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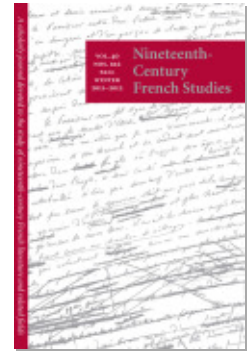
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Balzac's Algeria: Realism and the Colonial

DORIAN BELL

Characters in Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* seldom make it whole through a stint in Algeria. Philippe Bridau, the incurable reprobate of *La Rabouilleuse* (1842), joins the Algerian colonial campaign in search of a generalship—and gets decapitated for his troubles. The mediocre Oscar Husson of *Un début dans la vie* (1842) finally returns to France after an Algerian career that costs him an arm. Johann Fischer, the naïve instrument of Baron Hulot d'Ervy's Algerian machinations in *La Cousine Bette* (1846), commits suicide in an Oranian prison.

These lives and body parts cut short evoke the status in the *Comédie humaine* of Algeria itself. An absent setting that never attracts the Balzacian narrator's famously topographic eye, the nascent colony nonetheless registers on what might be called the work's proprioceptive map—that is, on the narrative's internal sense of its own disposition in space. Algeria lingers there with the ontological strangeness of something missing but still felt: a phantom limb, as it were, and a big one. It is fitting that the only Balzac story set in Algeria, *Le Programme d'une jeune veuve* (c. 1843), should appear among the fragments linked to the *Comédie humaine* but ultimately abandoned by Balzac. Cut from the whole, and yet a part of the whole, this most sustained incarnation of Balzac's Algeria epitomizes the fate elsewhere reserved in the *Comédie humaine* for a colony whose perception by the text only ever suggests an excision.

I say “colony” because Balzac was never interested in Algeria as anything else. And that, this essay will argue, has everything to do with the paradoxical nature of Algeria's place in the *Comédie humaine*. For all the critical ink spilled these last decades over the engagement with the colonial of the modern European novel, a vexed question remains: if without empire “there is no European novel as we know it,” as Edward Said so provocatively declared (*Culture and Imperialism* 69), why are the colonies relegated to the margins in so many of the nineteenth century's great realist novels? Said himself proposed that the European novel, with its totalizing ambitions of spatial and narrative mastery,

emanated from a same underlying impulse for mastery as the colonial project (69–71). This hypothesis impressively annexes even those texts in which the colonies do not appear: empire and the novel sharing a common psychosocial parentage, the novel could reinforce a colonial imperative without extensively figuring the colonies or even figuring them at all. Said partially subtracts France from his analysis on the grounds that for most of the nineteenth century empire enjoyed a tighter grip on the cultural imaginary in Britain than in France (71, 97–98). Yet Balzac’s various assessments of France’s Algerian project—more on these in a moment—suggest that, at least in the case of Algeria, France’s destiny was for Balzac already bound up in substantive ways with colonial expansion.

Still the question persists: whither Balzac’s Algeria? Said’s conjecture about the imperialist foundation of the novel’s claims to spatial and narrative mastery—claims never more evident than in the *Comédie humaine*’s epic intention to render the entirety of French life—would locate in the *Comédie humaine*’s Algerian references merely the most visible sign, like the tip of an iceberg, of an imperialist posture looming everywhere beneath the surface. And yet, Algeria’s status in the *Comédie humaine* hints less at a literary project ever-expanding in ambition than at one whose North African reach observed certain self-imposed limits. To be sure, Algeria’s emergence as a dimension of the *Comédie humaine* in its later volumes represents an expansion of the cycle’s geography. The expansion, however, doubles as contraction, insofar as Algeria eludes the cartographic precision with which the *Comédie humaine* usually integrated new locales.

Understanding this ambiguous staging of the colonial is the task at hand—and one that clears a path, I think, for understanding the similar, century-long reticence by Balzac’s realist inheritors to situate their novels in the colonies. That reticence would persist even in novels otherwise thoroughly suffused with the thematics of empire. Consider novels like Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami* (1885) or Zola’s *L’Argent* (1891), whose internal logics require the imperial periphery to which France redoubled its attention after 1870, but whose settings remain tightly circumscribed nonetheless by France’s continental borders. Few satisfactory explanations have been offered for this relative absence of imperial settings in canonical French realism. Arguments about French realists’ unwillingness to tackle the ostensibly incommensurable difference of the colonized do not square with those realists’ otherwise defining enthusiasm for opening new frontiers to representation.¹ If in the eighteenth century Montesquieu could pen an entire fiction featuring Persian protagonists, why should realists prove shy in the nineteenth century about depicting colonial spaces in their novels? Besides, as has been voluminously documented, nineteenth-century French authors writing in romantic, exoticist, adventure, and other veins

showed no compunction about ranging far and wide in their fictions. True, these authors often occluded the unpleasant colonial truths that contravened their constructed fantasies.² But the critical attention this occlusion has justifiably received itself overlooks the conspicuous paucity of colonial settings in the one novelistic mode—realism—whose largely France-bound ways furnish the least material for postcolonial re-readings.

There are of course multiple other possible explanations for the recalcitrance of French realism before empire, none of which I would presume to dismiss. It may very well be, for instance, that French realists, intent on lending a maximum of gravitas to their social critiques, were wary of venturing into a geographic periphery associated with more fanciful literary pursuits. Or perhaps they were loath to depict a world less verifiably real, and hence less credibly verisimilar, than the world readers could see outside their windows. I would suggest a rather more complicated relationship between French realism and the colonial, however. Taking Balzac as a central point of reference, I will be demonstrating how Algeria's shadowy status in the *Comédie humaine* symptomizes a broader disjuncture between the colonial periphery and realism's capacity for representing it. Inseparable as Balzac's nascent realism was from certain metropolitan assumptions about the representation and arrangement of social space, Balzac's representational tools proved inadequate to depicting a colonial periphery where, owing to the nature of imperial conquest, different spatial and epistemological circumstances prevailed. In other words, rather than ask why Balzac chose not to represent Algeria in any spatial detail, it makes more sense to ask why, on a fundamental level, he *could not*. Yet neither does Algeria disappear entirely from the *Comédie humaine*; as I will argue, traces of the colony linger on to betray realist worries that colonial failures of representation might prove systemic. First, though, it is instructive to consider Balzac's overt reaction to the conquest of Algeria. I therefore begin with opinions he voiced in the press and with his evolution toward a more circumspect position on the colony in the *Comédie humaine*.

IMPERIAL INDETERMINACIES

Balzac's journalistic pronouncements on France's occupation of Algeria hewed to a patriotic, nationalist script. In October 1830—three months after the surrender of Algiers to French forces—Balzac published an article in the newspaper *Le Voleur* defending the Général de Bourmont, architect of the conquest. Bourmont's sack of Algiers after its capitulation had raised eyebrows in France. Balzac demurred, chiding Bourmont's detractors for their "fanatisme de persécution" and predicting the exoneration of Bourmont's army from accusations of wrongdoing ("Lettres sur Paris" 878–79).

Balzac's defense of Bourmont extended to the Algerian colonial enterprise, which he endorsed on the grounds that it would help France better project power in Europe. Writing again in *Le Voleur* in 1831, he labeled the Algerian expedition an important first step in what he hoped would become a program of French territorial expansion on both sides of the Mediterranean:

Conserver Alger, conquérir les Alpes et le Rhin, Anvers, s'il est possible, telle est la pensée intime de tous les ministères qui se succéderont en France, parce que ces occupations territoriales sont des nécessités géographiques. [. . .] car la France satisfaite et grande devient l'arbitre influent de tous les débats sur le continent. Alger lui-même n'est-il pas un gage certain de la liberté maritime dans la Méditerranée? Laissez-le prendre par l'Angleterre, où en serait l'Europe? . . . ("Lettres sur Paris" 944)

In 1836 Balzac reiterated his support for the Algerian expedition, arguing in the pages of his own newspaper, *La Chronique de Paris*, for an increased French military presence in the new colony: "Quelques journaux s'alarment du retrait de nos troupes, qui serait, dit-on, ordonné par le nouveau cabinet à Alger; et, en effet, il serait assez peu concevable que l'on retirât des troupes sur un point où il faudrait, au contraire, en envoyer pour assurer à la France la possession d'une des plus belles conquêtes qu'elle ait jamais faites, et dont les résultats seront immenses" ("Articles" 341). A few days later in the same newspaper, he called for France to push further inland to Constantine: "Loin de réduire l'occupation au littoral de l'ancienne régence, il est prouvé que les intérêts de la France exigent la conquête de Constantine. La Chambre ne pense donc pas à ce que peut être Alger un jour? cette seconde France n'entrera-t-elle pas dans les compensations de l'avenir?" (344). Manifestly, Balzac considered the conquest of Algeria—"cette seconde France," as he put it—of ongoing strategic importance to the nation.

In the *Comédie humaine*, however, Balzac takes a noticeably less sanguine view of Algerian affairs. One of the best-known examples of this occurs in *La Cousine Bette*. Desperate for money, the Baron Hulot d'Ervy sends his uncle Fischer to Algeria to exact grain and hay from the beleaguered Arabs, then resell these supplies to the French military at exorbitant prices. The kind of swindle tolerated during Hulot's halcyon days in Napoleon's army, the Baron's Algerian scam runs afoul of a new, post-1830 order nominally less hospitable to the corruption of old. But the impression remains of an Algerian enterprise characterized more by scandal than anything else. For all the disgust Hulot's shenanigans elicit from the more scrupulous Prince de Wissembourg, Minister of War, Balzac lets it be known that things will likely not change very much. After Hulot's disgrace we learn that Wissembourg has created a depart-

ment tasked with reforming the Algerian military supply system. Its director: Marneffe, the syphilitic blackmailer and pimp . . .

Balzac's dark joke suggests an Algeria populated by criminals and has-beens, a depiction echoed elsewhere in the *Comédie humaine*. Consider the trajectory of the old Napoleonic soldier Giroudeau. Excluded by his unreconstructed Bonapartism from military life during the Restoration, Giroudeau wallows for years in a Parisian demimonde of carousing, stage girls, and petty crime. After 1830, however, Giroudeau rises to the rank of general in Algeria, owing to what the narrator concedes are "services réels" (*Le Programme d'une jeune veuve* 373). Giroudeau's old Napoleonic comrade, Philippe Bridau, fares worse in the colony. Even more of a *débauché* than his friend, Philippe follows Giroudeau to Algeria after a continental scheme gone awry. Unfortunately for him, he has previously made the mistake of snubbing Giroudeau. Giroudeau returns the favor by ensuring that his former friend languishes, unpromoted, in the dangerous outpost where Philippe eventually gets decapitated in battle by Arabs (*La Rabouilleuse* 540).

Balzac's Algeria is not all gruesome death and reprisal. Giroudeau reinvents himself, and even the conniving Philippe fights bravely on the battlefield. Other characters profitably turn to Algeria as a venue of last resort for personal and professional salvation. The dissolute young provincial aristocrat Savinien de Portenduère, dishonored after a stint in debtor's prison, rehabilitates his name helping to seize Algiers and becomes the toast of Parisian society (*Ursule Mirouët* [1842]). Oscar Husson's Algerian heroics compensate, in *Un début dans la vie*, for a singularly inauspicious early career in France.

Yet if occasionally in the *Comédie humaine* Algeria offers characters a second chance, we are still, on balance, a long way from Balzac's earlier journalistic touting of the colony as a "second France." For every Savinien de Portenduère, whose time in Algeria vaults him back into his rightful place atop French society, the *Comédie humaine* tells the story of a Jacques Brigaut, a worthy and principled man who pursues a death-wish in Algeria after having been defeated by endemic venality back home (*Pierrette* [1840]). History offers one possible explanation for this ambivalent status accorded the new colony. The Algerian corner of the *Comédie humaine* took shape in works Balzac penned in the 1840s, by which time a number of high-profile scandals had tarnished French efforts in Algeria. Some of these scandals brought to light tactics that possibly furnished Balzac inspiration for Hulot's Algerian machinations.³ Years of grueling guerrilla warfare between French forces and Abd-el-Kader's resistance may also have taken the bloom off Balzac's earlier Algerian reveries.

Nevertheless, I would argue that factors internal to the *Comédie humaine* account just as well, if not better, for the discrepancy between Balzac's jour-

nalistic and fictional treatments of the Algerian question. Shortly after putting the final touches on *La Cousine Bette* and its mercenary Algerian intrigue, Balzac could still opine in a December 1846 letter to Madame Hanska that “le port d’Alger terminé, nous avons un second Toulon devant Gibraltar; nous avançons dans la domination de la Méditerranée” (*Lettres* 479); evidently, the increasingly equivocal note struck by the *Comédie humaine* concerning Algeria did not necessarily index a diminishment of colonial enthusiasm on Balzac’s part. The *Comédie humaine*, however, concerned itself far less with France’s international standing than with evolutions inside French society. Within that domestic context, Algeria provided Balzac a means for illustrating and reinforcing notions he developed about the metropole—something that, given Balzac’s acid take on the progress of modernity, often cast Algeria in a rather less heroic light than it enjoyed in his nonfictional disquisitions on foreign affairs.

Thus, for instance, does Balzac use Algeria to make a point about France’s ongoing relationship to its past. Hulot, Giroudeau, and Philippe Bridau are examples of a recurring Balzacian type: the Napoleonic *dinosaure* sidelined during the Restoration and reduced to a life of dissipation. Balzac meant this type in part as an indictment of a decadent Restoration. But it also signaled his reservations about the Napoleonic legacy. While Balzac reportedly admired Napoleon’s exploits enough to own a statuette of the Emperor engraved with the motto “Ce qu’il n’a pas achevé par l’épée, je l’accomplirai par la plume” (qtd. in Maurois 130), the *Comédie humaine* makes it clear that he eyed with suspicion the rough-and-tumble, proletarian types Napoleon’s meritocracy had elevated to prominence. Algeria allowed Balzac to dispel any confusion on the reader’s part about whether, given an appropriate military opportunity, these *dinosaures* might again productively helm the nation. Hulot’s Algerian machinations definitively cement his status as a relic from another era with little left to offer. So, too, does the brutality Philippe had honed under Napoleon prove out of place on the new Algerian battlefield—a fact punctuated when Philippe’s final distress cry of “Votre colonel! à moi! un colonel de l’Empire!” goes intentionally ignored by the troops he has alienated (*La Rabouilleuse* 540). Even Giroudeau, who more creditably seizes his Algerian chance, finds himself in charge of a colonial enterprise hardly given a ringing endorsement in the *Comédie humaine*.

Attracting to itself and exposing an atavistic Napoleonic element, Algeria helps Balzac argue for moving conclusively beyond the Napoleonic past. But the real boundary Balzac is interested in marking has more to do with class. Napoleon’s Empire had ennobled and otherwise plucked from obscurity a caste of proletarian and middle-class soldiers, eroding class distinctions in ways unsettling to a monarchist like Balzac. Depicting the Algerian missteps

of a Baron Hulot d'Ervy or a Phillipe Bridau—beneficiaries of a Napoleonic peerage and knighthood, respectively⁴—therefore sends more than just the message that these holdovers from the Empire have outlived their relevance. It also intimates that they should never have been allowed to climb the social ladder in the first place.⁵

As I will be arguing in the remainder of this essay, however, Algeria's ideological usefulness to Balzac proves a double-edged sword. What class boundaries Balzac uses Algeria to reaffirm, the colony also works to erode. Later I will examine how such class-leveling effects fundamentally accompanied the imperial fact, and explore the representational challenge this posed for Balzac and the realist poetics he helped invent. Suffice it to say for now that Algeria comes to be associated in the *Comédie humaine* not only with policing the absolute class distinctions Balzac favored, but also with the difficulty of maintaining those distinctions hermetic. The colony's association with that difficulty, moreover, prevents Balzac's Algeria from ever becoming a full-blown setting, largely relegating it instead to a patchwork of references and perfunctory summaries apparently designed as much to contain as to reveal.

Even the one work in the *Comédie humaine* set in Algeria, the fragment *Le Programme d'une jeune veuve*, comes to a tellingly abrupt end after just a few pages. Balzac's abortive effort brings to the surface a tension already latent in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, the very first text in the *Comédie humaine*. In its tale of the misbegotten union between an aristocratic painter, Théodore de Sommervieux, and a *petite bourgeoise* incapable of understanding his art, *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* lays the dichotomous foundation for much of the ensuing project. Few themes would more saturate the *Comédie humaine* than the incompatibility between inspiration and money—or, correspondingly, between the aristocracy and a bourgeoisie nipping at its heels. This is at least in part because Balzac struggled with the knowledge that his own work, much of it published serially for a bourgeois public, was ineluctably situated at the emerging juncture between mass market and private muse (Bordas 9–12).

Questions of readership aside, the *Comédie humaine*'s genealogical bent also militated from within against the maintenance of tidy dichotomies of the sort on offer in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*. It was one thing for Théodore de Sommervieux and his wife Augustine to personify the divide between Art and Commerce, aristocrat and bourgeois; but what to do when one generation begat the next—as so often happens in the *Comédie humaine*—and biology blurred the lines between opposites? That seems to have been the question on Balzac's mind when, just a few months after *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* had taken its definitive place as the opening act of the *Comédie humaine*, he turned his attention to the Sommervieux's hybrid offspring Robert. Crucially, Algeria provides the setting for this inquiry. Given only fleeting mention in *La*

Maison du chat-qui-pelote, Robert de Sommervieux returns as the sole main character of the *Le Programme d'une jeune veuve*. The first and only chapter of that fragment describes how Robert has enlisted in Algeria to flee a sordid commercial scandal back home. The results, like his class origins, are mixed: no more able to escape the taint of his bourgeois financial dealings than he is to escape his mother's bourgeois birth, he sees his early success in Algeria give way to shame when the news of the Parisian scandal reaches his fellow spahis. The fragment ends in mid-sentence, Robert even more unhappy than when he began.

Here, in the only extended venture onto Algerian soil in the *Comédie humaine*, Balzac hedges on the colony's capacity for untangling class indeterminacy. If anything, Robert's Algerian adventure instantiates his hybridity. Robert is greeted by no less a fellow hybrid than Giroudeau, the scalawag-cum-general, who feels a pang of recognition upon being reminded by Robert's threadbare appearance of his own "folies de jeunesse." Briefly stoking expectations that Robert might turn out all right, we learn from the narrator that the young man "ressemblait vaguement à Napoléon arrivant en Égypte" (374). But the vagueness of the resemblance ultimately proves most meaningfully operative. Robert derives little more from his Algerian service than a redux of the continental embarrassment he fled. And Balzac, unable or unwilling to finish the story, makes that condition permanent.

Balzac's consignment of Robert to narrative limbo speaks to the difficulty posed by the bodily conflation in Robert of his dual origins. It also speaks to the privileged status of Algeria in the *Comédie humaine* as a place where otherwise hermetic categories overlap. Robert's very existence emerges in Algeria as living proof that Art and Commerce, aristocrat and bourgeois, prove refractory over time to attempts at maintaining them distinct, and never more so than in the period of French history chronicled by Balzac.

To be sure, Balzac was not averse to a certain class complementarity. An aside in *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1834) by Balzac's narrator and mouthpiece diagnoses the problem of a sclerotic Restoration that collapsed, according to Balzac, because its aging aristocratic elite failed to assimilate the energies of a youthful, bourgeois "génie" languishing "dans le froid grenier où il pouvait être en train de mourir" (931).⁶ In the case of Savinien de Portenduère, Algeria works to facilitate just such a strategic class union. Rehabilitated by his *coup d'éclat* in Algiers, Portenduère returns from Algeria finally worthy of his steadfast bourgeois fiancée, Ursule Mirouët, whose inheritance lifts him from the ranks of the ruined aristocracy.

As we have seen, however, Balzac's Algeria more typically functions elsewhere, in its exilic no-man's-land quality, as a metonym and repository for the tendency over time of class encounters to produce unclassifiable results.

The fate of the Vicomte Charles Keller in *Le Député d'Arcis* (1847) proves an interesting iteration on this pattern. The hybrid product of a union between the Keller and de Gondreville families—respective epitomes, in the *Comédie humaine*, of bourgeois and aristocratic vigor—Charles's virtuous death fighting Abd-el-Kader's rebellion in Algeria conforms to the young man's glorious potential. "Les plus brillantes destinées," observes the narrator, "semblaient promises à un jeune homme puissamment riche, plein de courage, remarqué pour son dévouement à la nouvelle dynastie" (722). But Keller's demise in far-away Algeria suggests that Balzac did not quite know what to do with his hybrid creation. The fact that Keller's disappearance opens an electoral opportunity for Simon Guiget, a paragon of the petit-bourgeois fatuousness so often lampooned in the *Comédie humaine*, favorably contrasts Keller's brand of ennobled bourgeois promise with the unalloyed bourgeois ambition Balzac reviled. On the other hand, Keller's popularity in the "cour citoyenne" (722) of Louis-Philippe subtly offers Keller as an embodiment, in his mixedness, of a July Monarchy denounced by the legitimist Balzac for what he considered its unholy fusion of bourgeoisie and aristocracy.

Keller's martyrdom in Algeria lets Balzac have his cake and eat it too. Gesturing, in his unfulfilled promise, toward Balzac's vision of class complementarity, Keller is simultaneously quarantined off in a way befitting a text that would still rather deal in class absolutes—witness Keller's paradigmatically bourgeois rival Simon Giguet—than allow class hybrids like Keller, Robert de Sommervieux, or the Napoleonic *dinosaures* to roam unchecked in the metropole. Algeria here works strategically to contain those who defy easy categorization and who therefore unsettle signification itself in the way that, as critics have often remarked, so preoccupies the *Comédie humaine*. And yet it would be overly simplistic to reduce Balzac's Algeria to a convenient, one-way escape valve for releasing pressure from a metropolitan textual machinery. Characters may remain largely out of sight while in the colony, but they do not remain out of mind: what may at first appear the text's unwillingness to chronicle these Algerian excursions in any visual or topographic detail ultimately betrays an inability to do so, freighting Algeria with a ongoing textual consequence all its own. Algeria, in other words, participates in the very breakdown in signification it is intended to contain. I turn now to the nature of this participation and to the literary effects it produced.

CLASSES AND SPACES

Everything so far begs an obvious and important question: what, specifically, about Algeria caused it to play so fraught a role for Balzac? The answer, I would suggest, gets to the heart of the even larger question regarding Balzac's

hesitation—and that of so many French realists—to set their work in the colonies. For it is indeed as a colony that Algeria exacerbated the aforementioned tension in the *Comédie humaine* between idealized class absolutes and their real-world erosion. Balzacian space typically contributes to the production of absolutes, especially of the class variety. Settings like the draper's shop owned by the bourgeois Guillaume family in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* do not simply surround the characters they contain; rather, they actively determine them, assuring for instance that Augustine Guillaume will acquire a bourgeois mentality as narrow as the windows of her childhood home. Balzac's spatial cosmology is also both diachronic and differential, shaping destinies over time according to varied and determinant segmentations in space (city vs. countryside, bourgeois environment vs. aristocratic environment, etc.).

Colonial locales disrupted all this. There, the absence of history—from the French perspective, that is—combined with a lack of the usual spatial segmentations to create an environment less suited to reproducing class differences. Such was especially the case in the nineteenth century when, with the rise of nationalisms, colonial expansion came increasingly to be practiced as an expression of national belonging. “Only far from home,” observes Hannah Arendt, “could a citizen of England, Germany, or France be nothing but an Englishman or German or Frenchman”; back home, that citizen was “closer to a member of his class in a foreign country than to a man of another class in his own” (154). Colonial implantation abroad produced novel dynamics, among them the ascendance of national over class identity. And this fact, I want to argue, impacted Balzac's fiction in the era of Algerian conquest.

That influence initially appears easy enough to quantify and explain. Algeria figures sparingly in the *Comédie humaine*, hardly a surprising result given the threat posed by the colony to the determinant reproduction of classes. Yet Balzac does not exactly elide the colony. Indeed, the *Comédie humaine* transforms Algeria's absence into a shadow presence, pointedly rehearsing that absence by inscribing it on the bodies of those who travel there. Take Oscar Husson, who in *Un début dans la vie* loses an arm on an Algerian battlefield. The reader never really witnesses Oscar's colonial experience. But Oscar's amputated arm lingers on, a lasting reminder of something lost to the text.

The nature of the reminder parallels the nature of the thing lost. Algeria itself remains notionally present to the work. Missing entirely, however, is any visual impression of the colony: we hear of it but never see it, even in the one text (*Le Programme d'une jeune veuve*) actually set in Algeria. Reflecting that specular diminishment—remarkable in a *Comédie humaine* otherwise notable for its rich specular economy—are the bodily diminishments suffered by characters (think of Philippe!) whose glancingly relayed encounters with the colonial leave them less than whole. Balzac thematizes Algeria's absence

from the *Comédie humaine*'s visible landscape as an amputation, but one after which the text continues to register what is missing.

The stubbornness of this sense of loss testifies to two interrelated phenomena. The first is Algeria's tendency, noted already, to subvert the class distinctions that Balzac otherwise uses the colony to police. We have seen, for example, how Balzac's deployment of Algeria as a means for returning an illegitimately-ennobled Napoleonic warrior caste to its rightful class origins shifts into anxious territory whenever it becomes clear that Algeria also acts to blur such ideological distinctions. The second phenomenon is the resultant disruption in the *Comédie humaine*'s usual mode of representation, a disruption most palpable in the imperial periphery but that ultimately looms over even the metropolitan heart of Balzac's representational order.

I will return in a moment to this creeping representational disruption, which I argue accounts both for Algeria's relative invisibility in the physical landscape of the *Comédie humaine* and for Algeria's more intangible, enduring presence in the largely France-bound text. But first it is worth considering how the same colonial site at once accommodates and frustrates Balzac's attempts at reaffirming class hierarchies. Such a protean role for Algeria not only points to an internal blockage in the *Comédie humaine*, but also refracts certain larger, unforeseeable consequences of the imperial fact itself.

That imperial fact was taking its modern shape at the same time as Balzac wrote the *Comédie humaine*. Charles X's June 1830 invasion of Algiers laid the Algerian cornerstone of the new colonial empire France would amass over the next century. Designed as the invasion likely was to bolster the prestige of a faltering Restoration regime, France's imperial aggression presaged what Benedict Anderson describes as later attempts by beleaguered European aristocracies to bolster class privilege at home by rehearsing that privilege in the conquest of colonial spaces (150).

Charles X's Algerian gambit failed, of course, to avert the bourgeois revolution that broke out just a month later. Yet France's colonization of Algeria proceeded apace, and with it the habit of yoking class destinies to the colonial project. Balzac furnishes a case in point. The narrator of *La Duchesse de Langeais* includes "la conquête d'Alger" among the few recent historical moments that had shown "l'aristocratie française les moyens qui lui restent de se nationaliser et de faire encore reconnaître ses titres" (933). Mounting reports of Algerian profiteering and graft in the ensuing years merely caused Balzac to recalibrate his class-policing hopes for the colony. If, by the mid-1840s, it probably no longer seemed realistic to imagine a French aristocracy reinvigorated by colonial conquest, Balzac still saw in Algeria a venue where a troublesome coterie of Napoleonic *dinosaures* might at least be made to de-integrate the "real" nobility to which Balzac felt they had never really belonged.

The problem with such a colonially-enabled class politics arose at the level of scale. The replication abroad of inherited aristocratic privilege—a privilege transformed in the colonies into a philosophy of innate European racial superiority (Anderson 150)—involved more than a one-to-one transposition of continental patterns of domination. The global scale of the transposition introduced into the equation the colonized masses, over and above which every European colonizer effectively enjoyed quasi-aristocratic rights. In other words, the same notion of born superiority that stratified European society back home actually produced commonalities abroad, at least among European colonizers. Arendt confirms how empire's global scale might produce new such commonalities when she observes that national allegiances displaced class allegiances in the colonies. Just as a shared bond of racial superiority among white European colonists diminished class differences, so, too, did the inter-European struggle for supremacy in the colonial periphery place a premium on national, rather than class, belonging.

The colonial self-replication by aristocracies that Anderson describes is thus not so far removed as it might first seem from the colonial class erosion described by Arendt. Indeed, the former arguably paved the way for the latter: to reproduce aristocratic principles of social inequality in the colonial encounter was simultaneously to undercut their class-based logic, introducing as imperialism did new racial and national modes of belonging that might compete with, and even supersede, class loyalties. Balzac contends with this kind of paradoxical imperial outcome in the *Comédie humaine*. Setting out to address, via the colonial periphery, perceived class ambiguities in the metropole, Balzac only finds more such indeterminacy waiting in Algeria.

Balzac's Algerian quandary has less to do with racialist ideology—still to reach its later apogee and only obliquely manifest in the *Comédie humaine*—than it has to do with other circumstances similarly introduced by the international scale of empire, circumstances that disrupt Balzac's usual descriptive apparatus. At the conclusion of this essay I will consider the question of national belonging in an imperial era, which I argue causes epistemic difficulties for Balzac in ways that account for the curious status of the colonial in the *Comédie humaine*. I want to focus now, however, on the difficulty caused for Balzac by the fact that the colonies occupied a spatial regime apart.

Balzac's unprecedentedly panoramic scope served his belief in the determinant, class-reproducing effects of space. The more bourgeois, aristocratic, and proletarian environments he could depict, and the greater a geographic range from which he drew them, the more convincingly he could represent the formative impact of those environments on the characters they shaped. But beyond the metropole, in new colonial lands where such European environments did not yet exist, things were different. There, the sweeping spatial

command Balzac exhibited over the metropole promised none of the usual dividends. Much as racial and national grids of relation complicated any simple transposition abroad of European class hierarchies, the nature of colonial space resisted any simple extension into it of Balzac's usual, class-affirming specular poetics. Little wonder that Balzac never represents the colonial periphery in any spatial detail, even if the narrative itself makes occasional detours into colonial affairs.

Note the refinement this suggests to a basic Saidian assumption. For Said, the modern European novel's growing spatial command over the metropole expressed the same will to spatial mastery that caused novelists (and colonial powers) to range even further afield—a dual movement that, as he puts it, “synchronizes domestic with international authority” (*Culture and Imperialism* 87). Implied is a certain continuity, with mastery of colonial and metropolitan space plausibly occupying two sides of a same, totalizing coin. What the example of Balzac demonstrates, however, is that there were limits to that continuity. Swooping down to reveal destinies etched into the twist of a Parisian street or the angle of a provincial façade, the *Comédie humaine*'s famous vistas mapped space because, ostensibly, space made the man. In the colonial frontier that premise was moot, and with it Balzac's roving, topographic eye. If in Algeria there could be no Pension Vauquer, its every surface concordant with the owner inside, then for Balzac the Algerian landscape might just as well not appear at all. Consider *Le Programme d'une jeune veuve*, which despite its Algerian setting fails to give any physical description of the colony. Such an uncharacteristic descriptive silence represents no mere artifact, as one critic has surmised, of Balzac's unfamiliarity with Algeria (Chollet 371). Rather, it signals a text stretched beyond its willingness to represent.

Already on display here, I would propose, is an intrinsic, structural limitation on the kinds of settings French realism could and would feature the rest of the century. One can legitimately cite a variety of more contingent reasons for the absence of colonial settings in canonical realist novels, including indifference. But how to account for the fact that novelists of other stylistic persuasions did not shy with similar consistency from colonial surroundings? Writers more closely associated with romanticism, for instance, thought nothing of setting their novels in the colonies; witness Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* (1826), set in Saint-Domingue (Haiti), or Sand's *Indiana* (1832), part of which takes place in Île Bourbon (Réunion). One explanation for the discrepancy, it should now be clear, lies in conceptions of space. Realists like Flaubert, the Goncourts, Zola, and Maupassant inherited a Balzacian fixation with what can only be considered a hallmark of French realism: the determinant relation between characters and their surroundings. That relation helped realists elevate the mundane to the mythical, transforming a desultory shop sign or a faded sit-

ting room into instruments of destiny. The colonial periphery, lacking as it did the usual, class-specific points of visual and spatial reference, lent itself poorly to the tactic. And so realists predictably balked—as a matter of poetics—at setting their works in the colonies.

Yet it would be a mistake merely to conclude from this that realist poetics did not “travel” well. The imperial emergence of a different, ever-growing spatial regime rendered problematic the naturalization by realists of spatial determinism into a universal principle. Chipping away, then, at so key an aesthetico-ideological girder of the realist project (or at least of its Balzacian strain), empire did more than just circumscribe the settings available to authors. It also registered in and on realism’s metropolitan stronghold with subtly disjunctive force.

Oscar Husson’s missing arm, from this perspective, lingers on with overdetermined significance after his return from Algeria. A reminder of the text’s tenuous representational grip over the colony, the arm also harbingers the continuation of that representational powerlessness into realism’s metropolitan domain. This is not to propose that the challenges Balzac encounters in the colonial periphery somehow follow Oscar home, like a catching disease; already in the metropole society was reordering itself, a phenomenon that furnishes the *Comédie humaine* its central obsession. What Oscar’s story does suggest, though, is that imperial expansion and its consequences were of a piece with a more generalized spatial disturbance in the emergent modernity Balzac chronicled. An avatar of that disturbance from an early age, Oscar finds himself targeted by the text for removal to colonial Algeria. His reappearance in the metropole thus announces a return of the repressed—one that harks back, in turn, to what I will be arguing is an inaugural repression in the *Comédie humaine* of the colonial itself, and that reinforces Algeria’s status as the ghostly other of Balzacian representation.

AN ARM AND A LEG

A quick summary of *Un début dans la vie* is in order. Of the initial coach ride that brings the aspiring bourgeois Oscar unwittingly face to face with so vastly superior a figure as the Comte de Sérisy, Balzac has a character flippantly remark that “tous les voyageurs sont égaux devant le coucou” (775). It is an obviously sardonic allusion by the author not only to post-Revolutionary egalitarianism, but also to modernity’s commingling of classes in space. For Balzac, that commingling debases all. Oscar acquits himself particularly badly, revealing humiliating information about the Comte traveling incognito by his side. This first misstep sends Oscar down a path so mediocre that, out of career desperation, he eventually allows himself to be conscripted and ends up

in Algeria. There an unexpected thing happens. Oscar again finds himself in proximity with a Sérisy, this time the son. The results, however, are different. Oscar heroically saves the younger Sérisy's life at France's Macta defeat, costing himself an arm but regaining the favor he had lost in the coach. The story ends with Oscar taking the same coach years later, complacent and self-satisfied. "C'est enfin le bourgeois moderne," sneers the Balzacian narrator by way of conclusion (887).

What has transpired? The story begins with an affirmation of socioeconomic difference. The worthy Comte de Sérisy takes away little more from his coach ride with a motley crew of bourgeois travelers than justified horror at their mendacious, uncouth ways. He owes his ordeal to the spatial neutrality of the coach: temporarily removed from their respective class habitats and the hierarchies determined therein, the passengers interact freely in a damning simulacrum of equality. The charade ends when the Comte gets out near his château, reestablishing the spatial order and leaving Oscar suitably chastised. For good measure, Balzac exiles Oscar to Algeria, further repressing the socio-spatial confusion incarnated by the heedless young man. But Algeria proves a bad choice for containing this social-climbing, boundary-overstepping threat. In the even more radical spatial neutrality of the colony, there are no châteaux to make things right; and so Oscar, almost by dint of sheer attrition, finally claws his way into society's graces.

Balzac, predictably, is not impressed. The newly distinguished Oscar returns from Algeria toting a valet, Belle-Jambe, whose name—evoking as it does the common French expression for futility ("faire une belle jambe")⁷—suggests an Algerian campaign good only for bourgeois advancement. We also know better by now than to overlook one more limb come back from Algeria to haunt the text. Oscar's colonial success elevates him into the outwardly respectable ranks of a bourgeoisie that, since his departure and the intervening 1830 revolution, has decisively taken the upper hand in France. Riding again in the same coach with several of the same bourgeois passengers, Oscar finds most of his compatriots enriched, ennobled, or both. And while Oscar and his ilk have arrived, this time around the coach itself, fittingly, never does. Balzac cuts away with the coach still en route, tacitly acknowledging that what had originally seemed a temporary spatial anomaly has permanently taken hold. The *belle jambe*, one gets the impression Balzac is hinting, belongs ultimately to him. The coach's earlier, corrective stop at the château has proven futile. So, too, has Balzac's broader insistence on the organic link between a man and his surroundings: Oscar cannot tell from the old coachman Pierrotin's continued perch atop the coach that Pierrotin now owns the entire coach line. What was a story about beginnings has become, after Oscar's Algerian exploits, a story

about ends—that of aristocratic France, yes, but also that of Balzac’s confidence in the predictive properties of space.

This return from Algeria of a repressed uncertainty doubles as the return, in the figure of Algeria itself, of a contemporary imperial periphery that I would argue the *Comédie humaine* repressed from the outset. Not for nothing does Oscar recall another memorable Balzacian amputee: the Provençal, that nameless, one-legged veteran of Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign (1798–1801) who recounts his ambiguous Egyptian dalliance with a panther to the narrator of *Une passion dans le désert* (1830).⁸ More than one critic has identified in the Provençal’s amputated leg a castration motif suggestive of a repression by the text of various threats embodied by the panther, like oedipal transgression (Beizer 92) or the abolition of sexual difference (Kelly 104). But it bears asking whether Balzac’s amputee might also suggest a repression of something rather more immediately topical. The occupation of Algeria was just six months old when Balzac first published *Une passion dans le désert* in December 1830. It seems unlikely that, in the aftermath of an invasion about which he had already publicly commented, Balzac did not have Algeria in mind as he wrote about France’s previous military foray into North Africa. The Provençal’s capture in Egypt by “Maugrabins” (1220)—a term usually reserved, even then, for those hailing from points further West, like Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria—certainly suggests some measure of geographic displacement.⁹

Why not, then, simply write a story about Algeria? One reason, I suspect, coincides with a likely reason why Balzac’s only work set in Egypt features a protagonist stranded alone in the desert. An orphaned entry in the never-completed trilogy *Les Français en Égypte*, *Une passion dans le désert* thoroughly belies the historically panoramic intent implicit in the planned trilogy’s title. The Egyptian campaign figures as little more than a pretext for the story, and the Provençal never so much as encounters another Frenchman in his desert odyssey. Just over a year into the project that would become the *Comédie humaine*, Balzac was already finding himself bereft, in an imperial African setting governed by a different spatiality, of his otherwise burgeoning capacity for representing socio-historical complexity. From this standpoint, the Provençal’s famous closing remark—“Dans le désert, voyez-vous, il y a tout, et il n’y a rien” (1232)—reads as Balzac’s own revealing conclusion about a canvas so simultaneously enticing and forbidding to him as empire. If Napoleonic Egypt, in its historical finitude, had perhaps at first seemed an easier imperial frontier to render than the still-ongoing Algerian adventure, it had not proven so.

Whether or not Balzac displaced onto Egypt the representational challenge posed by Algeria, *Une passion dans le désert* certainly epitomizes the truncated mode in which the *Comédie humaine* approaches the imperial. Atypically for

a work in the *Comédie humaine*, none of the characters in *Une passion dans le désert* would recur elsewhere, and Balzac never again finished a work set in Africa. *Une passion dans le désert* joins *Les Chouans* as one of only two texts Balzac completed among the twenty-three titles he projected for the *Scènes de la vie militaire* in his 1845 “Catalogue des ouvrages que contiendra *La Comédie humaine*,” titles which were to include the aforementioned Egyptian trilogy as well as two Algerian narratives, *L’Émir* and *Le Corsaire algérien*. In this fashion, *Une passion dans le désert* marks at once the entrance into and exit from the *Comédie humaine* of the colonial as sustained setting, evincing less a permanent omission than a placement of the colonial into abeyance somewhere in the unconscious obverse of the text.

Like any repression, Balzac’s early relegation of the colonial beyond the topographic horizon of the *Comédie humaine* accomplishes a certain labor. For one, it heralds a break from romanticism’s fascination with an exotic “elsewhere” of the sort the Provençal’s desert solitude so recalls. The romantic topos of exilic remove from a stifling, post-revolutionary bourgeois modernity ran counter to the developing poetics of Balzacian realism. Insisting on the formative effects on characters of their given environments, realism’s spatial determinism fairly precluded that removal in space might somehow provide any meaningful escape from social strictures; space could not, after all, easily function both as a medium for ontological constraint *and* liberation. Throughout the *Comédie humaine*, then, Balzac generally eschewed exoticist escapism in favor of depicting the colonial as what it was: a violent military and economic expansion by the metropole. But Balzac’s documentary turn in imperial matters only went so far. If exoticizing narratives set in the imperial periphery often suppressed the colonial realities that complicated the intended escape from modernity,¹⁰ Balzac reversed the equation, attending to modern colonial realities while almost never employing the colonial settings his metropolitan poetics struggled to represent.

THE IMPERIAL VOID

There is admittedly an appearance of tautology in proposing that a realist text like the *Comédie humaine* declined to represent colonial settings because of representational habits anchored in the metropolitan, a formula that comes perilously close to asserting that realism did not represent colonial settings because, well, it did not represent colonial settings. Yet the circularity recedes when one recognizes that, in addition to depending on the familiar class environments of the metropole to animate its spatial determinism, Balzacian poetics hinged even more fundamentally on a basic epistemic supposition—social interrelatedness—that made difficult any easy representational coexis-

tence of the metropolitan with the colonial. I want to turn in closing to the nature of this constitutive constraint, beginning with the limiting supposition that produced it.

Paradoxically enough, the limiting supposition in question underpinned Balzac's most totalizing representational claim. That characters in the *Comédie humaine* were determined by their immediate environments was a local manifestation of their larger determination by, and representativeness of, an interrelated social whole whose springs they were understood to reveal. This interrelatedness served, conversely, to guarantee a given character's representativeness of social reality, since it was only as part of an interconnected whole that a particular character could be expected to indicate anything of general validity. Balzac made no secret of considering this interrelatedness a cardinal epistemological and novelistic principle. In the "Avant-propos à *La Comédie humaine*" (1842) he famously cites his contemporary Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, the celebrated French naturalist, whose theory of a "unity of composition" connecting various biological forms in the natural world Balzac invokes to posit an analogously unifying interconnection in the social world (7–8). A world so construed was one that the novelist could aspire to represent in its totality, because to depict interrelation at work was, in effect, to render the truth of the whole. Thus could the *Comédie humaine*, with its interlocking plotlines and recurring characters, stand in for an entire society.

What has generally gone unremarked, however, is that for all the universality Balzac ascribed to the principle of interrelatedness, in practice he often conceived it along the finite lines of the nation. The Restoration aristocracy, to give one example, was for Balzac guilty of abdicating its role in an interconnected national body, having "[ne] point profité de la paix pour s'implanter dans le cœur de la nation" (*La Duchesse de Langeais* 929). Balzac might imagine the classes as hierarchically distinct products of separate class environments, but he simultaneously imagined them as interconnected components of a national organism that, by virtue of its very interrelatedness, enjoyed as much epistemic legitimacy for Balzac as the classes themselves.

And therein lay the rub, at least when it came to incorporating the colonies into Balzac's larger representational landscape. For to offer "la conquête d'Alger" as an example to the French aristocracy of "les moyens qui lui restent de se nationaliser et de faire encore reconnaître ses titres," as Balzac does in *La Duchesse de Langeais* (933), was to perform an awkward contortion. The notion that the aristocracy might use conquest to reaffirm its primacy was, ideologically speaking, straightforward enough; conservatives had linked aristocratic privilege with conquest ever since Boulainvilliers located the origins of French nobility in the assertion by supposedly aristocratic Franks of a "right of conquest" over the plebeian Gauls. But to adduce a *colonial* conquest in

this way complicated things substantially. Now the aristocracy was proving its meddle within an explicitly national context: locating in Algeria a way for the weakened aristocracy to “nationalize” itself, as Balzac puts it, only made sense if colonial invasion was understood to profit a national entity comprising more than just the aristocracy. In other words, Balzac’s “nationalization” presupposed its own outcome, implying as it did that a harmonious national body (with the aristocracy at its heart, of course) might be fashioned via an imperial adventure solely useful to that end because it already assumed the existence of such an interrelated national entity. Not only, then, did Algeria partially subordinate aristocratic agency to the dictates of national interrelatedness—an ideologically thorny issue for the monarchist Balzac—but it also hinted at the extent to which the *Comédie humaine* required interrelatedness to serve as its own transcendent foundation.

Testaments to this self-justifying foundation, Balzac’s imperial spaces come to inhabit the void beyond it. Consider how *Une passion dans le désert*, with its stranded hero and non-recurring characters, stages a complete breakdown in the interrelatedness otherwise so pervasive in the *Comédie humaine*. As a purely romantic convention, an Egyptian desert in which “il y a tout, et il n’y a rien” might simply have figured a void in the alienated soul. Here it instead figures a void subtending the whole, the “rien” beneath the “tout” of a realism that had staked its totalizing authority on shaky ground indeed. The colonies’ testimony to the limits of interrelatedness reflected the obvious challenge posed by the radical alterity of imperial locales to a homogenizing poetics predicated on the assumption that what obtained in one corner of the human world obtained everywhere. Worse still, Balzac’s admission that even a more modestly national interrelatedness might require for its realization what lay beyond it—namely, the colonial project—betrayed an essential unpredictability in the poetics of interrelatedness itself, which was far more certain about the fact of interrelatedness than it was about what new modes, exactly, of relation it might encounter. Hence does Algeria become for Balzac a locus par excellence of unintended consequences, where the aristocratic exploits of a Vicomte Charles Keller or Vicomte de Sérisy ultimately serve more to bolster the careers of their mediocre bourgeois counterparts (Oscar Husson and Simon Giguet, respectively) than to boost the national fortunes of the nobility—a reminder that, as I have already discussed, the scale of empire confounded any easy transposition or reinforcement abroad of metropolitan class hierarchies.

Balzac reacts to these unintended consequences by repressing their colonial catalyst into the unconscious of the text, yielding the ineffable imperial void that everywhere accompanies and escapes the *Comédie humaine*. Critics have often noted the *Comédie humaine*’s cartographic compulsion.¹¹ But we see now that this is only half the story. The compulsion in question ended,

by necessity, where the colonial began. It may seem strange to characterize Balzac's encounter with the colonial in terms of a specular failure; after all, both realism and empire have come so closely to be associated with the exercise of a fixing, classifying gaze. Yet against the easy topos of a panopticonal realist vision radiating ever-confidently outward, we can oppose the model of a colonial unease creeping ever-threateningly inward. Reaching, like Oscar's arm, from beyond their own absence, Balzac's imperial spaces announce a French realism whose pretensions to representational mastery would long encounter a complex boundary in the colonial project.

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NOTES

1. I have in mind Fredric Jameson's contention that "the prototypical paradigm of the Other in the late nineteenth century [. . .] is the other imperial nation-state [. . .] while the more radical otherness of colonized, non-Western peoples tends to find its representational place in that noncanonical adventure literature of imperialism." Jameson ascribes this relative absence of the colonized in canonical nineteenth-century literature to a "strategy of representational containment" aimed at repressing the realities of imperialist exploitation by displacing them onto the relationship between imperial powers. He never really elaborates, however, on the fundamental nature of this ideologically-motivated repression. We are meant to infer that the repression served a mystificatory purpose by forestalling consciousness of imperialism's brute structural iniquities. But Jameson's reference to the comparatively "radical" otherness of the colonized also strongly implies that the repression protected Europeans from worrying that their economic fortunes depended on peoples they considered incomparably different (49–50).

2. On writers' disappointment in and occlusion of an imperial fact disrupting to their overseas fantasies, see Behdad 13–17; Bongie 17–19; Dobie 4–5; Said, *Orientalism* 189–91; and Terdiman 227–57.

3. Anne-Marie Meininger notes that major Algerian scandals in 1838, 1844, and 1845 all involved the kind of military supply corruption described in *La Cousine Bette*. In June 1846, the month Balzac began planning *La Cousine Bette*, the Chamber of Deputies was consumed by acrimonious debate about this seemingly endless stream of scandals coming out of Algeria (Meininger 37–39). See also Donnard 328–30.

4. The nobility of Empire created by Napoleon included the title of Baron, which Hulot bears. Philippe, for his part, owes his status as an officer of the Légion d'honneur—a sort of Napoleonic knighthood—to his service of Napoleon at Waterloo.

5. Pierre Gascar has argued that the commitment to the Bicêtre asylum of the titular Napoleonic *revenant* in *Le Colonel Chabert* constitutes the “liquidation historique” of an Empire deemed too violent by Balzac and many of his contemporaries. Gascar posits Balzac’s distaste for the “carnage” wreaked by Napoleon’s strategies of mass warfare (7, 9). I would refine the point to suggest that the violence in question particularly unsettled Balzac for having risen up from the proletarian masses so successfully conscripted by Napoleon into his war machine. On Balzac’s relationship to the Napoleonic past, see also Samuels 224–32.

6. On this, see Brooks, “Balzac” 128.

7. The expression dates at least to this time. Balzac’s competitor Eugène Sue used it in his *Mystères de Paris* in 1842, the same year Balzac published *Un début dans la vie*.

8. The echo, in Oscar’s missing limb, of his fellow amputee in *Une passion dans le désert* is reinforced by the Egyptian tall tales spun by the irreverent Georges Marest to a rapt Oscar in the coach (777–79).

9. This is not necessarily a misnomer on Balzac’s part, however, as Napoleon’s letters frequently reference the presence in Egypt of “Maugrabsins.”

10. See note 2.

11. Peter Brooks, for instance, discusses Balzac’s transformation of Paris into a “legible topography,” a notion I have borrowed here (*Reading for the Plot* 173).

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