

The Gaze and the Fold in Balzac's *Lys dans la Vallée*

Mary Jane Cowles

With its focus on the memories of an idealized and unconsummated love, its evocation of the lush natural beauty of the Loire valley, its fetishization of abandoned dreams, and its first-person narrator's uneven progress from childhood to manhood, *Le Lys dans la vallée* (*The Lily in the Valley*) is arguably Balzac's most "romantic" novel. The narrative recounts the illicit passion of the young Félix de Vandernes for Henriette de Mortsauf, a virtuous wife and mother. As Félix makes his way at the court of Louis XVIII, thanks to Henriette's good advice, he falls prey to the seductions of another woman. This betrayal by the beloved Félix leads to Henriette's death. But what is the nature of this truly "fatal attraction"—fatal, of course to the object of his love, but leaving its mark on the narrator as well?

I. The Mother's Gaze

In the beginning was the mother, and it is her gaze that determines both the nature of the protagonist's later attraction and its "fatality." Felix is an undesired child. He spends his childhood as the victim of his mother's malicious neglect, a situation which causes him to put his very being into question:

Quelle vanité pouvais-je blesser, moi nouveau-né? quelle disgrâce physique ou morale me valait la froideur de ma mère? étais-je donc l'enfant du devoir, celui dont la naissance est fortuite, ou celui dont la vie est un reproche? Mis en nourrice à la campagne, oublié par ma famille pendant trois ans, quand je revins à la maison paternelle, j'y comptai pour si peu de chose que j'y subissais la compassion des gens. [...] [J]e me vis souvent puni pour les fautes de mon frère, sans pouvoir réclamer contre cette injustice [...]. (970)

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(What vanity could I have wounded, --I a newborn? What moral or physical deformity warranted my mother's coldness? Was I the child of duty, whose birth is accidental, or was I one whose very life was a reproach? Sent to a wet-nurse in the country and forgotten by my family for over three years, I was treated with such indifference upon my return to my father's house that even the servants pitied me. . . . I found myself often punished for my brother's misdeeds without being able to protest that injustice.)¹

The opening pages of Félix's narration abound in questions, as the narrator goes to all lengths to try to explain, to justify, his position as exile within his family. Although his confession in the opening pages clearly accuses his mother of egoism ("Quelle vanité pouvais-je blesser [...]?"), he senses nonetheless that he must unwittingly bear some responsibility for his abandon. He wonders if he is marked in some way which might at least explain his mother's disdain: "quelle disgrâce physique ou morale me valait la froideur de ma mère?" ("What moral or physical deformity warranted my mother's coldness?") The narrator is keenly aware that the culpability he bears may precede him. In Lacanian terms, he has been born into a symbolic order and his status is dependent on the Law, whether his birth constitutes the observance of that Law, that is the

consequence of marital duty (“l'enfant du devoir”) or its infringement through his illegitimacy, in which case his very existence is a constant reminder of the maternal failing (“celui dont la vie est un reproche”). But more importantly, those traces of some original fault, invisible to him, are inscribed upon his body and soul, and can be read by the unforgiving eyes of an all-powerful mother. Sexuality, whether in the form of marital duty or illicit passion, has left him always already guilty, always already marked. Félix is constantly the victim of both neglect and scrutiny: he seeks again and again some mark of recognition from his mother; she responds only with coldness and blame.

If, when at home, he races over to pick up his mother's handkerchief, she thanks him as if he were a valet. When the

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fall of Napoleon's Empire interrupts Félix's studies in Paris, and his mother accompanies him back to Tours, his mother's coldness during the journey effectively stifles all the tender words he had long planned to say. When she reproaches him for his silence, it becomes clear to what extent his existence is threatened because he is not truly *acknowledged*.

All the more reason for him to respond to his patently unjust neglect with resignation. If his sufferings cause him to develop a certain moral strength, they also produce a reversal: the effects of unjust treatment *create* the fault for which one is punished. The consequence of punishment is seen as its prophetically intuited cause, much as, according to Freud, a sense of guilt can pre-exist the crime, “and is therefore not its result but its motive. It is as if it was a relief to be able to fasten this unconscious sense of guilt on to something real and immediate” (52). Ultimately, Félix creates within himself the “disgrâce physique ou morale” which justifies his mother's abandonment:

Attendant toujours une douleur nouvelle, comme les martyrs attendaient un nouveau coup, tout mon être dut exprimer une résignation morne sous laquelle les grâces et les mouvements de l'enfance furent étouffés, attitude qui passa pour un symptôme d'idiotie et justifia les sinistres pronostics de ma mère. (971)

(Always expecting some new suffering—as the martyrs expected some fresh blow—my whole being must have expressed a sullen resignation which smothered the grace and liveliness of childhood, a state which appeared to be a symptom of idiocy and seemed to justify my mother's sinister prophecies.)

We should not be too surprised at the hint of masochistic pleasure that surfaces in his comparison to martyrs. This strategy allows the protagonist to define a role for himself within the family while it affirms the mother's omnipotence. The “attitude” of resignation takes on the appearance of a symptom, as if by conforming to his mother's image of him, Félix could finally construct a reason to exist.

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In the lyrical exordium that introduces his narration, the protagonist writes: “Quel poète

nous dira les douleurs de l'enfant dont les lèvres sucent un sein amer, et dont les sourires sont réprimés par le feu dévorant d'un oeil sévère?" (970). ("What poet will tell of the sufferings of the child whose lips suckled a bitter breast and whose smiles were stifled by the devouring fire of a severe glance?") It is not coincidental that nourishment and the gaze are linked in this passage, for both appear as the tools of maternal deprivation. In another passage recounting his early childhood, Félix tells of his longing for a local dish, the "rillettes" and "rillons" of Tours. Since they are low-class fare, his aristocratic mother will not allow him to eat them, and his classmates, well aware of his desire to taste them, tease him: "*-Tu n'as donc pas de quoi?*" ("*you really don't have the means, [the wherewithal]?*"). Their question, writes Félix, "m'apprit à mesurer la différence mise entre mon frère et moi. Ce contraste entre mon abandon et le bonheur des autres a souillé les roses de mon enfance, et flétri ma verdoyante jeunesse" (973). ("[it] taught me to measure the difference between my brother and myself. This contrast between my abandonment and the happiness of others soiled [polluted] the roses of my childhood and withered my budding [verdant] youth."). The notions of "ne pas avoir de quoi" and of measuring the difference between his brother and himself evoke metaphors of castration, further supported by the wilting of the protagonist's "verdoyante jeunesse."

Lest we doubt that the agent of Félix's "castration" is his mother herself, when he is studying in Paris as a young man, she appears as if by magic at the very moment he is finally about to slip away from his chaperone in the hope of losing his virginity in the arms of a prostitute: "au moment où faussant compagnie à M. Lepître [...]; eh! bien, ma mère arrivait en chaise de poste! Je fus arrêté par son regard et demeurai comme l'oiseau devant le serpent" (979). ("at the very moment when I was about to slip away from Monsieur Lepître [...] well, there was my mother arriving in a coach. I was stopped in my tracks [arrested] by her gaze, and stood still, like a bird before a snake.") Without venturing into the

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complex symbolism of the snake, let us note in passing that the snake is first of all a figure of the line, and that it is often considered to unite masculine and feminine attributes.² What interests us more, at least for the time being, is the nature of the gaze. Clearly it is the hypnotic quality of the snake's gaze that comes into play, captivating, capturing the bird, rendering it helpless, dependent, a thing to be devoured. We need only juxtapose this gaze with another—from a scene in which the narrator is forced to confess debts contracted for minor gastronomic indulgences—in order for the image of Medusa to become manifest: "Mon père pencha vers l'indulgence. Mais ma mère fut impitoyable, son oeil bleu foncé me pétrifia" (977). ("My father tended toward indulgence. But my mother was pitiless, her dark blue eye petrified me.") A snake-like gaze with a petrifying effect, the combination of a deprivation of nourishment with the prohibition on sexuality all evoke the specter of castration and of the phallic mother discussed in Freud's essay on the Medusa's head (1922). At the same time, they set the scene for the revelation of "true love."

II. The Scene of Capture

Many critics have considered, and continue to consider, the love between Félix and Henriette de Mortsauf as Platonic. It is true that Henriette is assimilated to the figure of a star that

Félix worshipped as an unloved and neglected child, and that her inaccessibility is certainly part of her attraction. Nonetheless, the scene of their first encounter—at a ball held in Tours in honor of the Duc d'Angoulême, the future Charles X—should disabuse us of the notion that the love of the two protagonists is truly Platonic. There is no exchange of glances, no glimpse into the beloved's soul. According to Jacques Borel, the passion Félix and Henriette share is neither Platonic nor courtly: not Platonic, because true Platonic love is desired and accepted as such, satisfied in its non-realization; not courtly, because the courtly code generally does not refuse physical love, but glorifies it as the reward of virtue, bestowed upon the knight who proves himself worthy (151-152).³ Here, however, passion begins in a luminous, fully erotic moment

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whose power is never muted, but whose realization is always denied. Describing this scene, Jean Rousset points out that it is the complete reversal of traditional first meetings: contact (the “franchissement” according to Rousset, or the overcoming of the obstacle) precedes seeing and speaking (366):

Mes yeux furent tout à coup frappés par de blanches épaules rebondies sur lesquelles j'aurais voulu pouvoir me rouler, des épaules légèrement rosées qui semblaient rougir comme si elles se trouvaient nues pour la première fois, de pudiques épaules qui avaient une âme, et dont la peau satinée éclatait à la lumière comme un tissu de soie. Ces épaules étaient partagées par une raie, le long de laquelle coula mon regard, plus hardi que ma main. Je me haussai tout palpitant pour voir le corsage et fus complètement fasciné par une gorge chastement couverte d'une gaze, mais dont les globes azurés et d'une rondeur parfaite étaient douillettement couchés dans des flots de dentelle. Les plus légers détails de cette tête furent des amorces qui réveillèrent en moi des jouissances infinies: le brillant des cheveux lissés au-dessus d'un cou velouté comme celui d'une petite fille, les lignes blanches que le peigne y avait dessinées, et où mon imagination courut comme en de frais sentiers, tout me fit perdre l'esprit. Après m'être assuré que personne ne me voyait, je me plongeai dans ce dos, comme un enfant qui se jette dans le sein de sa mère, et je baisai toutes ces épaules en y roulant ma tête. (984)

My eyes were suddenly struck by white, rounded shoulders where I would have liked to roll myself--shoulders faintly rosy, which seemed to blush as if they found themselves naked for the first time; modest shoulders that possessed a soul, and whose satiny skin reflected light like a silken fabric. These shoulders were parted by a line along which my gaze, more daring than my hand, slid. Quivering all over, I raised myself to see the bust and was spell-bound by the bosom, chastely covered with gauze, where blue-veined globes of perfect roundness were softly nestled in waves of

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lace. The slightest details of the head were lures which awakened infinite raptures within me; the brilliancy of the hair laid smoothly above a neck as soft and velvety as a child's, the white lines drawn by a comb where my imagination ran as along shady paths,—all these things made me lose my head. Glancing round to be sure that no one saw me, I dived into

that back as a child throws itself upon the breast of its mother, and kissed all those shoulders as I rolled my head there.

As so often is the case with Balzac, in order to understand the gesture of the protagonist, we must first follow his gaze. The look begins innocently enough, it seems: the viewer is struck by “de blanches épaules rebondies, sur lesquelles j'aurais voulu pouvoir me rouler” (“white, rounded shoulders where I would have liked to roll myself”). But there is a curious transposition of the Platonic topos. It is not the eyes which are windows to the soul, but the *shoulders*: “qui semblaient rougir comme si elles se trouvaient nues pour la première fois, de pudiques épaules qui avaient une âme” (“modest shoulders that possessed a soul and whose satiny skin reflected light like a silken fabric”). This personification of such soulful shoulders implies that, if they can blush at finding themselves bare, they can “see” the gaze of the beholder, despite the fact that Madame de Mortsauf is utterly unaware of the protagonist's stare. In this scene, it becomes clear to what extent Félix is, as Lacan puts it, “captured by the gaze” of the object which seems to *see him*. And as we read through the scene, from the conception of desire to its enactment, we can discover what it is that captures the protagonist.

There are several unusual textual cues that help explain Félix's attraction, which occurs as a kind of shock of recognition. First, the shoulders, which we imagine as being normal, albeit strikingly beautiful, explode into an unanticipated multiplicity: “je baisai toutes ces épaules en y roulant ma tête” (“I kissed all those shoulders as I rolled my head there”). “All those shoulders?” Shouldn't there be just two? In his essay on the uncanny, Freud writes that the language of dreams “is fond of representing castration by a

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doubling or multiplication of the genital symbol” (235), a notion which is also present in the “Medusa's Head.” The fact that the shoulders can be multiple does suggest an identification which a phallic object.

Second, during the protagonists' initial encounter, the discovery of the shoulders is accompanied by a glimpse of cleavage, “chastely veiled.” The sight of these “globes” nestled in a cascade of lace undoubtedly contributes to the overall effect, but seems de-eroticized, perhaps because they create greater anxiety, in comparison to the shoulders. It seems clear, though, that Félix's fixation on the shoulders benefits from a kind of “backwards displacement.”⁴ The erotic pleasure associated with the breast becomes the attribute of the shoulders: “je me plongeai dans ce dos comme un enfant qui se jette dans le sein de sa mère” (“I dived into that back as a child throws itself upon the breast of its mother”). Indeed, the shoulders sum up the whole woman, like Cinderella's foot for the prince. Shortly after his experience of this dazzling apparition, Félix leaves Tours as if on a kind of quest for the “femme qui a de belles épaules” (990) (“the woman with the beautiful shoulders.”). She is referred to quite simply by Félix's host as “vos belles épaules” (990, 1006).

Yet the one detail in the scene of their first meeting which seems most powerfully to capture Félix's gaze is the presence of the line—the part in the hair or the ridge of the back which directs his view. “Ces épaules étaient partagées par une raie, le long de laquelle coula mon regard, plus hardi que ma main.” (“These shoulders were parted by a line along which my gaze, more daring than my hand, slid.”) Or, in speaking of her hair, he describes “les lignes blanches que le peigne y avait dessinées, et où mon imagination courut comme en de frais sentiers” (“the white

lines drawn by a comb where my imagination ran as along shady paths”). The gaze flows, or runs, the length of a separating line. In following the line of the gaze, the imagination gets lost, for where does the line end, except in the hidden, the unrepresentable, the absent, the unknown, the unimaginable? In his book, *La relation d'inconnu*, Guy Rosolato proposes a model to theorize the

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human relation to the unknowable—one's own origins and death, for example—structured according to the model of object relations theory. For Rosolato, “la relation d'inconnu,” which we might call “unknown-object relations,” centers, much like object relations theory, on the figure of the mother. The fetish object is one of the privileged figures of this “unknown-object relations” because it concretizes a purely illusory object, the maternal penis (8).

Si le langage est la mise à mort de la chose, avec le fétiche cet ordre se renverse, et l'objet fige et supplante les séquences signifiantes qui aboutissent à lui.

Partant de là, l'objet fétiche fait saillir ce que l'on pourrait appeler *l'objet de perspective*: à savoir, l'objet en négatif qui sert d'organisateur pour toute construction d'objets, sur lequel s'appuient les chaînes de langages le concernant sans arriver à le réduire une définition complète, et que se profile comme *objet de manque*. *Objet de perspective*: qui tire le regard, sans les mots, et le porte au-delà, ou à travers les apparences visuelles de l'objet, et qui est une pièce nécessaire comme le point de fuite dans la perspective picturale, ou comme les ensembles vides. (27)

(If language is the putting to death of the thing itself, with the fetish this order is reversed, and the object fixes and supplants the signifying chains of which it is the culmination.

Because of that, the fetish object throws into relief what one could call the “perspective object” (*l'objet de perspective*): that is, the photographic negative of the object which serves as an organizing factor for all object construction, upon which chains of languages concerning it rely, without managing to reduce it to a complete definition, and which stands out as an *object of lack*. *Perspective object*: which draws the gaze to it, without words, and transports it beyond, or through the visual appearances of the object, and which is a necessary part, like the vanishing point in pictorial perspective, or like empty sets.)

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I would argue that Félix's gaze, as it follows these body lines to the vanishing point, constitutes the line itself as a kind of “perspective object.” This line, here represented by a part in the woman's hair or the ridge of her back, and elsewhere by a “fold,” even more apt to conceal what does not exist, is indeed the figure of the phallic object, but only as illusory. Thus this figure functions as an object of the Lacan's Imaginary Order for a number of reasons: it is the object that captures the gaze of the protagonist; it activates the impossible desire for union with the other; it plays a fundamental role in how identity is constituted; and finally it is, of course, illusory. Félix needs to recreate this maternal phallus in order to re-position this unknown woman *in the place of the mother*. Lastinger rightly compares Félix's fixation on phallic mothers to a “compulsion to repeat” (241). Each of Félix's object choices—his mother, Henriette de Mortsau, later his

mistress Lady Dudley—displays phallic attributes (Lastinger 242-243), but Henriette alone appears as the idealized mother, fulfilling an affective, and not merely biological function. What is the nature of the phallic femininity embodied by Henriette?

The relationship to the phallic mother must be recognized as ambiguous. On the one hand, it is clearly an attempt for the male child to deny the possibility of his own castration, by denying the imagined “castration” of the mother. By representing the attributes of both sexes, the phallic mother can offer the promise of a more complete union of mother and self in the mind of the pre-Oedipal child. In these ways, the phallic mother offers reassurance, but also the potential for the absorption of self.

On the other hand, as a more complete, and therefore more powerful, being, the phallic mother also represents the threat of castration. Lest we have any doubts, the assaulted Henriette fulfills the function of the phallic mother by throwing the narrator a withering glance: “Je fus pétrifié par un regard animé d'une sainte colère” (59) (“I was petrified by a glance of saintly anger”), a phrase certain to recall the mother's Medusa-like gaze that punctuated his youth, “son oeil bleu foncé me pétrifia” (52) (“her dark blue eye petrified me”). And,

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at least on the surface, Félix's mother and the beloved Henriette too often share the same coldness: Félix speaks of her “froideur réelle” (“true coldness”) (78), her “insensibilité de marbre” (“marble-like unfeelingness”) (79), and Henriette herself writes “Oh! oui, vous vous êtes toujours plaint de ma froideur! Oui, je ne suis bien que votre mère” (240) (“Yes, yes, you have always complained of my coldness; yes, I am indeed none other than your mother”). Finally, some analysts report that patients imagine the retention of the phallus within the mother's body following intercourse (*Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* 310). The phallic attribute in this case results from the usurpation of the penis, and hence of the paternal function.⁵

III. Recognition and Alienation

After Félix has finally been officially introduced to Madame de Mortsauf, despite his desire to not be caught staring at her shoulders, he cannot resist.

Cette crainte avivait la tentation, et j'y succombais, je les regardais! mon œil déchirait l'étoffe, je revoyais la lentille qui marquait la naissance de la jolie raie par laquelle son dos était partagé, mouche perdue dans du lait, et qui depuis le bal flamboyait toujours le soir dans ces ténèbres où semble ruisseler le sommeil des jeunes gens dont l'imagination est ardente, dont la vie est chaste. (995)

(Fear [of being detected] sharpened the temptation, and I yielded, I looked at them, my eyes tore away at the material; I saw the mole which marked the point from which the pretty line between the shoulders emerged, a fly lost in milk, and which, ever since the ball, had blazed in the darkness in which seems to flow the sleep of young men whose imagination is ardent and whose life is chaste.)

We discover, in addition to the ridge that divides the back, a detail not present earlier. The ridge emerges (literally, is born) from a mole, hidden by Henriette's dress, which Félix must

imaginatively rip away in order to contemplate

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it. This “lentille” or mole, occulted in the first description, functions much as does Lacan's “tache,” a “stain” or “spot,” discussed in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. The “tache” is the very representation of the *gaze*. It is compared to the ocelli, or eye-like spots on a butterfly's wing, which is a “given-to-be-seen.” It also “captures” the subject because it functions as the felicitous encounter (*tuché*) which produces recognition.

On s'apercevra alors que la fonction de la tache et du regard y est à la fois ce qui le commande [le champ scopique] le plus secrètement, et ce qui échappe toujours à la saisie de cette forme de la vision qui se satisfait d'elle-même en s'imaginant comme conscience. [...] J'entends [...] que nous sommes des êtres regardés, dans le spectacle du monde. [...] N'y a-t-il pas de la satisfaction à être sous ce regard [...] qui nous cerne, ce qui fait d'abord de nous des être regardés, mais sans qu'on nous le montre? (87)

(We will then realize that the function of the stain and of the gaze is both that which governs the *scopic field* most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness. [...] I mean [...] that we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world. [...] Is there no satisfaction in being under the gaze [...] that circumscribes us, and which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at, but without *our being shown* this?) (Sheridan, 74-75, my corrections italicized).

The subject who looks remains unaware of being the object of a “gaze.” He is nonetheless touched by the pleasure of being seen and recognized. In the case of Félix, the mole, unseen in the first view of the back, but still, we must imagine, present, constitutes the very source of the perspective object. It is significant, in the context of Lacan's discussion of the spot, that the word that Félix has chosen to designate the mole is “lentille,” a term whose definitions include the optical

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lens, and which reinforces the visual metaphor. The mole really *is* the eye that constitutes Félix as a desiring subject. It is also important to note that this image is recollected and savored in a dream-like state: “dans ces ténèbres où semble ruisseler le sommeil des jeunes gens” (“the darkness in which seems to flow the sleep of young men”). For if the gaze is generally elided in the conscious state, “Dans le champ du rêve, au contraire, ce qui caractérise les images, c'est que *ça montre*” (88) (“In the field of the dream, on the *contrary*, what characterizes the images is that *something shows*” [75, my corrections italicized]). Indeed, perhaps this is why the “lentille” only becomes *visible* after it has become the object of dream.

The view of the back, then, becomes for Félix what Lacan calls the “objet (petit) a.” It is an encounter which “captures” Félix because, for the first time—and even though Henriette recalls many of his mother's traits—he is seen, he is *recognized*. The incidences of this feeling of recognition are numerous in the text, and contrast with his real mother's lack of recognition. The

very first takes place at the scene of the ball, when Madame de Mortsauf responds to her aggressor, “elle se retourna, me vit et me dit: ‘Monsieur?’ Ah! si elle avait dit: ‘Mon petit bonhomme, qu'est-ce qui vous prend donc?’ je l'aurais tuée peut-être; mais à ce *monsieur!* des larmes chaudes jaillirent de mes yeux” (984) (“she turned, saw me, and exclaimed, ‘Monsieur!’ Ah! had she said, ‘My little man, what has come over you?’ I might have killed her; but at the word ‘Monsieur!’ hot tears fell from my eyes”). Félix is recognized as a *monsieur*, someone who counts in the world. He anticipates a pardon because he is *understood*. He can already read on her face “le pardon de la femme qui comprend une frénésie quand elle en est le principe, et devine des adorations infinies dans les larmes du repentir” (985) (“the pardon of a woman who comprehends a frenzy which she inspires, and divines the infinite adoration of those repentant tears”). In addition, after a childhood during which Félix is starved for affection, her ample bosom makes her the image of the good “mère nourricière.” Félix eats at her table; she awakens in him

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a new existence: “elle m'accorda le regard qu'elle réservait à ses enfants! [...] Je naissais à une nouvelle vie. J'étais donc quelque chose pour elle!” (1022) (“she granted me the same look she saved for her children. [...] I was born into a new life, I meant something to her!”). “Un homme seul connaît le friand plaisir d'être, au sein d'une maison étrangère, le privilégié de la maîtresse, le centre secret de ses affections: les chiens n'aboient plus après vous, les domestiques reconnaissent, aussi bien que les chiens, les insignes cachés que vous portez” (1049-1050) (“A man alone knows the delicious pleasure of being, in the midst of a strange household, the privileged friend of its mistress, the secret center of her affections. The dogs don't bark at you; the servants, like the dogs, recognize the hidden rank you bear”). We should note again that Félix perceives himself as the bearer of a hidden mark which can be *read* by the proper gaze. Here the value of Félix's existence is confirmed, and we see to what degree his passion is dependent on this narcissistic need to be recognized.

There is, however, another aspect to the back as “seeing” gaze. One of the elements that dominates in both descriptions of Madame de Mortsauf's back is the ridge as a dividing line. “Ces épaules étaient partagés par une raie” (984); “la jolie raie par laquelle son dos était partagé” (995). The line as a constituent part of the “objet (petit) a” foreshadows and symbolizes the eternal separation of Félix and Henriette. Lastinger writes, “It is precisely this phallic side of Henriette that poses the greatest threat to Félix as a being who cannot accept his separation from the Imaginary” (242). I believe, on the contrary, that as much as Félix wishes to remain a child—and is also captured by the Imaginary vision of Henriette and himself—at the same time, he desires her *because* she embodies that separation, *because* she figures his own castration. The line and the mole are clearly decoys, stand-ins for the subject's own lack, a lack he chooses not to see but which, in a sense, “sees” him, that is, externally symbolizes unconscious forces.

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IV. Avatars of Line and Fold

Since the figure of the line constitutes the “objet (petit) a” of the gaze, it dominates the mental landscape of the novel. “Plis” and “replis” (folds), “lignes” (lines) and “rides” (wrinkles) recur with surprising frequency. As can be expected, they bespeak both the anxieties of separation

and lack, and the illusory promise of plenitude. Among the myriad examples the text offers, I would like to point out three specific uses of the line or fold. First, in the natural landscape, the line is the defining feature of the valley designated by the title. Before he even meets Madame de Mortsauf, Félix is certain that the land near his host's château is *her* valley. But of course, the same features which suggest this identification had inspired his passionate frenzy at the ball.

Là se découvre une vallée qui commence à Montbazon, finit à la Loire, et semble bondir sous les châteaux posés sur ces doubles collines; une magnifique coupe d'émeraude au fond de laquelle l'Indre se roule par des mouvements de serpent. A cet aspect, je fus saisi d'un étonnement voluptueux [...].—Si cette femme, la fleur de son sexe habite un lieu dans le monde, ce lieu, le voici! [...] L'amour infini, sans autre aliment qu'un objet à peine entrevu dont mon âme était remplie, je le trouvais exprimé par ce long ruban d'eau qui ruisselle au soleil entre deux rives vertes, par ces lignes de peupliers qui parent de leurs dentelles mobiles ce val d'amour, par les bois de chênes qui s'avancent [...] et par ces horizons estompés qui fuient en se contrariant. (987)

(There one comes upon a valley, which begins at Montbazon, ends at the Loire, and seems to bound beneath the châteaux placed on its double hillsides,—a splendid emerald cup, in the hollow of which the Indre flows with a serpentine movement. At this sight, I was seized with a voluptuous surprise. [...] “If that woman, the flower of her sex, does indeed inhabit this earth, she is here, on this spot.” [...] Infinite love, with no other

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sustenance than the barely glimpsed vision which filled my soul, found expression there in that long ribbon of water streaming in the sunshine between the green banks, by the lines of the poplars adorning with their fluttering lace that valley of love, by the oak-woods encroaching [...] and by those muted horizons that flee in every direction.)

The charming beauty of this valley is not just breath-taking; it is voluptuous. If the twin hills, the two green shores, recall the forms of his beloved's breasts, infinite love is expressed most especially by the long ribbon of sparkling water. Although when he describes it again at the end of the novel, after Henriette's death, the valley has taken on a more somber hue, its fascination still emanates from the line of the fold: “ce vallon tranquille et solitaire [...]. C'est un vaste pli de terrain bordé par des chênes deux fois centenaires [...]” (1212) (“this tranquil, solitary valley. It is a broad fold of land, bordered by oaks that are doubly centenarian”). But as Borel reminds us, the river is a figure of separation, for Félix normally stays with his hosts at Frapesle, and Henriette's château, Clochegourde, lies on the opposite bank. Ultimately, that is exactly what Félix (unconsciously) wants.

A second figure of the fold is, strangely, the voice. When Félix first hears her voice, he calls it golden and compares it to a ray of sunlight that enters a prisoner's cell and turns it to gold. While Henriette converses with Félix's host, Félix listens on in silence, giving himself over to the charm of listening to her voice.

Le souffle de son âme se déployait dans les *replis* des syllabes, comme le son se divise sous les clefs d'une flûte; il expirait onduleusement à l'oreille [...]. Sa façon de dire les

terminaisons en *i* faisait croire à quelque chant d'oiseau; le *ch* prononcé par elle était comme une caresse, et la manière dont elle attaquait les *t* accusait le despotisme du coeur. Elle étendait ainsi, sans le savoir, le sens des mots, et vous entraînait l'âme dans un monde surhumain. (994-995)

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(The breath of her soul expressed itself *in the folds* of the syllables as sound is divided by the notes of a flute; it faded away sinuously to the ear [...]. Her way of uttering the terminations in *I* was like a bird's song; the *ch* as she said it was like a caress, and the way she struck the *t*'s confirmed the despotism of her heart. She thus extended, without being aware of it, the meaning of her words, leading your soul into superhuman realms.)

Although not visible, the voice has folds, but again those folds are the sign of division, like the play of registers on the flute. On the one hand, her voice is a caress, on the other, a despot. We should note, too, that the inflections are more important than the words, a persistent trait of the secret communication between the two protagonists. This sort of relationship to voice, not as the bearer of signification, but the bearer of music *prior* to signification, is very much like Kristeva's semiotic (*La Révolution du langage poétique* 22-26). For Rosolato, the mother's voice is one of the newborn infant's first perceptions. Because women's voices are usually distinct from men's, he considers the voice to be a prime marker of sexual difference. "On peut avancer [que la langue maternelle] est le premier modèle d'un plaisir auditif et que la musique trouve ses racines et sa nostalgie dans une atmosphère originelle—à nommer comme matrice sonore, maison bruissante,—ou *musique des sphères*. [...] La reviviscence de *la* voix suppose toujours un écart, un parcours irréversible quand à l'objet perdu (37). ("One can propose [that the mother tongue] is the first model of auditory pleasure, and that music has its roots and its nostalgia in an originary atmosphere—to be called a sonorous womb, a murmuring house,—or *a music of the spheres*.") We are reminded of the ethereal regions into which Henriette's voice draws the captivated Félix.

The final figure of the fold is another mark on the body: the wrinkles or furrows on the brow, the tracks ("sillons"), real or imagined, of one's tears or kisses. Thus in Henriette's final letter, she confesses that the kisses Félix gave her at the ball have dominated her life, *furrowed* her soul: "[vos baisers] ont

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silloné mon âme" (1215). Indeed, this is the sign with which the book opens, since it occurs in the third sentence of Félix's letter to Natalie de Manerville, the woman he now professes to love and to whom he writes the long confession-letter that constitutes the novel: "Pour ne pas voir un pli se former sur vos fronts, [...] nous franchissons miraculeusement les distances, nous donnons notre sang, nous dépensons l'avenir" (969). ("In order not to see a furrow [fold] form on your brow, [...] what obstacles we miraculously overcome! We shed our blood, we risk our future!"). This fold or wrinkle in the brow signifies disapproval, refusal, or separation, but unlike the other lines which capture the Félix's gaze, these lines are *inscribed*, usually by him, onto the body. As such they are *his* mark of refusal, his means of unconsciously exacting a revenge for the love denied him.⁶

Given his lifelong experience with frustration and refusal, it seems natural enough that

Félix would feel the need for revenge. In speaking of his mother, he recalls the day he was finally able to judge her clearly: “En ce jour commencent les représailles des enfants dont l'indifférence engendrée par les déceptions du passé [...] s'étend jusqu'à sur la tombe” (981-982). (“On that day begin the reprisals of children whose indifference, engendered by the disillusionments of the past, extends to the grave”).⁷ But since he is unable to punish his mother—other than by his indifference—he takes revenge on his mother substitutes. Thus, rather than respect Henriette's family life, he sees in her the promise of superhuman pleasures: “[...] je voulais vivre et attendre l'heure du plaisir comme le sauvage épie l'heure de la vengeance [...]” (999). (“I wanted to live and wait for the moment of pleasure as the savage awaits his hour of vengeance”). This comparison curiously equates love's pleasure with revenge. Consequently, he consistently derives some pleasure from her suffering, and is overjoyed when he is able to catch two of her tears and drink them: “Ah! quelle femme sur la terre pourrait me causer une joie aussi grande que celle d'avoir aspiré ces larmes!” (1036). (“Ah! What woman on earth could give me a joy as great as that of inhaling your tears!”)—the perfect maternal nourishment

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indeed. Later, when he abandons Henriette's “pure” love to live with his mistress Lady Dudley, he is tormented by a guilt which he turns against Madame de Mortsauf: “un esprit vengeur me jetait incessamment des idées sur lesquelles je n'osais m'appesantir. Mes lettres à Henriette peignaient cette maladie morale, et lui causaient un mal infini” (1185); (“an avenging spirit incessantly filled me with thoughts on which I dared not dwell. My letters to Henriette depicted this moral malady and caused her infinite pain”).

As much as Henriette enjoins Félix to uphold her precepts when he goes out into the world, to avoid any action which would cause her brow to furrow—“sans qu'un seul de vos succès me fasse plisser le front” (1096-1097)—his amorous “success” with Lady Dudley does just that. If her aging and mentally unstable husband's cruel and erratic actions have already begun to crease Henriette's brow, the knowledge of Félix's infidelity deepens them: “les lignes si menues qui [...] n'étaient que légèrement imprimées sur son front, l'avaient creusé” (1154); (“the slender lines which [...] were only lightly marked upon her forehead had deepened”). In their final encounter, Félix finds her whole face ravaged, and the meaning of the lines written on her forehead reveal both Félix's cruelty and her own repressed desires: “Son front [...] exprimait l'audace agressive du désir et des menaces réprimées” (1200); (“Her forehead [...] expressed the bold aggressiveness of desire and repressed threats”). It is not until death erases desire that “[l]es lignes de son visage se purifiaient” (1206), (“the lines of her face became purified”), revealing the indissoluble link between Eros and Thanatos.

Maternal abandonment and refusal in *Le Lys dans la vallée* determines the mother's presence as a source of frustration, suffering, and desire. The protagonist Félix de Vandenesse becomes fixated on the image of phallic mothers and, acting upon a compulsion to repeat, either chooses a woman unable to accede to his desires and punishes her for it (Madame de Mortsauf), or causes her to abandon him (both Lady Dudley and the addressee of his long letter, Natalie de Manerville), and is thereby masochistically punished in turn.

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In its emphasis on line and fold throughout the *Lys*, Balzac allows us to witness the constitution of

desire in the gaze that captures the subject. Félix's gaze uncovers the Lacanian "objet (petit) a," revealing, as in a dream, the perspective object *par excellence*, the illusory maternal phallus.

Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

² See Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994, pp. 844-858.

³ The text abounds, nonetheless, in explicit references to both Platonic love (Petrarch's love for Laura is the most common model) and to courtly love. But these comparisons serve to highlight the protagonists' exaltation: there is a measure of bad faith and misrecognition in their use by Félix.

⁴ It is interesting to note, with respect to this "backward displacement," that Rosolato underscores the nature of the fetish as that of an *anal penis* (28).

⁵ According to Lastinger, "Félix's mother represents at once the Imaginary object of his limitless desire and the threatening phallus that would break the union with the Mother and force him into the world of the Symbolic" (240).

⁶ Lastinger also speaks of Félix's revenge. "He has avenged himself of the phallus through Henriette's death" (244).

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