Balzac: the Readable and the Writable Empire

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Balzac's Empire

The Empire in *La Comédie Humaine* is represented by those who were ennobled by Napoléon Bonaparte, soldiers with illustrious military careers who grew rich and powerful and influenced the course of later events. The Empire is part of the history of many a character. It appears in *La Comédie Humaine* as *cause* (as opposed to both *effect* and *principle*): the proximate source of the present situation in many novels.

But the Empire is also a big parenthesis between Ancien Régime and Restauration, marking the transition between two distinctly different ways in which the nobility is known. Empire thus confronts both Ancien Régime and Restauration, in backward and forward looking perspective. And Balzac's Empire can also be confronted with the July Monarchy: the loss of the concept of great men after Napoleon's downfall would eventually result in the mediocracy of the July Monarchy.

This presentation will examine the role of *Empire* and *Empereur* in all of *La Comédie Humaine* to identify and characterize just what Balzac's empire was, considering examples of the description of the Empire as great metaphors for Balzac's mastery, control, and territorial imperative in his writing—and the threat of their loss. Balzac sits like the Emperor in the midst of his creation, exercising power and fending off failure.

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Opening the Door: Reinterpreting Balzac through interior space in Assia Djebar

Balzac's 1834-35 story, *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, by way of its somewhat enigmatic dedication to the painter Eugène Delacroix, refers most likely to Delacroix's painting of the same year as Balzac's story (1834), "Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement." Balzac's tale has also been linked to Delacroix's "La Barque de Dante et Virgile" (through the references to Dante in Balzac's description of Paris) and his odalisque "Femme avec un perroquet;" however, the most compelling and obvious connection between image and text remains "Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement." Most of what has been written on the relationship between Balzac's text and Delacroix's image focuses quite rightly on a post-colonial reading of Balzac's exoticization of both Paquita and the marquise as sexualized victim and hysteric; what Balzac makes use of from Delacroix's image, then, is the sensualized female "other" of the Orient as the ultimate location and object of forbidden desire and sexual deviance.

More than a century after Balzac and Delacroix, Assia Djebar re-appropriates Delacroix's title with a collection of short stories, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. Organized into two categories (before and after the Franco-Algerian War), Djebar's collection represents a series of tales of interior female Algerian spaces. Her collection, however, does not contain a straightforward condemnation of Delacroix's interpretation, but invites the reader to consider how both her stories and Delacroix's representation suggest the heavily nuanced and layered

position of the North African woman across space and time. Through an analysis of interior space and the opened/closed door in Balzac, Delacroix, and Djebar, my paper will reconsider the post-colonial reading of Balzac. What does Djebar teach us about *La Fille aux yeux d'or*?

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On beyond *S/Z*: Rereading 'Sarrasine'

It seems impossible to read Balzac's "Sarrasine" without *S/Z*. Barthes's work was part of a revolution that led from structuralism to various versions of post-structuralism. His goal was not so much to analyze a somewhat marginal work of a canonic writer, but to change paradigms. Even if the parts of *S/Z* devoted to the five codes themselves were a continuation through semiotics of structuralism, the rest of the work is more aligned with the Derrida and Kristeva of the theory revolution.

Barthes woke us up to "Sarrasine," yet I am suggesting that we need to re-read "Sarrasine" with *S/Z* put in brackets. In particular, "Sarrasine" has resonances both with other works by Balzac that problematize sexuality and gender, including the entire Vautrin cycle and "Séraphîta," as well as with other gender-bending novels of the mid-nineteenth century, including Gautier's *Mademoiselle Maupin*, Sand's *Gabriel*, and Belot's *Mademoiselle Giroux, ma femme*.

In this presentation, I shall focus on how both description and narration cannot fully render gender-bending matters. While Balzac does not fall into Gautier's romanticism or go as far as Sand who completely eschews extradiegetic narrative, he severely limits narrative capacity. This is not only due to the fact that the narrator has to maintain the secret of Zambinella as castrato, but also because the narrative position has to be a heteronormative voice. Balzac queers the narrative by deploying a third-person narrator, who is sometimes omniscient and sometimes limited, and who relies on dialogue to tell much of the unspeakable truth. Moreover, the author queers matters by naming the naive, male protagonist "Sarrasine," which means portcullis: a barrier full of holes. I shall examine the ramification of this porosity to develop an understanding of the narrative inscription of the short story.

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Louis Lambert: Hieroglyphs and Palimpsests

In Balzac's 1832 novel, the narrator functions as an archeologist in his restoring of Louis Lambert's fragmented and barely-visible writings. This narrator, or "Poet," "deciphers" the textual fragments of his childhood friend, Louis Lambert. Lambert's writing is compared to hieroglyphs and palimpsests, culminating in tensions between sacred texts, spoken word, and plundered lands. The novel is further imbued with historical elements regarding imperialism: the composition of the text follows the death of General Lamarque and the death of Champollion. Cultural plundering occurs on the very page as the hieroglyph, that is to say the sacred text, is recognized as the *scriptio inferior* of the palimpsest, which the Narrator and Balzac attempt to bring to the surface and to appropriate.

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The novel is marked by binary qualities between exotic voyages and returns to the homeland. Returning by train to his "homeland" of Touraine in 1823, the narrator learns that Lambert "est devenu fou" (676). Lambert's genius lies beneath layers of exotic cultures. Lambert intersects with German culture via references to Mme de Staël and Goethe. His religious beliefs are informed by the Old and New Testaments and Swedenborg. Named Pythagore because of his silence, Lambert has no voice until his writings are interpreted by the narrator.

The narrator sets out to salvage Lambert's writings, which are at risk of slipping into erasure. The comparison of Lambert's fragmented writings to hieroglyphics and palimpsests, as well as the comparison of the narrator to an archeologist and antique dealer, overwhelm the text with references to the exotic and imperialism. The narrator, like Champollion, "déchiffr[e] les hiéroglyphes de cette sténographie" (559-560). "Jamais antiquaire n'a manié ses palimpsestes avec plus de respect" (560). As the narrator sets out to decode Lambert's "hiéroglyphes de la pensée" (591), to etch out the *lisible* of Louis Lambert's forgotten fragments, we, the readers, doubt the accuracy of the scribe who is the narrator, leading us to theoretical concerns established by Barthes concerning the *lisible* and the *scriptible* (*S/Z* 10).