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Absolute Seduction: The Faustian Motif in Balzac and Valéry

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Abstract

This article analyzes ways in which the "quest for the absolute" is treated in two works: Balzac's novel, of the same name (*La Recherche de l'absolu*), and Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*. Both texts involve a paradoxical narrative device, by which the genius of the protagonist is communicated to the reader, not by the representation of his thoughts, but by a veiling of them--an impenetrable interiority that suggests communion with the absolute. This device is successful, to the degree that it plays upon our own desires for transcendent knowledge. Under closer scrutiny, however, we find that such texts must eventually involve a moment of violence; a disruption of the spell these "cerebral heroes" have cast.

The Faust myth becomes especially pertinent in the modern era, as existing paradigms for thought are called into question. The hubris of the German scholar, daring to turn against God for the sake of absolute knowledge, resonates with the experience of freedom – the sense of both possible success and failure –as beliefs and institutions of the past are challenged by an increasingly rational, secular world. This character type becomes a prominent and often central figure of Balzac's novels in particular. [1] Characters with an excessive passion, a desire to transcend the limitations of society and even life itself have the same effect as Milton's Lucifer: while they are eventually resolved into the essentially Christian moral teleology of the work, they are essential to the dynamic structure of the text, and indeed, are often more attractive than their "good" counterparts (one thinks of Vautrin, in particular). [2]

But beyond this reaction to the intellectual and spiritual crisis of the times –a gesture with which Balzac precedes Dostoyevsky, among others– the use of such characters, with their Promethean fate, corresponds to another, self-reflexive element of Balzac's work. Like Flaubert, the novelist had come to reject certain Romantic tendencies embraced in his youth. The emotional excess and nostalgia for idealized, absolute states of being, are replaced by a world-view firmly rooted in the real, and a recognition of its limits. The eventual failure of the Faustian characters in his novels is thus not simply a result of the writer's political and religious conservatism, but can be seen as deriving from his own experience as a creator. So that, in elaborating the narrative life of a character such as Balthazar Claës, with his excessive striving and ultimate failure, Balzac is addressing, or "working through," in psychoanalytic terms, his own temptations as an artist.

Paul Valéry will also explore the Faust figure later, at the turn of the 19th century, though from a more modern perspective, as one might expect. [3] *Monsieur Teste* does not strive to understand and manipulate some absolute principle of external reality, but the very source at which reality is perceived and conceptualized: the mind. But *Teste* also differs from Balzac's protagonist, in that he would seem to have actually attained a

certain knowledge of the absolute in question. Admittedly, this absolute is hardly that aspired to by Balthazar Claës in his scientific experiments. Indeed, not only is Teste uninterested in striving after some absolute principle in the physical world, but the purely interior, intellectual absolute he is concerned with is attained, paradoxically, in *not* being attained. If he has achieved mastery of a certain truth, it is in continually moving beyond the reification of his own thought process--the sediment which only appears to be the Truth. An admiring narrator observes:

Il était l'être absorbé dans son système, celui qui se livre tout entier à la discipline effrayante de l'esprit libre, et qui fait tuer ses joies par ses joies, la plus faible par la plus forte, — la plus douce, la temporelle, celle de l'instant et d'heure commencé, par la fondamentale — par l'espoir de la fondamentale (21).

And Teste himself claims: “Je n’apprécie en toute chose que la *facilité* ou la *difficulté* de la connaître, de les accomplir. Je mets un soin extrême à mesurer ces degrés, et à ne pas m’attacher” (22-3).

If Valéry has recognized a certain modern (indeed Postmodern) truth, however --that there are in fact no stable truths-- I would suggest that he nonetheless succumbs to the hubris of Faust, even if his protagonist does not appear to. For he needs to at least *suggest*, perhaps due to his own, narcissistic identification with this fantastic, idealized character, that such a being is possible; that the apparent limitations of reality could in fact be transcended. If Teste’s attainment of the absolute can never realistically be enacted or represented in the world of the text, it can nonetheless be validated indirectly, by the testament of other characters—those who attest to perceiving this greatness through their powerful, if vague feelings. Witnesses, that is to say, who are decidedly *Romantic*.

Initially, the two texts share a number of elements in their interpretation of the Faust character. Most notably, that of excessive interiority and absorption in the Self, and a consequent separation and alienation from others. When we are first introduced to Balthazar Claës, for instance, his description functions less to create an image of his outward physical appearance, than to suggest what exists, otherwise invisible to others, beneath the surface:

il regardait dans l'espace comme pour y trouver la réalisation de ses espérances [...]. Les sentiments profonds qui animent les grands hommes respiraient dans ce pâle visage fortement sillonné de rides [...] maissurtout dans ces yeux étincelants dont le feu semblait également accru par la chasteté que donne la tyrannie des idées, et par le foyer intérieur d'une vaste intelligence (43).

This interiorizing of the subject is even more extreme in the case of Valéry's protagonist. And what is significant, as we shall soon see, the more the subject is confined to this inner world of ideas, the more the nature of his superhuman character becomes vague, if not incomprehensible [...] and at the same time, hyperbolized. As Mme Teste explains to the narrator: "il ne lit presque rien de ses yeux, dont il fait un usage étrange et comme *intérieur*. Je me trompe, je veux dire: un usage *particulier*. Mais ce n'est pas cela du tout. Je ne sais pas comment m'exprimer; mettons à la fois *intérieur*, *particulier* [...] et *universe!!!*" (38).

Christiane Vogel identifies this extreme interiority as a defining trait in a series of "héros cérébrales," originating in the work of Poe and continuing through that of French Symbolists, Villiers de L'Isle-d'Adam, Huysmans and Rémy de Gourmont, among others. In such texts she locates "un schème essentiel qui veut que la présentation de notre héros l'éloigne du lecteur, que l'on estompe son visage alors qu'on prétend le dessiner. A cet égard, le premier point qui retient l'attention est la présentation indirecte du héros" (253-4). While this lack of access to such characters' thoughts and feelings is to a certain degree determined by their nature in the world of the text --the Faustian "orgueil" and onanistic "délices," of the following passage [4]-- it is also determined, to a great extent, by the reality of the text--the limitations, that is to say, which are imposed upon representation in the face of the absolute:

le héros cérébral [...] est essentiellement celui qui se retranche avec orgueil et délices dans son univers mental. Pour lui, le monde n'existe que réfléchi par le miroir unique de son esprit. Ses pouvoirs demeurent cachés et même virtuels **par une sorte de nécessité**; son action, qu'une pente fatale change en passion, reste éminemment intérieure" (252, emphasis mine); "(un) héros surhumain dont la nature exige qu'il se rende invisible" (261).

In the perspective of the present study, however, the "necessity" imposed upon the text by historical circumstances (the convergence of a pre-modern, fantastical character, and the emergence of Realism following the Enlightenment) is less significant than the potential effect/affect that accompanies such a device. It is important to note the second part of the above observation: "le premier point *qui retient l'attention* est la présentation indirecte du héros." For the veiled nature of such characters is not merely one curious attribute among many, imposed by the logic of and within the text, but a "fundamental structure" (253) that is highly motivated by the writer's desire to orient the reader's reception of such characters. In the *Cahiers* of André Walter, for example, Vogel observes: "les images du repli progressif de ce héros cérébral, bien loin de désigner négativement un être ineffable et de défier un regard étranger, doivent au contraire amener le lecteur à ce «sympathein» qui est [...] une note fondamentale des *Cahiers*" (263).

This suggestive veiling, with its affective draw, is all the more complex in that it takes place indirectly, affecting the reader vicariously, so to speak. As mentioned above, it

is important to note that the greatness of these "heroes" is communicated, not by an omniscient narrator, as fact, but by an admiring character within the text: if we are not allowed to witness the workings of such great minds, we nonetheless have the sense of doing so, through the affective response of characters who are able to perceive them [...] almost. Joyce Loubère identifies this as a crucial link between Valéry's text and another of Balzac's novels, *Louis Lambert*, as "le principe de l'étonnement causé dans l'esprit des non-initiés, incapables de suivre les séquences de pensées qui relient des idées apparemment très diverses" (87). [5]

And indeed, as the preceding passage from Valéry's text continues, Mme. Teste begins to wax poetic--though hardly in the manner of a conventional lover: "Ils sont fort beaux, ses yeux; je les aime d'être un peu plus grands que tout ce qu'il y a de visible. On ne sait jamais s'il leur échappe quoi que ce soit, ou bien, si, au contraire, le monde entier ne leur est pas un simple détail de tout de qu'ils voient" (38). This narrative device allows the author to invest the protagonist with the supposed omniscience of a Faust, without committing, in accordance with the modern insistence on the real, to the actuality of this power: it *seems* his eye --and by extension, his mind-- contains the world. While the wife of Balzac's protagonist is more realistic psychologically --she doesn't imagine her husband's mind encompassing all of reality-- she too is used to create a sense of her husband's other-worldly presence: "Elle était imposante, savait commander le respect par un regard où éclatait le sentiment de sa valeur et de sa noblesse; mais devant Claës elle tremblait; et, à la longue, elle avait fini par le mettre si haut et si près de Dieu, en lui rapportant tous les actes de sa vie et ses moindrespensées, que son amour n'allait plus sans une teinte de crainte respectueuse qui l'aiguillait encore" (61). These reflections do not simply serve to elaborate her own character, in relation to her husband, but end up determining our perception of the latter, if indirectly: the force of her own person, hardly negligible, pales before his--"so close to God."

In remaining conscious of this relay structure, detached from the characters whose perspective we are led to share, we are able to better analyze and question the way these texts function. To what degree, that is to say, does the response of such secondary characters correspond to the reality of the "hero" as it is constructed through other, less ambiguous elements of the text? How is the writer manipulating our own response to this character, and does this manipulation in fact serve the overall logic of the text?

In continuing to track these relationships, for instance, we immediately perceive a significant divergence between the two narratives: while we soon discover how an idealized perception of Balthazar Claës comes to be undermined by his progressively flawed character, we find that Monsieur Teste only grows more powerful in the eyes of others. A sign perhaps, that this device reflects a sort of Faustian excess, or hubris on the part of the later writer, as we suggested earlier, this eroticized element in the text, between the idealized subject and the other, is not limited to the conjugal relationship in Valéry's novel, but is present in Teste's relation to other characters as well. The narrator of the text initially seems to be a model disciple of this unusual master,

immediately dismissing his own, emotional assessment of Teste out of a respect for pure Reason: "Et je sentais qu'il était le maître de sa pensée: j'écris là cette absurdité. L'expression d'un sentiment est toujours absurde" (21). But this show of stoicism quickly degenerates into the open confession of feeling, in language which suggests the heroine of a Romantic novel, or a lovesick girl confiding to her diary: "Comment ne pas en ressentir pour celui qui ne disait jamais rien de *vague* [...]. Comment ne pas s'abandonner à un être dont l'esprit paraissait transformer pour soi seul tout ce qui est, et qui *opérait* tout ce qui lui était proposé?" (22-3).

The irony here, if not a significant problem in the logic of the text, is that Teste *doesn't* appear to "transform" or "operate" anything significant with his *über*-mind; he *is* in fact "vague" --not only in the highly abstract pronouncements he makes, but in his very personality and physical being: "Tout s'effaçait en lui, les yeux, les mains" (19); and elsewhere: "Monsieur Teste n'avait pas d'opinions. Je crois qu'il se passionnait à son gré, et pour atteindre un but défini. Qu'avait-il fait de sa personnalité? comment se voyait-il?... Jamais il ne riait, jamais un air de malheur sur son visage. Il haïssait la mélancholie" (21). Even his immediate surroundings take on this exceedingly anodyne, unremarkable quality: "J'en'ai jamais eu plus fortement l'impression du *quelconque* [...]. C'était le logis quelconque, analogue au point quelconque des théorèmes, --et peut-être aussi utile. Mon hôte existait dans l'intérieur le plus général" (29).

Given that Valéry is not bound by, and is indeed in rebellion against the verisimilitude of the realist esthetic (with which Balzac is traditionally aligned, whether accurately or not), the absolute "anonymity" of Teste can be seen as a valid, if not a necessary aspect of Valéry's project--his desire to push the modern version of Faust, the "cerebral hero," to its limit, embodying (in refusing to embody) a being that is pure possibility: "Comment peindre alors un être purifié de toute contingence et riche de virtualités infinies? Il faudra l'évoquer de manière indirecte et fragmentaire, voire contradictoire; il sera même nécessaire de le réduire au pur anonymat par une espèce de théologie négative" (Vogel 257). And yet, such a being does not exist in a vacuum, whatever liberties the writer might have believably taken with regard to the limits of representation. Not, in any case, as long as that writer depends upon the perception and appreciation of this being by other characters in the text to effectively communicate, and indeed, essentially *embody* the presence of this character for the reader, as we have seen.

By contrast, in the reality of Balzac's text such an individual must eventually come to lose the admiration, if not the respect of others. As Balthazar is turned progressively inward by *his* unusual genius, it is less and less a cause for wonder or admiration, than a concern --if not a menace-- to himself and those around him. Where Teste can apparently navigate with relative ease the threshold between interior and exterior, self and other, Balthazar is increasingly separated from the world and people around him. Several critics have devoted attention to the isolated genius, not only in *La Recherche*, but a number of Balzac's novels.

In his important work on *La Recherche*, Josué Harari suggests that Balthazar's profound alterity is due to the problematic nature of that which he seeks--a single point

at the source of creation which is undivided by the binary structures which sully the biological process of regeneration:

If Balthazar Claës does find himself at the focal point he seeks --the unique point where all of nature converges and is born again-- then it necessarily follows that nature, in order to produce what it has produced, needs nothing but itself. Everything can be produced out of the one, the same, the identical [...]. The Absolute is thus [...] the point that denies the fundamental character of any relation to the other (154).

Balthazar's "absolute" rejection of others must inevitably have negative consequences in the world of the text: the isolated genius must meet a tragic end in a world in which individuals prosper or fail according to their ability to adapt --whether passively, or through manipulation-- to others--the world, that is to say, of the *Comédie Humaine*: "the familial, social and economic world of the Claës can be reconstituted only if Balthazar, the man of the nonrelation, is excluded from it" (Harari 163). But the fate of this isolated genius can also be read in a much larger context, as Harari points out. In a body of work that is famous for its intertextuality, and its impressive ability to regenerate out of its multiple characters and plot lines, the sterility of characters such as Balthazar Claës keeps them from further contributing to the growth of the *Œuvre*, and necessitates their disappearance:

seekers of the Absolute [...] must be excluded from Balzacian humanity, for their search is precisely that which is only meaningful outside of any and all possible relations with the other. The search for the Absolute is fundamentally and profoundly antisocial. That is why every 'creator' of the *Etudes*, unlike the other characters of the *Comédie Humaine*, must not return, so that the writing of the *Comédie* can proceed (163).

Madelaine Ambrière also situates the fate of Balthazar within the sociological perspective that is so central to the *Comédie Humaine*. For her however, the problem lies not so much in the mysterious knowledge in question, but in Balthazar's refusal to communicate this knowledge to others. Entertaining the possibility that the scientist may actually have access to information that might contribute to scientific discovery -- not some mystical creative force, as Harari suggests, beyond any possible realization in the real-- she suggests that his final silence is not so much a result of the Absolute's extra-linguistic nature, as a stubborn choice on the part of the protagonist: "Aussi son savoir, qui ne circule pas, ne vit pas et meurt avec sa personne" (52). In the *truly* "realist" perspective of the Balzacian world (not simply the attention to mimetic representation of reality associated with this term), no one person or thing can be entirely separated from, placed above the rest of humanity. If any one part of the "body" of society refuses to participate in the vital interaction of the whole, it must atrophy, an

"agent of death": "Si la science, comme l'argent, comme le sang et l'énergie vitale, ne circulent pas, ils deviennent agents de mort, et le personnage représente un élément de démonstration du système balzacien" (52).

And Ambrière's metaphor of the body --a figure we will return to later-- is important here. For it is essential, not only to Balzac's vision of society, but to his own role as the "physician" of this society--not necessarily he who treats the latter, but who, with the keen and thorough scope of his *regard*, is able to accurately diagnose the symptoms and causes of the malady in question:

il (Balthazar) assume le même destin, effectue le même parcours solitaire et passionné, sous le regard de l'auteur, regard qui se révèle exclusivement médical pour observer et décrire cliniquement les étapes de ce qui est devenu monomanie. Toute analyse dispersante du personnage, sous le regard de la Famille, de la Société, de la Religion, s'unifie dans l'image dominante de «l'homme de désir», dont le destin se trouve, par là même, voué à l'échec (52-3)

The significance of this observation is revealed in Ambrière's further reflection on Balzac--as-physician. She goes on to point out insightfully how Balthazar's final silence can be contrasted with the death-bed scene of Dr. Pascal, the token "man of science" in another, similar novelistic cycle--Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series. The doctor, one of the few positive characters in the later writer's work, speaks in great detail in his final moments, leaving a "veritable scientific testament," and thus living on in a sense, by sharing the knowledge he has acquired (Ambrière 52). I would suggest that this contrast also reveals much about the creators of these characters, and their relation to the creative process. For while Zola, who also considered himself a physician for modern society, confidently inserts this role within the novel in the ideally lucid and knowledgeable doctor, Balzac has "dissected" the idealized *savant* so to speak, leaving the enthusiasm of his own pursuit of absolute knowledge (as a young artist) in the protagonist of *La Recherche*, while remaining outside of the text where he can carefully keep watch over him. This ability, I would suggest, proves a crucial factor in the development of the "cerebral hero," when compared to Valéry's text.

A significant divergence in the way these texts handle the problematic alterity of these characters can be read, as we suggested earlier, in corporeal terms. And not simply in the figural body of society, as Ambrière notes, but in the actual physical bodies of characters in the text. As we have already observed, while Balthazar's abnormal interiority is increasingly perceived by others in his physical appearance, admiration for Teste actually increases, paradoxically, to the degree that he is impenetrable to the other's gaze. Where he evokes wonder for "his disappearance act," as attested by his wife's exclamations, "Il faut l'avoir vu dans ces excès d'absence! Alors sa physionomie s'altère, --s'efface! [...]. Un peu plus de cette absorption, et je suis sûre qu'il se rendrait invisible!" (44) --Balzac's character is observed as a sort of walking corpse, a zombie with lifeless eyes: "chaque jour, la vie de l'âme s'en retirait davantage, et la

charpenterestait sans aucune expression. Parfois les yeux prenaient une couleur vitreuse, il semblait que la vue se retournât et s'exerçât à l'intérieur" (68).

And as with actual, physical death, such a state cannot but traumatize loved ones; those who have been left behind, so to speak. As absence, paradoxically, is capable of inflicting the greatest suffering, her husband's state affects her so strongly that Mme. Claës feels it as an oppressive, *physical* force:

(Il) ne regarda pas cette femme, ou s'il la regarda, ne la vit pas, et resta tout droit au milieu du parloir [...]. Une horrible souffrance à laquelle cette femme ne pouvait s'habituer, quoiqu'elle revînt fréquemment chaquejour, lui étreinit le cœur, dissipa son sourire, plissa son front brun entre les sourcils vers cette ligne que creuse la fréquente expression des sentiments extrêmes" (41).

Indeed, I would suggest that it is at the level of the physical, finally, that we witness a crisis in the Faustian myth at the center of both of these texts--a crisis which, in the case of Valéry, is not perhaps intended. Both texts involve a scene of physical violence, in which the imposed barrier between interior and exterior, self and other, can no longer hold.

In Balzac's text, this event is a familiar one. Unable to abandon his obsession, even after the death of his wife (for which he is essentially responsible), holed up in his empty house, after having sold everything to buy the materials for his experiments, Balthazar Claës is ostracized from the rest of humanity, walled up within, hidden from the "body" of society. Referred to by the townspeople as a "sorcerer" and "devil," for what are perceived as alchemical experiments and his disregard for others, he meets his fate at the hands of a group of taunting boys. Although --and this detail is significant-- it is not in fact the physical blows of the latter that bring on his eventual death. The agent of reality which breaks through the wall protecting his interiority comes, not from without, ironically, but from within. The "blow" which knocks him down, leaving him paralyzed, is not a physical one, delivered by those who persecute him, but the shock of his own feelings, awakened after lying dormant for too long: "les facultés avaient été jusqu'alors conservées par la chasteté naturelle aux savants chez qui la préoccupation d'une découverte anéantit les passions [...] son corps décrépît ne soutint pas la réaction de ses sentiments, il tomba frappé d'une attaque de paralysie" (295).

If the equivalent violence in Valéry's text is less obvious, and does not in fact infirm this apparently superior being, it is sufficiently disturbing to warrant our attention. Especially since it is this very individual who is, not the victim of the violent act, but the perpetrator. If Teste has seemed capable of supporting his role as a Faust figure -- better, indeed, than the original, maintaining both his access to the absolute *and* the social order-- there are certain moments, his wife explains to the narrator, when the transition between these two worlds is less than smooth, to say the least:

quand cet époux extraordinaire me capture et me maîtrise en quelque sorte, et m'imprime ses forces, j'ai l'impression que je suis substituée à cet objet de volonté qu'il vient de perdre. Je suis comme le jouet d'une connaissance musculeuse [...]. La vérité qu'il attendait a pris ma force et ma résistance vivante; et par une transposition tout ineffable, ses volontés intérieures passent, se déchargent dans ses mains dures et déterminées. Ce sont des moments bien difficiles (45).

The suggestion of domestic violence, if not rape here, can hardly be seen as part of some sort of metaphysical fantasy, as this text is often read. Indeed, with its insistence on the physical, this scene is in a sense the one point of the text that insists on traditional novelistic conventions--that the reality within the text corresponds, to a certain degree at least, to the reality of the world, with its logic and laws. And this scene is all the more disturbing for the psychological reality it evokes, in the common response of the victimized wife, excusing her abuser; that he "knows not what he does": "J'imagine qu'il ne sait pas exactement ce qu'il fait, ce qu'il pétrit" (45). "Ce sont des moments bien difficiles. Alors, que faire! Je me réfugie dans mon cœur, où je l'aime comme je veux" (45).

Isn't this abrupt, violent intrusion of the physical in Teste's relation to others at odds with his supposedly pure "possibility"; a state which is dependent, precisely, on the ambiguity of his physical being? As Pascal Dethuren points out: "homme sans corps, Teste évacue de l'être tout ce qui fait son fondement ontologique, pour ne plus considérer que ce qui fait son possible" (48). Indeed, Teste's outstretched arm is embodied, despite his creator, in contrast to this otherwise amorphous figure throughout the novel, much like the striving statue he has supposedly been liberated from, according to Dethuren: "le corps du penseur en a fini, ici, avec la massivité musculaire qui, chez Rodin par exemple, était encore le symbole sublime de la puissance spirituelle. Aucun image, aucune matière, aucune corporalité ne viennent cette fois garantir ou affermir la force de la pensée" (47) (recall that Mme Teste describes her husband's force as "muscular," a qualification that is displaced, significantly enough, to the realm of the mind and abstraction: "Je suis comme le jouet d'une connaissance musculeuse"). This abrupt appearance of physical force on the part of Teste's grip forces us to remember the potentially destructive forces that accompany modern ideals that are supposedly "beyond good and evil," in the realm of pure possibility ("Aussi ne fait-il jamais jouer son intellect sur les notions de bien ou de mal [...] mais seulement sur celles de possible et d'impossible," Dethuren 48).

Furthermore, isn't it possible that this outstretched, grasping arm is, at some level, the striving reach of Valéry himself? Most often labeled as the efficient practitioner of the lucid, methodical thinking he admired in others (Mallarmé, DaVinci, Descartes), he would initially seem to have realized such restraint in his treatment of the "cerebral hero"--the unemotional, über-rationalist Teste: "Il sait bien que l'emphase guette notre héros; c'est pourquoi il choisit la réserve et même une certaine réticence" (Vogel 258).

And yet, even those critics who have acknowledged a certain success in his realization of this figure, have called attention to Valéry's inability to entirely suppress the Faustian striving for the absolute that haunted his youth. Christiane Vogel observes: "il rejette les «illusions métaphysiques» et «et les superstitions littéraires»; il refuse toute forme de transcendance, mais l'exaltation de la volonté et l'ambition de la pensée systématique subsistent en lui, plus fortes que jamais" (268). [6] If such language remains somewhat ambiguous, suggesting that such "exaltation" is nonetheless mastered, or "contained" ("en lui"), Paul Gifford observes that the "hyperbole volontariste" of Valéry's project must eventually supersede the writer's apparent control of his material--the return of the repressed, in Freudian terms:

Du même mouvement dont il s'applique à extirper de soi l'illusion romantique de «l'âme», Valéry creuse la blessure et la béance du Désir. Plus il se veut objectif et technicien, plus il réprime et comprime le ressort mystique de son éros idéaliste [...]. C'est préparer toutes les revanches et toutes les résurgences du refoulé (262).

Whatever the intention on Valéry's part, the inscription of this physical gesture in the text, at precisely that point when the protagonist's entire being --body and mind-- is concentrated on the absolute, only to lose it ("Tout son être qui était concentré sur un certain *lieu* des frontières de la conscience, vient de perdre son objet idéal," Teste 45), reflects, or rather *embodies* a conflict between the striving for pure ideation, and the imperfect, limited body of the desiring subject that will always make its presence felt at some point.

But perhaps most importantly, in disrupting the otherwise tranquil surface of this unusual text --where the fantastic (dis)embodiment of absolute intellect is somehow able to thrive, believably-- this grasping arm calls attention to another participant in the modern version of Faust: ourselves, as readers. For it is not simply the other "inferior" characters within such a text, or the (self-)admiring creator of the latter, who are blinded to the contradictions of the "cerebral hero," seeing presence in absence, complete revelation in the carefully hidden. We too are seduced by such a character to the extent that we entertain his improbable existence--this formless figure acting in, and more importantly *upon* a world that inherently relies on mimetic representation. We are seduced, that is to say, not by the text's ability to convincingly represent this possessor of the absolute, but to the degree that it makes us *want* to see such a being, despite its inability to actually produce him.

And what we must question then, at least as critical readers, is the extent to which we remain in fact that critical. When such a textual sleight-of-hand is successful --the provocative "veiling" analyzed in these texts-- giving the *sense* of something where there is essentially nothing, the criteria for judgment can become equally vague ("infiniment plus vivant"), as Joyce Loubère's appraisal of Valéry reveals: "La grande ironie, c'est que le personnage qu'il crée, en faisant du Balzac à l'envers, devient, grâce à la technique révisée qui débarasse le personnage central

du superflu et le situe dans un champ neutre, infiniment plus vivant que le héros de Balzac qui disparaît dans le flou du roman" (90). Esthetic values (abstraction vs. mimesis, in the preceding citation) become interchangeable, depending on the reader's preference.

Indeed, we find that two of the critics who treat the "cerebral heroes" of Balzac and Valéry use the same terminology to justify their valorization of one or the other--terminology, it should be noted, which has arisen to validate otherwise unprovable, supernatural phenomena: the "magical" and the "mystical." For Aline Mura, for instance, Balzac's writing is not *réaliste*, as it is normally viewed, but involves a mystical transcendence of reality. The silence of Balthazar Claës concerning the Absolute is not suspect, but communicates the writer's "vision" of the latter, which is ultimately unspeakable: "le récit de fiction a le dernier mot: il dit ce silence qu'il outrepassa" "à la frontière de la diégèse, dans cet espace indéfini où la parole se conquiert" (48); "c'est en tant que visionnaire qu'il tend vers le dépassement de la réalité immanente [...] un mouvement mystique et métaphysique" (50). What is particularly revealing about her assessment of the text, however, is that she continues to utilize this discourse in designating the "effect" of such textual magic on the reader: "le lecteur est [...] sous l'effet d'un envoûtement; il sait que la parole entendue est celle de la vérité" (50)--the very language that is used by another critic to assert the superiority of Valéry's hero over Balzac's: "Valéry crée un personnage envoûtant dont on ne débarrasse pas facilement l'imagination" (Loubère 91).

A "spell," as a much older text, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has emphasized, is hardly the ideal mode for an objective perception of reality. Or rather, the reality that reveals requires no judgment on the part of the perceiver (indeed, it in fact requires the impairment of this faculty), but is wholly determined by the will of another. And in any case, regardless of such questions of responsibility, doesn't such a spell reduce its "victim," in the perspective of anyone who is not so bewitched by a given work, to the same isolated, self-justified state as the characters in question here? Does a discourse that has become arbitrary --as the preceding citations would seem to suggest-- still serve as a means of communication between individuals, with all of their differences?

If "we cannot easily free our imagination" of the enchantment certain works of art hold over us, to the detriment of our will to truly understand them, we are nonetheless capable of doing so. In his own insightful analysis of *La Recherche*, Scott Sprenger acknowledges that the author has in fact made the reader an object of, if not precisely a spell, a "trick." Playing on the Faustian hubris in all of us, Balzac makes us implicitly believe in the validity of Balthazar's quest ("His principal trick is to play on our intellectual vanity," 8). But this trick is so placed in the structure of the narrative that, if we are able to "doubt" our own tendencies to identification ("The key to reversing the genius side of this Janus-faced narrative, as Balzac tells us, is *doubt*," 8), the text reveals the true nature of the quest for the absolute--a continual state of desire, in which the subject must maintain a fragile balance, or rather "tension," between the drive to believe and the conscious rejection of self-delusion:

the narrator's aim is not to have us exchange one narrative paradigm for another (genius for madman); it is to demonstrate the causes and effects of mimetic desire through a vicarious, esthetic *experience* of identification and disenchantment with an illusion of transcendence. To be properly understood, the two poles of the sequence must remain in tension: too much identification leads to permanent mystification (we see only genius); too much doubt will either block or dialectically overturn the mimetic/mystification process (we see nothing) (8).

Balzac's novel, then, is no more the repudiation of an attainable absolute, than the uncritical entertainment of such a possibility. Rather, by drawing us into an intermediate space, between what would appear to be mutually exclusive perspectives on this modern desire, the writer enables us to reflect on our own desire as readers. As the critical texts cited earlier suggest, albeit unintentionally, what is at stake here is not simply the evaluation of a given text, but the forces which play upon the process of evaluation itself. To what degree are we able to be seduced by a work without surrendering the critical faculty, taken over by, taking on the Faustian discourse ("le lecteur est [...] sous l'effet d'un envoûtement; il sait que la parole entendue est celle de la vérité")? Just as the consequences of a certain hubris will eventually disrupt any quest for the absolute in literary texts --whether or not this event is knowingly willed by the creator-- a similar fate would seem to await the critical discourse that neglects its own *via media*: the tightrope between appraisal and scrutiny. If the maintenance of such tension in the hermeneutic process is not always easy, knowledge has commanded higher prices, after all:

Mephisto:
But for life's sake, or death's—just one detail:
Could you give me a line or two? (Faust 185).

Notes

[1] This belief in the relevance of the Faust story as a parable for modernity is noted by Christopher Smith, in his introduction to La Recherche de l'absolu, the novel we will be concerned with in the following pages: "whereas Goethe had set his portrayal of modern man's typical dissatisfaction with life as it is in a mediaeval framework, Balzac insisted all the time that his concern was with a problem of his own age" (Smith x). See also Borel, regarding the general fascination with Faust in the early 19th Century (307).

[2] William Blake famously observed, in regard to the creative potential afforded by "evil," whatever the writer's stated morals: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (124).

[3] While Valéry's most direct treatment of this story, appropriately titled "Mon Faust," would appear the obvious choice for the present study, I have instead chosen to look at the earlier Monsieur Teste, where this archetypal figure is less consciously present in the writer's creation. The wealth of correspondence between this and Balzac's novel will hopefully justify this decision in the reader's eyes.

[4] See Sprenger, for a discussion of the "onanistic dimension of Balthazar's expression of desire" (15).

[5] Pascal Dethurens, who has also devoted a comparative study to these texts, points to this same fact, regarding the later of the two: "nous ne connaissons Teste que par personne interposée: sa femme Emilie, son ami le narrateur et le «log-book» qu'il tient" (47).

[6] Valéry himself admits in the Introduction to Teste that he conceived of such an individual, "pendant une ère d'ivresse de ma volonté," 7. And Jean Levaillant notes that if Valéry began his text under the influence of the "grand rêveromantique du pouvoir de l'esprit," his later revisions coincide with a "renoncement aux illusions de l'époque de la grande ivresse de la volonté. Dès 1896, le créateur de M. Teste serait «débarrassé de sa hantise d'absolu»" (cited in Gifford, 257-8).

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