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## ***Between fantasque and fantasmagorique: a fantastic reading of Balzac's La Peau de chagrin***

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*Nicoletta Pireddu*

A reader of literature always finds implicit or explicit clues in a diegesis to unmask the imaginary quality of the story: the notion of truth in diegesis, as Michael Riffaterre underlines,<sup>1</sup> is paradoxically bound to the fictionality of the work and conditioned by its textual nature. Once arranged on the written page, words are no longer directly linked to external reality through a process of mimesis, but rather, they interact within the narrative structure. The text, however, compensates for the split between verbal representation and non-verbal entities with "signs indicating a convention of truth, signs of a plausibility that make readers react to a story *as if* it were true" (2, my emphasis). Verisimilitude as a descriptive system is the result of such a pact, which allows external referentiality to be indirectly evoked in the text through reality effects. It is exactly the code of the real which opens *La Peau de chagrin*, in line with Honoré de Balzac's literary technique: the gaming-house scene, where the protagonist is introduced, epitomizes what in the "Préface" becomes the main faculty of writers: "Ils *inventent* le vrai, par analogie."<sup>2</sup> Through invention and analogy, an artificial world is created, where events, however fictional, are ordered according to a coherent causal sequence; although "exterior referentiality is but an illusion" (Riffaterre 3), expectations are fulfilled and the "as if" strategy sustains the compromise between the narrative system and assumptions about reality.

It is in these terms that we can read the "atroce épigramme" (Balzac 18), the "poésie vulgaire," the "mélodrame plein de sang" (20) which condense and literalize the atmosphere in the first sections of the novel. The law which protects the passion of gambling is also a guarantee of precision, in that it imposes the temporal and spatial parameters which frame the opening scene: "quelque temps après l'heure à laquelle s'ouvrent les maisons de jeu, . . . un jeune homme vint au Palais-Royal; et, sans trop hésiter, monta l'escalier du tripot établi au numéro 39" (17). Nevertheless, there is something in the same page which escapes the "miroir concentrique" of the author's imagination, "où . . . l'univers vient se réfléchir" (8). By hinting at a "contrat infernal" (17), the narrative voice makes another sign system interfere with the code of the real, and anticipates an alternative pact: the "as if" convention which seems to be grounded in verisimilitude becomes at the same time the mediator between the natural and the supernatural, between Raphael's rational realm and the disconcerting powers of the magic skin. Not simply a *speculum* for Balzac's realistic representation, the novel turns into a form of unresolved speculation about a chain of events which defy everyday logic. "Est-ce une plaisanterie, est-ce un mystère?" (307), the protagonist wonders examining the talisman: it is exactly this hesitation between these two possibilities, deprived of any final answer, which calls the fantastic into being. Like Raphael and the other characters at the gambling-house, the novel as a whole is *en jeu*, at the mercy of an interplay of *fantasque* (264) and *fantasmagorique* (49), two opposing poles which epitomize, respectively, Todorov's notions of "uncanny" and "marvelous".<sup>3</sup> The "bizarre, capricieux, changeant"<sup>4</sup> events which the *fantasque* alludes to, correspond to those apparently unexplainable phenomena which, for the Bulgarian critic, are finally deciphered according to the laws of reality. Similarly, with the supernatural effects implied by the *fantasmagorique*, the novel enters the realm of the marvelous, which is ruled by a new set of norms. Attempts to interpret the nature of the magic skin create an oscillatory movement between these categories, and describe a middle ground of hesitation on which the fantastic quality of Balzac's text is founded.

#### 1. The deviation from the realistic code.

The moment Raphael leaves the *maison de jeu* to enter the *magasin de curiosité*, the law which controls human actions according to

a logic of order and ordinariness ceases to be effective. If among the *visages de plâtre* and the *coeurs glacés* it is the protagonist's own presence which arouses a "sentiment épouvantable" (Balzac 23) and which seems to conceal some horrible mystery, once he begins wandering through the streets of Paris, then the disquieting atmosphere of the city at night anticipates the hallucinatory topography of the antique store. The reality effect, still sustained by Raphael's itinerary along historical monuments, is set against unsettling encounters with weird figures which interfere unexpectedly with his suicidal projects: the sarcastic comments of the old woman dressed in rags and the hideous appearance of the two beggars work as intimations of that irrational, demonic realm already evoked by the opening image of the infernal contract, and magnified in the following section.

Raphael's visit to the antique dealer, and his immediate perception of things "sous d'étranges couleurs" (33), overturn the clearness and emptiness of the casino into the chaos of a "tableau confus où les oeuvres humaines se heurtaient."<sup>5</sup> The material juxtaposition of objects at the store, as well as the verbal antitheses describing them, hint at the analogous conflict of natural and supernatural which stems from this scene and which underlies the novel as a whole. Under the effect of his visionary experience, Raphael "sortit de la vie réelle, monta par degrés vers un monde idéal, et tomba dans une indéfinissable extase" (Balzac 35); however, he is constantly struggling to bring these sensations back to the logic of rationality, trying to decipher them according to the parameters of everyday life. The chain of uncanny images which follow one another as he progresses with his visit of the store evokes "les enchantemens d'un songe" (39) but presupposes at the same time physiological explanations: "le principe était sans doute dans une irrégulière circulation de son sang" (33), and its effects derive from the devastating action of fever and hunger. In the bazaar of human follies, "formes . . . étranges" and "créations merveilleuses" generate a liminal space which absorbs Raphael's perception: "doutant de son existence, il était, comme ces objets curieux, ni tout-à-fait mort, ni tout-à-fait vivant, . . . sur les frontières de la mort et de la vie" (39). At this stage of the novel, the experience of the threshold acquires a leading role, becoming the central metaphor not merely for the derangement of Raphael's senses but for the mechanism of interpretation itself: the disquieting figure of the antique dealer and the mysterious powers of the magic skin in-

validate the reality effects as the only parameters to normalize events, by creating an interplay of the ordinary and extraordinary, the two poles which delineate Raphael's mental oscillation.

"Les terreurs de la vie étaient impuissantes sur une âme familiarisée avec les terreurs de la mort": nothing seems to shake the protagonist's equilibrium after his painful inner struggles, and this sceptical attitude leads him to attribute the "caresse froide et digne des mystères de la tombe" (44) to the wings of a bat. However, no justification can be found for the sudden apparition of the *petit vieillard* surrounded by a sphere of blazing light, and announced by a terrible voice which Raphael can have either imagined under the effect of a nightmare or actually perceived. The "doute philosophique" (45) which characterizes the protagonist's hesitation vis-à-vis the nature of this extraordinary character is not dispelled after he recognizes "dans le vieillard une créature de chair, bien vivante, point fantasmagorique" (49). Far from excluding occult powers, the physical consistency of the antique dealer rather reinforces this possibility through the duplicity of his face, which recalls "soit une belle image du Père Eternel, soit le masque ricaneur de Méphistophélès" (47). Being a human figure endowed with supernatural features which stir both rapture and repulsion, he personifies the fantastic, the coexistence of the uncanny and the marvelous, arising exactly from the undecidability between the two. Although the atmosphere of the place as a whole is contaminated by and filtered through the visitor's emotion—which could explain the old man's frightful characteristics as a result of Raphael's hallucination—the *vieillard* is intrinsically ambiguous. Not simply "une espèce de fantôme" (45), and no longer transfigured by the protagonist's nervous tension, he engages in a dialogue with the visitor. However, he soon destabilizes the realistic code to which he seems to adhere, by revealing the magic skin and its unexplainable faculties.<sup>6</sup>

In the Paris of a Balzacian novel, "au dix-neuvième siècle, temps et lieu où la magie devait être impossible" (Balzac 48), Raphael cannot but look for a natural cause which explains the brightness of the talisman. "Comme un enfant pressé de connaître les innocens secrets de quelque nouveau jouet" (55), the realistic character aims at demystifying a phenomenon which challenges the logic of verisimilitude. However, the mathematical evidence of his demonstration finds its limit in the mischievous smile of superiority with which the antique dealer reinstates the fantastic quality of the skin. A story stems from

the mysterious words indelibly embedded in its tissue, which Raphael's rationality judges impossible, but which the subsequent events will prove to be undeniable. The "peau symbolique" (56) acquires a Lacanian connotation precisely for its connection with language, a language which, because of its "otherness," defies a translation into ordinary discourse. Actually, the decipherment of the inscription from Sanskrit to French does not eliminate the intellectual instability produced by the reading of its contents: the code of the fantastic implanted in the text of the skin opposes its strategy of incertitude and anxiety to the normalizing power of reason. Raphael abandons the "as if" convention of realistic aesthetics, and subscribes to a fatal contract which turns the engraved signs into symbols of the ontological relation between a character and an object, between "un mécanisme de chair et d'os animé par la volonté et qui fait un individu homme" (254) and "un morceau de chagrin . . . dont la dimension n'excède pas celle d'une peau de renard."<sup>7</sup>

In reply to the impotence underlying Raphael's death-wish, the skin provides "un mystérieux accord entre les destinées et les souhaits du possesseur" (Balzac 61), an occult fusion of *vouloir* and *pouvoir* which, however, does not immediately exert its effects. It is exactly the deferment of the talismanic powers, so far merely assumed through a verbal formula, which avoids the outright shift to the marvelous: confronted with a hypothesis which he can neither totally explain nor absolutely reject,<sup>8</sup> Raphael is still trying to maintain a critical distance. The warnings of the old man against the destructive consequences of the pact have no direct influence upon the light-hearted attitude of the protagonist, "surpris et presque irrité de se voir toujours plaisanté" (Balzac 61), but rather work as a prolepsis for the catastrophic events which take place after the retrospective narration of Raphael's life. Although it is the skin in his pocket which seems to provide the fulfilment of his first wishes, the intervention of magic is once again made ambiguous by its possible attribution to chance, namely, to the category of the *fantasque*. In line with the realistic turn of the novel, the laws of everyday logic still prevail.

The leap from the banquet scene to the memories of the protagonist epitomizes the awkward juxtaposition of realistic and fantastic effects in Balzac's text. However, the alleged incompatibility of the *étude de mœurs* with the events related to the magic skin, and the subsequent split of Balzac's text into self-contained parts,<sup>9</sup> tend to neglect the elements of continuity between the two modes:

Raphael is a "desiring machine"<sup>10</sup> even before the possession of the talisman, and the fatal contract with the skin intensifies the pact he has already signed with himself to seal his decision of "mourir pour vivre" (Balzac 127). Therefore, his past life contains the germs of two themes which, once developed to an excessive degree, contribute to the creation of the fantastic. Moreover, the explosion of his wishes at the antique dealer's shop represents the climactic reaction to a prolonged constraint which is dictated by the paternal law:

jusqu'à vingt-et-un ans j'ai été courbé sous un despotisme aussi froid que celui d'une règle monacale. Pour te révéler les tristesses de ma vie, il suffira peut-être de te dépeindre mon père. . . . Sa paternité planait au dessus de mes lutines et joyeuses pensées de manière à les enfermer sous un dôme de plomb. . . .(108)

The interdiction of the father is the first hindrance to Raphael's emotional freedom, which he himself additionally restricts when he shuts passions out with the door to his room, in order to write the *Théorie de la volonté*. Repressed desires return however, and the devastating effects of their "Faustian overreaching"<sup>11</sup> mark the transition from Raphael's realistic biography to a magical adventure, from the logic of verisimilitude to that of the fantastic: the supernatural powers of the skin literalize such a figurative expression as "j'aurais, en certains momens, donné ma vie pour une seule nuit" (Balzac 121), as well as any rhetorical and mechanical use of words connected with the semantic field of longing.<sup>12</sup> On a meta-narrative level, the dynamic underlying desire in *La Peau de chagrin* can be extended to the role of the fantastic vis-à-vis nineteenth-century tradition: not unlike the passions in Raphael's life, the fantastic is the repressed alter-ego of positivism and, more specifically, of Balzac's realistic writings. Therefore, the narrative of desire developed in this text is intertwined with the desire of a fantastic narrative which surfaces as an independent and rival literary genre (Brooks 316).

If the adventure of the skin constitutes the compensatory aftermath of Raphael's failure (Rudich 218), it also reverses his previous goal: "mourir pour vivre" becomes "je veux vivre maintenant!" (Balzac 229). Nevertheless, according to the paradoxical logic of the talisman, the realization of this utterance will coincide with the opposite effect: since the skin is "une antiphrase" (230) which shrinks proportionately at each desire, the fulfilment of such a global wish determines its total consumption and, consequently, the protagonist's

death. With the tyrannical accomplishment of his longings, the pen which marks the profile of the skin upon the white cloth also inscribes Raphael's agony, and the widening gap between the "lignes impitoyables et capricieuses" (238) becomes the tangible proof which convinces Raphael of the truth of the old man's premonition. The scepticism, which, in the first section of the novel, prevented him from taking the inscription seriously, is here replaced with an obsessive submission to the talismanic law, to the point that "il essayait de douter; mais un pressentiment anéantissait son incrédulité" (238). As if under the antithetical strategy of the skin, the effort to believe previously threatened by his mocking attitude, turns into a nostalgic longing for uncertainty. However it is annihilated by concrete results: "Il voyait clairement ce que chaque désir devait lui coûter de jours . . . il croyait à la peau de chagrin" (238).

Such a lack of intellectual vacillation creates another order in Raphael's mind. The satanic laugh of the *marchand de curiosité*—who appears at the side of Euphrasie as Raphael had playfully commanded—is the sound of the marvelous, of the supernatural accepted, and it disrupts the voice of science. Rationality, that which the protagonist had relied upon to dissipate any residue of mystery at the antique dealer's, is now at the mercy of a ruinous power. Against the indisputable shrinking of the skin, the "lois ordinaires de la zoologie" (287)—which Lacrampe, the wise man, invokes—reveal their inadequacy, and anticipate the more clamorous failure of M. Planchette's experiments. The explosion of the hydraulic press, meant to act upon the talisman's surface, is the concrete mark of the impossibility to compress an unknown phenomenon by reducing it to natural causes. With the defeat of science, the unexplainable bond tying the skin and Raphael's life is reaffirmed: if physics and chemistry provide no remedy to the contraction of the *morceau de peau d'âne*, medicine is equally powerless when confronted with the character's physical degeneration. The supernatural "coïncidence entre . . . désirs et . . . rétrécissement" (312) which enslaves Raphael, remains unscathed and unquestioned until the end of the novel, when the deferment of his suicide finds its resolution. With the fulfilment of his final wish—the union with Pauline—the protagonist can read his death sentence in the last fragment of the magic skin, "fragile et petit comme une feuille de saule" (356).

From intellectual detachment to emotional obsession, the parabola of Raphael's attitude towards the obscure logic of the magic skin

progressively abandons the realm of the *fantasque* to join the *fantasmagorique*: the contract he signs with the skin, now devoid for him of any constitutional ambiguity, subdues him to a demonic power he no longer denies. Since the oscillation between the two poles has finally determined the predominance of one of them, the fantastic effect of Raphael's experience—located on the border separating the uncanny and the marvelous—seems to have evaporated.<sup>13</sup> However, the character's perception and interpretation of events, as Todorov underlines, do not constitute the decisive source for the fantastic: it is the reader's own hesitation which promotes it. It is on the meta-narrative level that *La Peau de chagrin* maintains doubt alive. The unachieved dialogue following the conclusion of the events inserts an additional voice which reinstates the interpretative openness of Balzac's text: the unanswered questions raised in the last two pages epitomize the conceptual gaps which hinder a facile acceptance of either the natural or the supernatural.

## 2. *Imagination de poète* and *peau des chagrins*: the fantastic in danger.

For the reader who replaces Raphael in the interpretation of events, the novel literalizes further threats to the survival of the fantastic. If the diegesis has shifted from *fantasque* to *fantasmagorique*—thus leading the protagonist to a choice which erases his hesitation—on the meta-narrative level, then the permanent uncertainty, which the fantastic requires from the reader, clashes with two possible kinds of naturalization, namely, a poetic and an allegorical approach to the text.

Analogously to Raphael's recollection of his past experiences, *La Peau de chagrin* as a whole can be taken "comme une orgie de paroles, de mots sans idées . . ." (Balzac 232). The protagonist's account of reality often consists in a combination of words working in their literal sense to the detriment of actual events, thus thematizing the lack of referentiality which underlies a poetic interpretation (Todorov 60). Raphael, a poet himself, embodies such an approach, which the novel exemplifies in the numerous references to the activity of writing. The literariness of literature filters a neutral description of his perceptions, so that the "océans de meubles, d'inventions, de modes, d'oeuvres, de ruines" which are part of his hallucinatory experience at the antique dealer's "lui composait un poème sans fin" (Balzac 37). From a model which the work of art has to reproduce,

everyday life becomes textualized. In Raphael's "imagination de poète" (198), actual episodes and people surrounding him are defined in aesthetic terms. For example: the banquet scene is at once "un livre et un tableau" (75); Aquilina is vaguely comparable to "une tragédie de Shakespeare" (93); and the representation of Foedora as a French *blason du corps féminin* is built upon artistic analogies, for Raphael found "la passion empreinte en tout, l'amour écrit sur ces paupières italiennes, sur ces belles épaules dignes de la Vénus de Milo. . . . Il y avait certes tout un roman dans cette femme!" (151). In the seclusion of his room, the protagonist, struggling to achieve his literary work, transfigures the environment with his inspiration. The words which allow him to express "des pensées presque intraduisibles" also recreate the most common objects, shifting from denotation to connotation: "à force de contempler ces objets, je leur trouvais une physionomie, un caractère, et ils me parlaient souvent" (133). The thematization of writing and of its material support in the novel marks the characters' descriptions, thus questioning their representative function: Raphael's father "avait l'air d'un hareng saur enveloppé dans la couverture rougeâtre d'un *pamphlet*" (108-9), and M. Porriquet, Raphael's former teacher, appears as a "figure . . . accompagnée de longs cheveux gris en désordre et desséchée comme un *vieux parchemin* qui se tord dans le feu" (243).

According to the reading of the text as a "poème vivant" (223), which Raphael's attitude promotes, the role of the magic skin is reduced to the literal effects of an antiphrasis exchanging the protagonist's life not so much for the content of his longings as for "the word of desire" (Weber 119). If the decisive element in this pact is not the protagonist's intention but rather his utterance *à la lettre*, the logic of the talisman sanctions the crisis of representation: as in Raphael's orgy of words without ideas, the object is cut off from its verbal evocation.

However, the literalization of events stemming from the skin as "antiphrase" (Balzac 230) is opposed to an allegorization of the novel as a whole, hinging upon the idea of the skin as a "fatal symbole du destin" (280). In this respect, the texture of *La Peau de chagrin* veils another level of meaning which, in Todorov's analysis, reduces the talisman to a metaphor for life and a metonymy for desire (Todorov 67), and works as a leitmotif for the entire plot. Starting from the opening idea of "une parabole" (Balzac 17) until the final relation between Foedora and society, a figurative meaning is superimposed

upon the literal value of numerous episodes and characters in the text. The novel exhibits its exemplary function even before the narration begins. The winding line in the title page leading back to "STERNE. *Tristram Shandy*, ch. CCCXXII"<sup>14</sup> already establishes a connection between the actual image and a general meaning. For Balzac, the meandering curve stands for human life, a "drame qui serpente, ondule, tournoie et au courant duquel il faut s'abandonner comme le dit la très spirituelle épigraphe du livre."<sup>15</sup> The turns of the trajectory reveal the *détours* of the novel and anticipate the zigzag of Raphael's destiny, not subdued to the logic of rationality but rather to the law of the talisman. Therefore, the wild ass' skin becomes "la peau des chagrins," the material support from which the protagonist can read his own consumption under the yoke of desire.

Throughout the narration several other images work similarly, and thus reinstate their allegorical quality. The old man at the gambling house epitomizes "la passion réduite à son terme le plus simple" (Balzac 18): being "le Jeu incarné," he embodies one of the objects of Raphael's longings, which the extended paternal interdiction has intensified. Similarly, his encounter with the women during the banquet becomes charged with figurative meaning: the "drame sanglant" (92), which each of them could recount, conveys at the same time the literal effect of Aquilina's experience—her lover's execution on the guillotine—and the indirect allusion to the contiguity of death and woman, the two principles which decree Raphael's fate. In line with Balzac's exploitation of antithetic values, Aquilina contrasts with Euphrasie as "l'âme du vice" clashing with "le vice sans âme" (95), both being vehicles for the expression of abstract qualities which affect the protagonist's behaviour after his demonic pact. The play of similarity and difference between the two female characters, while reducing them to "images vives et originales de la folie" (101), equally sanctions Aquilina's incarnation as "la joie humaine" (93) and Euphrasie's transfiguration "par une sinistre allégorie" (95) offering a portrait of cold corruption—while a new name, Foedora, represents Raphael's desires and the theme of his life. It is in these contradictions that the idea of the protagonist's existence as a cruel antithesis finds its constant support, and it is in this light that the skin as antiphrasis becomes its allegorization.

Both poetic and allegorical readings of *La Peau de chagrin* undermine the reality effects of Balzac's writing and, transitively, its potentially fantastic nature which depends on them. However, the

interpretation of the text in terms of a mere syntactical arrangement of words, sustained by the thematization of literariness through the protagonist's "imagination de poète" (198), reaches an impasse when Raphael's poetic voice is confronted with the referentiality of the scientific code: albeit sceptically and without solving the mysterious phenomenon, the doctors have to acknowledge that "cette peau se rétrécit réellement" (315). The same power of the pen which promotes the protagonist's activity as a writer also frames his existence by tracing on the cloth the fatal lines circumscribing the shrinking skin. Therefore, his death works as an actual event in the novel, one which retrospectively puts into question "la valeur nominale des paroles, des idées" (163).

With its shift to figurative language, the alternative interpretation of *La Peau de chagrin* in terms of "indirect allegory"—which Todorov sustains<sup>16</sup>—implies a transparent and exhaustive connection linking the two levels of signification, namely, the logic of the magic skin and the realm of actual life, the combination of words in the inscription and the unfolding of Raphael's desire. In fact, there is a residual voice which disrupts this correspondence at the very moment it becomes tautological: when both the talisman and the human life it represents are reduced to nothing, Pauline's disquieting laugh and her last exclamation—"Il est à moi! . . . je l'ai tué! . . . Ne l'avais-je pas prédit? . . ." (Balzac 358)—redefine the female role from angel to demon, and introduce another equally mysterious source for Raphael's death. From her first, vague prediction earlier in the novel to the final, triumphant comment on her lover's destruction, Pauline sets in motion a cryptic plot mechanism parallel to the law of the skin, which, however, is not even unfolded in the "Conclusion."

The reiterated open questions after the text of the novel thwart the reader's desire of naturalization. Balzac's disseminated allegories in *La Peau de chagrin* work against their own function: they hint at a revelation which the epilogue does not fulfil; they promise and deny the decipherment of its enigma. Significant in this respect is the unattainable etymology of the name "chagrin": the meaning of the talisman is built upon a "mystérieuse origine" (285) which the scientists cannot recover.

### 3. *Oui et non*: the black hole of the fantastic.

Although Pauline's prophetic powers and her lethal influence on Raphael render her "une figure surnaturelle" (358) whose meaning

is problematized, the novel suggests at the same time a physical explanation for the protagonist's death, by hinting repeatedly at his illness: "Ne suis-je pas pulmonique? . . . Ma mère n'est-elle pas morte de la poitrine?" (238) The symptoms of tuberculosis which make Pauline perceive "le hideux squelette de la MORT" (309) under his livid face, actually interfere, in the final scene, with the idea of corporal decay provoked by the magical effect of the skin. The unresolved confrontation between these two options casts doubts on the Faustian nature of the pact itself, by implying a mere mechanical shrinking of the talisman, not connected with Raphael's death. Further details in the text partake of the same ambivalence between two orders of explanations. Although apparently distinct, both the old man at the gambling house and the antique dealer are presented as *petits vieillards*, thus calling into being an uncanny process of doubling which equally connects the antique dealer with the Auvergne farmer because of their common age of 102; similarly, the death of Raphael's rival in the duel scene can either result from a desire secretly formulated in the protagonist's mind and fulfilled by the skin, or be ascribed to his fear vis-à-vis Raphael's "sécurité surnaturelle" (335).

"A une époque où tout s'explique, . . . dans un siècle de lumière, où nous avons appris que les diamans n'étaient que du carbon solide" (281), Balzac's novel questions the parameters of objectivity and rationality through a combination of "cas" and "devinette."<sup>17</sup> The investigation into the events—which should culminate in a decision about their nature—does not lead to a definite solution but rather to the perplexity embedded in the fantastic, to that oscillation between "oui et non" (102) which the reader experiences when confronted, like Raphael, with another order of norms grafted onto everyday data. The contrast of the uncanny and the marvelous, of *fantasque* and *fantasmagorique*, underlying the attempted interpretations of the skin throughout the plot, determines the point of convergence of the *thétique* and *non-thétique* (Bessière 37). Balzac's fantastic strategy merges an empirical, realistic motivation of events with a non-realistic probability, and establishes a paradoxical dialogue between their respective voices, namely, the scientific and the supernatural codes. A mere passage from the former to the latter would replace the *cas* with the *devinette*: the inquiry into reality based on a cause and effect criterion would lead to the decipherment of its cryptic sig-

nification according to an allegorical key, as Todorov's analysis suggests. In fact, *La Peau de chagrin* results from their coexistence: if "Cuvier . . . est . . . le plus grand poète de notre siècle," who awakens "le néant sans prononcer de paroles grandement magiques" (Balzac 42), the wild ass' skin is treated as a mineral in the hands of chemistry. It is the exchange between the two codes which promotes the antinomy of the fantastic in Balzac's text: when the impossible breaks into the rigid structure of plausibility, thus invalidating the principle of experimentation, the two conflicting codes intertwine to the point of undecidability. The skin, as antiphrasis embodying such a contrast, shrinks to the point of vanishing into its center: like a black hole, it absorbs contradictions and entraps within itself the solution to the play of *thétique* and *non-thétique*.

As the "parfaite machine à raconter" (Bessière 26), Balzac's fantastic novel narrates a story of discontinuity and uncertainty; it represents reality by problematizing its norms, by testing the law of verisimilitude as the skin threatens the scientific logic of naturalization. The French realistic author *par excellence*, whose *Comédie Humaine* hinges upon the homology between the structures of the work of art and those of the social milieu, also writes a destabilizing version of such a connection. Therefore, the intersection of the code of causality with that of the supernatural in the fantastic space of *La Peau de chagrin* becomes, on the meta-narrative level, the dialogue of Balzac's two personae, a further paradoxical discourse which asserts the positivistic faith in explanation and simultaneously neutralizes it by juxtaposing with it an "other" order of signification which rationality cannot grasp. It is exactly this essayistic strategy that the story of the talisman sets in motion. Far from any heuristic finality, the novel leaves the *cas* of the magic skin unsolved and articulates a *devinette* granting no access to its unknown logic.

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### Notes

1. Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 1.
2. Honoré de Balzac, "Préface" to *La Peau de chagrin* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1984) 9. My emphasis. This edition reproduces the original one of 1831.

3. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (New York: Cornell UP, 1975) 41. Unlike Todorov's corresponding genres, the terms *fantasque*, *fantastique*, and *fantasmagorique* in Balzac's text do not define three rigorously distinct categories from the beginning. Especially in the case of the *fantastique*, the novel does not refer to a self-contained domain. However, in the light of Todorov's theory, Balzac's use of such terms provides new insight into the events of *La Peau de chagrin*: the alternation of the *fantasque* and *fantasmagorique* reflects the unresolved ambiguity between the uncanny and the marvelous, which is the origin of the fantastic.

4. *Petit Robert: Dictionnaire de la langue française* 758.

5. Samuel Weber, *Unwrapping Balzac. A Reading of "La Peau de chagrin"* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1979) 35.

6. In these terms, the fantastic nature of the antique dealer is not merely due to his connection with the repulsive or grotesque quality of the objects he is selling, "des choses qui ont cessé d'être attendrissantes ou désuètes pour s'animer d'une vie propre, féroce ou répugnante," as Louis Vax observes. In fact, the character himself participates in the supernatural realm, in that he possesses the secret of the talisman which will manipulate Raphael's life. Louis Vax, *La séduction de l'étrange* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965) 73.

7. Roland Le Huenen, "La sémiotique du corps dans *La Peau de chagrin*: le tout et le fragment" *Le roman de Balzac* (Paris: Didier, 1980) 55.

8. René Quinsat, "Réalisme et fantastique balzaciens" *Europe* 611 (1980) 50.

9. For Linda Rudich, the novel is to be considered *réaliste* from the first chapter to Raphael's agony—the moment which marks the development of the fantastic and prolongs it until the end. This perspective inevitably overlooks the pivotal events at the antique dealer's, which in fact disrupt the purity of the realistic code, and constitute the starting point of a parabola leading to the protagonist's destruction. Linda Rudich, "Une interprétation de *La Peau de chagrin*," *L'Année Balzacienne* (Paris: Garnier, 1971) 207.

The fantastic effects of *La Peau de chagrin* are totally sacrificed for the sake of realism in Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac et le mal du siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) (ii) 1415-1613. It is an accurate study of Balzac's novel in relation to the *mal du siècle* but it reduces the text to a historical document accounting for "la société d'avant et . . . d'après la révolution de Juillet."

10. Peter Brooks, "Narrative Desire" *Style* 18 (1984) 312.

11. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981) 130.

12. My emphasis. For the literalization of figurative expressions as one of the features of the fantastic, see Todorov 79.

13. Such an observation does not coincide with Yvonne Bargues-Rollins' assertion in "Une 'Danse macabre': du fantastique au grotesque dans *La Peau de chagrin*" *Romantisme* 48 (1985) 33-46. She finds that Raphael's adherence to the grotesque quality of the magic skin "confirme son échec en tant que héros fantastique." Although in the last part of the text the protagonist's reactions present an undeniable departure from the fantastic, Bargues-Rollins underlines for the total length of the novel "l'insignifiance du héros qui ne questionne jamais le jeu de la raison et de la déraison." Such a simplistic account of Raphael's attitudes totally neglects the protagonist's continuous struggle to interpret the events according either to rationality or to such a different, unknown logic as the supernatural. It is exactly his mental and emotional

involvement which sets in motion the evolution from the uncanny to the fantastic and to the marvellous.

14. Such an epigraph does not appear in the original version of the novel. The trajectory which in Sterne's text describes the movement of *caporal* Trim's cane, develops progressively from a serpentine shape to a real snake in later editions of *La Peau de chagrin*. (See, for instance, the 1920 Grevin edition).

15. Honoré de Balzac in *La Caricature*, 11 août 1831, quoted in Raissa Reznik, "Sur l'Épigraphe de *La Peau de chagrin*" *L'Année Balzacienne* (Paris: Garnier, 1972) 372.

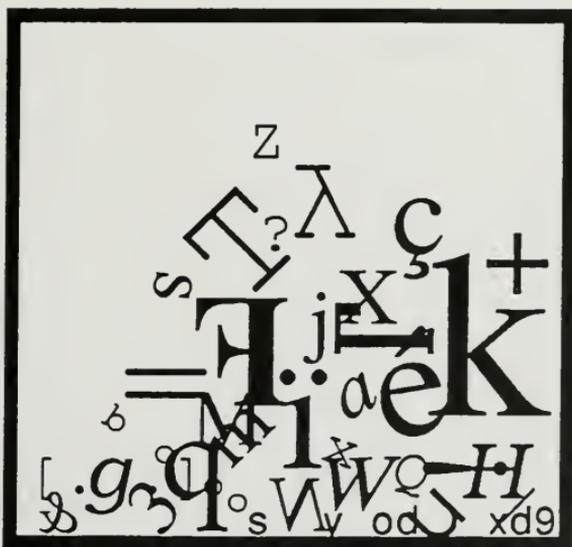
16. Todorov, *op. cit.* Other critics also find, in allegory, the main explanation for Balzac's text. Cf. Pierre Bayard, *Balzac et le troc de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1978); Marcel Schneider, *La littérature fantastique en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1964) 175.

17. Irène Bessière, *Le récit fantastique* (Paris: Larousse, 1974) 22-23.

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Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait  
ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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