that secures his fate. Paul de Manerville, is identifiable as victim at the beginning of the novel, he is broken as an effective combatant by his upbringing. In a psychological profile in the the incipit of the narrative, Paul's role as victim is secured. His subsequent meeting with Natalie Évangélista and her mother mark the next steps on his pathway toward his inevitable downfall. His upbringing has cultivated an ineffectiveness, which he cannot overcome:

Paul n'osa lutter contre son père, et perdit cette faculté de résistance qui engendre le courage moral. Ses sentiments comprimés allèrent au fond de son cœur, où il les garda longtemps sans les exprimer; puis plus tard, quand il les sentit en désaccord avec les maximes du monde, il put bien penser et mal agir (CM, III, 528).

The capacity to deal with circumstance only exists in Mme Évangélista, as Paul de Manerville does not even have a heroic level of decency to fall back upon. Due to his insipidity, he fails to act as either hero or reluctant failure. The failure of the

¹⁹² Andrew J. Counter, 'L'Interdiction, or, Balzac on the Margins of Law and Realism', *Law and Humanities Journal* (2017), 11, 1.

marquis d'Espard on the other hand, is mitigated by his moral stature, which raises him above the victor/victim nexus.

3.6 Conclusion

Le Contrat de mariage, ostensibly the story of a woman seeking to secure her daughter's social and financial position through an advantageous marriage contract, is not a simple conte. Research into the relevant texts supports Tim Farrant's recognition that 'Balzac's *scènes* are primarily concerned with the characters' emotions and experience; by their veracity and exemplary validity in the context of contemporary society'.¹⁹³ Research into the nature of that veracity has revealed contradictions, pluralities, illusions and tensions that begin to question the character of what may be legitimately termed 'exemplary' in the context of *La Comédie humaine*.

Balzac reveals that world as responsive to an *infra-reality*, which is plural, ambiguous and ephemeral. His creative exploitation of that plurality is both a reflection of and part of the world it seeks to expose. In previous sections I have explored the way characters act outside the normative, apparently seeming to deny the socio/economic imperatives of the new world order, and yet remaining effective within that order. Such a response is not activated when confronted with an external reality, but triggered by a sublimated emotional force, which colours how characters will perceive events. The nature of that force is an instinctive reaction to emotional need and therefore without any recourse to reason or doubt.

In depicting both the family milieu and the social milieu, Balzac represents appearance as a force beyond rational or moral judgement. Despite its lack of substance and its reliance upon artifice and superficiality, it is a creative product, an exchangeable commodity of value, both financial and social, and one that promotes a sanctioning of deceit. Balzac reveals this phenomenon against a background of social change where individual identity and status are increasingly determined by social influences, particularly those of power and wealth. He shows social authority to be effective in the use of deceit, protective of anonymity and silently acquiescent in the face of immorality. For the individual, an investment in this type of exchange seeds an interest in maintaining the illusion of appearance as a reality. In this way an immoral act, which has the appearance of legitimacy, becomes a socially acceptable one. These forces are the power that breeds, nurtures and sustains the *vol décent*.

¹⁹³ Farrant, *Balzac's Shorter Fictions*, p. 13.

Ostensibly, Balzac fronts the narrative with the legal manipulation of the marriage contract for immoral purpose, but behind this event, he shows an insidious, subtle infiltration of deceit into society as a whole, against the backcloth of socio-economic change. Innuendo, silence, implication, contradiction, the inchoate and the ambiguous, are amongst the many elements used in perpetrating deceit and as has been shown Balzac uses what we have termed, a form of 'literary gossip' that surreptitiously infiltrates the narrative. The reader is also involved with this form of literary exchange and thereby becomes an acquiescent partner in the deceit.

Balzac's representation of the relationship between the natural world and the social world shows that instinctual responses found in nature continue to inform and drive behaviour in an increasingly sophisticated nineteenth-century French society. But Balzac also reveals a form of deceit amongst those instinctive natural responses. He shows the basic instincts for survival, security and procreation still active in society. Even the social hierarchy shadows nature in essence, if not in expression, in a society where the exceptional member, as in nature, enjoys an extended freedom and power. The text of *Le Contrat de mariage* reveals that the exceptional individual, although manipulative of society, is unaffected by historical forces. It points to potential conflict between certain individual members of society and society as a whole, a tension that cannot be resolved. In the Balzacian world, the 'existences fortes et créatrices' with 'le pouvoir oublier' have a level of immunity from social influence that fuels creativity and self-interest.

The female protagonists of the *vol décent* are exceptional in terms of their focus and power. The women display a plurality of response to circumstances, and share an indifference to the means they adopt to achieve their aims. Morality is subordinated to the satisfaction of ego; an action unsullied by emotion or conscience. The *vol décent* in this context is a necessary stratagem.

In *L'Interdiction*, Balzac proposes that morality and good intention will never overcome the reality of self-interest. The notion that goodness will conquer self-interest is clearly rejected. M. d'Espard is a victim because he cannot recognise reality. He works toward a fair and informed society but is so isolated from society that he is unable to either recognise or respond to the reality of circumstance. Mme d'Espard recognises that both the political hierarchy and the legal institutions, despite their avowed devotion to public welfare and justice, will protect their own

self-interests above all. The marquis, on the other hand, devoted as he is to welfare and justice, is isolated from this reality and will inevitably be its victim.

The female protagonists of the *vol décent* are as focused on the realisation of their ambitions as their male counterparts. The ruthless female is without moral scruple, matching their male counterparts in self-interest. They recognise reality and exploit the possibilities available to them.

Chapter 4

The *vol décent* and Theatre: *Mercadet*

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Collaboration
 - 4.2.1 Introduction
 - 4.2.2 D'Ennery and a change of focus
 - 4.2.3 The Audience, The Aside and the Success
- 4.3 *Mercadet: A Comedy of Illusion and Wealth*
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 - 4.4.4 Morality and the Market
- 4.5 Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

Le Faiseur, a *comédie du capital*,¹⁹⁴ performed under the title of *Mercadet* at the Parisian *Théâtre du Gymnase* in 1851, the year after Balzac's death, is a comedic celebration of the *vol décent*. Balzac's contributions to the stage, unlike his publication of numerous novels, had proved unsuccessful before the staging of *Mercadet*. However, the comedy that opened on the 21 August 1851 was not Balzac's original five-act version of *Le Faiseur*, written between 1840 and 1848, but a 'Comédie en trois actes et en prose' adapted from Balzac's original five act script by Adolphe d'Ennery in 1851. As a form of theft that attracted social approbation but failed to attract legal retribution, the *vol décent* allowed indulgence in an unashamed embrace of illusion and chicanery. However, the work's popular appeal in 1851 fails to provide unequivocal evidence for the notion that it 'se signal[e] comme un incontestable chef-d'œuvre'¹⁹⁵ for Balzac. The intervention by d'Ennery denies Balzac sole authorial credit for the work but does not detract from the comedic and dramatic capacity of the *vol décent*. In fact, the collaboration results in a concentration on the *vol décent* as an operative commercial and social norm based on the relationship between illusion and wealth; a process that facilitates questionable financial transactions and becomes embedded in cultural mores of self-interest. Its commercial capacity to deceive without legal consequence is converted in the 1851 version from a dubious socio-economic practice to a humorous comedic construct.

The new priority awarded to the *vol décent* as a formula for comedy is created by the collaborators' focus on the *vol décent* as an outrageous, immoral practice freed of restriction, irrespective of its legality and sanction; a practice that strips the *vol décent* of its association with probity and propriety. It becomes a behavioural norm out of kilter with everyday manners and therefore a source of amusement ripe for manipulation and exaggeration, the fodder of farce. The analogy with Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 publication of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, drawn in turn from the Spanish collection of tales *El Conde Lucanor* of 1335, is apposite. Where the *vol décent* is protected by its 'legality', the Emperor's absence of clothing

¹⁹⁴ Philippe Berthier, (ed.), *Présentation: Le Faiseur, Notes et Bibliographie* (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2012), p. 10.

¹⁹⁵ Perrine, Coudurier, 'Le Théâtre de Balzac', *Fabula: la recherche en littérature* (2012), < http://www.fabula.org/actualites/le-theatre-de-balzac_52913.php > [accessed 2 February 2013]

is protected by the popular and expedient belief that they are only invisible to those unfit for their office. Where the child breaks the spell by merely stating the obvious truth to a previously silent, acquiescent public, the collaborators of *Mercadet* do the same with a relentless exposure of a comedic reality that works beyond the law. The change of perspective frees the audience from moral concern by releasing the inherent absurdity of the *vol décent* into plain sight. It becomes a victory for common sense over nicety that melts the *vol décent*'s pretence of integrity, leaving expediency as its sole justification. The re-structuring also works toward excluding the audience from the wider ethical debate of Balzac's original text; a change in focus, this thesis argues, that consolidates the comedic success.

The play's commercial triumph in 1851 was marked by a run of approximately one hundred performances to full houses. The sustained popularity of the comedy was exceptional for the period and for Balzac as dramatist. In *Balzac Criticism in France 1850-1900* published in 1976, David Bellos poses, but leaves unresolved, the question of who was actually responsible for the comedy's acclaim. He writes: 'the public that flocked to nearly 100 performances of *Mercadet* may have been appreciative as much of d'Ennery's stagecraft as of Balzac's dramatic genius'.¹⁹⁶ This chapter considers both aspects in historical context, their collaborative contribution to *Mercadet* and illumination of the *vol décent*.

Whilst the text of the Balzacian novel and nouvelle reveals an intrinsically theatrical style in the extravagant physicality of its descriptions, dramatic, often melodramatic events, extraordinary and sometimes stereotypical characters, *Mercadet* adopts a comedic theatricality as part of a wider stagecraft in an *illusion comique*. It works to satisfy a theatre audience acquainted with, and often actual participants in, the financial chicanery of the period and particularly that of the *vol décent*. The process is portrayed in a flamboyant, fantastical comedy in which speculation and risk are the prime drivers. The joint irreality of character and plot, revealed in a hectic flow of dramatic activity and verbal dexterity, largely serves to dominate the moral and social discord that underpins the *vol décent*. However, d'Ennery's re-structuring and pruning of the original Balzac text does not succeed in creating a play that works entirely in comedic isolation. The success of *Mercadet* is not exclusively its hilarity. It also signals the extent to which the *vol décent*, as an

¹⁹⁶ David Bellos, *Balzac Criticism in France 1850-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976), p. 64.

acceptable deception in pursuit of wealth, has become an integral part of commercial and social manners. The success of *Mercadet* implies that its strict comedic form, which often sacrifices dramatic insight to comedic popularity, anticipates the nature of the audience, its mood and its easy familiarity with pretence.

Balzac does not seek a direct representation of reality in *Mercadet*. Aided by d'Ennery's trimming of the original text, he delivers a comedic representation of the *vol décent* through an exploitation of the relationship between illusion and wealth. The purposeful promotion of the *vol décent* as a construct ripe for comedic representation marks a significant move for Balzac. *Mercadet* illuminates the farcical aspects of the *vol décent* rather than its systemic response to socio-economic change, inviting a reappraisal of Balzac's own position regarding the *vol décent*. Where the systemic element attracts moral and commercial judgement in the novels, the comedic element on stage becomes a satirical romp indulging an audience in search of uproarious relief. The *vol décent* lends itself to such treatment, being an oxymoronic opposition reliant upon a tenuous grasp of reality. It is capable of slipping from the fragile oxymoronic reality into the absurd, a balance, it may be argued, which is barely sustained in *Mercadet*. In the movement, from the judgemental to the comedic, awareness of Balzac's ironic detachment from the world he represents, is strengthened. The detachment, clearly heard in the narrative voice of the novels, enjoys almost free rein at the *Théâtre du Gymnase*.

The mid-century historical moment at which *Mercadet* was played for the first time was of a period that thrived on illusion. Political, commercial and social practice all confused promise and pretence with reality. The illusion of acquired wealth and position, characteristic of arrivisme, speculative profit supported by mere representations of value, the economic collapse of 1851, the social normalisation of dishonesty and chicanery, investment in possibilities that never materialised, the political upheaval of 1848, all indicate that illusion was not without historical base.¹⁹⁷ This is recognised and exploited in *Mercadet*.

¹⁹⁷ Please see Section 4.4

4.2 The Collaboration *and the vol décent*

4.2.1 Introduction

The Balzac/d'Ennery 'collaboration', unusual in that it was a posthumous association, adopted a common and 'necessary device at a period when demand ran high [...and] it was particularly in evidence during the Restoration period'.¹⁹⁸ The contemporaneous theatre reviews which, usually without actually naming d'Ennery, do refer to the significance of his contribution. He regarded theatre as a business whose survival, as with all commercial ventures, was ultimately dependant upon financial success. The commercial imperative relied on audience anticipation and subsequent approval, conditions that maximised initial and ongoing sale of tickets. The provision and primacy awarded to audience satisfaction, in a market where theatre had no government support, made d'Ennery the target of 'les critiques qui [...] se sont souvent révoltés en voyant le peu de cas qu'il faisait de l'art, du goût et de la logique'. D'Ennery's response to his critics reveals both his commercial pedigree and his particular talent: 'Les pièces que vous trouvez mauvaises ont cent, cent cinquante représentations. Le public nous applaudit'.¹⁹⁹

Whilst d'Ennery's intervention questions Balzac's pre-eminence as authorial source, it ensured a successful, staged, comedic representation of the *vol décent*. The notion is fully promoted in *Mercadet* by both contributors, as an acknowledged behavioural practice of deception that tests the limits of publicly sanctioned immorality. However, the *vol décent* is tested as a largely comedic, rather than expedient notion. D'Ennery's contribution to the success of the play draws on a knowledge and experience of theatre which had been tested and acclaimed over some 200 plays as author or collaborator. His ability to meet the demands of commercial theatre was achieved with an 'untiring pen and accurate judgement of public taste [that] earned him a fortune of twelve million francs',²⁰⁰ an outcome which Balzac himself had unsuccessfully sought to achieve in the theatre world. Gustave Claudin writes of d'Ennery:

¹⁹⁸ F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1993]), p. 248.

¹⁹⁹ Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*, (Paris: Administration du grand dictionnaire universel, 1866)

²⁰⁰ Bellos, *Balzac Criticism in France 1850-1900*, p. 64.

D'Ennery a fait, comme on sait, plus de deux cents pièces qui toutes ont eu un très grand succès. [...] Nul ne sait mieux que lui amener une scène émouvante et en tirer tous les effets qu'elle comporte'.²⁰¹

Although time has not shown d'Ennery to have a literary stature of Balzacian proportions, his contribution to the French theatre of the period was significant. The extent of d'Ennery's contribution to the final script, by way of deletion, insertion of new text, re-draft and editing of the original, is considerable. His dramatic reduction of the script from five acts to three, development, deletion and movement of scenes, integration of acts, narrative changes, reduction and elimination of passages, collectively contribute major changes to the play's structure, characterisations, and modifications to the original authorial concept. This thesis considers d'Ennery's restructuring and direct changes to Balzac's original text, their influence on the collaborative script, the success and the *vol décent* as comedic concept, social and commercial phenomenon. D'Ennery's contribution, as master of stagecraft is highlighted, together with a detailed and original examination of his subtle exploitation of the 'aside' as a contrived manipulation of audience interaction with the *vol décent* and the stage.

The losses and the revisions made to the original Balzac text, whilst indicative of d'Ennery's theatre skills, also serve to highlight the residual strength of Balzac's core concepts. Despite d'Ennery's contribution, with its signature focus on comedic extravagance and pace, *Mercadet* retains echoes of the Balzacian spirit. The focus on social and individual response to the *vol décent*, the infiltration of milieux by socio-economic and historical forces, all remain visible as core Balzacian drivers. Despite the adoption of a relentless comedic form that almost amounts to farce, reference to the ultimate superiority of individual resolve in conflict with adverse circumstance, the primacy of family as social unit and the immorality of socially disinterested profit still remain.

4.2.2 D'Ennery and a Change of Focus

The collaborative version of *Mercadet* at the *Théâtre du Gymnase* had been brokered by Balzac's widow and the theatre director Montigny, who secured the services of Adolphe d'Ennery. Mme Balzac's arrangement with Montigny, to place the text in d'Ennery's experienced hands, came with an ironic proviso:

²⁰¹ Gustave Claudin, *Mes souvenirs: les boulevards de 1840-1870* (Paris: Calman-Levi, 1884), p.241.

De grâce soyez bien discret sur la collaboration, n'en dites pas un mot à personne, pour ne pas nuire à notre succès; vous comprenez que les journaux qui auront des égards pour la mémoire de M. de B[alzac] n'en auront plus pour un collaborateur.²⁰²

Her commercial instinct is clear, as is the reliance on a silent deception designed to maximise a conversion of the residual respect for her husband into hard capital. This deception reflects a rising mood and methodology of the period that goes to the heart of commercial exchange in *La Comédie humaine*, a strategy which recognises a primacy for financial security over moral scrupulousness.

Gautier's accredited reference to d'Ennery in *La Presse* details the high level of skill and theatrical experience required for commercial success when he acknowledges that 'la pièce a été ébarbée et ajustée aux dimensions de la scène par la main habile et discrète de M. d'Ennery, passé maître aux rogueries du théâtre'.²⁰³ The observation recognises that even Balzac's dramatic genius requires the collaborative, complementary skills of the theatrical entrepreneur, director and editor, to ensure commercial success. Those skills stretch to textual techniques that stimulate audience response, as this research illustrates in its analysis of d'Ennery's use of the aside.²⁰⁴ D'Ennery had honed his theatrical skills on the Boulevard du Temple where he designed productions to satisfy both the working and the upper classes, whereas in *Le Théâtre du Gymnase* he was to find 'the new mobile society of the Restoration [...] the bourgeoisie [...] in the same milieu as the aristocracy'.²⁰⁵ By 1851 that audience mix included a post 1848 working class element at the *Gymnase* that had 'joined the illusion that a new social order had dawned'.²⁰⁶

D'Ennery's 'main habile et discrète' may not have been quite as subtle as Gautier implied. Douchan Z. Milatchitch in *Le Théâtre de Honoré de Balzac*, identifies a dilemma of identity:

Dennery a pris beaucoup et souvent même trop de liberté; il a fondu des actes ensemble, et ramené leur nombre à trois. Il a développé certaines scènes, en a déplacé d'autres, et parfois supprimé de longs passages; tel, par exemple et à tort semble-t-il, le dialogue entre le faiseur et son propriétaire par lequel commençait le premier *Mercadet* et où Balzac avait voulu montrer le banquier volé et ruiné par son associé, l'homme d'affaires, l'homme d'affaires plus malheureux en somme que malhonnête, luttant contre certains créanciers.²⁰⁷

²⁰² Collection Lovenjoul, Ms, A272, fol. 42, lettre inédite.

²⁰³ Théophile Gautier, *La Presse*, 1 septembre 1851, p. 2, col. 3.

²⁰⁴ Please see section 4.

²⁰⁵ Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac's La Comédie humaine*, p. 47.

²⁰⁶ F.W.J. Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1848-1898: Dissidents and Philistines* (New York: Scribner, 1971), p. 15.

²⁰⁷ Douchan Z. Milatchitch, *Théâtre de Honoré de Balzac* (Paris: Hachette, 1930), p. 255.

It is clear from d'Ennery's changes and deletions that he works to a practised strategy. He seeks to reduce the piece, finding it too long to be sustained as a comedy. The reduction from five to three acts, together with the amalgamation of scenes succeeds in reducing its length to one that holds the balance between an accommodation of pace and a restriction in time that ensures the pace is maintained. He makes a series of deletions which remove the overbearing elements of moral instruction, leaving the script to intrigue, action, and expectation, the elements able to accentuate and exaggerate the comic.

The notion of Mercadet as victim, 'la victime d'un abus de confiance' (1,1)²⁰⁸ is almost eclipsed in the collaborative edition. The original opening scene, between the landlord Brédif and Mercadet is taken out and so is Mercadet as someone fighting misfortune, victim at the hands of Godeau and creditors who 'pour recouvrer quelques sous, côtoient la loi jusque sur la lisière du vol'.²⁰⁹ The Mercadet role now stands in direct confrontation with the creditors. By his deletion of the original first scene d'Ennery immediately reverses the notion of creditors as villains and the debtors take on the role. Mercadet is thereby set up to become the unquestioned, isolated hero with the capacity to confront seemingly impossible odds; a tactic that places Mercadet in an adversarial contest. The exclusion of the original authorial intention, for good commercial theatrical purpose, comes with a sacrifice of mood and morality:

En spéculant, Monsieur, il y a mille manières de faire fortune, mais je n'en connais qu'une seule de bonne, que la brave bourgeoisie n'aurait jamais dû quitter: c'est d'amasser l'argent par le travail et par la loyauté, non par les ruses.²¹⁰

The absence of Mme Mercadet's extended advice to her husband, on the contrasting values of speculation and dutiful family endeavour, is lost and with it a questioning ethical perspective. Whilst the full original piece is certainly overbearing and delays the action, the original authorial intention is forfeited to d'Ennery's comedic expediency. Deletion from the original text of Mme Mercadet's disclosure of the true identity of the fake Godeau and her distaste of sharp practice, is a modification of the narrative which allows both the pace to be maintained and permits the improbable final scene, so welcomed by the audience.

²⁰⁸ Analysis of the collaboration and stage directions is based on the reprinted Paris edition of *Mercadet* that was originally published by La Librairie Théâtrale in 1851. For comparative purposes the original edition of *Le Faiseur*, published in Paris by Cadot in 1853, has also been used.

²⁰⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Faiseur* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), Act 1, Scene 1, p. 33.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Act 4, Scene 17, p. 154.

The original scene, in which Père Violette pleads with Mercadet for financial help due to the purported suffering of his family, is successfully delivered. Mercadet is moved by the display, because of its resort to familial affection, and gives him sixty francs from his sole remaining funds. (It is interesting to note that Balzac allows du Tillet to display a similar moment of unexpected compassion in appearing, at César's darkest financial hour, to offer him the olive branch of funds; a dispositional deviation which signals a complexity in character not previously displayed). D'Ennery, who feels the action to be out of character, or more likely to prove ineffective and distracting for the audience, substitutes an offer of speculative gain. Similarly, in the confrontation between Goulard and Mercadet, d'Ennery modifies the text to change the character of Goulard, originally portrayed as hard-nosed and revengeful discounteer, to apparent conciliator and appeaser.

Adolphe Minard, in the original version, as per his counterpart Anselme Popinot from *César Birotteau*, was represented as a pragmatist responsive to the realities of penury and the limitations of social possibility. Minard, the nuanced realist, who rejects an impossible financial situation in the original, regarding both himself and Julie's father, is changed by d'Ennery into a melodramatic innocent. It is one of a series of transitions that undermine the realism and the literary content of Balzac's *Le Faiseur*. They begin with d'Ennery's reduction of the opening exchange between Mercadet and his landlord, in which it was originally disclosed that Mercadet was a victim of circumstances 'condamné par la malchance à jouer le rôle d'un faiseur'.²¹¹ D'Ennery is equally capable of adding to the primary text, as he does with the instructions to la Brive regarding Godeau and the prelude to the revised final scene.

The denouement itself is almost totally modified in a reconstruction designed to bring the audience to a crescendo of excitement in preparation for a fantastical *deus ex machina* ending. D'Ennery adds to the Balzac text, creating the possibility of the new ending, in his instructions to la Brive. The original text does not bring the creditors together for a joint confrontation with Mercadet but d'Ennery does exactly that to heighten tension and raise audience expectations. It results in a final victory much applauded by the audience. Auguste Lireux, writing the review in *Le Constitutionnel*, captures the impact:

²¹¹ Douchan Z. Milatchitch, *Le Théâtre de Honoré de Balzac*, p. 260.

Avant le lever du rideau, la salle était sous le coup d'une visible émotion. On attendait la pièce avec anxiété; on l'a écoutée dans une attention profonde, et elle s'est terminée au bruit de frénétiques applaudissements. C'est un très grand succès.²¹²

The original Balzac text had left the issue of Godeau's return open, an irresolution that d'Ennery recognised would deny the audience a *finale* of celebration and closure. The riotous acceptance of the *deus ex machina*, whilst indicative of the audience's commitment to *illusion comique*, denies the challenge of unresolved dilemma. More significantly, it creates a union between players and audience. D'Ennery also adds de la Brive to the final scene, having diverted him from his role as Godeau impersonator, to join in the final celebrations. The delay gives time for Pierquin to buy the *Basse Indre* shares at the right moment, creating a total closure of outstanding deals. The proposed marriage of Minard and Julie can go ahead as Mercadet is now in funds himself, free to authorise the union. The audience, manipulated and primed for a happy denouement, delight in their victory.

4.2.3 The Audience, the Aside and the Success²¹³

D'Ennery's awareness of the theatre market as a commercial transaction between audience demand and theatrical supply is evident in his basic restructuring of Balzac's text. He reads audience expectation at the historical moment when the play comes to the stage. The audience of 1851 Paris seeks comic relief not an encounter with moral dilemma, it seeks hope and resolution in difficult times, a combination that d'Ennery satisfies with unrelenting humour and a happy, if improbable, ending. D'Ennery recognises and accepts the audience movement from classical orthodoxy to a modern day engagement with commercial reality. Théophile Gautier contrasts *Mercadet* and Molière's *Don Juan*, a comparison that illustrates the change in social manners which accompanies an historic shift in circumstances.

Il y a dans le *Don Juan* de Molière une certaine scène de M. Dimanche qui montre combien l'ancien créancier était débonnaire et patriarcal à coté de celui de nos jours. Tout s'est perfectionné, surtout la dette et quand on songe que Don Juan pouvait faire bâtonner M. Dimanche [...] on est pénétré pour Mercadet d'une profonde admiration. Mercadet, c'est Don Juan et M. Dimanche, avec le progrès du temps.²¹⁴

The theatre critic contrasts the 'débonnaire et patriarcal' character of the *ancien régime* exchange, one historically observed to have been played out against a social backcloth based upon order and privilege, dealing in tangible products, with the

²¹² Auguste Lireux, *Feuilleton du Constitutionnel*, 25 août 1851, p 1, col 1.

²¹³ Martin Shields, 'The Audience, the Aside and the Success', *French Studies Bulletin* (2013), pp. 87-90.

²¹⁴ Gautier, *La Presse*, 'Théâtres' 1 septembre 1851, p 1, col. 4.

intangible debtor/creditor relationship of the Restoration. The contrast that Gautier highlights draws on the underlying historic shift that witnesses a breakdown of class rigidity and the wave of social fluidity that comes to characterise the period. The debtor/creditor opposition now operates in a market that is without fixed structure but offers speculative financial opportunity partially evidenced at *La Bourse* through trades that involve fictitious financial products. It is in this new world order ‘inconnue autrefois et produite par notre civilisation compliquée²¹⁵ that ‘le faiseur’ must operate. The change of conduct implicit in the *vol décent* infiltrates the audience of the *Théâtre du Gymnase*. They seek an engagement with the stage, in a vindication of their involvement with the *vol décent*. D’Ennery is alert to the mood and its commercial attractions, amending the Balzac script to ensure they are satisfied.

However, his talent, visible in major changes to the script, is not confined to dramatic re-structuring, it moves easily into a detailed, subtle manipulation of the ‘aside’. D’Ennery uses the ‘aside’ to bring the audience into a joint conspiracy with Mercadet and the *vol décent*. It plays a significant role in legitimising the *vol décent*, an activity with which the audience would be familiar, converting it from a dubious practice into a *cause célèbre*.

In Balzac’s original five-act version of the play, he uses some one hundred and fifteen asides and in the three-act ‘collaboration’ eighty-five asides are used. Michel Autrand, writing in 1999 of the abundance of asides in Balzac’s five act *Le Faiseur*, points out that ‘c’est en soi un phénomène fréquent et souvent remarqué dans la dramaturgie du XIX^e siècle’.²¹⁶ Whilst d’Ennery has actually made a pro-rata increase in the number of asides in the three-act version he also develops, as well as intensifies, the impact of the direction. From Balzac’s hundred and fifteen asides in the original version one hundred and eight are designated *à part* and only seven designated *bas* whereas in the d’Ennery three act version the eighty-five asides are divided fifty-nine *à part* and twenty-six *bas*; the latter figure including the variations of one *bas aux autres*, one *à voix basse* and one *à lui-même*. The distinction between the two stage directions is significant. The direction *à part* excludes the other characters but not the audience who are offered an exclusive, if

²¹⁵ Ibid., p 1, col. 4-5.

²¹⁶ Michel Autrand, ‘Rire et humour dans *Le Faiseur*’, *L’Année balzacienne* (2000), p. 435.

one sided, direct exchange with selected characters. This type of exchange creates a bond between character and audience that is composed of a ‘secret’ knowledge operating within a ‘silent’ association. The asides also suggest collusion between Mercadet, as a potential liberator from destitution, and the audience, many of whom in this period were coping with impending financial disaster. A union of interests occurs in which Mercadet’s liberation is celebrated by the audience as a joint venture in freedom from the *vol décent*. The direction *bas* on the other hand, whilst it also includes the audience, can exclude or include other characters and is therefore capable of delivering multi-layered relationships in a mode that the audience alone is privileged to experience.

Use of the asides, in both the five act *Le Faiseur* and the three-act *Mercadet* version is dominated by the character of Mercadet. In d’Ennery’s version, from the total of eighty-five asides Mercadet delivers sixty-one and other characters a total of twenty-four. Michel Autrand’s 1999 article focused on the effect of ‘l’abondance et la singularité des apartés’²¹⁷ in *Le Faiseur*, with its dominance by the *à part*. We focus on an analysis of the twenty-six *bas* deliveries from all characters in *Mercadet* and their potential for stimulating audience response.

The comedy’s five exchanges delivered *bas* between Mercadet and Mme Mercadet exclude the domestics as a whole (1,3), Virginie in particular (1.4), and the creditors on three occasions (3,7), but also include the audience in an awareness of the bond between husband and wife, an awareness reinforced *bas* (3,7), that could ultimately be capable of subverting Mercadet’s financial resolve. While that knowledge is denied to many of the other characters in the drama, the whole audience is invited to hear and observe what purports to be a private exchange. The confidences, overheard in this and other exchanges and made *sotto voce*, create compelling attachments between audience and character.

The use of the lowered voice is not confined to the unveiling of relationships: its conspiratorial, furtive and exclusive character delivers a variety of dramatic effects. The *bas* that is used to expose M. and Mme Mercadet’s relationship in Act 1 is simultaneously adopted to expose the machinations of the Bourse that Philippe Berthier recognises as ‘la Vie - l’argent, le sang et le sperme du corps social’²¹⁸ of

²¹⁷ Autrand, ‘Rire et humour dans *Le Faiseur*’, *L’Année balzacienne* (2000), pp. 434-5.

²¹⁸ Balzac, *Le Faiseur*, p. 16.

the age. In this new world order, appearance is used to disguise subterfuge and it becomes for Mercadet the essential *modus operandi* of social and financial exchange. He interrupts his wife when she is heard committing the ‘sin’ of telling the truth, to whisper ‘voilà comment vous parlez à vos domestiques? [...] ils vous manqueront de respect demain’.²¹⁹ There is an appropriate harmony here, between the need for deceit and its delivery *sotto voce*. The *bas* not only seeks to exclude but also to seduce the audience into a furtive embrace of villainy. Having enticed Goulard into the scheme to artificially boost the value of his shares in the mines of the Basse-Indre, Mercadet confirms artifice as the period’s effective means of exchange in his response *bas* to Goulard’s enquiry as to who would buy them, ‘le voyez-vous, l’honnête homme, prêt à voler le prochain’.²²⁰

The same device brings the audience into private conclave with the Minard/Mercadet sub-plot (2,3), where Minard is temporarily persuaded that his interest in Julie must be sacrificed for her own sake. The direction *à lui-même*, allows Mercadet to share with the audience his personal awareness that ‘c’est un amour bien vrai, bien sincère, bien noble! Et comme je ne croyais pas qu’il en eût dans le monde’.²²¹ This reminds the audience of his underlying humanity and, together with the reality of Mercadet’s exposure of human nature and practice, prevents the comedy from flirting too frequently with farce.

D’Ennery’s experience of theatrical practice and audience response influences the structure and the direction of the play. He reduces Balzac’s five act version to three acts, arguably the maximum sustainable length for his audience and changes Balzac’s ending to the play. In deference to bourgeois sentiment, d’Ennery sees Mercadet succeed and the creditors paid. He recognises the complex social mix of his audience by opening the play with the domestics, replacing the bourgeois characters Mercadet and Brédif with Virginie, a working class saver and investor who has a direct interest in the bourgeois financial chicanery. Her financial interests are brought to the attention of the audience in an *à part* from Justin and sustained by a series of asides from Mercadet, whose concern lies in how she obtained the funds. The character of De la Brive provides an upper-class interest in which Mercadet’s inventiveness and pragmatism is contrasted with the ineffectual and

²¹⁹ Balzac, *Mercadet*, p. 8.

²²⁰ Balzac, *Mercadet*, 1,6, p. 18.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 11,2, p. 50.

waning capital of title; an exchange reflected in the stage directions, where De la Brive is awarded seven of the twenty-four asides not allocated to Mercadet, giving him frequent and direct address to the audience. The balance of asides, with the exception of Justin's one *à part* and one *bas*, are all made by the bourgeois creditors, aspiring or existing family members. The bourgeois dominance of the audience is acknowledged, not merely in the bourgeois activities and values unfolding on stage but also in the ways in which Balzac and d'Ennery capture and hold their attention.

4.3. *Mercadet: A Comedy of Illusion and Wealth*

The three act collaborative version of *Mercadet* that opened at the *Théâtre du Gymnase* in Paris on the 25 August 1851 remained focused on the interrelationship between illusion and wealth at the heart of the *vol décent*. It was a notion that the Balzac reader of the novels knew to be a questionable but serious practice that carried profound moral consequences; a phenomenon which had infiltrated commerce and society to create a culture of creative opportunism and social cynicism. However, this new *Mercadet* played relentlessly as a comedic work rather than a dubious socio-economic practice. It relied on a change in perspective that posed questions as to how a successful comedic identity dominated and its impact on understanding of the *vol décent*.

In her recent work, *Theatre in Balzac's La Comédie humaine*, Linzy Erika Dickinson devotes a chapter to *César Birotteau* and 'how certain aspects of [...Balzac's] own attempts at writing for the stage can be discerned in the novel, and how the novel, in turn, seems to have engendered the theme for the play of *Mercadet ou Le Faiseur*'.²²² The transition from novel to drama also involves a movement from the tragedy of *César Birotteau* to the comic domination of *Mercadet*, a transition, it will be argued, which fails to fully eclipse the moral consequences of the *vol décent*. Gautier, writing in *La Presse* recognises its capacity to retain and excite moral dilemma. He says of *Mercadet*: 'il va comme tout le monde jusqu'à la limite du code civil, pensant que ce qui n'est pas défendu est permis'.²²³ As a form of theft that attracted social approbation but failed to attract legal retribution, the *vol décent* provided a foundation upon which the audience could openly and unashamedly embrace the idea of chicanery. The French theatre world of the mid nineteenth century, having become dominated by commercialism, was operating in an increasingly capitalist culture and therefore, unlike the state funded theatre companies, was subject to the satisfaction of commercial imperatives for survival. Audiences at the *Gymnase*, in the prestigious *Faubourg Saint Germain*, came increasingly from the aspiring bourgeoisie of post-Revolution and post-Empire, with an early representation from the working classes, **post** hopes raised in 1848.

²²² Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac's La Comédie humaine*, p. 289.

²²³ Théophile Gautier, *La Presse*, 1 septembre 1851, p. 1, col 5.

In a comedy that is relentless in its pace, the process of the *vol décent*, is stripped bare of its avowed propriety and pretence. A blatant, indulgent culture of its own is unveiled, out of step with any pretence of propriety or probity. Balzac shows the *vol décent* and its power of wealth creation having its own methodology and cultural identity, a combination which infiltrates society and forms distinct social norms. The priorities of the new culture, money and illusion, are played out as a low comic dramatic phenomenon and with ironic distancing from event, sentiments that reflect Balzac's own position. The servants show the mood of the time in play: 'Je compose mon air comme si j'avais perdu ce que j'ai de plus cher au monde' says Virginie, to which Justin replies *à part* 'Son argent' (1,1). The centrality of appearance, as sign, if not the substance of wealth in the *vol décent*, is confirmed by Virginie in her amusing, yet cynical description of the suitor's carriage, 'leur cabriolet reluisait comme du satin...leur cheval avait des roses là (elle montre son oreille), il était tenu par un enfant de huit ans, blond, frisé, des bottes à revers'. (Ibid.).

Conventionally, the exposition is given by the servants in the first scene. The involvement of the servants signals their participation in the performance, as both characters and commentators, reflecting the social fluidity of the period. More significantly they become investors, moving in conformity with the times from cash savings to investment. The anonymity of investment allows the investor freedom from social inhibition and in the wider field of speculative investment, money, sufficient appearance of it, or a persuasive 'performed identity' are the only prerequisites to membership of the market. The new, current values are established in a series of reversals of practice and priority. The opening exchanges immediately reference the status reversal of the creditor and the servant: 'Il y a des créanciers qui sont d'un grossier!...ils vous parlent ...comme si nous étions les maîtres!..' (Ibid.). There is also a moral reversal, where the expedient practices of immorality become a cause of admiration. Justin's listing of Mercadet's talents describes a new order of hero:

Je le crois capable de tout, même de devenir riche. [...] il rebondissait ...il triomphait!
Et quelles inventions! C'était du nouveau tous les jours!.. du bois en pave!..des pavés
files en soie! [...]Et toujours des créanciers! Et il les promène et il les retourne!
Quelquefois je les ai vus arrivant...Ils vont tout emporter! Le faire mettre en
prison!...Il leur parle, et ils finissent par vivre ensemble. Ils sortent les meilleurs amis
du monde, en lui donnant des poignées de main!...Il y en a qui domptent les lions et
les chacals, lui dompte les créanciers...Ces sa partie! (Ibid.)

The contrast with the much publicised Napoleonic virtues, honour, undeviating purpose, courage, heroism and order, is clear. Balzac gives the audience a hero for

their own times, one who responds to the demands of fluctuating markets, intangible products, speculative profit operating under a series of socio-economic transitions. The *vol décent* in these markets requires versatility, creativity, invention, illusion and a humorous disposition. The new order looks to circumvent convention and legality, seeks enterprise over conformity, chicanery over propriety, disinterestedness above probity. The *vol décent* of the *La Comédie humaine* displays those priorities but always under the cover of probity; in the comedic *Mercadet* they are in plain sight. The caring, enduring values exercised by Mme Mercadet toward her servants are determined by her husband to be ineffective, ‘Voilà comment vous parlez à vos domestiques?... ils vous manqueront de respect demain’. (1,1) The advice is one of expediency rather than manners, for illusion to succeed it requires a measure of efficacy.

To transform the *vol décent* from accepted legal practice to a topic for farce, requires a change in perspective. The transformation takes place when the ‘performance’ of the *vol décent* takes on a different meaning because it is viewed through a different lens, one that reverses established positions and responses. The action that earned legitimacy and sanction as the *vol décent* becomes a performance of the absurd. Balzac turns the *vol décent* on its head with a social and financial revision:

Vous connaissez bien votre époque!....Aujourd’hui, madame, il y a plus que des intérêts, parce qu’il n’y a plus de famille, mais des individus! Voyez, l’avenir de chacun est dans une caisse publique! ...Une fille, pour sa dot, ne s’adresse plus à une famille, mais à une tontine...La succession du roi d’Angleterre était chez une assurance. La femme compte, non sur son mari, mais sur la caisse d’épargne!...(1,5)

He undermines and re-structures the relationship between family and society. Mercadet changes the emphasis from family as unit to family as individuals, marriage as two individuals pursuing personal financial interests rather than joint interests. Balzac highlights social and financial upheavals that demand a re-assessment of values and conduct. The domestic changes, immediately matched by the new financial realities of credit and the consequent adjustment of moral values:

D’ailleurs qu’y a-t-il de déshonorant à devoir?...Quel est l’homme qui ne meurt pas insolvable envers son père? Il lui doit la vie et ne peut la lui rendre...La terre fait constamment faillite au soleil. La vie, madame, est un emprunt perpétuel!...et n’emprunte pas qui veut!...Ne suis-je pas supérieur à mes créanciers?... J’ai leur argent, ils attendent le mien?...Je ne leur demande rien, et ils m’importunent...Un homme qui ne doit rien!.. mais personne ne songe à lui! tandis que mes créanciers s’intéressent à moi! (1,5)

The declamatory excess of Mercadet's speech marks the comedic representation of the *vol décent*, leaving moral and financial possibility unrestrained. The possibilities are exaggerated and, in the absence of fiscal control, offer a complete reversal of the ethics that traditionally purported to restrain borrowing and contribute sound commercial and social practice. The *vol décent*, no longer played as a serious practice but was still improbably confined within the market. Similarly, the rhetoric is both intemperate and exciting, a reflection of the times and a breaking of established classical theatrical forms with contemporary practices and values.

Jules Janin, noting the change in textual form, refers, in his review of *Mercadet* in the *Le Journal des Débats* on 25 August 1851, to the contrast with Molière and *Don Juan*. In the scene with Dimanche Janin highlights the display of aristocratic *mœurs* protected and isolated from social and economic circumstance. He finds in the 'élégant et spiritual gentilhomme' a power, not ultimately of position, but of taste; manners so exquisite and refined that 'le mot *dette* et le mot *argent*, deux paroles qui blessent ses oreilles délicates, ne sont pas prononcées' but still leave the bourgeois creditor Dimanche 'charmé de ce grand seigneur qui le met à la porte d'un si beau geste'.²²⁴ This is a capital of manners that Janin feels is indifferent to circumstances, a power of form and words that conforms to aesthetic values capable of transcending financial need. In *Mercadet*, Balzac destroys that connection, prioritising audience reaction, circumstance and financial necessity above authorial taste. In return, he earns the disdain of the celebrated critics who review *Mercadet* at the *Théâtre du Gymnase*; their classical leanings accusing him of immorality and appalling taste.

However, a close reading of Gautier's review of *Mercadet* reveals that, exceptionally, he seeks to extend recognition of the scope of Balzac's talent. He sees that the representation of a comedic *vol décent* has its foundations in the circumstances and culture of the period. Gautier confronts the contemporaneous accusations of immorality through a contextualisation of the play that shows morality to change with the needs and influences of socio-economic circumstances. Also citing the connection between *Mercadet* and Molière's *Don Juan*, he notes the change in social manners which accompany an historic shift in circumstances. In

²²⁴ Janin, *Journal des Débats*, 25 août 1851, p. 171.

doing so, he implicitly places Balzac into a distinguished line of dramatists from the seventeenth century

Il y a dans le *Don Juan* de Molière une certaine scène de M. Dimanche qui montre combien l'ancien créancier était débonnaire et patriarcal à côté de celui de nos jours. Tout s'est perfectionné, surtout la dette et quand on songe que Don Juan pouvait faire bâtonner M. Dimanche [...] on est pénétré pour Mercadet d'une profonde admiration. Mercadet, c'est Don Juan et M. Dimanche, avec le progrès du temps.²²⁵

Gautier contrasts the 'débonnaire et patriarcal' character of the *ancien régime* exchange, historically played out against a social backdrop that was largely privileged, protected and dealing in tangible products, with the intangible debtor/creditor contract of the Restoration. The contrast draws on the underlying socio-economic shift of social fluidity that comes to characterise the period. The debtor/creditor opposition now operates in a market that is without fixed structure but offers speculative financial opportunity, partially evidenced at *La Bourse* through trades that involve fictitious financial products. It is in this new world order 'inconnue autrefois et produite par notre civilisation compliquée'²²⁶ that 'le faiseur' must operate and that Gautier uses to explain, reflect and determine social practice and ethics. This is a sociological interpretation that places Balzac as accurate observer and recorder of the new morality rather than its apologist. Gautier deepens understanding of the effect of the new commercial and social pressures by highlighting the position of the 'faiseur' within the context of the early stock exchange where commercial transactions are created, traded and financed. Significantly he pictures the driving spirit of those financial aspirations infiltrating wider society:

C'est un faiseur, c'est-à-dire un homme qui veut se créer une fortune rapide dans le mouvement souvent fictif des capitaux [...] et qui comprend les opérations à la Bourse, le jeu sur les actions de chemins de fer, les sociétés en commandite, les achats de créances, l'exploitation des idées bonnes ou mauvaises, la mise en train d'entreprises, les directions de théâtres, les fondations de journaux.²²⁷

The critic recognises here that the long-term stability of the *ancien régime* has been replaced by the speed, creativity and volatility of the search for 'une fortune rapide'. That search embraces 'l'exploitation des idées bonnes et mauvaises' that become the random currencies in a game of chance which no longer plays to the rules of a settled order. The spirit of the game is not however restricted to *La Bourse* but permeates outward into other commercial, artistic and social centres. Gautier is seen

²²⁵ Gautier, *La Presse*, 'Théâtres' 1 septembre 1851, p 1, col. 4.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 1, col. 4-5.

²²⁷ Gautier, *La Presse*, 'Théâtres' 1 septembre 1851, p 1, col. 5.

to use its influence in ‘les directions de théâtres, les fondations de journaux’ to emphasise the the growing commercialisation of creativity, which needs to financially exploit a new order of popular taste. Satisfying that taste, he implies, necessitates an approach to drama that can change theatre from an elite art form to one that moves toward the requirements of a mass media industry.

Illusion itself enjoyed great popularity, particularly black humour on the eve of 1848, within a social system that thrived on illusion. *Mercadet* therefore works as both a committed comedy, which reveals the potential of an underlying absurdity in the notion of the *vol décent*, a diversion which emphasises Balzac’s ironic isolation from the period he represents, and as reflection of an historic moment. The play confirms the extent to which speculative and manipulative practice has become embedded in the manners and consciousness of current society. Its contemporary appeal suggests that it resonates with its knowing audience.

Balzac’s revisionary perspective on the *vol décent*, which delivers an *illusion comique*, involves the potential of the *vol décent* as comedic paradigm to be realised. The task demands a re-structuring of narrative, character, textual style and stagecraft. In the world of *La Comédie humaine* the great practitioners of the *vol décent*, du Tillet, Nucingen, Moreau, Mme d’Espard, amongst them, are exceptional and in a minority. They are identifiable by their detachment from the emotional consequence of social and economic disaster. The indifference precludes social attachment and the perpetrators, whilst they can attract admiration, fail to attract reader sympathy or humorous response. In the *Mercadet* comedy Balzac retains much of the character of the exceptional being in Mercadet himself but does not grant him immunity from audience affection or humour, in fact he promotes the relationship. Mercadet is under threat of financial disaster throughout the piece, with the creditors converted to the ‘villains’. With the exception of his family and Minard, all the characters are his combatants, creating an imbalance of forces ranged against him and positioning Mercadet as potential hero. He plays the role throughout with great humour, no matter how desperate his situation and the audience admire his fortitude, invention and unconquerable spirit.

Balzac creates the multiple roles of Goulard, Pierquin, Violette, Verdelin and the Comte de la Brive as creditors, making all but de la Brive apparent victims of a Mercadet *vol décent*. However, all the creditors use the deceptions of the *vol décent* themselves in attempts to rectify their positions. In behavioural terms the creditor

becomes indistinguishable from the debtor. They are not innocent or hapless victims, each displays a relentless cunning and guile whilst none are singular, exceptional or attract sympathy. However, they all become targets for ridicule. In fact all display the same repetitive methodology, request for payment with threat of consequences followed by the hope that Mercadet has another speculative venture which may restore their loans. This provides the fodder for farce, allowing the audience to anticipate and then observe the same ritual realised. Mercadet, in anticipation of Pierquin's threat asks, 'vous pensiez à me faire arrêter?' (1,8) Pierquin senses a speculative opportunity, joining it with the threat 'écoutez donc, vous avez deux ans ...mais ce mariage est une superbe invention' (1,8). The routine is only only to slight alterations, which enhance the ritual. Violette, transforms his threat into a plea for the prevention of his children's impending deaths from starvation, 'je viens vous supplier de me donner le plus petit à compte, sur les intérêts, vous sauverez la vie à toute une famille' (1,11). Learning of the Barricade Blocks Scheme he sees hope, 'oui, c'est beau! c'est grand' (1,11) and, despite his purported poverty, raises four thousand francs to fund the speculation!

As Godeau has not returned with Mercadet's funds and the possibility of such an event being highly improbable, Mercadet totters at the edge of bankruptcy. Nevertheless, he remains afloat by his ingenuity, his immunity from the creditor's coercion, his indomitable spirit and the fact that the debtors' collective inadequacy means they remain totally dependent upon him to resolve their own financial dilemmas. The situation appears both irresolvable and ludicrous, a situation in which the *vol décent's* interrelationship of illusion and wealth still carries on relentlessly, but to no avail. The connection between illusion and wealth is virtually broken, the wheels of speculation still turning but going nowhere.

In contrast to this world of illusion in pursuit of wealth Balzac sustains an equally improbable narrative of young love with a proposed liaison between Minard, Mercadet's penniless clerk, and his daughter Julie. Love is played as the illusion, its purity and its pursuit of the ideal in direct opposition to the deceptions and inventions of the *vol décent*. The love between Julie and Minard is presented as being enough in itself, its purity and innocence overcoming all. The proposed marriage delivers a confrontation between illusion and reality.

Mon père, nous logerons dans un petit appartementau besoin je serai sa servant.....Oh! je m'occuperai des soins du ménage avec un plaisir infini, en songeant qu'en toute chose il s'agira de lui.....je lui épargnerai bien ses ennuis, il ne s'apercevra

jamais de notre gêne . [...] D'ailleurs l'amour nous aidera à passer les jours difficiles. Adolphe a de l'ambition comme tous les gens qui ont une âme élevée, il est de ceux qui arrivent. (1,7)

Mercadet counters:

Aujourd'hui qui est-ce qui ne se voit pas plus ou moins ministre? ..en sortant du collège, on se croit un grand poète, un grand orateur!..Sais-tu ce qu'il serait, ton Adolphe? Père de plusieurs enfants qui dérangeront tes plans de travail et d'économie, qui logeront son excellence rue de Clichy et qui te plongeront dans une affreuse misère...tu m'as fait le roman et non l'histoire de la vie. (1,7)

Mercadet separates hard reality from romantic idealism. It is the reality that Balzac stresses in *La Comédie humaine* where the distinguishing factor between aspiration and realisation is the confrontation with what is, rather than what ought to be or is imagined to be. In this instance Julie's romanticism believes that love can work in a vacuum, where best intention prevails over social and economic reality. In fact, in response to romantic and comedic demand Balzac allows Julie and Minard a happy ending, the same civility he extends to the creditors and to M. et Mme Mercadet, stressing that it is a fictitious representation of a society not a reflection of reality. It underlines a widening of the ironic distance that Balzac maintains from the society that he represents.

4.4 The Influences of Historical Moment

4.4.1 Introduction

In *Balzac Criticism in France 1850-1900* Bellos seeks an explanation for the success of *Mercadet* in 1851 from specific events related to the performance, namely the anniversary of Balzac's death, 'an atonement for Balzac's drab and unsuccessful funeral'²²⁸ and d'Ennery's contribution. However, an additional explanation is found in the 'total atmosphere which envelops all milieux',²²⁹ the overarching socio-economic, political and historic influences that filtered into the world of finance and theatre, particularly those at the mid-century. Theatricality on stage and more generally in society reflect a period's trends and the Restoration and July Monarchy witnessed a series of inchoate positions that placed appearance and illusion in a fresh perspective. In the absence of fixed positions, stable government and reliable social structures, appearance took on a deeper significance, becoming too readily synonymous with reality. Theatricality, as an aid to the promotion of illusion, aids the transition between appearance and reality through a suspension of disbelief; a deferral that farce seeks to sustain through repetition and exaggeration, creating a normalcy for the improbable.

Press and theatre are heavily intertwined in the world of corruption, chicanery and villainy that characterised the period. Dickinson refers to Balzac's treatment of the press in *Un grand homme* and finds 'no counter-evidence offered by historians of the theatre to suggest that they are untrue [...] and that the picture of the theatre press [...] as corrupt and mercenary has its basis in reality and that little was to change during Balzac's lifetime'.²³⁰ In extending the status, as accurate observer and recorder of the press, that Dickinson awards to Balzac and to his observations on the world of theatre, the following note from Balzac to Mme Hanska dated 16 July 1844 is significant. He refers in the letter to a projected work entitled *Le Théâtre comme il est*, (of which a sketch remains in *Ébauches rattachées à la Comédie humaine* (ER, XII, 588) and his remarks provide a vivid personal account of that world:

Théâtre comme il est, travail [...] destiné à faire connaître le derrière des coulisses, le drame affreux, hideux, comique, terrible, qui précède le lever du rideau. Là, les personnages abondent, personnages inconnues [...] et les plus originaux, les plus

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. 417.

²³⁰ Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac's La Comédie humaine*, p. 81.

curieux, les plus saisissants qui existent et vierges, pour la littérature s'entend, car il n'y a rien de vierge au théâtre (LMH, I, 882).

When the theatrical interests of the entrepreneur, producer, director and players share practices 'les plus saisissants' with a corrupt and mercenary press, the exchange reflects the nascent dynamics of the period. The same dynamics drive events in *Mercadet*. Corruption, avarice and the 'hideux, comique, terrible' all sit within the twin worlds of theatre and press.

The theatre world of the day, including the theatre press, was itself complicit in the commercial and social 'growing preoccupation with falseness in nineteenth-century France'.²³¹ Carpenter's work on the *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France* reveals that deception in the theatre world of the period was not limited to 'publishing masquerades but was also [...] reaching into the fields of journalism, caricature, and even political history'.²³² Masquerade, a common theatrical currency that seeks through disguise to assume a false appearance, finds another stage, similarly theatrical, within a financial market that deals in hypothetical share values and the speculative outcomes of high risk business ventures, a trade in intangible and unknown future values. *Mercadet*, as entrepreneur operating in this sector, is shown practising the commercial arts of deception as an inevitable *modus operandi*: a workable ordering of an undefined market. The ordering incurs a moral cost in its use of deceit, but it is a cost that Balzac, in the context of financial chicanery, shows to be easily offset against the drive for wealth and social mobility. Nevertheless, that sense of inevitability, while it clouds the notion of immorality, does not extinguish the wider moral corrosion that results from established and sanctioned deceit. The world of *Mercadet* is also that of many of the aspirant bourgeoisie of the period, that 'new, mobile society',²³³ a group represented amongst the audience at the *Gymnase* in August 1851.

Balzac presents the phenomenon of the *vol décent* against a backcloth of arrivisme, the unearned establishment of reputation, ambition or wealth. It takes on a disproportionate presence after the fall of the Napoleonic order and the demographic movements between the provinces and Paris. The transitory, testing

²³¹ Scott Carpenter, *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 4.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Linzy Erika Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac's La Comédie humaine*, (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000) pp. 46-47.

nature of the period encouraged the assumption, rather than the achievement, of status. As Balzac repeatedly shows in *La Comédie humaine*, the assertion of established positions was often more illusionary than realised, the adoption of the image of financial or social position more certain than its achievement. The illusion of acquired wealth and position lies at the heart of *Mercadet*, most obviously in the person of Le Comte de la Brive, a deception in perfect harmony with the *vol décent*, as exercised in the financial markets surrounding *La Bourse*. The difficulty of making the actual transfer from image to reality was reflected in the underlying process of ‘financialisation’, the problematic conversion of speculative profit into a hard realisable capital.

There is a dramatic union between the text of *Mercadet* and the socio-economic circumstances in 1851. Hélène Gomart has identified that ‘Balzac voit dans le régime de Juillet la confirmation des mouvements et des enjeux de l’argent, dont la Restauration avait donné les premiers signes’.²³⁴ The financial atmosphere in France that fed into those movements was dominated by a belated coming to terms with an exponential growth of European capitalism. Central to the functioning of capitalism is the acquiring and realising of capital itself and while the acquiring of capital is difficult enough, the ‘financialisation’ of capital, the conversion of an ethereal commodity into ‘real’ money, is even more difficult. Place this transition in the context of ‘an economy in which the speculative begetting of money from money supercedes the industrial production and consumption of goods’,²³⁵ and a milieu that delivers creative financial solutions evolves. A solution arrives, in what Anna Kornbluh describes as a ‘fictitious capital [...that] capaciously captured the ungroundedness of capital. [...] Where the industrial economy traded goods, the financial economy exchanged representations of value’.²³⁶ This was the world of *Mercadet*, set at the end of the July Monarchy.

²³⁴ Hélène Gomart, *Les opérations financières dans le roman réaliste* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004), p. 25.

²³⁵ Anna Kornbluh, *Realising Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 1.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

4.4.2 'Financialization'

The 1848 revolution arose from a complex mix of forces that Jardin and Tudesq describe as 'cette conjunction des mouvements en profondeur et des événements en surface que jaillit l'étincelle révolutionnaire de février 1848'.²³⁷ The surface events included the bad harvests of 1846 that resulted in the importation of grain and a consequential movement of gold abroad. The French infatuation with railways fuelled an increase in the number of share issues, spread payments and created a scramble for funds that drained cash supplies. The urgency was further aggravated when railway shares began to fall, causing panic and a general loss of confidence in speculative commerce. By 1847, the banks in France had started to fail, joining those in England and Belgium, which had both been heavy subscribers in French railway shares. However, investment and speculation continued to grow. The nature of that growth, which Balzac draws upon for narrative content, was matched by a comparative growth in market chicanery. The combination was to be fully reflected in *La Comédie humaine*. Investment and speculation were funded by capital often held in the Caisses d'Épargne. By 1844, 'the total of deposits reached 393 million contributed by 150,000 savers'.²³⁸ The funds were invested in the railway companies, mining and raw materials, with increasing speculation in these areas. The competition between the rival companies trying to attract capital for investment becomes increasingly frantic and increasingly dishonest. The founders of companies, who only had to place a down payment on shares before selling, accelerated speculation and invention, often co-ordinating their efforts whilst posing as competitors. The distinction between investors and political policy makers became increasingly blurred, leading to national scandals. A norm of illusion and dishonesty grew around investment and speculation in a new capitalist economy, 'in which industrial, commercial and financial sectors weighed as much as agriculture, the traditional source of influence'.²³⁹

It was the commercial atmosphere of illusion and dishonesty that infiltrated the Parisian social scene. Many of the audience at the *Théâtre Gymnase* on 23 August 1851, the first night of *Mercadet*, would have been fighting for commercial

²³⁷ A. Jardin & A-J. Tudesq, *La France des Notables* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 233.

²³⁸ Palmade, *French Capitalism in the Nineteenth Century*, (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1961) p. 111.

²³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 115.

survival. For both Mercadet and the audience, a time of financial reckoning was at hand. Ironically, the economic crisis was to be relatively short lived, with the period 1851-1882 experiencing a phase of capitalist prosperity; a period of financial success that twice saw a return of *Mercadet* to the stage.

Le Faiseur, and its re-working as *Mercadet*, remained dramatically reflective of the period from the end of the 1830s to 1851 in which it was originally conceived, written and re-written. The actual production at the *Théâtre du Gymnase* accurately mirrors the economic collapse of 1851 and the contemporaneous mood: an atmosphere recognised by Philippe Berthier:

L'action est supposée de se dérouler en 1839 [...] Aucun reçu: il s'agit d'une tranche bien crue de vie contemporaine, découpée dans la réalité économique, sociale et humaine de la monarchie de Juillet à son apogée.²⁴⁰

The demand for credit to invest in unrealised opportunity that characterised the age, is directly reflected in Goulard, Pierquin and Violette as Mercadet's creditors and Mercadet himself as a hopelessly over-indebted speculator. Mercadet, again characteristic of the age, seeks to borrow even more money to invest in speculative mining and railways, to gamble on or create movements in stock market values, in order to short sell for gain.

The text of *Mercadet* shows the historical movement of capitalism filtered into the specific milieu of investment trading. The movement is a display of dubious financial practices and the recognition of a widening social embrace of deceit. A mix of observation and scepticism allows Virginie to question the reliability of appearance and rumour: an ongoing dilemma both for those at the Bourse and for a society in a state of social flux. De la Brive's carriage is matched by Mercadet's lavish eleven room apartment, meals, both exquisite and costly, that have 'un beau potage, un beau poisson puis quatre entrée; mais finement faites...' (1,4) and even borrowed silverware. All are visual statements of wealth but in fact disguise the reality of a parlous financial situation.

The details of financial practice, anecdotes that easily attract moral condemnation, also introduce the reality that money can accumulate or decline without reference to ethics. The bankrupt is not necessarily a dishonest man, but when the value of realisable assets is below that of liabilities, penury beckons. Such a situation is only resolvable by a correction of the financial imbalance and that

²⁴⁰ Philippe Berthier, *Le Faiseur: Presentation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), p. 10.

requires money or an increase in assets immediately capable of conversion into cash. As Mercadet states, 'je n'ai pas besoin de conseils, ni de morale, mais d'argent' (1,12). This is a dilemma in which financial necessity is in direct opposition to probity: a dramatic antagonism that Balzac repeatedly confronts and d'Ennery exploits. The nature of business necessity is introduced in Mercadet's response to Virginie's advice that their suppliers will no longer supply:

Qu'est-ce que c'est que des fournisseurs qui ne fournissent pas?...on en prend d'autres... Vous irez chez leurs concurrents, vous leur donnerez ma pratique, et ils vous donneront des étrennes (1,4).

No alternative exists for Mercadet if he is to continue trading. If he does not then the chances of full repayment to his creditors and his own freedom from debt, cease. The reality of that situation is endorsed in Mercadet's reference to Goulard's position as creditor, 'je lui dois trop pour qu'il ne m'aide pas encore dans les grands jours comme celui-ci par exemple' (1,6) whilst offering him a further speculative enterprise. The business reality reveals a common interest between debtor and creditor when 'le spéculateur et l'actionnaire se vâlent tous les deux, ils veulent être riches en un instant' (1,5). It is the blatant disclosure of the detailed chicanery on behalf of both Mercadet and the creditors; a transparent dishonesty that stuns with its absence of any social or moral reserve. 'Ces paperasses en échange de quelque actions' (1,10) says Mercadet with a flippant disinterest in the nature of the transactions themselves. The 'insider dealing' on the shares in the Basse-Indre mines and the intended false appearance of Godeau see the same moral indifference operating at a higher level of deception, without any blurring of intent or necessity.

The issue of money is not a new dramatic interest in French theatre. Lesage's *Turcaret* in 1709 and Beaumarchais' *Les Deux Amis ou le Négociant de Lyon* are both concerned with financial chicanery and the latter with bankruptcy. However, as Dickinson has shown, 'No dramatist prior to the nineteenth century shows the processes of financial speculation [...] or the mechanisms of [...] transactions with creditors and investors'.²⁴¹ The exposure of financial transactions in *Mercadet* is an uninhibited, unashamed confrontation with established social and dramatic standards. It is made acceptable through its comedic presentation but the melodramatic and even the sometime farcical comedy does not disguise the hard core of reality that lies beneath, a reality familiar to its audience. Its lack of reserve

²⁴¹ Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac's Comédie humaine*, p. 291.

offers those in the auditorium, experiencing the same financial pressures, a legitimacy and public acknowledgement of their plight. In the person of the ‘Napoléon des Affaires’ it offers them their own hero and the possibility of escape.²⁴²

The period’s focus on money and investment is spread beyond the level of the bourgeois trader, extending direct interest into the higher social levels, the established theatregoers at the *Théâtre du Gymnase*. The aristocracy, appropriately represented by someone of dubious heritage in the person of De la Brive, is trying to find a toehold in speculation, at one end of the social spectrum, and Virginie, the cook, at the other. De la Brive talks of the aristocrat’s problem in the new world order:

Un homme comme moi, capable d’inspirer des passions et de les justifier, ne peut être ni commis ni soldat! La société n’a pas créé d’emploi pour nous. Eh bien! Je ferai des affaires avec Mercadet (2,4).

The business he hopes to achieve concerns marrying Mercadet’s daughter, in the false belief that Mercadet ‘c’est un des plus faiseurs. Tu es bien sûr qu’il ne peut pas donner moins que cent cinquante mille francs à sa fille?’ (2,4) However, on the unveiling of his own deceptions he looks to ‘la circulation de l’argent’ (3,2). The individual, rather than the class, is now the determining factor in a capitalist society that generates social mobility. Virginie, a servant in possession of a small fortune (that Mercadet assumes she has stolen from them) displays an awareness of comparative interest rates. When offered a return by Mercadet of ‘dix francs pour cent francs tous les six mois!... c’est un peu mieux que la casse d’épargne’ (1,4) she replies, without committing herself, ‘je crois bien, elle donne à peine cent sous par an’ (1,4).

Those who desire instant wealth are highly susceptible to false information, and Mercadet, in his manipulation of share prices in the Basse-Indre enterprise, illustrates the point:

Il est dans l’intérêt de mon ami Verdeline d’organiser une panique sur les actions de la Basse-Indre; entreprise longtemps douteuse, et devenue excellent tout à coup, par les gisements de minerai qu’on vient de découvrir... Ah! Si je pouvais acheter pour cent mille écus... ma fortune serait...(1,7)

²⁴² Please see Section 4.2.4.

He stimulates a market that trades on short-term rewards, where speculation promises an immediate satisfaction of avarice. The rumour of newly found mineral deposits delivers the swift possibility of such a satisfaction.

4.4.3 Political Atmospheres

The nostalgic, political retrospectives of the period that viewed the individualism and glory of Napoleon in an heroic light, are captured ironically in Mercadet's award to himself of the title 'le Napoléon des affaires [...] et sans Waterloo' (2,9). Nostalgia in the theatrical context acts to reflect a glow of false remembrance, a comedic easing for the audience of current realities. It creates a therapeutic distancing from the actuality, a re-setting of social and moral perspectives temporarily legitimised by comedic form. However, Mercadet's earlier admonishment of his wife, regarding her conciliatory manner toward the servants, does also reference a Napoleonic call to order, a determined pathway, the necessity of which Minard is later informed by Mercadet: 'c'est surtout dans le désordre qu'il faut avoir de l'ordre' (2,2). The necessity of order and audacity in a chaotic milieu is not denied: 'Il fallait commander....comme Napoléon, brièvement [...] on paye d'audace' (1,5). Verdelin, anticipating at last, a return on his investment, offers Mercadet the same fashionable epithet he has earlier awarded himself: 'c'est bien joué! Merci! A propos, salut au roi de la bourse, salut au Napoléon des affaires!' (3,9) The contemporaneous political mood is also reflected in the references to England, whose commerce is already steeped in financial speculation and French railway and mining interests. England was years ahead of France in its exploitation of capitalist opportunity and indulgence in the manners of wealth. Balzac shows English influence reflected in the French adoption of English affectations and false certainties. 'Permettez que je vous serre la main à l'anglaise' (2,6) says Mercadet to De la Brive, while De la Brive advises Méricourt that 'L'Angleterre, monsieur, nous jouera toujours' (2,5) and Mercadet recollects 'comme disent les Anglais, du bon côté de la loi' (3,4).

The investment preferences favoured by Mercadet and the other speculators directly reflect those of the period. D'Ennery's re-structured opening to the play immediately confronts the audience with the presence of familiar investment territory: 'Monsieur Mercadet est parti pour Lyon. Ah! ...il est allé? Oui, pour une affaire superbe, il a découvert des mines de charbon de terre' (1,1). The selected

references provide the audience with constant reminders that the comedy concerns financial chicanery of a contemporaneous nature. Goulard refers to his shares in ‘des mines de la Basse-Indre’ (1,6). Mercadet compares Pierquin’s exorbitant interest rates with the return on a gold mine: ‘Je vous rapporte autant qu’une ferme en Beauce’ (1,10), and the shortage of gold that has gone to import goods, informs Violette’s reaction to the presence of gold coin. ‘Soixante francs en or! Il y a bien longtemps que je n’en ai vu!’ (1,11). The wider economic context, in which traditional tangible goods such as gold coin, land and wine, those traded by the likes of Grandet in *Eugénie Grandet* are dramatically replaced by borrowed capital and speculative gain, is directly referenced within a current political context by Mercadet in response to De la Brive’s assertion of land ownership:

Aujourd’hui, peut-être, vaut-il mieux avoir des capitaux. Les capitaux sont sous la main. S’il éclate une révolution, et nous en avons bien vu des révolutions, les capitaux nous suivent partout. La terre, au contraire, la terre paye pour tout le monde. Elle reste là, comme une sottise, à supporter les impôts, tandis que le capital s’esquive! (2,5)

The normalisation of credit is extended by Mercadet into the political arena, reflecting the interests held by government ministers and government borrowing, when he advises Virginie that ‘aujourd’hui le crédit est toute la richesse des gouvernements’ (1,4). The political immersion in financial sharp practice provides the audience with a powerful justification of their own practices.

4.4.4 Morality and the Market

Balzac recognises that ‘l’argent; il n’a pas de cœur, l’argent’ (CB, VI, 244). At the same time, he recognises the role of decency in its achievement. However, there is no conflict here. He accepts an apparent irreconcilability in the ‘honneur moderne’ (1,5) represented on stage visually with a coin. The conjoining of money with the ethical notion of decency is a behavioural phenomenon recognised by the audience. The reality is that notions of decency disguise the true nature of financial transactions. They create the illusion of decency as a dynamic force in the procurement of wealth. This is not to suggest that money cannot be earned in a socially acceptable manner but it does mean that speculative monetary gain is unaffected by the manner of its achievement.

Despite Mercadet’s victory in the market place, the comedy remains grounded in social and moral perspectives. If the work did not remain firmly underpinned by the many moral and social issues that this new, speculative market provokes, it

would be a mechanical, deterministic piece. The reaction of the audience, as well as the textual content of d'Ennery's version, would suggest that it is not.

The impact of speculative finance on behaviour patterns is introduced in the opening scene. Virginie, the cook, reveals a level of purposeful, and theatrical, deception: 'Tantôt il faut prendre un air étonné, comme si on tombait de la lune, quand un créancier se présente [...] Tantôt je compose mon air si j'avais perdu ce que j'ai de plus cher au monde' (1,1). The cook is not just involved in the deception of creditors as an employee but is also involved in speculative enterprise and its practices. Mercadet questions the acquisition and source of her funds 'cette fille a mille écus à la caisse d'épargne qu'elle nous a volé' (1,5) but he does not question her right of access, as servant, to the market. This is a new, but already established, social freedom.

In the opening act Mercadet also offers the audience a detailed picture of the new social order, its financial and moral priorities:

Aujourd'hui, madame, il y a plus d'intérêts parce qu'il n'y a plus de famille, mais des individus! Voyez, l'avenir de chacun est dans une caisse publique! Une fille, pour sa dot, ne s'adresse plus à une famille, mais à une tontine [...]. La femme compte, non sur son mari, mais sur la caisse d'épargne! [...] Les domestiques dont on change, comme de chartes, ne s'attachent plus à leurs maîtres! (1,5)

Family and social duties are shown subject to money, in a transition from the *ancien régime*, with its established, immobile structures and concentration of wealth, to the new world order with its dispersal of wealth and social mobility. The moral dilemmas that arise are humorously resolved, in a reversal of the established relationships between debtor and creditor:

La terre fait constamment faillite au soleil. La vie, madame, est un emprunt perpétuel et n'emprunte pas qui veut! Ne suis-je pas supérieur à mes créanciers? J'ai leur argent, ils attendent le mien? Je ne leur demande rien, et ils m'importunent. Un homme qui ne doit rien! mais personne ne songe à lui! tandis que mes créanciers s'intéressent à moi! (1,5)

Self-worth is calculated by the capacity to borrow; social identity is determined by wealth in a process of dehumanisation that increasingly has no need of virtue. The distinction between morality, empathy and money is clearly made by Mercadet: 'je n'ai pas besoin de conseils ni de morale, mais d'argent' (1,12). However, neither Balzac nor d'Ennery allows the money process to totally eclipse human values. Whilst domination by money feeds the comedic mood, Mercadet's humanity shows intermittently and eventually comes to dominate the denouement.

Linzy Erika Dickinson acknowledges this moral dimension, seeing it transferred from the novel *César Birotteau* to the stage with *Mercadet*: ‘Balzac’s intentions in the novel [...] were moralistic whereas in the play they are more satirical, in conformity with the demands of stage comedy, although here too a moral standpoint is evident’.²⁴³ In the scene where Père Violette falsely pleads poverty, Mercadet shows a latent decency, giving the old man his last ‘soixante francs en or’ (1,11). A similar unnecessary generosity, (in the context of financial chicanery), is offered to Minard in Mercadet’s refusal of financial assistance. However, both incidents are worthy of some qualification as Minard’s offer would not have saved Mercadet from bankruptcy and in Violette’s case Mercadet believes he has already set him up to finance another venture: ‘j’ai assez semé, il me faut ma récolte’ (1,11). These gestures, whatever their moral weight, lose much of their significance when compared to Mercadet’s unqualified devotion to his family. In the company of his friend Verdelin, Mercadet reveals his true purpose:

Voyons, Verdelin, j’aime ma femme et ma fille, ces sentiments-là, mon ami, sont ma seule consolation au milieu de mes récents désastres, ces femmes ont été si douces, si patientes! Je les voudrais voir à l’abri du malheur! Oh, là sont mes vraies souffrances (1,12).

The play’s central dilemma is that financial speculation in particular and capitalism in general encourages behavioural practices that polarize its practitioners. The alienation, an estrangement from feeling and affection, erodes the fellowship of relationships. Prendergast sees this Balzacian notion to be based on his recognition of ‘a sense of mistrust which is the inevitable accompaniment of society devoted to the pursuit of private interests’.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac’s Comédie humaine*, p. 315.

²⁴⁴ Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis*, p. 85.

4.5 Conclusion

Mercadet's first run at the Théâtre Gymnase in 1851, in stark contrast to the apathy of the theatre-goers at the later performances in 1868 and 1888, involved a fusion of emotions between auditorium and stage that generated continuous waves of applause from the audience and climaxed with the shouts of victory celebrating *Mercadet*'s release from debt. The continuum of one hundred successful performances that followed strongly implies that audience response was sustained throughout the run and could not simply have been a repeating valedictory for the too early deceased Balzac. It speaks more of a current social and economic foreboding that responds to a seductive, comedic rendition of speculation and risk. However, impending financial catastrophe, a dramatic force already recognised and exploited by Balzac in novel form, still required a change in format and a level of stagecraft capable of rendering it successful. The transition is due to the expertise of Adolphe d'Ennery, a talent that ensured the success which was much promised by the original Balzac text, but denied.

Balzac's comedic staging of the *vol décent*, together with d'Ennery's stagecraft provide this thesis with fresh perspectives not only on the *vol décent* itself, but also on the importance of historic moment to its theatrical success. The successful comedy must trigger laughter, the reaction to a repeatable performance in words and gesture designed to be the object of such a response. However, the performance must have an acceptable public identity, one that provokes a communal, shared response indicating that it is a subject suitable for laughter. If the performance provokes a divisive response then it is prone to rejection on the grounds of bad taste, an outcome inappropriate for the comedy play which relies for success on a spontaneous, uniform and all-embracing audience response. The reaction determines the acceptability of the action as a source for laughter as well as its comedic potential. The task of the playwright is to meet those criteria. In *Mercadet* Balzac had the problem of presenting the *vol décent*, a morally suspect form of theft, as suitable material for comedy.

This research shows that transformation of character, stagecraft, textual style and manipulation of the narrative have all combined to produce the appropriate backcloth for a comedic performance of the *vol décent* that works as a satirical romp successfully played for laughs. The *vol décent* itself moves from a legally and

socially sanctioned phenomenon, complicated by economic necessity, social admiration, probity and propriety in *La Comédie humaine*, to a comic performance in *Mercadet* where open display of chicanery, deviousness double-dealing and guile, make it suitable for public amusement. Whilst the process remains the same, the response it stimulates relies on a change of vision. The new perspective on the *vol décent* responds to its oxymoronic form as a comedic tool, where an apparently tenuous balance of improbabilities holds. The comic domination of the piece is somewhat modified by the innocence of Minard and Julie and the values of Mme Mercadet that retain the social significance of family and Christian virtue. They combine with Mercadet's capacity to perform effectively in the face of adversity in a coupling which holds out the expectation of a higher order of future activity.

The success of *Mercadet* is not restricted to its authorial contributions. It thrives on the historic moment in which it was played, a period which provides safe haven for the *vol décent* and illusion in the pursuit of wealth. These were recognised as operative roles in social and commercial life. The mood of the audience reflects the period, whereby the unacceptable becomes acceptable as long as the illusion surrounding its performance is sustained. In *La Comédie humaine* the illusion of propriety and probity surrounds the *vol décent*, disguising its underlying immorality. In *Mercadet* the pursuit of wealth is insistent but exposed as absurd ritual, humorous in its obviousness, exaggeration and repetition but devoid of other attraction and therefore unable to offend and suitable for indulgence. Theatre and its audience were part of an opportunist search for wealth. **The theatre provision was no longer designed to impose values and form but one that provided** a theatrical good designed to satisfy demand, seeing morality as part of the response to current, variable socio-economic need. The *vol décent* is used by Balzac to satisfy that demand, converting it to an object of humour that satisfies audience requirements. It works to legitimise their own activities as speculators and socially as a practice embedded and played out in everyday **mores**.

D'Ennery's contribution was not restricted to a dramatic reduction in Balzac's script or the minutiae of the aside. 'Il a développé certaines scènes, en a déplacé d'autres, et a parfois supprimé de longs passages'.²⁴⁵ Most significantly, he changes the ending with the return of Godeau. Balzac had left the question of Godeau's

²⁴⁵ Milatchitch, *Le Théâtre de Honoré de Balzac*, p. 255.

return unanswered, bequeathing to the audience a mythical figure whose presence is only determined by reference, ‘who exists only in the characters’ heads, not in material form’.²⁴⁶ D’Ennery converts the ephemeral into the actual, giving the audience what they want, an actual victory replacing the ambiguity of Balzac’s conclusion with a triumph over adversity. It is Godeau’s return, payment of the creditors and Mercadet’s release from debt that brings the audience to its feet.

Mercadet offers a justification of the *vol décent* under the notion of a social hierarchy of needs. The priority of family duty takes precedence over commercial deception, a ranking acknowledged by Sérisy in consideration of Moreau’s *vol décent*,²⁴⁷ and repeated here. Mercadet’s deceptions and deprivations, ultimately used in the service of wife and daughter, are justifiable and expedient. Balzac places expediency in the service of family alongside a commercial expediency that equalises the relationship between debtor and creditor. The creditors, as Gautier observes in his review, are as mired in chicanery as Mercadet himself. The capitalist period offers individuals who were denied it under the *ancien régime*, the possibility of financial independence: ‘Il n’y a pas de bonheur possible dans la misère, il n’y a pas de malheur que la fortune n’adoucisse’ (1,10).

²⁴⁶ J C, ‘Godeau’s return’, *TLS*, 12 August 2016, p. 36.

²⁴⁷ Honoré de Balzac, *Un Début dans la vie*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), I, pp. 733-887.

Chapter 5

The *vol décent* in the Institutions of State:

Les Employés and *Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse*

- 5.1 Introduction
 - 5.1.1 From Individual to Bureaucratic Forms
 - 5.1.2 Identifying an Institutional *vol décent*
- 5.2 In Search of an Historical Structure for Bureaucratic Discord
 - 5.2.1 Creating Past and Immediate Past Time
 - 5.2.2 Present Time Influences
- 5.3 The Social Species
 - 5.3.1 The Supernumeraries
 - 5.3.2 'Cette petite bourgeoisie parisienne'
 - 5.3.3 Senior Management
- 5.4 Buildings and Architecture
 - 5.4.1 The Ministry
- 5.5 Caricature in *Les Employés*
- 5.6 An Inevitable Discord
 - 5.6.1 The Bureaucratic Effect
- 5.7 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 From Individual to Bureaucratic Forms

The final chapter, in contrast to others in this thesis, considers the *vol décent* as a group phenomenon, one that comes to control the workings of the institutions of state. *Les Employés*, published in 1835, is Balzac's only major work solely focused on public administration and bureaucracy. The importance of work in the field is that Balzac shows state bureaucracy operating within an institutional *vol décent* through which deception, deprivation and distortion become stable and sanctioned forms of power. The *vol décent* that dramatically impacts on the working of the Ministry, arises from an administrative backcloth against which 'L'État vol autant les employés que les employés vol le temps dû à l'état' (E, VII, 1103). In a tacit agreement between the employee groups, they retain their unearned benefits, an agreement in which the state becomes the victim of consolidated inefficiency. Further, the bureaucratic process itself contains instruments of power capable of manipulating or preventing civil performance. These instruments, which are used within the process of administration, act to legitimise misrepresentation. The legitimacy allows bureaucratic process to become established as a cultural norm in wider society.

The numerous expressions of the *vol décent* within the Finance Ministry reflect the interrelationships between the different factions which make up the overall group of civil servants. The internal discord is further aggravated by the external relationship between the Ministry, acting as gate keeper for the government, and members of the public seeking government assistance. The primary antagonism, between the state as employer and the employees, is a mutual exchange of deprivations and benefits whereby 'l'État vole autant les employés que les employés volent le temps dû à l'État' (E, VI, 1103). The internal factions, senior and junior employees, the supernumeraries rich and poor, senior management and lower ranks, also adopt the *vol décent*, as a weapon of both protection and aggression. The opposition of public and Ministry, the former involuntarily subjected to a *vol décent* which works to deprive them of state aid, results in a benefit by way of the ongoing survival of the Ministry in its contest with government. The approbation of *décence* is necessarily awarded to the Ministry by a public who are without alternative. It is in the endless movements of benefit/loss

between the groups that Balzac finds the cause of inertia and inefficiency at the heart of the Ministry. It is a condition he seeks to reverse in a proposal of direct, despotic control.

Graham Robb testifies to the significance of Balzac's literary contribution toward an understanding of practice in state institutions when he says 'he was one of the first writers to make bureaucracy the subject of serious fiction in *Les Employés* and the *Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse* [...] bureaucratic dramas which are still enlightening today'.²⁴⁸ I add to those works Balzac's contribution to *La Caricature* titled 'Le Ministre', published under the pseudonym Alfred Coudreux. For Robb, the revelatory elements of Ministry practice are teased out by Balzac's move away from dramatic, institutional malevolence toward bureaucratic 'random interference, [and] its futile over-activity'.²⁴⁹ This is a move toward the recognition of bureaucratic practice as a formative power; where institutional practice becomes institutional purpose. This chapter includes an extended consideration of the transition from practice to purpose.

Xavier Rabourdin's quest for promotion within the French Civil Service of *Les Employés* is portrayed as a justifiable and honourable aspiration. Despite this, his hopes are thwarted by the internal interests of the institution and those of the employees. The effectiveness of those self-serving priorities provides the reader with a fictional representation of the often iniquitous historical progress of bureaucracy in France.

Les Employés reveals state institutions compromising both governmental purpose and employee aspiration whilst simultaneously frustrating those, from beyond the Ministry, who seek government support for public projects. Such projects held a particular family interest for Balzac. The long-term animosities between his family members and government departments had resulted in hopes dashed for Balzac's father, sister and brother-in-law. The sustained, residual memory of acrimony suffered by his family at the hands of the state machine and conflicts with bureaucracy suffered by Balzac himself, provide him with direct experience of public administration. As early as 1 October 1830 Balzac was displaying his antipathy toward ministers in the 'Prospectus et numèro-modele' of

²⁴⁸ Robb, *Balzac: A Biography*, p. 106.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Le Caricature with the opening line ‘C’était un petit homme, - autrement il n’aurait pas nommé ministre.’²⁵⁰ Although he is referring to Guizot, its wider connections denote his general disdain for ministers. The contempt is stressed in ‘que de monde pense à cet homme! me dis-je, tandis qu’il ne pense à personne- que à lui’.²⁵¹

Balzac reflects on the evolution of state administration in a broad historical context that stretches from the *ancien régime* to the Restoration, with brief but telling reference to the period of Napoleon and Empire. However, history and family are not the sole frames of reference used to trace the development of bureaucratic form. *Les Employés* shows Balzac's authorial attention, typically centred on individuals, transferred to a study of group behaviours. The transition toward an administrative identity was purposeful, clearly evidenced in the progress from Balzac's precursory *La Femme supérieure*, in which Célestine Leprince held the title role, to *Les Employés* where she loses her primary position to a collective body of numerous civil servants. From her work on the original manuscripts, Anne-Marie Meininger has identified the form of that progression:

Le Manuscrit montre comment s'est peu à peu opérée cette substitution; et le processus est à noter: c'est à mesure que les employés l'emportaient sur la femme supérieure, en nombre d'abord, en importance ensuite'.²⁵²

Bardèche argues that the transition, from ‘female talent frustrated to administrative incompetence satisfied, denies Céleste and Rabourdin the grandeur they deserve and results in un roman manqué’.²⁵³ However, counterbalancing that loss is a significant administrative, historical and above all sociological, study which observes individual behaviours combining to form a group identity. Bardèche recognises that transition as a movement from ‘la voie royale de l’ambition, peuplée d’équipages, ornée de duchesses’,²⁵⁴ to one in which ‘la volonté de s’enrichir et de parvenir n’est pas moins tenace [...mais] les ambitions y ont une autre cadence et un autre visage’.²⁵⁵ This is a new style of arrivisme, common amongst the civil servants in *Les Employés*, but distinct in manner and purpose from that of the aspiring entrepreneur in the commercial world. The entrepreneur of *La Comédie humaine* seeks personal financial gain from contrived or existent circumstances,²⁵⁶ whereas

²⁵⁰ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Ministre, Œuvres Diverses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), II, p. 798.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Anne-Marie Meininger, ‘Introduction to *Les Employés*’ (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), VII, p. 860.

²⁵³ Bardèche, *Une Lecture de Balzac*, p. 204.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Please see Chapter 2.

the civil servant purports, in altruistic fashion, to deliver a common good. In effecting social change, the public employee is confined and largely defined by administrative process. In contrast, the commercial entrepreneur is apparently free to exploit circumstances in any manner that yields profit.

Balzac's transitional movement from individual to group, via the precursory *La Femme supérieure*, repeats an earlier transition from concept to performance first glimpsed in the 'Fantastique avant propos' section of *Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse* that appeared in the *Les Causeries du lundi* on the 10 March 1834. The concept of the material transition of thought and bureaucratic failure are explored in *Les Employés* and indeed underpin that work. The importance of 'l'idée' in the Balzacian œuvre is recognised by Anne-Marie Meininger:

'Oui, messieurs, les idées sont des êtres' dit M. de Lessones à Louis Lambert dans le 'Fantastique avant-propos': à elle seule, cette phrase indique à quel point *Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse* relevaient du concept de base des Romans, des Contes et des Études philosophiques sur les pouvoirs matériels de la pensée.²⁵⁷

The *Revue de Paris* of 15 February 1835, in an announcement of the inclusion of *Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse* in an anticipated edition of the *Études Philosophiques*, highlights the importance for Balzac of the concept of the material powers of thought:

Une œuvre de haute importance, dont le titre a déjà soulevé la curiosité de quelques administrateurs. En effet, les *Aventures administratives* offrent une histoire vraie qui met à nu les passions ignobles et les intérêts mesquins qui entravent, en France, la réalisation des idées les plus importants²⁵⁸

In a direct address to the stranger, Louis Lambert states: 'tu n'es pas un homme, toi qui parles, tu es une idée, une idée ayant pris une voix, une idée incarnée' (AIH, XII, 790). The magnitude of the 'idée' is that it is embodied in the being expressing the concept yet continues to transcend time. Hence 'Napoléon était une grande idée qui gouverne encore la France' (AIH, XII, 777), a notion that gives material powers to thought. The low 'passions ignobles et les intérêts mesquins' are the powers which destroy 'l'idée'. Balzac establishes its timeless element from the archives of the 1605 saga of the Canal de l'Essonne. Using historic time he sees 'l'idée' of connecting the Loire to the Seine below Corbeil, established in 1605, with Surville's current canal project of 1833. A period of over two hundred years in which concept

²⁵⁷ Anne-Marie Meininger, 'Introduction to *Aventures Administratives d'une idée heureuse*' (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), XII, p.756.

²⁵⁸ *Revue de Paris*, 15 Fevrier 1835, quoted by Anne-Marie Meininger in 'Introduction to *Aventures administrative d'une idée heureuse*' (Paris: Gallimard), XII, p. 755.

has failed to dim ‘une idée utile à tous, mise à néant par les intérêts particuliers qu’elle froissait’.²⁵⁹ While Surville’s project fails, and is mirrored in the failure of Rabourdin, the philosophic concept is transferred to *Les Employés* where administrative incompetence and the power of ‘passions ignobles’ are found denying and destroying inspired vision. As Balzac transfers the concept he renews it, presenting the material power of thought in a socio-political arena. In *Les Aventures administrative d’une idée heureuse* Balzac asserts a ‘proof’ for the material transfer of thought, in *Les Employés* the ‘proof’ is found again in contemporaneous political practice.

The collective identity of the civil servants is established by their common identity as employees of the state. However, the collective group is made up of a various sub-groups who are each at variance with state purpose for different reasons but collectively become a consolidated opposition to authority. In his article, *Balzac, voix de son siècle et du nôtre*, Jean-Louis Harouel confirms Balzac’s understanding of bureaucracy as a social force. This places the *vol décent* as a tool available to the group as well as the individual, potentially extending its range of influence.

À l’historien de l’administration, Balzac apporte à la fois une fresque vivante et une pensée. De l’administration, il s’est fait le peintre, mais aussi l’historien et sociologue.²⁶⁰ [...] Balzac s’empare de la bureaucratie comme d’un phénomène macro-social, qu’il replace dans une perspective historique. D’où l’originalité et l’intérêt de sa démarche.²⁶¹

It is the ‘phénomène macro-social qu’il replace dans une perspective historique’ which provides a narrative setting for the *vol décent*’s significance as a composite power. In placing bureaucracy in an historical context Balzac suggests a rationale behind its evolutionary development that delivers a behavioural form which responds to present time needs. The context of government service also provides for an extended awareness of the notion of the *vol décent*, allowing it to be recognised as a social dynamic capable of shaping the manners of a significant section of society. Furthermore, the civil service, as a sub-division of governmental power designated to execute governmental will, automatically enjoys a celebrity capable of attracting public attention and thereby infiltrating wider society. The diffusion is both functional, in its operative practices, and cultural in its capacity to invade social convention and morals.

²⁵⁹ Laure Surville, *Balzac et Ses Œuvres* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1858), p. 142.

²⁶⁰ Jean-Louis Harouel, ‘Balzac et l’Administration’, *L’Année balzacienne* (1977), p. 860.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 684.

Although the Ministry is a restricted milieu in the world of *La Comédie humaine* and the ‘figure de l’administrateur [...] une des figures mineures’,²⁶² both represent the forerunners of a bureaucratic force that is to grow exponentially. Zeldin reveals that ‘in 1848 there was about a quarter of a million in 1914 half a million and in 1945 one million.’²⁶³ While the expansion served to provide social mobility, the reluctance of its members to move subsequently into other sectors resulted in ‘an enormous, constantly growing clan of families. While the test of merit was increasingly applied, the civil servants almost formed a heredity class, with considerable cohesion of outlook and values’.²⁶⁴

5.1.2 Identifying an Institutional *vol décent*

In *Les Employés*, Balzac exposes the *vol décent* using the cynical perspective of Bixiou to highlight operative deception at the heart of the Ministry of Finance. Balzac uses the character of Bixiou, rather than the narratorial voice, in a unification of attitudes. Bixiou shares the disposition of the participants in the *vol décent* that he describes, a joint distancing from the hierarchical structures of the institution by a mix of personal and group interest. He is a character who will later be revealed as one of ‘des plus hardis cormorans éclos dans l’écume qui couronne les flots incessamment renouvelés de la génération présente’ (MN, VI, 330).

Bixiou’s perceptiveness, delivered in the same cynical style of indifference, that he used to expose the reality behind Nucingen’s commercial *vol décent* in *Les Employés*. In a change of narrative perspective, by appointing Bixiou as spokesman, Balzac distances the narrator, ensuring that the mood of cynicism applied to Nucingen’s *vol décent* is not seen restricted to the world of finance but found equally present in government service.

In *Les Employés*, Bixiou unveils the reality of the *vol décent* underlying the administrative masquerade. Balzac continues to use Bixiou as narrator but this time the tone changes to express Balzac’s own seriousness of purpose regarding the consequences of government administration. The explication is reasoned, structured, and well argued, testament to Balzac’s formal and direct involvement with Ministry practice:

Il y a évidemment une réforme administrative à faire; car, ma parole d’honneur l’État vole autant les employés que les employés volent le temps dû à l’État; mais nous

²⁶² Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac*, p. 551.

²⁶³ Zeldin, *A History of French Passions*, p. 114.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

travaillons peu parce que nous ne recevons presque rien, nous trouvant en beaucoup trop grand nombre pour la besogne à faire, et ma vertueuse Rabourdin a vu tout cela! Ce grand homme de bureau prévoyait, messieurs, ce qui doit arriver, et ce que les niais appellent le jeu de nos admirables institutions libérales. La Chambre va vouloir administrer, et les administrateurs voudront être législateurs. Le Gouvernement voudra administrer, et l'Administration voudra gouverner. Aussi les lois seront-elles des réglementations, et les ordonnances deviendront-elles des lois. Dieu fit cette époque pour ceux qui aiment à rire (E, VII, 1103).

This is a *vol décent* between the state and the employees of the state. However, whilst both benefit marginally, (a benefit with comes with compromises attached), through a mutual accommodation with inefficiency and individual group interest, this composite resolution, designed to satisfy disparate interests, perpetrates loss upon an external third party, the public they purport to serve. Further, the *vol décent* is observed as an activity in which the individual self-interests, of both the socially connected and the socially and economically disadvantaged, combine to exert a collective will against established order. The problems of Billardière's Ministry result from a joint deception in which, with the exception of Rabourdin and Sébastian, the employees fail to fully engage with administrative purpose. The administrator determines the process of implementation and has no personal financial interest in the transaction. It is the distancing from monetary reward in the administrative process which Barbéris describes as 'cet idéal de l'homme qui juge et agit non en termes de profit, mais en termes d'organisation'.²⁶⁵ However, Balzac clouds the apparent distinction between monetary and administrative benefit when he shows financial capital in competition with a new form of social capital. Whilst du Bruel speaks for both sides of the divide between financial and social capital, Phellion and others settle for a balanced mix of petit bourgeois statements of social capital, security of employment and financial limitation.²⁶⁶

Under the declaration that 'les employés volent le temps dû à l'État', Bixiou unveils a working deception in which dilatoriness and self-interest combine to eclipse endeavour. However, the theft of time by the employees in the institutional *vol décent* is matched, and arguably caused, by a theft perpetrated on the employee by the employer: a quid pro quo when 'l'État vole autant les employés [...] parce que nous ne recevons presque rien'. This is a theft of employee time by the State promising to deliver financial return, but either postponing delivery or failing to deliver. Its methodology is to offer unpaid or poorly paid employment in

²⁶⁵ Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac*, p. 551.

²⁶⁶ Please see Section 5.3.3.

anticipation of a permanent future position that enjoys appropriate benefits, pension rights and security, all backed by the state.

The deprivations of employer and employee are balanced by the apparent benefits that accrue to each side. The financially desperate employee grasps at the opportunity of a permanent future benefit offered by the state. He simultaneously reduces the odds against disappointment with a general dilatoriness that allows alternative strategies to be pursued whilst still ‘working’ at the Ministry. The procrastination becomes a power in the hands of the employee, one capable of frustrating institutional purpose. For the higher orders in the Ministry the *vol décent* facilitates a consolidation of the status quo, albeit at a cost to efficiency. Retained structures, positions and practices permit those in power to maintain status and thereby authority, at the expense of the employees.

The internal sanction of deceit, exercised by both parties to the employment contract, is underpinned by a political impotence in which ‘la Chambre va vouloir administrer, et les administrateurs voudront être législateurs. Le Gouvernement voudra administrer, et l’Administration voudra gouverner’ (E, VII, 1103). This is a sanction of inertia in which both exploiter and exploited maintain the system. The inertia is sustained by the recognition that vested interest in the status quo, however tenuous that may be, will ultimately resist the possibility of change. The rich supernumerary awaits his moment, the poor one seeks to satisfy the status quo in the hope that it may eventually yield beneficial reward. The higher management must guard their salaries, not put them at risk, while the petit bourgeois seeks to establish a new cultural identity and yet retain the status of government employment. Billardièrè’s total absence from the Ministry, tolerated by all, is silent witness to a compromise with administrative inertia.

The external social tolerance of the governmental *vol décent* arises from the powerlessness of the needy. They must acquiesce in administrative self-interest due to the necessity of retaining an association with power. The need for association is predicated on the basic instinct for stability and permanence, conditions for the Balzacian ‘employés’ that are of greater importance than those of risk and uncertainty that are associated with wealth and power. The ministries of state combine to resist uncertainties by the obstruction of any complaint that may arise from the public with a seemingly impenetrable barrier of bureaucratic minutiae and manners. The institution, in an assertion of its responsibility and *décence* offers a

face of probity and bureaucratic exactitude that works to hide internal schism and discord. It goes unchallenged because of the institution's propinquity to power and position as gate keeper between state and public.

Balzac's placing of a *vol décent* at the heart of government activity triggers for the reader an early awareness of the life/work dilemma that will come to dominate notions of individual freedom in late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century society. The reader is aware that only Roubourdin (and to a lesser extent Sébastien) find themselves in a position where their work at the Ministry satisfies their aspirations and satisfies their intellectual capacities. They are the only two characters who fully escape participation in the *vol décent* at the Ministry. The other employees seek some level of compromise with the institution and the institution with the employees. Whilst Balzac's analysis of the 'species' in employment reveals the compromise to result from poor salaries, low employee competence and appointment by association he also points to the deeper compromise between individual aspiration and institutional exigency.

5.2 In Search of an Historical Structure for Bureaucratic Discord

5.2.1 Creating Past and Immediate Past Time

In a re-enforcement of Balzac's own romantic vision, his representation of Restoration bureaucracy in *Les Employés* finds itself at odds with historical fact. The opposition arises from the novel's comparative study of an *ancien régime* in which the narrator finds a benign, logical and efficient contribution to public administration, and a Restoration period in which he reveals such expertise to have been lost and replaced by malign self-interests. The view confirms Balzac's romantic vision at a point where Prendergast sees his 'historical imagination and reactionary fantasy begin to coalesce'.²⁶⁷ He introduces the intervening period of Napoleon and Empire to offer a solution to the purported administrative decline. The solution draws on his imaginary structural pattern of the *ancien régime*, with its head of state, and he combines it with the notion of the supreme individual. For Balzac, the combination is evidenced in the era of Empire, when Napoleon temporarily controls both governmental policy and its execution.

Balzac contrives historical fact to satisfy his vision of a nation state whose institutions and practices conform to his own sense of the ideal. It is an ideal that Christopher Prendergast locates at 'a point in Balzac's thinking at which historical imagination and reactionary fantasy begin to coalesce'.²⁶⁸ He refers, to Balzac's sketches of pre-Revolutionary manners and recognises Balzac's lament for lost 'forms of human negotiation and exchange [...] characterised [...] by the ease and poise of the culture of the *ancien régime*'.²⁶⁹ Prendergast's allusion to 'historical imagination', in an age that began the rational exploration of science, including the social sciences, but had not yet determined its processes, questions the relationship between historic recall and literature.

The lack of a clear distinction between history and literature had already been acknowledged by Jane Austen earlier in the nineteenth century. Devoney Looser recalls that Austen's awareness that her 'early foray into history writing famously describes itself as the work of a partial, prejudiced and ignorant historian'.²⁷⁰ Austen ridicules the value of the verifiable information of her day. She finds that

²⁶⁷ Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis*, p. 83

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Devoney Looser, 'Whatever her persuasion', *Literature & Literary Criticism, The Times Literary Supplement*, January 20 2017, No. 5938, p. 3.

information to reflect the learning patterns of the writer, patterns capable of attaching false emphasis to fact and data.

In his recent essay on nostalgia, Simon Godhill acknowledges that ‘every society has some version of its own past, and many of these are idealized pictures [...] fantasizing about a simpler, happier world’.²⁷¹ He finds something particular in the nineteenth-century association with nostalgia, asserting that its proliferation was due to ‘the intense awareness of the rapidity and profundity of social change [...] the more the present felt troubling, the more the past seemed to matter’.²⁷² This was reflected in the work of the century’s theorists of change, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud but also in the literary works, particular interest being those of Balzac’s predecessor in literary history, Sir Walter Scott. The erratic but compelling power of change delivered a political, commercial and social uncertainty that informed future development. While the search for stability in the midst of chaos, together with the search for an understanding of the nature of change, offers an explanation for a nostalgic understanding of history, it does not help to define the literary form that historical reference will take.

The historical picture of the *ancien régime*, delivered by the Balzacian narrator, is an assertion of certainty. Unequivocal and prescriptive, the narrative voice establishes the appearance, if not necessarily the reality, of a solid historical foundation. The Balzacian narrator proceeds to argue for an administrative ideal and the lasting material presence of thought already established in *Aventures administratives d’une idée heureuse*. This firm unquestioned premise proposed by the narrative voice hides a questionable historicity but successfully tests the boundary between appearance and reality central to the notion of the *vol décent*, a boundary easily lost in the presence of literary ‘truth’.

Xavier Rabourdin finds the historic causes of employee discontent inside his own Ministry in ‘ces petites révolutions partielles qui furent comme le remous de la tempête de 1789 et que les historiens des grands mouvements sociaux négligent d’examiner’ (E, VII, 906). The ‘petites révolutions partielles’ in this instance are what Balzac argues to be the movements away from a direct, controlled relationship between power and its executives. In the Balzacian narrator’s representation of

²⁷¹ Simon Goldhill, ‘Look back with danger: Why nostalgia is not what it used to be’, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 5 2017, No. 5953, Cultural Studies, p. 15.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

government administration, during the former *ancien régime*, dogmatic argument takes precedent over fact:

Autrefois sous la monarchie, les armées bureaucratiques n'existaient point. Peu nombreux, les employés obéissaient à un premier ministre toujours en communication avec le souverain, et servaient ainsi presque directement le Roi. [...] Ainsi le moindre point de la circonférence se rattachait au centre et en recevait la vie. Il y avait donc dévouement et foi (E, VII, 906).

The 'historical' overview asserts that the period enjoyed an effective, coercive authority that resided in the king and exercised by him through his minister. The minister similarly enjoyed a simple, accessible, direct line of effective communication with each of his bureaucrats, one that mirrored the connection between minister and crown. The direct line of communication apparently inspired devotion and good faith between staff and the hierarchy. Balzac's representation of the administrative structure does reflect, at least in a conceptual form, that of the pre-Revolution administration. However, the Balzacian overview of *ancien régime* bureaucracy in action is not a reflection of historical fact. Nicholas Henshall, in his review for *History Today* advises:

Far from the effective concentration of coercive authority usually associated with absolute monarchy, government in Early Modern France was the art of managing thinly concealed chaos. [...] In the 1780's, royal incompetence brought the regime down.²⁷³

The implied success of Balzac's 'historical' communication paradigm from the *ancien régime* is dependent upon an omnipotent power which resides in the crown and a minister capable of effectively executing that power. For Balzac, power is dissipated when the crown is replaced by a plurality of government forces at the time of the Restoration. [Les] 'chefs flottent à tous les vents d'un pouvoir, appelé *Ministère* qui ne sait pas la veille s'il existera le lendemain' (E, VII, 906). As for the civil servants themselves, the new post-Empire government and its ministers freely appoint staff on the grounds of political or personal expediency. For Balzac, a bureaucratic nightmare results, one that was operating in the recent past of the Restoration period:

La bureaucratie [...] organisée sous le gouvernement constitutionnel, inévitablement ami des médiocrités, grand amateur des pièces probantes et de comptes, enfin tracassier comme une petite bourgeoise. Heureux de voir les ministres en lutte constante avec quatre cents petits esprits, avec dix ou douze têtes ambitieuses et de mauvais foi, les bureaux se hâtèrent de se rendre nécessaires en se substituant à l'action

²⁷³ Nicholas Henshall, *History Today Book Reviews* (no date) <<http://www.historytoday.com/Nicholas-henshall-power-and-politics-old-regime-france-ancien-regime/>> [accessed 14 February 2016]

vivante par l'action écrite, et les créèrent une puissance d'inertie appelée le Rapport (E, VII, 907).

This is an imaginary scene of bureaucratic incompetence, which is at odds with historical record. G. de Bertier de Sauvigny's research into the actual staffing, financial probity and running costs of the government machine in 1830 reveals an interesting and surprising level of financial and administrative competence:

Le chiffre total des personnes qui [...] émargent au budget de l'État, s'élève à 647,000; si l'on retire 245,000 pensionnés, 47,000 ecclésiastiques, 194,000 militaires des armées de terre et 42,000 pour la Marine, il reste en tout et pour tout 119,000 fonctionnaires pour tous les services civils. L'effectif total des employés des ministères à Paris ne dépasse pas 5,000; le ministère des Finances [...] 3,000. [...] Sur un budget de 1,095 millions, en 1830, [...] c'est à 150 millions que se chiffre le coût de la machine administrative, soit un peu plus de 13% des dépenses de l'État.²⁷⁴

Balzac uses history as a literary device that pictures, on one side, a dynamic and effective structure for government administration and on the other a picture of government administration whose structure and powers of leadership have been dissipated. The 'petites revolutions partielles' punctuate and propel the process of corruption. The antidote to that decline is captured in his reference to Napoleon's control of an expanding bureaucracy during Empire. The reference discloses Balzac's prejudice in favour of powerful, direct and ultimately despotic rule, rather than the multiple forces of democracy. Balzac's integrity regarding his representation of observed contemporaneous manners contrasts with his imaginative historical recall to create contradictory and plural positions.

Napoleon is an irresistible, iconic reference for Balzac. Despite his avowal of 'deux Vérités éternelles: la Religion, la Monarchie, deux nécessités que les événements contemporains proclament' (Avant-propos, I, 13), for Balzac Napoleon satisfies his faith in the power of the individual will, his political and social ideals. He contrasts Napoleon's control of bureaucracy, with a system both instigated and operated by too many lesser men during the Restoration:

La bureaucratie, pouvoir gigantesque mis en mouvement par des nains, est née ainsi. Si, en subordonnant toute chose et tout homme à sa volonté, Napoléon avait retardé pour un moment l'influence de la bureaucratie, ce rideau pesant placé entre le bien à faire et celui qui l'ordonner, elle s'était définitivement organisée sous le gouvernement constitutionnel, inévitablement ami des médiocrités (E, VII, 907).

Napoleon did reduce bureaucratic influence but despite his 1806 reforms, that developed the powers of the Conseil d'État, he was not able to permanently control it. With the insertion of 'pour un moment' Balzac avoids factual misrepresentation.

²⁷⁴ De Bertier de Sauvigny, *La Restauration*, p. 275.

He momentarily sacrifices discourse on the supremacy of Napoleon's will to stress that 'le gouvernement constitutionnel, inévitablement ami des médiocrités' that results 'en lutte constante avec quatre cents petits esprits'. Balzac's devotion to the precepts of monarchy and the *ancien régime* led him toward the legitimist cause at the July Revolution of 1830, political conversion in 1831, and an adherence to the rights of succession of the elder branch of the Bourbons. Whilst this led to a conflict for Balzac between the Bourbon cause and that of the Bonapartist party, his priority in terms of political succession rested with the side that best offered social order and peace. It is an unwelcome picture of social disintegration that is reflected in the *vol décent* at the heart of *Les Employés*. In 1836, he captures the revival of interest in the former Emperor and the rise in Napoleonic iconography; images that he continues to disperse throughout *La Comédie humaine*. He looks to the crown for permanence and to a Napoleonic will to secure it. These are the conditions he discovers to be absent from Restoration bureaucracy and he adapts history to support that view.

5.2.2 Present Time Influences

Balzac does not seek to compete with the contemporary treatment of public service characterised by the ridicule and satire of Jacques-Gilbert Ymbert (1786-1846):

Le chef étudiait le violon, [...] le sous-chef prenait des leçons d'anglais; des deux rédacteurs, l'un crayonnait des caricatures et l'autre arrangeait des vaudevilles de circonstance; le commis d'ordre faisait des ouvrages en carton, l'expéditionnaire des dessins pour broderie et le garçon de bureau des vestes et des culottes.²⁷⁵

Ymbert's *Les Mœurs administratives* and *L'Art de faire des dettes et ne point les payer* made him famous. They also established 'le mode d'emploi – d'une gaieté salubre – pour rétablir l'équilibre et assurer la redistribution dans une société divisée'.²⁷⁶ This provided the practice of the *vol décent* with legitimacy, as a corrective to establishment injustice. The satire, often earned at the expense of the bureaucracy, also embraced the wider world of the bourgeoisie as a whole. Its most successful advocate was artist, actor and playwright, Henri Bonaventure Monnier (1799-1877). A personal friend of Balzac, Monnier illustrated the *La Comédie humaine* and created the famous bourgeois Monsieur Prud'homme. The character first appeared in 1830 in Monnier's *Les Scènes populaires, dessinées à la plume*,

²⁷⁵ Jacques-Gilbert Ymbert, quoted by G. De Bertier de Sauvigny in *La Restauration*, pp. 275-6.

²⁷⁶ Jacques-Gilbert Ymbert, *L'Art de faire des dettes* <http://www.payot-rivages.net/livre_L-Art-de-faire-des-dettes-Jacques-Gilbert-Ymbert_ean13_9782743600952.html> [accessed 4 January 2017]

lithographs that ran to twelve editions and in 1853 his *Grandeur et décadence de Joseph Prud'homme* came to the stage. The production ensured that Prud'homme came to characterize the French bourgeois.

However, for Balzac, a satirical form whose 'but réel est d'amuser le public par la désinvolture de leurs définitions et la cocasserie de leurs digressions',²⁷⁷ did not satisfy his serious purpose of exposing government administration. Anne-Marie Bijaoui-Baron's article on Balzac's *Physiologie de l'employé* recognises this when she claims it to be 'le plus féroce réquisitoire contre la bureaucratie'.²⁷⁸ The animosity displayed in this earlier work is confined and disguised by his use of irony; an appropriate technique capable of satisfying readership mood for humorous characterization and digression whilst signalling authorial disquiet.

Although *Les Employés* reveals some of the same behavioural idiosyncrasies celebrated by Monnier and Ymbert and exploits the popularity of the caricature, the novel displays a serious preference for taxonomy over satire. Balzac's milieu in *Les Employés* is the Finance Ministry and he classifies the different human species that are found there. Alongside that classification, he draws on the period's growing awareness of group behaviour as a joint force that interacts with other groups and individuals within society. The work of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who coined the term 'sociology', reflects the style of nineteenth-century enquiry into social development evidenced, although not cited, in the Balzac text. Comte's notion of positivism, the search for invariant laws governing the social and natural worlds, and a proposed (but not practised) methodology that included observation, comparison and historical research all find reference in the Balzac oeuvre.

Balzac freely acknowledges, in the 'Avant-propos' to *La Comédie humaine*, a writing career influenced and directed by the work of, inter alia, Leibniz, Buffon, Needham and Charles Bonnet and the scientific study of the notion of *l'unité de composition*:

Il n'y a qu'un animal. [...] L'animal est un principe qui prend sa forme extérieure, ou, pour parler plus exactement, les différences de sa forme, dans les milieux où il est appelé à se développer. Les Espèces Zoologiques résultent de ces différences. [...] La société ressemblait à la Nature (Avant-propos, I, 8).

The present time influences of historic fable and popular satire on Balzac's portrait of discord and deception in government administration are secondary to the

²⁷⁷ Anne-Marie Bijaoui-Baron, 'L'Ironie de Balzac', *L'Année balzacienne* (1980), p. 69.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

influence of bureaucratic incompetence that he feels to have been perpetrated on his family. Anne-Marie Meininger's Introduction to the Pléiade edition of the text²⁷⁹ establishes that *Les Employés* is firmly anchored in the reality of personal experience, and reflects Balzac's horror of centralised administration.

Confrontation with government bureaucracy was experienced by the Balzac family. Balzac's father, Bernard François, retired in 1818 with 'une pension décevante'²⁸⁰ from the state, one that earned Mme Balzac's ceaseless discontent. The superior woman of the precursory *La Femme supérieure*, Céleste Rabourdin née Leprince, is based, 'des grands traits aux détails',²⁸¹ on his younger sister Laure. Balzac changes the emphasis from the frustrations of a talented woman in early nineteenth-century Parisian society, central to *La Femme supérieure*, to the administrative impositions and deceptions of *Les Employés*. However, Laure/Céleste remains a victim of her aspirations, but this time at the hands of the Ministry and in the guise of Céleste Rabourdin. The thwarting of female ambition, retained in the person of Céleste, is further exacerbated by her marriage to the good but ineffective civil servant Rabourdin. This union mirrors the reality of Laure's marriage to Eugène Surville who actually worked in the department of 'Ponts et Chaussées'. Balzac also had direct personal experience of the nightmare of bureaucracy in his unsuccessful attempt to save Sébastien Peytel from death and in his disputes with the censors in 1822. He also advised Laure and Surville during their long attempt to secure support for the Orléans to Nantes canal venture and the dire consequences of their failure to attract funding.

Balzac does not only rely on his emotional responses, powerful and obvious as they are, but transfers the factual elements of family incidents, character and manners into the narrative of *Les Employés*. This is most clearly evidenced in the character and circumstances of his sister Laure and her struggle against the exercise of administrative powers. On the 1 October 1836, Balzac wrote to Mme Hanska with the following disclosure concerning his sister's situation:

Hier, 29 [septembre], ma sœur s'est donnée [*sic*] pour sa fête, *le plaisir* excessif de me venir voir, car n[ous] ne nous voyons que très peu. Les affaires de son mari vont lentement et sa vie aussi à elle s'écoule dans l'ombre; et ses belles forces s'épuisent dans une lutte inconnue, sans gloire. Quel diamant dans la boue! Le plus beau diamant que je sache en France. Pour sa fête n[ous] avons échangé nos pleurs! (LMH, I, 339)

²⁷⁹ Meininger, 'Introduction to *Les Employés*', XII, pp. 860-877.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 864.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

His deep feelings for Laure are made clear here but he also discloses what is to be the topic of *Les Employés* and the motive for writing the novel. In his recognition of 'ses belles forces s'épuisent' he finds the motive and in 'une lutte inconnue' the topic. Laure's marital situation, the frustrations of a *Femme Supérieure* and the struggle with the administration, are directly transferred into the character and circumstances of Céleste Rabourdin. They share upbringing, education and aspirations, both marry civil servants and suffer the long struggle against the bureaucratic strictures that eventually thwart their ambitions and kill their own hopes of a social status that reflects their talents. The inter-relationship between Laure and Céleste provides the text of *Les Employés* with a pre-determined prejudice against the civil service as institutional power. It is an informed prejudice and one that Balzac sustains. It can be contrasted with his capacity to colour history in his favour as the prejudice is based on experience rather than imaginative design.

5.3 The Social Species

5.3.1 The Supernumeraries

Balzac reveals the bottom rung of the bureaucratic ladder to be occupied by a subgroup of supernumeraries that he designates as ‘les surnuméraires pauvres’. The poor supernumerary is introduced as someone who is ‘riche d’espérance et a besoin d’une place’ (E, VII, 946) identifiable with social displacement. They are victims of the disassociation from power that comes with poverty. Balzac shows poverty and its counterpart of powerlessness to heavily influence the practices, manners and morality of its victims; a reinforcement of the secure Balzacian connection between sign and substance. As V.S.Naipaul was to observe a century and a half later, the powerless embrace deceit as a necessity, ‘lie about themselves, and lie to themselves, since it is their only resource’.²⁸² The contribution of the poor, aspirant supernumeraries to deception in the Ministry *vol décent* also ceases to be a moral choice and becomes one of necessity. It arises from the separation of the poor supernumerary from the wealth stream and the political influence that ultimately controls the distribution of wealth. It is interesting to note that Niall Ferguson’s twenty-first-century analysis of the degeneration of government institutions in *The Great Degeneration*²⁸³ finds their socially regressive character manifest in the miserably low wages paid to employees; a commonality that his research discovers to be at the heart of all institutional degeneration.

The ability of the poor to ‘lie to themselves’, as Naipaul expresses it, is found in *Les Employés* amongst ‘les jeunes gens entêtés ou les imbéciles qui se disent: ‘J’y suis depuis trois ans, je finirai par avoir une place’ ou les jeunes gens qui se sentent une vocation’ (E, VII, 948). For Balzac, such self-deceptions offer understandable, yet temporary, respite from pitiless circumstances. However, they also hold a strong affiliation to youthful illusion. Where the seductions of irrational hope, characteristic of self-delusion, offer only a temporary antidote to harsh reality, illusion can conversely act as a permanent stimulant for creativity and discovery:

Sans l’illusion, où irions-nous? Elle donne la puissance de manger la *vache enragée* des Arts, de dévorer les commencements de toute science en nous donnant la croyance’. L’illusion est une foi démesurée (E, VII, 946).

²⁸² V.S. Naipaul, *Literary Occasions* (London: Picador, 2003), p. 193.

²⁸³ Niall Ferguson, *The Great Degeneration* (London: Penguin Books, 2014)

In the Balzacian world, it is the response to circumstance that usually determines outcomes.²⁸⁴ Balzac's example of youthful illusion works in circumstances such as the arts and sciences, where aspiration is free to act. His example of false aspirations he places in a situation where the freedom to act is hopelessly compromised.

The acceptance of poverty as a criterion for entry into the Ministry, is itself an endorsement of social differentiation. The differentiation goes hand in hand with an understanding of poverty as an exploitable good. Balzac's description of the background, in which the poor supernumeraries strive to survive, highlights that socio-economic vulnerability:

Le vrai, le seul surnuméraire, est presque toujours le fils de quelque veuve d'employé qui vit sur une maigre pension et se tue à nourrir son fils. [...] Toujours logé dans un quartier où les loyers ne sont pas chers, ce surnuméraire part de bonne heure; pour lui, l'état du ciel est la seule question d'Orient! Venir à pied, ne pas se crotter, ménager ses habits, calculer le temps qu'une trop forte averse peut lui prendre s'il est forcé de se mettre à l'abri, combien de préoccupations! (E, VII, 947)

In extreme cases, the worker is unable to exercise choice and is objectified as the property of the potential employer. In the absence of choice, the employee becomes, without cost to the employer, a tradable commodity. Balzac does not represent that extreme, but does expose the struggle to resist the ever present forces that deny opportunity:

Cette épreuve est rude. L'État y découvre ceux qui peuvent supporter la faim, la soif est l'indigence sans y succomber, le travail sans s'en dégoûter, et dont le tempérament acceptera l'horrible existence, ou, si vous voulez, la maladie des bureaux. De ce point de vue, le surnumérariat, loin d'être une infâme spéculation du Gouvernement pour obtenir du travail gratis, serait une institution bienfaisante (E, VII, 948).

As the poor supernumeraries are not paid and three quarters of them leave the Ministry without actually achieving employee status, the retention of those remaining is due either to their continuing vulnerability, or to their irrational hopes or even because they can undertake other employment without it resulting in dismissal. Paradoxically, this opportunity arises from the self-interest of the employer as much as the initiative of the employee. The employer's interest rests in the maintenance of unpaid or poorly paid work by the supernumerary, an arrangement that leaves funds available for re-allocation while employment levels are maintained.

The other sub-group at the foot of the bureaucratic ladder is termed 'le surnuméraire riche' characterised by one who is 'pauvre d'esprit et n'a besoin de

²⁸⁴ Please see Chapter 2.

rien' (E, VII, 946). In this faction, the pseudo employment that results for the poor supernumerary is contrasted with an advantageous positioning in the Ministry for the rich supernumerary, where he is 'confié à un employé supérieur ou placé près du directeur général' (E, VII, 947). The apparently incongruous combination, between the potential young administrator without wit and the senior administrator without purpose, owes its presence to a residual social reliance on the power of familial alliances. Ironically, the forces that drive the rich supernumerary into the Ministry come from institutional changes in other government departments. The changes assure 'une famille riche n'est pas assez naïve pour mettre un homme d'esprit dans l'Administration' (E, VII, 946-7).

Vers cette époque, bien des familles se disaient: "Que ferons-nous de nos enfants?" L'Armée n'offrait point de chances de fortune. Les carrières spéciales, le Génie civil, la Marine, les Mines, le Génie militaire, le Professorat étaient barricadés par des règlements ou défendus par des concours; tandis que le mouvement rotatoire qui métamorphose les employés en préfets, sous-préfets, directeurs des contributions, receveurs, etc., en bons hommes de lanterne magique, n'est soumis à aucune loi, à aucun stage (E, VII, 947).

The rich supernumerary emerges from a culture that relies on association with established interests for advancement and financial security. The association is with an established figure that already holds power within the institution or someone able to exercise influence on those in power. The connection with privilege that results in a position at the Ministry cements present with future privilege to secure the status quo. Balzac refers to this social phenomenon as 'la haute comédie de l'Administration' (E, VII, 947), a performance in which the strength of association with privilege determines subsequent wealth and position. The bond is iniquitous, based on birth, inheritance, nepotism or privilege itself, but it is also ubiquitous and socially contagious. Even the poor supernumerary is 'presque toujours les fils de quelque veuve d'employé qui vit sur une maigre pension' (Ibid.) reliant on familiarity with the Ministry and former connections. The rich supernumerary is, 'toujours cousin, neveu, parent de quelque ministre, de quelque député, d'un pair très influent' (Ibid.).

5.3.2 'Cette petite bourgeoisie parisienne' (E, VII, 933).

In his review of Anne-Marie Meininger's three detailed folders of textual analysis on *Les Employés*, Maurice Regard argues that the work, although not wholly successful as a novel, nevertheless [...] méritait du moins par sa valeur documentaire cette étude minutieuse, érudite définitive, remarquablement

intelligente. Il est, à côté des *Paysans*, un témoignage sur une classe sociale déshéritée'.²⁸⁵ It is clear that Balzac as narrator purposefully brings to bear the microscopic, scientific methodology of the day to his fictional presentation.

S'il était possible de se servir en littérature du microscope [...] peut-être ferait-on voir des figures à peu de chose près semblables à celles de sieurs Gigonnet, Mitral, Baudoyer Saillard, Gaudron, Falleix, Transon, Godard et compagnie, tarets qui d'ailleurs ont montré leur puissance dans le trentième année de ce siècle. Aussi voici le moment de montrer les tarets qui grouillaient dans les bureaux où se sont préparées les principales scènes de cette Étude (E, VII, 954).

Balzac studies the 'petite bourgeoisie parisienne' as a social group defined by its relationship to government administration. He divides the group into two 'species', one largely controlled by the ministerial culture, the other comprising individuals whose 'mœurs, quoique plates, ne manquent pas d'originalité' (Ibid.). The comparison reveals that there is a limitation on the effects of institutional control evidenced in the survival and flowering of individual interests.

Those without the talent or the disposition to survive beyond the Ministry use its confines as shelter, an environment where their inadequacy or vulnerability can be protected. The environment consolidates and intensifies their dependency. The combination of forces ensures the maintenance of the *vol décent*. The spiteful Dutocq, ubiquitous office clerk 'incapable et flâneur' (E, VII, 961) is such an employee. Ironically, he keeps his position by virtue of Rabourdin's generosity toward him, yet his inadequacy will ensure his manager's downfall. His vulnerability breeds its own form of defence, 'Dutocq connaissait assez les bureaux pour savoir que l'incapacité n'empêche point d'émarger' (E, VII, 961). The ability of the weak to sense the presence of weakness in others is stimulated by the instinct for survival. 'Méchant et très intéressé, cet employé avait donc tâché de consolider sa position en se faisant l'espion des bureaux' (Ibid). This combines with Rabourdin's instinctive selflessness and a departmental culture that protects and nurtures the incompetence of des Lupeaulx, all of which conspire to defeat departmental purpose, secure Rabourdin's downfall and the survival of the administrative *vol décent*.

Balzac contrasts Dutocq's insensitivity with Auguste-Jean-François Minard's humanity. Both share poverty but the contrast confirms Balzac's assertion that circumstance is not the sole determinant of consequences, the response of the victim

²⁸⁵ Maurice Regard, 'Revue Critique', *Les Employés*, Édition critique et commentée, par Anne-Marie Meininger, *L'Année balzacienne*, (1968), p. 455.

being the primary factor. This is a notion that places options and therefore power, in the hands the individual. Minard marries a girl whose ambition is impoverished by apprehension. However, she finds another form of happiness, which despite poverty, is matched by the hardworking, uxorious Minard.

Zélie nourrissait ses enfants elle-même, faisant sa cuisine, ses fleurs et son ménage Il y avait quelque chose de touchant dans cette heureuse et laborieuse médiocrité. En se sentant aimée par Minard, Zélie l'aima sincèrement (E, VII, 977).

However touching the scene, it remains one of mediocrity and vulnerability. It contrasts with Du Bruel, a man of talent and some sophistication, who keeps a tenuous but desired affiliation with the Ministry. Balzac subtly captures the nature of such an affiliation: 'du Bruel venait cependant au bureau, mais uniquement pour se croire, pour se dire sous-chef et toucher des appointements' (E, VII, 962). Writer of the theatre reviews for the Ministry, he simultaneously consolidates his position in the department by writing articles requested by ministers. This also permits him to provide Mme Rabourdin with theatre tickets and befitting transport to the theatre. Because Rabourdin's generosity of spirit tolerates du Bruel's activities beyond the confines of the Ministry, he increases his income of four thousand five hundred francs with one thousand two hundred francs pension from the civil list, and eight hundred écus from the arts fund. An additional nine thousand francs comes from his vaudevilles playing at three theatres. His private life is as deftly ordered as his financial dealings, yielding firm connections with the influential duc de Chaulieu, who secures him a cross of the Légion d'Honneur, anticipating that du Bruel's novel will be dedicated to him. This exchange of laurels is matched by du Bruel's shared domestic arrangements with the actress Florine and the dancer Tullia, a household that holds out the promise of close association with the duc de Rhétoré, eldest son of the duc de Chaulieu. Du Bruel even manages to use the resources of the Ministry to enrich his work as dramatist, in a cross fertilisation of scripts: 'Du Bruel, vrai piocheur, lisait au bureau les livres nouveaux, en extrayait les mots spirituels et les enregistrait pour en émailler son dialogue'(E, VII, 963).

His multiple activities can be seen as a response to the financial limitations of Ministry employment but equally they facilitate artistic freedom and particularly dramatic talent. For Balzac, art and income are inseparable companions in the commercial world of the Restoration and he shows both aspects simultaneously satisfied by du Bruel's capacity for manipulation of circumstances. The manipulation is a form of entrepreneurship, a joining of circumstances that yields

financial return. Solidifying alliances is a competence shared with M. Phellion, another employee in Rabourdin's office who teaches at a girl's school in the evenings. Balzac follows Phellion's progression along the pathway of respectability and financial compromise:

Fier de sa place, heureux de son sort il s'appliquait à servir le Gouvernement, se croyait utile à son pays, et se vantait de son insouciance en politique, où il ne voyait jamais que LE POUVOIR. [...] «Quand on appartient au Gouvernement, on n'est pas son maître» (E, VII, 968/9).

Rabourdin facilitates du Bruel's freedom to undertake activities outside the Ministry and arranges a bursary from the government for the benefit of Phellion's sons. This represents a long-term binding to government. Responsible family man, Phellion stays within the limitations of family income, arranging for his daughter to be brought up without cost in a household where his wife gives piano lessons. Balzac contrasts du Bruel's artistic flamboyance and his social charm with Phellion's solid petit bourgeois respectability. Where du Bruel uses the Ministry as a secure and permanent springboard from which to jump into the world of theatre, Phellion looks to his association with government to provide security and to a Ministry in which social respectability is promoted. He enhances his status with the publication of *Ces petits traités substantiels*. It contributes an intellectual element to a clerical career, an element ratified by its presence on the academic shelves of the University Library and in a departmental status that permits the presentation of 'un exemplaire papier vélin, relié en maroquin rouge' (E, VII, 969), to Mme Rabourdin. Although pompous, unlike Monnier's Prud'homme, M. Phellion is a serious, purposeful and distinguished petit bourgeois. His values, in a volatile world of capitalist growth and social dispersal reflect the need for order and stability. He represents a group that replaces the hegemony of money with shared standards of respectability, educational aspiration and a close, permanent affiliation with power; forces that solidify the institutional *vol décent* with worthiness.

In the contrast between du Bruel and Phellion, Balzac reveals the effect of financially straitened administrative employment on two contrasting ambitions and demonstrates the binding relationship between social circumstance and behavioural patterns. However, whilst both characters are exposed to the same culture and practices the impact delivers quite different outcomes. Whilst Phellion's intellectual and social ambitions are worthy, they remain resolutely 'petit bourgeois' in nature. His house with garden at four hundred francs per month, his hospitality with beer

and cake, stakes of five sous, are not merely the signs of financial constraint but are also evidence of respectability, prudence and sound thinking. For Balzac, this is a new form of social capital. The salon, furnished with portraits ‘du Roi, le la Dauphine et de Madame, des gravures de Mazeppa d’après Horace Vernet, de celle du *Convoi du pauvre* d’après Vignerot’ (E, VII, 969) represent for Phellion visible evidence of rightful order restored and imaginative representations of transcendent powers:

Tableau sublime de pensée, et qui, selon Phellion, devait consoler les dernières classes de la société en leur prouvant qu’elles avaient des amis plus dévoués que les hommes et dont les sentiments allaient plus loin que la tombe (Ibid.).

‘Les vingt metres de terre attaché à perpétuité’ (Ibid.) that house the remains of his father and mother-in-law, provide Phellion with visible evidence of his own ideal of family. His appearance is appropriate for a respectable teacher of history and geography. ‘Il portait de beau linge, un jabot plissé, gilet de Casimir noir ouvert, laissant voir des bretelles brodées par sa fille, un diamant à sa chemise, habit noir, pantalon bleu’. He offers a striking but understandable contrast to du Bruel ‘vêtu avec le laisser-aller du vaudevilliste, le sous-chef portait le matin un pantalon à pied, des souliers-chaussons, un gilet mis à la réforme [...] le soir, il avait un costume élégant, car il visait au gentleman’ (E, VII, 962-3). The clothes are appropriate for circumstances but also representative, in terms of disposable income, of the disproportionate expenditure made on fashion; a visible passion and recurring motif at the Ministry.

Many of the characters in *Les Employés* see fashion as a necessary display, and in this respect, Balzac is in tune with his age. Fashion reflects the social and economic forces of the time and Balzac shows them played out with particular resonance in government service. In the character of Vimeux, a copyist with a salary of one thousand five hundred francs only, Balzac introduces to the reader a devotee of physical appearance:

Bien fait, cambré, d’une figure élégante et romanesque, ayant les cheveux, la barbe, les yeux, les sourcils noirs comme du jais, de belles dents, des mains charmantes, portant des moustaches si fournies, si bien peignées. [...] Son bonheur son seul plaisir était la toilette. Il se ruinait en gilets mirifiques, en pantalons collants, demi-collants à plis ou à broderies, en bottes fins en habits bien faits qui dessinaient sa taille, en cols ravissants, en gants frais, en chapeaux (E, VII, 972).

The low order employees of the Ministry are badly paid, with earnings at the same level as working class workers. However, the pressure on the civil servant to maintain a certain lifestyle and appearance forced the employee to make drastic

savings on basic necessities, ‘en particulier, s’il peut rogner sur ses repas, son chauffage et son logement, il doit rester vêtu correctement pour faire honneur à l’administration’.²⁸⁶ Balzac provides evidence of sacrifices made to appearance when he discloses that ‘Vimeux déjeunait d’une simple flûte et un verre d’eau, dinait pour vingt chez Katcomb et logeait en garni à douze francs par mois’ (E, VII, 972). This is a re-alignment in expenditure forced by government strictures, an economic change that in turn accompanies a re-alignment in the cultural value of display. However, socio-economic forces are not the sole determiners of change. The status of government office, felt in the minds of the employee and the public, acts to consolidate the ‘contraste entre une apparence honorable et une triste réalité’.²⁸⁷

In Bixiou, Balzac captures the exotic, dilettante Parisien mood of the period, placing it in contrast with Rabourdin’s aspirations for reform:

Il offrait la preuve vivante des observations de Rabourdin, relativement à la destruction constante de la hiérarchie administrative à Paris, par la valeur personnelle qu’un homme acquiert en dehors des bureaux (E, VII, 975).

While Bixiou does not display the focus or energy of the Balzacian genius, he goes a long way towards the requirement of disinterest in his dealings with group or individual. He is more observer than participant because his talents ‘étaient incomplets, incapable d’assiduité’ (Ibid.), a common Balzacian warning for the aspirant.

5.3.3 Senior Management

In a narrative digression, Balzac exposes des Lupeaulx as a natural and inevitable perpetrator of the *vol décent*, with the exercise of its deceptions, moral ambivalence, avoidance of retributory powers and a deprivation of institutional purpose, which is unseen and therefore goes unchallenged:

Les moralistes déploient ordinairement leur verve sur les abominations transcendantes. Pour eux, les crimes sont à la cour d’assises ou à la police correctionnelle, mais les finesses sociales leur échappent; l’habileté qui triomphe sous les armes du Code est au-dessus ou au-dessous d’eux, ils n’ont pas ni loupe ni longue vue; il leur faut de bonnes grosses horreurs bien visibles. Toujours occupés des carnassiers, ils négligent les reptiles; et heureusement pour les poètes comiques, ils leurs laissent les nuances qui colorent le Chardin des Lupeaulx (E, VII, 919).

Des Lupeaulx sets the pace in duplicity, ‘il sollicitait, amiable et spirituel dans toute l’acceptation du mot, moqueur à propos, plein de tact, sachant vous compromettre par une caresse’ (Ibid.). His manners seduce the naïve and the socially susceptible

²⁸⁶ Anne-Marie Bijaoui-Baron, ‘L’Employé Bel-Homme’, *L’Année balzacienne* (1979), p. 180.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

because even ‘les médiocrités qui forment le noyau du monde politique savent de la science des autres (E, VII, 920). Des Lupeaulx does not owe his position at the Ministry to family influence but to his exploitation of historic circumstance at the end of Empire and the beginning of the Restoration:

Il avait compris que sous la Restauration, temps de transactions continues entre les hommes, entre les choses, entre les faits accomplis et ceux qui se massaient à l’horizon, le pouvoir aurait besoin d’une femme de ménage (Ibid.).

A typically ludic and playful Balzac adopts the role of ‘cleaning lady’ to restore good order at a time when social and political cohesion has been lost. Balzac proposes that a society in continual flux creates both social and individual disorientation. His remedy lies in a re-imposition of the fixed rules and established social structures that establish stable environments. An absence of stability in society exposes the vulnerabilities of its members, where ‘quelque grand que soit un homme d’État il a besoin d’une femme de ménage avec laquelle il puisse être faible, indécis’ (Ibid.). The remedy illustrates Balzac’s fundamental belief in a binary order of church and crown, the twin anchors of state. However, it is social mobility and political change that characterised the Restoration, and provide des Lupeaulx with opportunity.

Des Lupeaulx finds a currency in disorder that will secure him his place in the Ministry. Sustaining the metaphor of ‘la femme de ménage’, Balzac strengthens his faith in the capacity of circumstances to determine events. Where ‘Napoleon faisait ménage avec Berthier, et Richelieu avec le père Joseph, des Lupeaulx faisait ménage avec tout le monde’ (E, VII, 920-1), circumstances throwing up opportunity for the second rate as well as the first. In the world of *La Comédie humaine*, it is the capacity to respond successfully to circumstance rather than to be overpowered by it, that distinguishes individuals; a notion that Balzac was to develop later in *César Birotteau*.²⁸⁸

Unfortunately for the Ministry, des Lupeaulx’s expertise lies in tidying up after his superiors and not in administrative reform; his talents require the continuing presence of ministerial disorientation: a situation he maintains at the Ministry:

Il restait l’ami des ministres déçus en se constituant leur intermédiaire auprès de ceux qui arrivaient, embaumant ainsi la dernière flatterie et parfumant le premier compliment. Il entendait d’ailleurs admirablement les petites choses auxquelles un homme d’État n’a pas le loisir de songer: il comprenait une nécessité, il obéissait bien;

²⁸⁸ Please see Chapter 2.

il relevait sa bassesse en en plaisantant le premier afin d'en relever tout le prix, et choisissait toujours dans les services à rendre celui que l'on n'oublierait pas (E, VII, 921).

Des Lupeaulx feeds on the period's political flux, retaining a use for both those leaving and those newly arrived on the political scene. He combines flattery with obsequiousness in a *modus operandi* that relies on his acute awareness of vulnerability in office and political priority. This allows him to turn the deficiencies of others into hard currency. Conversely, the obsequious des Lupeaulx is also capable of acquiring value by association with the highly competent. At the close of Empire in 1814-1815, and borrowing from 'Gobseck, Werburst et Gigonnet, croupiers de l'entreprise' (E, VII, 921) des Lupeaulx buys in the most pressing debts of Louis XVIII. While the profits go to the three money lenders 'des Lupeaulx fut nommé maître des requêtes, chevalier de Saint Louis et officier de la Légion d'honneur' (Ibid.). The honours are gifts designed by the political hierarchy for the amour-propre of the subordinate, to keep him in service, to mark him out from his peers, and persuade him that he is 'un homme indispensable à des hommes d'État' (E, VII, 922).

As a 'middle man', des Lupeaulx is well placed to restore a semblance of order where political ineptitude has created chaos. Balzac contextualizes des Lupeaulx's suitability for office:

Une fois grimpé, l'homme habile chercha les moyens de se maintenir sur son échelon car, dans la place forte où il s'était introduit, les généraux ne conservent pas longtemps les bouches inutiles. Aussi, à son métier de ménagère et d'entremetteur, avait-il joint la consultation gratuite dans les maladies secrètes du pouvoir. Après avoir reconnu les prétendues supériorités de la Restauration une profonde infériorité relativement aux événements qui les dominaient, il imposa leur médiocrité politique en leur apportant, leur vendant au milieu d'une crise ce mot d'ordre que les gens de talent écoutent dans l'avenir. Ne croyez pas que ceci vint de lui-même; autrement des Lupeaulx eût été un homme de génie, et ce n'était qu'un homme d'esprit (E, VII, 921).

'Son métier de ménagère et d'entremetteur' is confined, its limits marked when des Lupeaulx seeks to increase his status to 'commandeur de La Légion d'honneur, gentilhomme de la chambre, comte et député'. He is not 'un homme de génie' but 'un homme d'esprit', a crucial distinction for Balzac and the Balzacian world order. The 'génie' has the capacity to work ceaselessly in the cause of converting idea into reality, whereas the 'homme d'esprit' is restricted to idea. When des Lupeaulx needs to seek out people and circumstances that would play out to his advantage, his judgement deserts him. He confides his own ministerial ambitions to his minister, failing to recognise that the minister will protect only his own interests. However, des Lupeaulx's capacity to recognise and protect the self-interest of others, at the

expense of institutional purpose, and the conservation of the *vol décent* makes him ideal for high bureaucratic office.

In Baudoyer, Rabourdin's incompetent rival for the post of Divisional Director, the common pattern of an association with existing self-interests through family influence, is displayed and extended. His wife's uncle Bidault, in alliance with the moneylender Gobseck, is able to bring financial pressure on des Lupeaulx to the disadvantage of Rabourdin. In the hapless Baudoyer's case, the influence the family is able to assert is compromised by his wife's position as the departmental cashier. Elizabeth Baudoyer represents the new bourgeois Parisian whose qualities and vices are barely distinguishable but equally distasteful.

The counterpoint to these forces is represented by Xavier Rabourdin, Office Director in the Treasury department, who is motivated by the possibility of reform. Balzac is careful not to totally distinguish Rabourdin from the other civil service entries, maintaining the image of the Ministry as a bastion of misplaced associations. He provides him with a mysterious benefactor who procures him a position. However, he quickly moves from assistant to departmental head by endeavour rather than favour. It is Rabourdin's plan for departmental reform that provides Balzac with an opportunity to expose the weaknesses he sees in the system, an opportunity that he takes in full measure. His royalist principles of direct, unequivocal control and his hatred of parliamentary government, that he sees dissipating power, he puts into the mind of Rabourdin 'qui se disait "On est ministre pour avoir de la décision, connaître les affaires et les faire marcher"' (E, VII, 907). Rabourdin seeks to make the system fit for the successful execution of decisions, an ambition that runs contrary to the wishes of the other employees. For Balzac such a transformation would require the will of a Napoleon. In Rabourdin he puts into play, against the degenerative forces of the Ministry, an innocent faith in the inevitable reward of good and rightful intent. In unspoken conflict with the interests of all in the department save Sébastien, he is 'un honnête homme aimant son pays et le servant' (E, VII, 899), the true officer of state that Barbéris sees acting in the honourable cause of civil organisation, rather than profit. However, as well as his exactitude, prudence, integrity and skill Rabourdin, like des Lupeaulx, holds within himself the seeds of his own downfall:

L'homme qui avait enterré les illusions de la jeunesse qui avait renoncé à de secrètes ambitions; vous eussiez reconnu l'homme découragé mais encore sans dégoût et qui

persiste dans ses premiers projets, plus pour employer ses facultés que l'espoir d'un douteux triomphe (E, VII, 899).

The element of resignation denies him the benefits of ambition and youthful illusion. Aspirations have been replaced by competence and good taste. His plan of reform reflects his integrity and administrative ability but he is a man without the strategy and the indomitable will required for its execution in a totally hostile environment.

5.4 Buildings and Architecture

5.4.1 The Ministry

In *Les Employés*, the Ministry buildings determine the ambiance, relationships and practices of employee and visitor. Members of the public who seek redress or favour from the Ministry enter a building that reflects its clandestine, ambiguous administrative mood, ‘des corridors obscurs, des dégagements peu éclairés, des portes percées, comme les loges de théâtre, d’une vitre ovale qui ressemble à un œil [...] et sur lesquelles sont des indications incompréhensibles’ (E, VII, 954). ‘The vitre ovale qui ressemble à un œil’ looks on both the employees and visitors. In anticipation of a twentieth-century Kafka, it suggests the silent presence of an ever watchful, controlling power that exerts its authority from beyond the Ministry. Within the Ministry itself, employee status is denoted by the size and positioning of the rooms, each employee having a pre-determined physical space that reflects their status and power in the hierarchy:

Vous êtes dans une première pièce où se tient le garçon de bureau; il en est une seconde où sont les employés inférieurs; le cabinet d’un sous-chef vient ensuite à droite ou à gauche; enfin plus loin ou plus haut, celui du chef de bureau (Ibid.).

The signs of status stabilize the hierarchical ladder and consolidate government power. Although the clear visual structures can also motivate the aspirant toward higher office, mobility and activity are restricted within pre-determined parameters. Public power requires constant visual re-enforcement of the values and divisions it creates. Visual signs and status are joined in a permanent physical manifestation of government authority and direction. At the same time they firmly connect certain employees with their own need for stability and display. The power behind the display remains a potent force for both those who seek a working commitment to the administration and for those who enjoy the association with power but need to explore beyond its limitations. The *vol décent* at the Ministry is a direct reflection of that dilemma, and the building a determining factor in the establishment and consolidation of administrative culture. It is a ‘living’ construct with the capacity to reflect fluctuations in power and administrative style.

The ‘littérature du microscope’ is at work in Balzac’s detailed description of those changes. Although the directors suffer a decline in status due to an amalgamation of departments and ‘ont perdu tout leur lustre en perdant leurs hôtels, leurs gens leurs salons et leur petite cour’ (E, VII, 955), the employee’s office earns a

description of minutiae that represent a dramatic comparison in terms of wealth and practice with that of the directors:

Le bureau des employés est une grande pièce plus ou moins claire, rarement parquetée. Le parquet et la cheminée sont spécialement affectés aux chefs de bureau et de division, ainsi que les armoires, les bureaux et les tables d'acajou, les fauteuils de maroquin rouge ou vert, les divans, les rideaux de soie et autres objets de luxe administratif. Le bureau des employés a un poêle dont le tuyau donne dans une cheminée bouchée, s'il y a cheminée. Le papier de tenture est uni, vert ou brun. Les tables sont en bois noir (E, VII, 955-956).

The Ministry and its fittings visually enforce the structures and powers of employees as it wishes them to be. The permanence of the structures and facilities indicate employee practices that conform with strictures of place and practice.

Whilst the form and structure of the Ministry imposes values and practices on its employees in *Les Employés*, in *César Birotteau* Balzac shows 'les institutions dependent entièrement des sentiments que les hommes y attachent et des grandeurs dont elles sont revêtues par la pensée' (CB, VI, 304). The change in authorial focus is subtle, whilst it ostensibly re-aligns responsibility for behavioural response to circumstances from institutional pressure to the individual; in fact, it exposes a different form of coercive influence. These persuasive powers in *César Birotteau* arise from a wider context:

Pour les gens qui prennent au sérieux la Société, l'appareil de la Justice a je ne sais quoi de grand et grave. [...] Aussi quand il n'y a plus, non pas de religion, mais de croyance chez un peuple, quand l'éducation première y a relâché tous les liens conservateurs en habituant l'enfant à une impitoyable analyse, une nation est-elle dissoute; car elle ne fait plus corps que par les ignobles soudures de l'intérêt matériel, par les commandements du culte que crée l'Égoïsme bien entendu. Nourri d'idées religieuses, Birotteau acceptait la Justice pour ce qu'elle devrait être aux yeux des hommes, une représentation de la Société même, une auguste expression de la loi (CB, VI, 304-5).

Birotteau has been nourished on religion, and has a belief in ideals that are to be found in society. Of particular importance to him is the notion of justice, a concept he believes is made manifest in the law. He is therefore unquestioning of the physical presence of the law, the grandeur of its monuments, and equally a victim of its theatre. He is a victim because he is unable to challenge its purported integrity. While 'les ignoble soudures de l'intérêt matériel' may lead to the dissolution of society, the alternative renders the individual subject to emotional rather than rational response. 'Ils deviennent rares, les hommes qui ne montent pas sans de vives émotion l'escalier de la Cour royale, au vieux Palais de Justice à Paris et l'ancien négociant était un de ces hommes' (CB, VI, 305).

5.5 Caricature in *Les Employés*

Keri Yousif's recent work on *Balzac, Grandville, and the Rise of Book Illustration* refers to *Les Employés* with regard to 'the growth of book illustration and its destabilisation of the cultural field'.²⁸⁹ I extend that work in a consideration of how destabilisation, caused by the opposition of the visual and written, was reflected in *Les Employés*. Balzac includes in the novel a caricature, in visual form, that plays a decisive role in the narrative but he also uses the mode of literary caricature as a recurring verbal motif to test the reality of the emergence of a new social capital and, by consequence, the social acceptance of the *vol décent*.

The popularity of visual and literary caricature in early nineteenth-century France reached a level where it was capable of meeting and promoting a national demand for art and the written word. The nature of the creative arts themselves was also moving between romanticism and realism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, encouraged by the methodology of the natural sciences based on observation, categorisation and analysis. The combination of productive capacity and artistic form allowed the novel, short story, and visual art to become mass market products. Amongst those products was the visual and literary form of caricature that Roger Kimball defines thus:

Caricature is fundamentally an illustrational art. It exaggerates a physical quality in order to reveal an underlying moral or emotional reality. In the best caricatures, exaggeration evaporates in the light of a higher realism.²⁹⁰

The exploitation of the caricature due to improved technology transformed the commercial market of print and publication. The technological advance of the lithograph was matched by efficiencies in printing which resulted in improved capacity, quality and speed. These advances coincided with a general expansion in public literacy and a particular boost in the formation of boy's schools during the 1830's, both of which resulted in a corresponding expansion of the readership market. A marketing strategy emerged to exploit the emerging niche markets, such as the new young readership of *Le Journal des enfants* and women subscribers to *Le Journal des femmes*, in a combination of image and word that enjoyed additional revenue from advertisements. Charton's mass market publication *Le Magasin pittoresque* favoured image above the written word, selling in high volumes at low

²⁸⁹ Keri Yousif, *Balzac, Grandville, and the Rise of Book Illustration* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 4.

²⁹⁰ Roger Kimball, 'Strange seriousness: discovering Daumier', *The New Criterion*, Vol.18, No.8, April 2000.

cost. The success of this model was followed by Emile Girardin who launched the daily newspaper *La Presse* at a reduced annual subscription, making up the shortfall in revenue with increased circulation and advertising. Balzac was directly involved in this expanding market as both contributor of articles for the press and writer of the *feuilleton*. He was fully aware of the potential of the newspaper as a marketable product, as he was to demonstrate in *L'Illustré Gaudissart* where financial and linguistic deception is adopted for the *vol décent* but is matched by Margaritis's deception over the sale of wine to Gaudissart; a cross deception that provides evidence of the spread and normalisation of chicanery. Balzac sees the competition for space between the visual and the textual as a challenge to the hegemony of the writer. He also sees it as a financial and cultural threat to the superiority of the artist as opposed to the practitioner.

La Presse proved that the *feuilleton* attracted and retained subscribers for the publisher, also providing funds to remunerate the writers on a cash per line basis. However, the success of the *feuilleton* placed the novel and short story in direct competition for space with caricature/illustration. The lithograph further aggravated that competition by providing the opportunity for both to appear on the same page of the newspaper.

The commodification of art and literature brought into focus for Balzac the conflict between the true artist, both literary and visual, and the merely skilled practitioner. For him the artist stands at the head of society, influencing and shaping the world. In his article titled 'Des Artistes' published in *La Silhouette* on 25 February, 1830, he makes the supremacy of the artist clear:

Un homme qui dispose de la pensée, est un souverain. Les rois commandent aux nations pendant un temps donné, l'artiste commande à des siècles entiers; il change la face des choses, il jette une révolution en moule; il pèse sur le globe, il le façonne (OD, II, 708).

In *Les Employés* Balzac transposes that notion into the Ministry, where he confirms his view of artistic supremacy in his critique of the caricaturist/illustrator Bixiou. Although Bixiou is a perceptive observer of circumstances he is not a creative artistic force, nor has he an exclusive dedication to artistic purpose. For Balzac, this condemns him to artistic mediocrity. Bixiou does however continue to reflect the commercial appropriation of art in a trajectory that shows him moving between the roles of aspiring painter, caricaturist and illustrator. This was a common movement during the period but it is important to stress that Balzac recognises the caricature

as a potent artistic form, one often practised by great visual artists, such as Honoré Daumier, Henry Monnier, Charles- Joseph Traviès de Villers and J.J. Grandville. Although he condemns caricature where it fails as art, his purpose is not to distinguish amongst artists but to expose disproportionate reward of consumer-orientated goods masquerading as art.

For Balzac, deception by way of a commercial assertion of artistic merit, rather than its actuality, degrades the creative force of aesthetics and challenges the supremacy of art that heightens understanding of the human condition ‘by opening access to otherwise inaccessible insights’.²⁹¹ The process of production, editing and distribution is controlled by the publisher and sanctioned by the purchaser who responds to impact over substance: ‘en effet, le public, gent moutonnière, prend l’habitude de suivre les arrêts de cette conscience stupide décorée du nomme de: *vox populi*’ (OD, II, 717). In present times, the advent of television, radio, internet and social media has, under commercial pressures, become media creators of impact at the expense of both fact and creative substance. It has led to a reversal of priority, where not only does popular impact determine content but it is presented and interpreted as significant. This is exactly the outcome that Balzac feared. The shock induced by Bixiou’s dramatic caricature changes the direction of the narrative and ensures that the employees will bring about the downfall of Roubourdin. The actual caricature itself brings about a further *vol décent* within the narrative, when Roubourdin’s reasoned plan is denied an audience by Dutocq and Bixiou. The immediate shock of the visual caricature arouses the basic instinct for survival, galvanising opposition and effectively destroying any chance of the plan’s implementation. The deception by visual analogy is not a total denial of reality but it sufficiently distorts, selects and excludes, to deny any alternative interpretation. Balzac marks the limitation of commercially minded illustration and its absence of aesthetic insight by the exposure of Bixiou’s fatal character traits, attributes that fail to reach those required of the serious artist:

Cet homme, tout sens et tout esprit, se perdait par une fureur pour les plaisirs de tout genre qui le jetait dans une dissipation continuelle.[...] Malgré sa gaieté d’épiderme, il percevait dans ses discours un secret mécontentement de sa position sociale, il aspirait à quelque chose de mieux, et le fatal démon caché dans son esprit l’empêchait d’avoir le sérieux qui en impose tant sots (E, VII, 975-976).

²⁹¹ Bernard Harrison, ‘Realism’, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. by Richard Eldridge, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 226.

Having exposed limitations of temperament, Balzac proceeds to expose those limitations in action. Sensing promotion by attaching himself to the hapless Baudoyer, Bixiou agrees for a fee to produce a caricature of Rabourdin that will destroy his deserved opportunity for promotion. Rabourdin's plan to increase the efficiency of the Ministry involves a reduction in staffing levels, a just proposition, in terms of public expenditure, but one that easily attracts the universal disquiet of the employees. To exploit that fear, the caricature is used to enhance apprehension with an image of Rabourdin as a butcher. However, Bixiou is shown to lack the imaginary powers of the artist and the caricature's content is proposed by Dutocq:

Il faudrait représenter Rabourdin habillé en boucher, mais bien ressemblant, chercher des analogies entre un bureau et une cuisine, lui mettre à la main un tranchelard, peindre les principaux employés des ministres en volailles, les engager dans une immense souricière sur laquelle on écrirait: *Exécutions administratives*, et il serait censé leur couper le cou un à un. Il y aurait des oies, des canards à têtes conformées comme les nôtres, des portraits vagues, vous comprenez! Il tiendrait un volatile à la main, Baudoyer, par exemple fait en dindon! (E, VII, 1001)

The graphic representation of the employees' own imminent 'execution' signals the ultimate separation of the employees from their income, status and future. The impact of the caricature is felt when the 'executioner' is recognised as Rabourdin and the victims as 'les principaux employés, who are the people who will view the work. The use of hybrid human-animals in the style of Grandville works to momentarily delay the shock only to increase it when their own faces are recognised in a predictive picture of their fate. The Ministry office is transformed into a kitchen, the attachment of the employee to place firmly established by the books and pens littering the floor. The analogy is reinforced by sight of 'une immense souricière' inscribed with the title '*Exécutions administratives*'.

This visual caricature, credited to Honoré Daumier, appears in *Les Employés* to provide the only example of an in-text lithograph in *La Comédie humaine*. Friend of Balzac, Daumier was an artist of the highest order, his work with caricature admired and lauded, particularly by Baudelaire. In an essay dedicated to 'quelques caricatures françaises' Baudelaire gives an appreciation of Daumier:

Feuilletez son œuvre, et vous verrez défiler devant vos yeux, dans sa réalité fantastique et saisissante, tout ce qu'une grande ville contient de vivantes monstruosités. Tout ce qu'elle renferme de trésors effrayants, grotesque, sinistres et bouffons, Daumier le connaît. Le cadavre vivant et affamé, le cadavre gras et repu, les misères ridicules du ménage, toutes les sottises, tous les orgueils, tous les désespoirs du bourgeois, rien n'y manque.²⁹²

²⁹² Expositions virtuelles: Daumier, 'Daumier vu par Baudelaire', *Bibliothèque nationale*, <http://www.expositions.bnf.fr/daumier/pedago/01_2.htm/> [accessed 17 July 2017]

Daumier's actual work bears copious witness to his talent but the caricature in *Les Employés* provides an exception, being of dubious quality and without any major artistic merit. As the narrative describes Bixiou as the artist it raises the question as to whether or not Balzac illustrated the caricaturist's imaginary limitations by making Dutocq the designer of the piece and, in alliance with Daumier, matched Bixiou's limitations in artistic practice. This is an unanswered question but it illustrates Balzac's quest to distinguish the true artist from the commercial pretender.

As Jean-Marc Laurent notes in his *Histoire de la caricature en France*, 'La nourriture de la caricature est l'observation. Savoir observer et déceler les traits physiques'.²⁹³ Balzac uses the visual caricature in *Les Employés* in a self-conscious manner, making it a crude narrative instrument that causes Rabourdin's downfall.

In an attempt to challenge and match the general impact of visual caricature, and also to show a destabilisation of social values characteristic of the period, Balzac makes multiple employee character sketches in *Les Employés*. Written in the encyclopedic, taxonomic style of scientific analysis but they also contain textual pictures, observations that enjoy a kinship with the traditional visual caricature. However, Balzac's textual descriptions do not represent the fantastical, such as human/animal depictions but stay within the bounds of possibility. Balzac does use exaggeration in his written caricature but it is always rooted in a reality which might be deeply unpleasant and grotesque, but remains entirely believable. Balzac's restraint is indicative of the transition from imaginative romanticism to observable realism; a movement in which 'realism in literature, for one thing, becomes associated with claims to 'truth' or at least to the truthful 'representation of reality'.²⁹⁴ The result is subtle and a 'true' representation of social type.

Phellion's portrait provides good example. It begins, typically for Balzac, with a review of Phellion's family situation, his relationship to the Ministry, career history and milieu, all of which combine to inform the reader of character. He then moves to a scene, observable in the mind's eye of the reader, which creates a

²⁹³ Jean-Marc Laurent, 'Histoire de la caricature en France', *Histoire Pour Tous*, <<http://www.histoire-pour-tous.fr/histoire-de-france/5014-histoire-de-la-caricature-en-france.html>> [accessed 17 July 2017]

²⁹⁴ Harrison, 'Realism', *The Oxford handbook of Philosophy and Literature*. ed. by Richard Eldridge, p. 224.

memorable caricature of the minor civil servant consolidating fresh priorities and new social capital:

Vous devinez l'homme qui tous les ans conduisait, le jour des Morts, au cimetière de l'Ouest ses trois enfants auxquels il montrait les vingt mètres de terre achetés à perpétuité, dans lesquels son père et la mère de sa femme avaient été enterrés. «Nous y viendrons tous», leur disait-il pour les familiariser avec l'idée de la mort (E, VII, 969).

The picture of Phellion and his three children in the cemetery are contrived but function as an immediately recognisable social reality, a potent, sad picture of good intent hopelessly flawed and corrupted. However, it is the words spoken, but not displayed, that deliver the memorable pathos. Balzac creates a striking caricature of an early nineteenth-century bureaucrat, that could be extended to many other groups, displaying the new bourgeois values of propriety and establishing a new social capital. *Ancien régime* values had been earned by association with established power, but Balzac displays the destabilisation of those values by the self-interest of the emergent bourgeoisie.

5.6 An Inevitable Discord

5.6.1 The Bureaucratic Effect

Balzac asserts that anything which deviates from, or delays governmental decision results in a degeneration of institutional purpose. For him, the decision making process, is required to be autocratic, instinctive and swift. Similarly, administrative triumph, through the successful execution of governmental dictate, must march along a route free of unsolicited ideas or employee self-interest. This peremptory, hierarchical concept rests on the same notion of a natural order of superiority that Balzac mistakenly held to be effective in the *ancien régime* period.

The ability to delay and subvert process as an exercise of power is captured in the adoption of 'le Rapport'. It becomes a working methodology, instigated by the Ministry and ostensibly designed to inform the minister and act as a defence before the two Chambers and the Restoration Court. However, Balzac sees the report as a currency of administrative power, a tool capable of controlling and manipulating both the law making process and its implementation:

Le rapport devint ainsi, pour l'affaire et pour le ministre ce qu'est le rapport à la Chambre des députés pour les lois; une consultation où sont traitées les raisons contre et pour avec plus ou moins de partialité. Le ministre, de même que la Chambre, se trouve tout aussi avancé avant qu'après le rapport. Toute espèce de parti se prend en un instant. Quoi qu'on fasse, il faut arriver au moment où l'on se décide. Plus on met en bataille de raisons pour et de raisons contre, moins le jugement est sain. Les plus belles choses de la France se sont accomplies quand il n'existait pas de rapport et que les décisions étaient spontanées. La loi suprême de la d'État est d'appliquer des formules précises à tous les cas, à la manière des juges et des médecins. Rabourdin, qui se disait: « On est ministre pour avoir de la décision, connaître les affaires et les faire marcher » vit le rapport régnant en France (E, VII, (907/8).

The narrator's declamatory statement of purported fact relies for success on reader acceptance of fictional certainty. The illusion of certainty is created when simple answers are given to simplified concepts, a rhetorical space in which reason and debate are silent. The reader is offered, in a seductive and reductive process, an absolute resolution to complex unresolved issues. The style of delivery reflects the prerogatives of autocracy, unfounded assertion, unquestioned definition, opportune omission, unresolved resolution followed by unequivocal instruction, all without resort to 'les raisons contre et pour'.

The report is a legitimate government tool. It provides the power to manipulate change, but not always for the better. For Balzac it becomes a vehicle for the deception inherent in the *vol décent*. 'Les raisons contre et pour' invite 'plus ou moins de partialité', a variable factor that always wears the persuasive cloak of

officialdom. Sensitive to the coercive power of the report, Balzac seeks to take it out of the bureaucratic arsenal with a generalisation that is actually a call to nationalism and historic certainty. ‘Les plus belles choses de la France se sont accomplies quand il n’existait pas de rapport et que les décisions étaient spontanées’.

The autocratic and decisive manner of Balzac’s ideal administrative process is shown to be compromised and then dissipated by the use of the report. The capacity to undermine governmental purpose is also found in the common bureaucratic trope ‘que plus il y aurait de monde employé par le gouvernement, plus le gouvernement serait fort’ (E, VII, 908). At the Ministry level, it ensures larger budgets and creates a funding hierarchy that differentiates between different ministries. At the employee level, it stimulates group power and satisfies basic security needs. For the government it works to consolidate power, the substantial presence of government servants being a visual assertion of authority.

Although the purpose of the report is intellectual analysis and evaluation of circumstance, it goes against the Balzacian notion of a dynamic administration based on an essentially monarchical or Napoleonic, dictatorial ideology whose purpose, in the context of government, is the introduction and implementation of despotic decision. The strength of Balzac’s commitment to his understanding of *ancien régime* and Napoleonic ideology can be found as early as 1820 in his ‘livre de cuisine’, *Pensées et Maximes de Napoléon* and its subsequent expansion and reiteration in 1839. Saint Paulien in *Napoléon Balzac et l’Empire de la Comédie humaine* confirms Balzac’s self-identification with Napoléon in the realm of literature as much as in the field of political thought:

Bien loin de croire qu’il dénature la pensée napoléonienne, il est persuadé, au contraire qu’il en est le très fidèle interprète: n’est-il pas la réincarnation littéraire, politique de l’Empereur? Il est Napoléon-Balzac.²⁹⁵

The *Maximes et Pensées* themselves provide evidence of the affinity between Balzac and the former Emperor regarding the efficacy of despotism, the supremacy of the will and individual genius. Amongst the selected extracts below Balzac also reflects on an *ancien régime* that he sees enacting socially beneficial values through similarly disposed despotic monarchy:

²⁹⁵ Saint-Paulien, *Napoléon Balzac et l’empire de la Comédie humaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979), p. 152.

La Frontière du gouvernement démocratique est l'anarchie, celle du gouvernement monarchique est le despotisme; l'anarchie est impuissante, le despotisme peut accomplir de grandes choses.²⁹⁶

La monarchie est fondée sur l'inégalité des conditions, qui est dans la nature, et la république sur l'égalité, qui est impossible.²⁹⁷

Une mauvaise loi appliquée rend plus de services qu'une bonne loi interprétée.²⁹⁸

Whilst supporting the primacy of effective action the maxims confront the political movement of the period toward democracy. For Balzac such a movement results in an acceptance of the *vol décent* where deception becomes an integral part of the social fabric.

²⁹⁶ Saint-Paulien, *Napoléon Balzac et l'empire de la Comédie humaine*, p. 153.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

5.7 Conclusion

Les Employés is a complex narrative. At once retro-active and avant-garde, the novel, together with *Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse*, exposes the notion of the *vol décent* as a force capable of both stabilizing and manipulating the ministries of state.

The principal *vol décent* in *Les Employés* distinguishes itself from the other forms of acceptable theft identified in the thesis. Typically, the protagonist gains an immoral but lawful and socially acceptable benefit at the expense of the victim: as does du Tillet in *César Birotteau*, or Mme Évangélista in *Le Contrat de mariage*. However, the *vol décent* that controls the employees at the Ministry creates a settlement in which the parties, high officials and lower grades, suffer both loss and gain in a consolidation of diverse interests. The result is that the *vol décent* acts to seal an unresolved discontent and a deviation from administrative purpose. The impact of the *vol décent* at the Ministry, with its acceptance of hopes curtailed, leads to the creation the creation of new social values and new forms of social capital. The public employee's movement from monetary aspiration to a social status based on education, cultural association and political allegiance, all exercised or disguised with bourgeois decorum and decency, results in a public employment phenomenon still pervasive in the twenty-first century.

Balzac sets *Les Employés* at a post-ancien régime, post-revolution, post-empire and most importantly a post-industrial revolution, moment. He recognises that he is writing at a historical point when fundamental socio-economic and political shifts are taking place. In *Les Employés* he focusses on bureaucracy and its interference in executive directives. For him this marks a fundamental shift from dictatorial power to a manipulative administrative practice and corrupting political interests. Behind the bureaucratic pursuit of an alternative social status lies the elemental conflict between personal and employment interests, a conflict that has dominated industrial relations and public services to the present day. It is a conflict in which the necessity for earnings is weighed against aspirations of personal fulfilment beyond the sphere of employment, a condition reflected in the behavioural patterns of so many of the Ministry civil servants. Technological advances followed in the wake of the industrial revolution and directly determined and created commercial opportunity. These advances are recognised in their impact

on newsprint and publication, visual artists and writers. The scientific approach to understanding of the early nineteenth century was led by rational, rather than religious, thought. Balzac's awareness of the impact of historical change on social behaviour is well documented, and for him such changes are the forces that ultimately determine social direction, culture and manners. This idealism refers to a lost world of certainty where government and governmental process were deemed to work in legitimate and rational harmony.

Balzac's idealism is in conflict with experience and he argues for both in *Les Employés* and *Aventures administratives d'une idée heureuse*. Toril Moi finds the root of that opposition when he states that: 'Realists judge only by experience and idealists [...] judge only by reason'.²⁹⁹ However, he also resolves the issue for Balzac when he asserts that 'a realist technique is [...] perfectly compatible with idealist aesthetics, for the realist serves the ideal by pointing to the deleterious consequences of its absence'.³⁰⁰ The ideal is captured in the perfect idea, propagated by the superior being and delivered by reasoned process. It is through failure in the interchange between crown, minister and administration that Balzac exposes the fatal deviation from the ideal at the hands of bureaucracy.

Balzac's sociological approach owes much to the period's work in the field of natural science, particularly its taxonomic methodology. It invites caricature to heighten awareness of social types, an invitation that Balzac embraces and exploits. However, the unresolved discontent captured by the *vol décent* re-occurs for Balzac himself. Almost in revenge for his family's misfortunes at the hands of the Ministry, he uses the narrative to display bureaucratic incompetence. Similarly, he distinguishes the artist from the illustrator through the narrative in an attempt to secure appropriate financial reward for the artist. As art and its financial appreciation are subject to commercial criteria in the new world order he recognises that aesthetic values, previously rewarded under patronage of crown and church, no longer have benefactors.

In the latent discord between employee and employer at the Finance Ministry and the accommodation of the *vol décent*, which stabilised but did not resolve dispute, Balzac exposes the limitations of compromise: inertia, inefficiency and the

²⁹⁹ Toril Moi, 'Idealism', *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* ed. by Richard Eldridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 280.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

absence of unified purpose. He shows this in a wider political context by illustrating both the limits of executive political power over the institutions of state, and the limits of institutions to influence governmental purpose. In doing so, he proposes the presence of opposing and irreconcilable social and political forces.

Balzac's solution to organisational dysfunction is dictatorship, either monarchical or Napoleonic, with its promise of direct, unadulterated, effective action. In *Les Employés* however, he sees it giving way under the newly emergent powers of social mobility and individual opportunity. He reveals Napoleon to have been limited in his capacity to maintain control over the bureaucratic machine, and shows the monarchical delegation of power to ministers to have ceased to be effective. It is the civil servants, now occupying a new market in which they enjoy entrepreneurial opportunity and alternative forms of social capital, who find themselves in a position to limit governmental power. When newly available opportunities are seized by the employees, collective power fragments, and like the *vol décent* in this case, creates a stagnant equilibrium. Balzac identifies the limits to idealism when the ideal is tested against the new socio-economic realities of Restoration France. The reality of circumstance makes change an inevitability that idealism cannot resist. The idealism/brute reality opposition is a familiar concept in Balzac's work: indeed the primacy of reality over idealism is clearly established by Mme d'Espard's individual will in *L'Interdiction*. In *Les Employés* on the other hand, it is a new collective social power that Balzac shows to be at work.

Conclusion

It is ironic that Balzac's first acquaintance with the concept of acceptable theft was during his adolescent years spent as a clerk in the legal chambers of Guillonnet-Merville and Maître Passez. He witnessed an oxymoronic fusion of opposing forces in which the legal codes, the body of law designed to determine social conduct and standard, in fact facilitated the subversion of those purposes. The codes, by omission and inept drafting, legitimized opportunities for chicanery amongst lawyers and their clients in what became known as a *vol légal*. Balzac had observed the working of a dubious but expedient notion of acceptability that legally sanctioned and indeed encouraged sharp practice. His awareness of that notion, in a criminal context, is found in his early *Code des gens honnêtes ou l'art de ne pas être dupe des fripons* of 1825.

The *vol décent*, an extension of the *vol légal*, enjoys a ubiquitous presence in *La Comédie humaine*. We see it not only in the texts chosen for close analysis but also in the wider Balzacian œuvre extending the notion beyond one dependent upon anomalies in the law. The research reveals, in the Balzacian world, and by implication, as a social reality, a recurring exploitation of opportunities that are not subject to social or legal retribution. Balzac shows the absence of reprisal to give reign to immorality. Irrespective of the immoral or illegal character of such actions, they are nevertheless effective in multiple forms and circumstances. The sobriquet *vol décent*, recognised in the thesis as a fertile and almost certainly a Balzacian construct, is a fusion of deprivation, integral to the concept of theft, and decency, integral to the notion of social acceptability. I have argued that its ubiquitous presence implies that dishonesty was an accepted social reality. The recent work by Rosemary Peters in *Stealing Things*, Scott Carpenter in *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France* and Sotirios Parachas in *Reappearing Characters in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* has established the normalisation of deception and fraudulence in nineteenth-century France, particularly in the field of literature and publishing. Balzac's work reflects the social *mentalité* that values

expediency above ethics and immorality detoxified by wealth, social position or self-interest.

The *vol décent* requires a combination of elements, which acting together, offer the opportunity for unfettered, usually immoral behaviour to succeed without fear of retribution. This research has identified the essential elements of the process of the *vol décent* as deprivation, a loss of value, financial, political, social or personal, belonging to another. It results from a deception perpetrated on the victim, often with unwitting collusion. The third element is a sanction of the act, an acceptance that allows the perpetrator of the deception to be the beneficiary of the loss. As an action motif the *vol décent* is recognised by its constituent parts but the research has shown those parts are subject to the circumstances in which they operate and dependent upon the dispositions of both perpetrator and victim. This thesis demonstrates that Balzac used all these elements and each one in diverse forms. The multiplicity of forms makes categorisation of the *vol décent* problematic.

Balzac often bases much of the deception element of the *vol décent* on the confusion between appearance and reality. The continuum of deception, in terms of creative inventions acting in the cause of deceit includes, inter alia, silence, false information, visual delusion, bureaucratic process and dramatic display, all of which serve to close or even eclipse the distinction between appearance and reality. The deprivation and benefits in the *vol décent* are equally diverse. They range from financial benefit, social benefit, psychological satisfaction, class mobility, to confirmation of social and financial superiority. The sanction of deprivation is commonly revealed by Balzac to be a result of social apathy, impotence or vulnerability, self or group interest. He looks at the general human condition in a fixed time scale, confined to the historic circumstances of a period experiencing fundamental socio-economic change. The Restoration was characterised by social and commercial liberation certainly, but also by chaos.

Using the *vol décent* as heuristic, this research finds originality in the Balzac vision which goes beyond socio-economic theory and current critical coverage. It emerges from recognition of socio-economic determinist theory but asserts the presence of alternative forces that confine its impact and re-shape its form. The centrality of circumstance and the interrelationship of time and place that Balzac represents as determinants of human action are qualified and ultimately able to be subordinated by the hegemony he awards to individual genius. The *vol décent* finds

and unveils both the process and positioning under which the supreme individual must act. The supremacy resides in the rare capacity to detach the process of achievement from the burden of external influences. This immanent activity wholly isolates the sovereign individual from external pressures and restraints, contained within the mind, independent of all social manipulation. The dominant characteristic is the supreme individual's disinterest, an absence of regard or concern for others, a freedom of action liberated from state control. Balzac recognises this disconnect as being characteristic of the new financial transactions in non-tangibles, where profit is measured by the relationship between investment and yield, a purely mathematical calculation that has no need of human exchange. The detachment is consolidated by exclusive and relentless focus on the process, at the expense of any engagement with transcendent values. Balzac recognises the potency of the *vol décent* as heuristic in the social, economic and philosophic consequences the paradigm reveals.

In the field of commerce and business, the strategy of exclusive self-interest and the application of will, offer the key to financial success through a concentration on process rather than ideology. The notion of detachment from socio-political theory delivers freedom of action. The freedom is adopted by Nucingen, whose disinterest in his investors is total, emphasised by his silence and isolation. His calculations for financial gain are allowed to run their course and despite the crises that arise he and his strategy remain impervious to change. The combination of disinterest, focus and resolve is the recipe for financial and social success, the foundations of power. The financial superstars of *La Comédie humaine*, Nucingen, du Tillet, the Kellers, de Marsay, Grandet all manifest the same attributes, focus, relentless application and social disinterest. The formula is not restricted to commerce however. The hierarchy of superior individuals that adopt its disciplines include musicians, artists, scientists, leaders and, in the case of Vautrin, extraordinary villains. The blueprint constitutes a combination of forces capable of maximising individual human potential. As philosophic proposition it asserts a hegemonic role for the superior individuals who operate beyond social dogma and values. Balzac accepts and embraces the hard realities of individual success and the primacy of the individual, but he does not promote an anti-social strategy but rather maintains a protean position between the improbable and the effective.

In every aspect of his social enquiry, Balzac points to an underlying predisposition in the human condition to accommodate the *vol décent*: the individual and society will accept breaches in established rule and convention in order to improve function or to satisfy aspiration whether for group or self-interest. Where an absence of retribution and the chance of benefit collide, Balzac reveals a human susceptibility to amoral opportunism. Even a professed devotion to law and ethics can find itself compromised in the presence of opportunity. At this point susceptibility metamorphoses into positive action. The *vol décent* itself acts as a virus that infiltrates all milieux, offering an easy opportunity which is not without risk but is without fear of a social or legal reckoning. Blame does not attach to the exponents of the *vol décent*. Indeed Balzac shows them often praised for prescience and cunning: a cultural influence in which unscrupulous opportunism is covertly praised and sanctioned.

Balzac graphically illustrates the commodification of life. He recognises that illusion, often stimulated by theatrical intervention, can be converted into actuality, thereby transforming falsehood into truth. In doing so he anticipates the cultural changes so evident in twentieth and twenty-first century society. The obsessive desire for commodity acquisition that he displays is of such persistence that it comes to represent and then determine much of human worth. We sense his fear of a total displacement of other values and his anxiety at the replacement of the ease and poise of the *ancien régime* by the anonymity of capitalist exchange. That process involves a belief in the reality of what is in effect an illusion, that having is being. Balzac's stress on theatre and the skills of theatricality show how the transfer from appearance to reality can be made. This is the process by which the potent images of fashion, advertising and creative display award recognition of social and personal status. They consolidate the belief that representation has become life. Balzac emphasises the centrality of belief in this equation by conflating belief with desire. César Birotteau accepts the 'play' performed at the Keller Bank because of his need for money, his desire for financial salvation. It strengthens his belief that the representation of reality he observes is an actuality. Similarly, Mme Évangélista's relentless display of the signs of wealth meets the desire of her audience to believe that she is in reality fabulously wealthy, even though she is approaching destitution.

From his position at the beginning of major capital and commercial growth, Balzac recognises the capacity of these transforming forces to effect fundamental

cultural change. He foregrounds a critical tradition in which cultural change, as a response to the combination of commodification and the illusionary powers of reification, is analysed. Guy Debord, in *La Société du spectacle*, writing in the middle of the twentieth century inherits exactly that combination and places it in a Marxist context:

L'aliénation du spectateur au profit de l'objet contemplé (qui est le résultat de sa propre activité inconsciente) s'exprime ainsi: plus il contemple, moins il vit; plus il accepte de se reconnaître dans les images dominantes du besoin, moins il comprend sa propre existence et son propre désir.³⁰¹

Balzac is a forerunner of the notion of a post culture society in which the individual is alienated from his natural values. This is a move that for George Steiner is consonant with rapid technological and scientific development; that results 'in a retreat from the word, spoken, remembered and written discourse, the backbone of consciousness.'³⁰² Present time recognition and evaluation of the re-definition of culture by 'the obsessive acquisition of manufactured products [which] brings about the 'reification' of individuals, *turns them into objects*' is led by Mario Vargas Llosa.³⁰³ His concerns still reflect Balzac's awareness of the fundamental social changes being forged post Revolution, post Empire and post Industrial Revolution. The *vol décent* is a contributor to that cultural change, recognised by its successful reliance on deceit and its social acceptance; factors which signal a departure from established social values and order. Balzac shows it as part of the new order, holding a permanent place in a society where sophistry and disinterested have become institutionalised and admired.

This thesis demonstrates how the *vol décent* infiltrates society at all levels and across all milieux. It has explored how Balzac challenges the reader to question the human capacity for social conformity. Its established presence and ubiquity poses the question of whether it provides a necessary social function as well as a pre-determined immunity. A breach with social conformity is one Balzac finds inevitable when, as in the cases of Mme d'Espard and Mme Évangélista, there is a conflict between ethical ideology and the demands of hard reality. Balzac also shows the *vol décent*, as with Pierrotin and Moreau, to be a tool capable of working in favour of social mobility and a re-distribution of wealth and of opportunity.

³⁰¹ Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 31.

³⁰² George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Toward the Redefinition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 86.

³⁰³ Mario Vargas Llosa, *Notes on the Death of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 10.

Whilst not a palliative that could be made universally available, for the fear of triggering social chaos, the *vol décent* remains an attractive, acceptable and necessary release from authoritarian control. Its permanence, necessity and acceptability make it an inevitable cultural event. It also brings into the cultural mix a permanent tolerance of sharp practice.

In my analysis of victim and perpetrator of the *vol décent* Balzac shows how both parties accommodate and even collude in deception. Nucingen's attractiveness for the investor for example, is achieved by his public reputation and enhanced by his own silence. This is matched by the investor's need to believe in the financial omnipotence in the banker, a belief reinforced by the investor's personal incapacity to act in such a market. The inability of the investors to confront adverse circumstances blinds them to, or allows them to disregard, any notion of Nucingen's deception. A commonality of purpose, regarding the outcome of deception, is to achieve a benefit of some kind. It may result in financial reward for the perpetrator, as in the case of du Tillet and Nucingen, financial salvation for Mercadet, political gain for de Marsay, social gain for M. and Mme Moreau or personal satisfaction for Mme and Mlle Évangélista, and the satisfaction of self-interest for Mme d'Espard. All deliver the hope of aspirations fulfilled and the promise of security, financial or otherwise.

The *vol légal* is sanctioned by the law itself, a position of contradiction that attracts a mood of social amusement around the law. It renders the law subject to the exercise of guile and sharp-practice. Balzac observes this mood of flippancy infiltrating society, sanctioning deviousness as acceptable practice. Pierrotin's neighbours and the local police join forces in a conspiratorial entertainment to support his breach of regulations as a collective equalisation of opportunity. However, Balzac also reveals that when the social mood is acquiescent in chicanery, it does not need to be in support of a good cause. The thesis demonstrates that the *vol décent* certainly acts for individual purpose but is also capable of informing social mood and practice. In turn, the *vol décent* reflects on the human capacity to accommodate individual desire in preference to common good. Balzac exposes an oxymoronic reality in which appearance is so persuasive and so inviting that illusion is accepted as actuality, a transmutation that acquires tradable social and financial value.

While Mercadet's embrace of financial speculation and risk accepts deception as a component of speculative trade, he also accepts it as a solution to impending disaster. Deception acts both positively, to equalise creditor and debtor, and emotionally to extend hope in the freedom of financial reprieve. The excited audience applause at the Gymnase came from a bourgeoisie in financial straits. Mercadet delivers them hope and resolution, a seductive combination impossible to question for those vulnerable to financial and social disaster. In the face of institutional authority, such as the bank, government department, the law, Balzac recognises that individual authority is rendered ineffectual. The disparity in power increases according to the comparative levels of institutional and individual strength. Direct approval of the *vol décent* is found amongst those who benefit. The benefit does not need to directly accrue to those approving the act but can gain a general approval that benefits a broader section of society.

In César Birotteau's rejection by the Keller Bank, Balzac has provided a theatrical melodrama whose *mise-en-scène*, manners and method, provides a public display of the self-sanctioning power that lies in the *vol décent*. This unacceptable face of deprivation is revealed when the Kellers, Nucingen and du Tillet, all conspire to destroy César Birotteau. They take all César's self-esteem, by holding out financial olive branches and then withdrawing them, in a cat and mouse display that will end in César's death. The display exposes an alliance of sanctioned power with the human capacity for wanton cruelty, a combination that questions society's capacity to control individual actions.

This thesis has explored how Balzac exposes a normalisation of deceit that operates in the general play of life, where theatrical display, usually exercised in demonstrations of wealth or social status, becomes part of social manners. The manners exert social standards and values that leave society subject to a fashion in deception. These signs assert a reality which does not exist, but function as part of the overall trivia of social discourse. The commonality of gossip legitimises daily pretence. It acts as a welcome palliative for the human condition, soothing discontent. However, the normalisation and acceptance of duplicity, in its various social manifestations, does not always dull the potency of this immoral, public, *vol décent*. Balzac shows targeted gossip, a collective language of social discourse, capable of inflicting severe deprivation on its victims, without the fear of reprisal. Victim of his Parisian neighbourhood gossip, Diard is tainted by suspicion. This

means he cannot realise the value of his art collection; his aspirations for a political position are dashed and he suffers marital estrangement and death

Balzac's imaginative creativity is often uncannily prescient, capable of highlighting and defining what will become a universally acknowledged behavioural reality. In the *vol décent* he recognises a process that will come to play a morally questionable, but ubiquitous role in French commercial and social life. In fact, his visionary power anticipates an even greater role for the *vol décent*, the capacity to deliver mayhem on an international scale and to trigger social restructuring.

Although *La Comédie humaine* is based upon the society in transition that Balzac experiences, this research reveals the *vol décent* as an inherent feature of human nature, not the sole outcome of circumstantial or historical determinism. This is not to suggest that socio-economic and historic influences are not major formative determiners of the human condition but that they must be balanced against inherent, organic, selective powers that reveal Balzac as more than a traditional realist. The *vol décent* reflects the historic upheavals that marked the period of the Restoration and July Monarchy. The milieux selected for research all reflect these transitions and the *vol décent* as heuristic still accommodates the notion of change and paradox, offering easy recognition of the inchoate as a determined position. The impact of those functioning, interim positions in operation contributes important additional insights into the complex relationship between human nature, historical determinism and their narrative representation in *La Comédie humaine*.

As the thesis has argued, the open-ended versatility of the *vol décent*, its freedom from retribution, its open testing of the limits of legality and morality, its exploitation of the ambivalent, all directly contribute to the achievement of financial, social and domestic benefit. The *vol décent* between the state and its employees in *Les Employés*, is responsible for a Ministry inertia which provokes a search amongst the employees for new means to power and a reshaping of the work/employer relationship. The search for new powers leads to the manipulation of the 'report', which in turn creates a powerful bureaucracy capable of taking power from the state. Acquisition of power gives the civil servant a new status of employment security and a freedom to explore additional interests and opportunities. In Phellion and du Bruel Balzac shows the outcome of the *vol décent*

working as catalyst, a stimulus to the formation of new social groupings, the establishment of fresh value systems and a restructuring of society.

The higher the level of social acceptance that deception achieves, the greater the failure of ethics as an effective restraining power. This thesis demonstrates that Balzac clearly marks a limit to the effectiveness of morality, showing goodness and decency to fail in the presence of necessity. The combined forces of Judge Popinot's application of integrity and the marquis d'Espard's dedication to a rectification of historic wrongdoing collapse in the face of Mme d'Espards self-interest. Balzac allows the good Sérisy, himself victim of the *vol décent*, to recognise the welfare of Moreau's children to be above truthfulness or loyalty. Balzac is able to use the construct of the *vol décent* to bring into play the underlying forces that determine individual human behaviour. Du Tillet's climb up the social and financial ladder is a response to the circumstances of his birth and the accidents of experience, a combination that brings him into easy confrontation with harsh realities that others cannot face. For du Tillet, and more obviously so for Nucingen, the reality of their own needs overpower any consideration of the needs, or circumstances of others. This is an unpalatable but cogent realisation in the world of *La Comédie humaine*.

In the bureaucratic *vol décent* of *Les Employés* Balzac reverses, or at least restricts the hegemony of individualism. In what may be termed a sociological analysis of group behaviour, characteristic of the period, he observes power being wrested from the ministerial dictatorship of government. Although he observes social morality to fail, as an ultimate controller of behaviour when in conflict with necessity, he recognises a collective interest able to tame authority. He observes a fundamental movement away from the acquiescence in employer power that characterised the *ancien régime*. In the stability of government service, he finds the employee seeking alternative sources of income or alternative activities. Ironically, those options arise from the embrace of post-industrial revolution capitalism.

The thesis has engaged with Balzac's nostalgic view of the *ancien régime*, a period that provides him with a template for ideal commercial exchange, and national stability. It is a distorted perspective that searches for stability, looking back from an age characterised by social, political and economic upheaval. Paradoxically, Balzac destroys his own utopian vision of the *ancien régime* in a reliable display of artistic integrity that ultimately must award primacy to his observations rather than to his ideals. The observations reflect an underlying

macrostructure of the human condition that the *vol décent* has helped to unveil: the primacy of human vulnerability; the conflict between the ideal and the real; the human instinct for stability and order in a period of chaotic change.

The *vol décent* also works as a philosophical paradigm, stimulating reader response beyond narrative event. The paradigm, whilst accommodating contradiction and resolution, invites a testing of argument, encouraging logical disputation: the essentials of dialectic process. It directs the reader beyond observation and the creative imagination, pointing toward a wider, rational, abstract and methodical consideration of reality. Imaginative literature does not proceed by argument toward truth but relies on the creative image as a representation of reality from which assumptions may be drawn. The literary process cannot therefore answer the philosophical dilemmas it provokes through philosophic discourse. However, its capacity to stimulate reader response beyond the literary image, remains.

The philosophic dilemma that this thesis identifies, between the ethical and the expedient, arises naturally from the *vol décent* and is joined by its counterparts, the conflict between individual and social interests, social acceptability and personal ethics. In using the *vol décent* as heuristic this research recognises that Balzac further extends philosophic debate when he confronts the socio-economic and historic as determinants, the fundamental conflict of necessity and ethics, individual and social supremacy, deception and expediency, the immanent and the transcendent, unfettered possibility. This research has exposed the Balzacian assertion of individual supremacy and the process by which it becomes a possibility. However it notes that he does not mark the limits to that behavioural pattern or the levels of its social impact. As novelist, he triggers reader awareness of an underlying philosophic dilemma but prioritises the dramatic, literary attraction of individual possibility.

Balzac first explored the potent elements of the *vol décent* at a rudimentary commercial and political level in *Les Marana*, set in post-Empire France. In his later work we see it pervading all walks of life. Fast forward to 2008: the *vol décent*, now in a state of advanced sophistication, has brought the banking systems of the United States of America and Western Europe to the brink of collapse. The requirements of the Balzacian *vol décent* have been met in full. The hypocritical mask of professionalism and integrity worn by the bankers, financiers, lawyers and politicians is recognisably Balzacian.

The high risk and largely unregulated market, so humorously depicted in *Mercadet*, becomes an international reality in the USA financial markets of 2008. The legal anomalies characteristic of the *vol décent* are replicated in the Glass-Steagall legislation of 1998 and compounded by the anti-predatory state laws, which allow national lenders to sell increasingly risky loan products in the USA. They do so with false credit ratings that had placed AAA ratings on junk securities.

The *vol décent* of 2008 is remarkably similar to Du Tillet's achievement of short term gain against a proposition that never comes to fruition. The derivative in both cases is an invention whose value lies in the social capital created by greed and deception. All this has been presaged by Balzac.

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