

DIMENSIONS OF VAUTRIN

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the early stirrings of Vautrin in Balzac's consciousness, his sources both literary and historical and the shaping of these early beginnings into the mesmeric figure as we know him today. Our aim will be to present a coherent and succinct view of the dominating forces which the master novelist has interwoven in his character.

The first chapter traces the dominant literary trends relevant to Vautrin's creation. Mood and personality of the character as well as their meaning in the context of romantic literature are explored. An important question is whether Vautrin has a prototype. Answers to this question precede discussion of the extent to which Vautrin is Balzac's creation.

Upon establishing Vautrin's sources in literature, we next consider his historical and contemporary roots. Thus, an attempt is made to look beyond literary influences to people and events which influenced Balzac's perception of his world and, therefore, the development of his character. The extent to which Balzac found his literary inspiration in the people and the events of contemporary society, and the extent to which he related these observations to previous literary trends will be weighed. Turning from a factual study to a

literary one, we take a look at the dominating forces in Vautrin himself. The first concern of Chapter Two will be to evaluate the impact of these forces in the character on the reader. Balzac tried to evoke a particular aura around Vautrin and a study of the author's presentation of his character is designed to provide clues as to his success. We will also look at Balzac's method of developing an aura surrounding Vautrin, his past and present sources of wealth and prestige among the underworld. Consideration of Vautrin's power, his own awareness of it and how he uses it will be a central focal point in this chapter.

With the discovery of Vautrin's essence, we shall see how it complements and even motivates his dominating passion. Thus the third chapter, being the pivotal one in this study, attempts not only to depict the reasons behind his determination to revolt and the results thereof, but is largely concerned with linking the character to his creator, literally and philosophically. It is deemed especially important to convey that Vautrin is well able to stand on his own convictions, though the evident parallels with Balzac's own social consciousness are openly discussed.

Our fourth chapter focuses on a chink in Vautrin's otherwise impervious facade: his overwhelming need of love. Partly because of its revolutionary spirit, partly in spite

of it, Vautrin's need for love is not satisfied in conventional terms. The ambiguity of the love he feels for Théodore Calvi, Eugène de Rastignac and then Lucien de Rubempré, absorbs our interest in this chapter. Most important however, is the view of this need for love in light of his own downfall as a figure of revolt. To what extent did Balzac predict it? Could Vautrin have succeeded if he had been capable of a more conventional love? The human side of this calculating figure is revealed to us through these questions.

Our final chapter turns its focus back to the author. In his use of realism and allegory, Balzac adds a greater dimension to this already powerful figure. Our ability to participate as actively as we do in the characterization is seen in terms of Balzac's mastery of these two literary formulae.

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Lovingly dedicated to Dod, Mum, Oho and Paul.

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CHAPTER ONE: I: IS VAUTRIN AN INNOVATION?

Introduction

Vautrin is not a mere creation of Balzac's imagination. Literary models inspired him as did living ones and he was particularly influenced by the trends in eighteenth-century literature. These included the gothic novel typically shrouded in mystery and terror as well as exhibiting a taste for rebellious natures. A brief survey of such prominent writers as Lord Byron, Goethe and Schiller and their evil creations will indicate some of Vautrin's most obvious physical and spiritual sources.

The aforementioned creators of that violent type from which Vautrin was to spring were, in turn inspired by the romans noirs of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Lewis and Charles Maturin. These novels of black literature combined revolutionaries, gloomy settings and tales of horror. Ghosts, bloody nuns and damsels in distress became the indispensable features surrounding the romantic bandit. A closer look at the traditional physique of the heroes and an overview of the various types of popular rebels will illustrate Balzac's debt to the romantic movement.

Romantic Roots

One need only read Le Père Goriot and Splendeurs et

misères des courtisanes to be impressed by a striking figure endowed with great strength and an uncomfortably piercing eye. Comparison with his romantic predecessors, their emanations of evil power, their herculean strength and the scowls that darken and furrow their faces, reveals a close similarity of external features and distinguishing moods in Balzac's Vautrin.

Physical and Metaphysical

The physical aspect of the heroes in Romantic literature is carefully developed to evoke the metaphysical: predominantly fear and uneasiness. The earliest example of this development is found in Ann Radcliffe's Schedoni. This striking figure of The Italian or The Confessional of the Black Penitent, (1797), is described as being tall, and:

"...as he stalked along, wrapt in the black garments of his order, there was something terrible in the air; something almost super-human. His cowl, too, as it threw a shade over the livid paleness of his face, encreasing its severe character, and gave it an effect to his large, melancholy eye, which approached to horror... an habitual gloom and severity prevailed over the deep lines of his countenance; and his eyes were so piercing that they seemed to penetrate, at a single glance, into the hearts of men, and to read their most secret thoughts; few persons could support their scrutiny, or even endure to meet them twice." 1.

Such arresting features, particularly the expression of the eye, are evident in Balzac's description of Vautrin. Fur-

1. Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (New York:Meridian, 1956), p.59.

thermore, Byron's creation of Conrad and the Giaour is derived from Ann Radcliffe's work and both characters show a direct relationship to Schedoni in physical characteristics. Byron's heroes and Schedoni share the same powerful gaze instilled with a sinister power, also a characteristic of Vautrin. Byron says of Conrad:

" There breathe but few whose aspect might defy
The full encounter of his searching eye;
He had the skill, when Cunning's gaze would seek
To probe the heart and watch his changing cheek,

There was a laughing devil in his sneer,
That raised emotions both of rage and fear." 2.

The Giaour, in his monk's habit, mirrors Schedoni:

" Dark and unearthly is the scowl
That glares beneath his dusky cowl.

Oft will his glance the gazer rue,
For in it lurks that nameless spell,
Which speaks, itself unspeakable." 3.

Ann Radcliffe then, is at the roots of the literary fad of mixing romanticism, mysticism and pseudo-science in physiognomy. It was she who created the hero who was to haunt literature for a long time: handsome, gloomy, proud, with mysterious and terrible passions darkly suggested by his piercing, black eyes. Byron, Scott, Lewis and Maturin underwent Radcliffe's influence as, through them, as well as directly, so did Balzac. Not only in physique and mood is Vautrin's debt to the Romantic literary movement visible, but also in the various types of rebels and heroes that dom-

2. Lord Byron, The Works Of Lord Byron (London: John Murray, 1904), Vol. 3, 234-235.

3. Ibid., p. 125.

inated literature.

Character Types

The philosophy behind this new breed of villainous rebel is best expressed by the following:

" Ces misérables brigands, l'objet du dégoût et de l'horreur des nations, en deviendront les arbitres et les échafauds se changeront en autels. Dieu a revêtu d'une mission particulière ces hommes de sang et de terreur qui usent, qui brisent les ressorts de l'état social pour le recommencer." 4.

Their mission then, is to tear down the old, making way for a new society based on greater equality. From the mere physical attributes, let us turn to study the different strains of rebels who chose this passive or active destruction as their mission. For example, active revolt characterizes the rebel, the social misfit and the hero-villain, while the melancholic misfit finds solace in escape from the painful realities of society.

The character Conrad, from The Corsair, (1814), lies in the second category and best exemplifies Byron's rebel. Conrad, the leader of a band of pirates, has deliberately chosen evil. Depicted as bloody in crime and vice, shunned and feared, alone and mysterious, he is an entirely sinister and overpowering figure. He valued the fear which he inspired above everything except his love for Medora, upon whose

4. Honoré de Balzac, Histoire des Treize tome xiii, préface, pp. 7-8.

death:

" He left a Corsair's name to other times,
Linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes."5.

This man of destiny, to a certain degree at the cross-roads and disenchanted with life, faces either active revolt against society or a hyper-sensitive passivity. Conrad chooses the former in opposition to the quiet desperation of Byron's other famous rebel, Manfred. Vautrin too, having weighed the advantages of active and passive revolt, as witnessed in Le Père Goriot, chooses the path of anarchy, crime and vice.

The social misfit is best exemplified by Karl Moor, the leader of Schiller's Die Rauber, (1781). Moor is a fusion of the influence of Rousseau; the idea that natural man, kind and harmless, can be changed by society into a vicious criminal. Moor is presented as the ideal youth in search of liberty and at war with tyranny, yet imbued with the tender feelings of love and melancholy. Never able to control the disorder of his will and his actions, his existence is marred by murder and injustice. By his defiance of God and man, he destroys the world of justice and morality which he so much wanted to save, and for which reason he became an avenger of all violence and injustice. In comparison with Vautrin, Balzac barely dwells on the latter's original innocence. However, one can certainly see in him

5. Ibid., p.296.

Moor's tender feelings of love and his harsh defiance of God, justice and morality. Vautrin, however, is stronger in purpose than Moor and is not beset by the same conflicts of will and action.

In addition to the type of rebel who cannot content himself to live conventionally in a society which refuses to recognize his individuality, there is the type who, instead of rising in open revolt against society, prefers to withdraw from it and lead a life tormented by a deep melancholy and filled with sighs of ennui. Characters of this type are the dreamers as opposed to men of action. They either commit suicide or end their days in a typically romantic, exotic country, where they feel akin to nature, away from the corrupting influences of civilization. Two such rebels afflicted with the mal du siècle are Werther and René. Certainly Vautrin exhibited similar dreams of escape to idealistic plantations in America as revealed in Le Père Goriot.

As well as active rebels and melancholic misfits, the Romantic movement also produced epic heroes in an epic literature preoccupied with the theme of revolt and of man and his destiny. The greatest of these is Milton's Satan, whom M Mario Praz ascribes as the source for Conrad, Giaour and Karl Moor. Satan is a being, proud of his rebellion, who, even though defeated, refuses to repent. R.J.Z. Werblowsky sees Satan in part:

" ...as rebel against a rather passive God's immutable decrees, (he) becomes the symbol of the power-carrier who strains every muscle, fibre and nerve against a supreme and unrelenting and ipso facto cold and hostile fate." 6.

Praz also draws a parallel between the physical features of Milton's "Fallen Angel" and the later Romantic rebels. Satan personifies the sadness, death, diabolical charm and sinister air of the "sublime criminal" who was to appear at the end of the eighteenth century.

Alongside the Romantic rebel and the melancholic hero then, there existed the hero-villain. He appears as the epitome of all that is evil and is instilled with an eerie, supernatural power. The qualities which comprise in part the Romantic rebel also apply to the villain of the gothic novel:

" ...mysterious (but conjectured to be exalted) origin, traces of burnt-out passions, suspicion of ghastly guilt, melancholy habits, pale face, unforgettable eyes." 7.

Satan, Vautrin and, as we shall see, Melmoth and Ferragus share the villainous qualities mentioned above.

Melmoth is a striking example of the Gothic hero-villain. The nature of this type is two-fold; he is a powerful being, capable of exercising great self-control and is a marked criminal. Although his character is presented larger than life, its negative side is accentuated in order for

6. Zwi Werblowsky, Lucifer and Prometheus (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1952), p. 79.

7. Praz, Op. cit., p. 59.

the reader to sense fully the atmosphere of impending doom so necessary to the Gothic tale. He is a symbol of moral rebellion in an orthodox society,

"...whose evil is the result of a clash between his passionate nature and powerful individual will and the unnatural restraints of convention, orthodoxy or tradition." 8.

Indeed, a similar clash with parallel results is visible in Vautrin, though an atmosphere of doom is not an integral part of Balzac's novels.

The character of the hero-villain who was to emerge, after much painful trial and error, in Vautrin, was preceded, in Balzac's own writings, by Ferragus. In 1833, while keeping within the limits of the roman noir literary tradition, Balzac created, in his Histoire des Treize, Ferragus. He created a secret society of adventurers and nobles,

"...tous fatalistes, gens de coeur, et de poésie, mais ennuyés de la vie plate qu'ils menaient, entraînés vers de jouissances asiatiques." 9.

a society,

"...contre laquelle l'ordre social serait sans défense, [qui] renverserait les obstacles, foudroierait les volontés et donnerait à chacun d'eux le pouvoir diabolique de tous." 10.

In this early work, one can already discern the hostility towards society that was to mark Vautrin. Like Ferragus,

8. Charles Maturin, Melmoth the Wanderer (Lincoln, Nebraska: Bison, 1961), P.x.

9. Balzac, Treize tome xiii, préface pp. 7,8.

10. Ibid., pp.7,8.

Vautrin was a former convict who headed "Les Grands Fanandels" and "La Société des Dix-Mille",

"...un monde à part dans le monde, hostile au monde, n'en reconnaissant aucune loi, ne se soumettant qu'à la conscience de sa nécessité et n'obéissant qu'à un dévouement." 11.

Balzac was learning to synthesize the Romantic influence with his own creativity: the literary precedent had been set and one third of Vautrin's make-up determined. The rest of him was to be drawn from Balzac's creative genius and the real world where Balzac could exercise his talents in a barely explored area: the underworld.

11. Ibid., pp.7,8.

CHAPTER ONE: II. VAUTRIN'S HISTORICAL ROOTS

Continuing our pursuit of Vautrin's sources, we now turn to prominent people whose lives or physique bear a strong resemblance to Vautrin's. Two contemporaries of Balzac's who could have served as models for his character are François Vidocq and Pierre Coignard. Both were convicted villains who turned their knowledge of the criminal world to the benefit of society and rose to fame in the police force. A comparison of life patterns and physical appearances with Vautrin's will show how much Balzac owed his inspiration to them.

The conclusive proof that Balzac did use real life models is in a letter to Hippolyte Castille, dated October 11, 1846. In it, Balzac alluded to his creation of Vautrin:

" Ce personnage qui représente la corruption, le bagne, le mal social dans toute son horreur, n'a rien de gigantesque. Je puis vous assurer que le modèle existe, qu'il est d'une épouvantable grandeur et qu'il a trouvé sa place dans le monde de notre temps. Cet homme était tout ce qu'était Vautrin, moins la passion que je lui ai prêtée. Il était le génie du mal, utilisé d'ailleurs." 12.

From François Vidocq then, the elusive and by now legendary convict who became police commissioner and who published his Mémoires in 1827, Balzac borrowed the bodily traits and some occurrences..

12. Albert Prioult, Balzac avant 'La Comédie humaine' (Paris: Courville, 1936), p.365.

Vidocq

In his life pattern, for example, one can detect many similarities to Vautrin's. Vidocq was born at Arras in 1775. He stole money from his father and ran away from home, hoping to go to America. He took to the roads in France, however, and for several years travelled with a circus. He joined, then deserted, the French army. He was condemned by army courts for forgery and sent to Brest on an eighteen-year sentence of forced labour. Stubborn and physically strong, he escaped three or four times, only to be recaptured and put into irons. In 1809, he offered his services to Baron Pasquier in the police department. Vidocq felt that as he had personal knowledge of the criminal way of life, he could be invaluable in tracking down criminals. The proposition appealed to Pasquier who recognized genius in Vidocq, and he agreed to the plan, on condition that Vidocq spend two years training with the force to teach the jargon of the criminal world. Vidocq became chief of the 'police de la sûreté'. In 1827-1828 he helped produce his Mémoires.

A brief outline of Vautrin's life and criminal record follows, paralleling that of Vidocq and later, Coignard. Vautrin was born Jacques Collin in 1779, and was brought up by his aunt, Jacqueline Collin, who had him educated by the Fathers of the Oratory. After his education was completed, she put him to work in a bank, where he was charged with a

forgery committed by his friend, Franchessini. He escaped from prison while serving the five-year term and went to Paris as Vautrin. From 1815-1820, he stayed at the 'Pension Vauquer', where he was arrested by Bibi-Lupin. Sent to Rochefort, Vautrin lost little time in making his escape and went to Spain. In Spain, he killed the Abbé Carlos Herrera, took on his identity, and returned to Paris. Later, in his role of Vautrin, he became assistant to Bibi-Lupin, and in 1830, he succeeded him as the head of the 'police de la sûreté', a position which he held until 1845.

As Vidocq expressed the romantic theme of the rebel and the criminal re-established in the world of society, so does Vautrin represent the same theme in Balzac's world of the 'Comédie humaine'. Both are men who began in opposition to the law and worked against it and who finally became reconciled with the law and worked for it, using their experiences to help law conquer the very malevolence which they once personified. However, though the Mémoires of Vidocq caused somewhat of a sensation in 1828-1829, he was not the only convict who had become police chief. Pierre Coignard's adventures were quite similar, as we shall see.

Coignard

Coignard, born in Toulon in 1785, was imprisoned for robbery and, after his escape, went to Spain where he took the name of Count Saint-Hélène. After fighting in the Span-

ish army, he joined the French army in which he rose to Major. He was decorated with the Cross of Saint Louis and the Legion of Honour in 1815, and was named commander of the Paris police. He was betrayed by one of his former prison mates and sent to prison in Toulon where he died. Resemblances in life patterns are very strong between the two Frenchmen and Vautrin. It is possible to recognize their common bodily traits that incorporate and develop some of the prominent features of Vautrin's literary predecessors. The eyes, the build and the spiritual qualities in particular are as evident in Radcliffe's heroes as they are in Vidocq, Coignard and Vautrin.

Léon Gozlan described Vidocq as he appeared in 1844 as:

" ...un homme à figure bovine, large au front, bestiale du bas, solide, inquiétant, d'un caractère étrange, cheveux autrefois rouges assurément, aujourd'hui gris d'hiver. Ensemble complexe, rustique et subtil, d'une expression peu facile à définir, d'un mot, d'un trait, du premier coup; et calme cependant, mais calme à la manière redoutable des sphinx égyptiens." 13.

Gozlan continued his description by drawing attention to Vidocq's massive chest and his hand- feline, yet authoritative, preventing Gozlan from getting a full view of his face. He seemed to express an air of power and a strong will in his whole being.

Similarities spring to mind at the introduction of Vautrin in Le Père Goriot where Balzac presents him to us

13. Jules Bertaut, 'Le Père Goriot' de Balzac (Paris:SFELT, 1947), p.132.

as a man of about forty years old, with:

"...les épaules larges, le buste bien développé, les muscles apparentes, des mains épaisses, carrés et fortement marquées aux phalanges par des bouquets de poils touffus et d'un roux ardent. Sa figure, rayée par des rides prématurées, offrait des signes de dureté qui démentaient ses manières souples et liantes." 14.

The most striking feature of Vautrin are his eyes. He gave a feeling of resolution and imparted an uneasy sensation in a glance that seemed to penetrate the inner being of whomsoever he beheld. He was not to be crossed, no matter how pleasant or friendly he appeared to be. He made it his business to know the affairs of everyone around him, although no one knew anything about his personal life. Thus it has been noted that physical similarities in both literary and his historical figures abound, as do parallels in life patterns. Nevertheless, neither Vidocq nor Coignard, during their life as outlaws, considered themselves rebels against society as a whole and, even less were they the grandiose incarnation of revolt that Vautrin was in 'La Comédie humaine'. In part, these dimensions of Vautrin probably stem from Diderot's 'Le Neveu de Rameau', a work read and admired by Balzac, in which a bohemian states:

" Dans la nature, toutes les espèces se dévorent, toutes les conditions se dévorent dans la société." 15.

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14. Honoré de Balzac, Le Père Goriot (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p.36. (Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, this edition will be used and identified as Goriot.)
15. Pierre Citron, Goriot, préface, p.16.

Vautrin voices the same sentiment by drawing a parallel between Paris and a virgin forest in which savages fight one another; he declares that only strength matters in society, that morality is a false front, and wealth rules supreme:

"Si je réussis, personne ne me demandera:
'Qui es-tu?' Je serai Monsieur Quatre-millions."¹⁶

Conclusion

This chapter reveals the surprising number of elements brought together in the creation of Vautrin. From his romantic youth, Balzac retained a predilection for poetic heroes, for the exceptional men presaged by Schiller and Byron. He combined these influences with a fascination with the underworld and an ability to record what he witnessed around him. The dominating traits of the resultant figure, Vautrin, are examined in the following chapters. Some underline Balzac's debt to his predecessors and to his era, and some illustrate Vautrin's power to lead Balzac's pen by a powerful personality all his own. He is, above all, "l'incarnation de cet instinct de puissance,"¹⁷ and he acts as a powerful force unifying the Comédie humaine.

16. Goriot, p.112.

17. Muriel Ferguson, La Volonté dans 'La Comédie humaine' (Paris: Georges Coueville, 1935), p.159.

CHAPTER TWO: MYSTERY AND POWER

Introduction

Vautrin's mysterious and powerful impact on the reader, the means Balzac used to achieve this, and his techniques to heighten Vautrin's mystery and power are well worthy of analysis. Vautrin's physiognomy is also discussed in reference to these two characteristics. Finally, the appropriateness of the frequent satanic epithets and adjectives applied to Vautrin are explored as well as their sources in Vautrin's mysterious and powerful character.

Mysterious Vautrin

In Balzac's literary scheme, most characters have a dominant trait, a particular mania around which is woven a fairly simple background to set off and sometimes exaggerate the trait. Vautrin's complex nature arises from the wealth of subordinate elements which are placed around him to justify and support his governing passions. To support an ambition-driven rebellion against society then, Vautrin consciously develops certain facets of his character. Among these is a sense of mystery and power.

As with other aspects of Vautrin's personality, those showing him as a mysterious and powerful man can, for the most part, be traced back through Balzac's own work and

personality to their sources in literature and in life. Hence Vautrin appears as an immense amalgamation of ideas and characteristics gathered here and there throughout all of Balzac's experience of literature and of the world. However, before examining these influences more closely, let us briefly place Vautrin in the perspective of the Comédie humaine, to attempt to explain Balzac's preoccupation with this individual.

Balzac's official reason for writing about a criminal was that he was obliged to in order to present a complete fresco of his society. Nevertheless, there appear to be more profound reasons. Gozlan, for instance, tells us that Balzac had a great taste for the mysterious workings of the police and the underworld:

" Cette révélation faite par Balzac d'un événement qui arriva en partie, vint m'apprendre, pour la première fois, confirmée depuis par tant d'autres, son goût excessif pour les négociations secrètes, pour les expéditions conduites sinueusement dans l'ombre, les projets arrangés de loin, enfin, ses penchants dominants d'artiste pour les affaires de police et les machinations de tout genre qu'emploie celle-ci, par nécessité, dans le but de parvenir à la découverte des voleurs et des criminels."¹

Vautrin not only completes a total panorama of French society in the nineteenth century, but he also is an extension

1. Léon Gozlan, Balzac intime (Paris:Librairie illustrée, n.d.), p.278.

of a particular preoccupation of the author. Hence the importance of the position he assumes within the criminal world of La Comédie humaine. Balzac's great interest in the psychology of outlaws is realized in this chapter through a study of mystery and power, that distinguishes the underworld elite.

Balzac's excessive taste for the secret machinations in his characters has been noted not only by Léon Gozlan and Fernand Roux, but Curtius too has amplified this "préoccupation du mystère"², both in connection with Balzac's personal life and in his works: "...sur Vautrin lui-même, une des plus puissantes créations de Balzac, pèse un sombre mystère, qui dirige toute sa vie."³ Some of the methods by which Balzac cultivated and accentuated the mysterious side of his protagonist can be traced back to the early Romantic writers and include use of restraint in discussing his characters and their motivations, ambiguity of interpretation, and finally, concealment of pertinent information,

The authors of the late eighteenth century often completely veiled, or allowed only brief glimpses, of the antecedents or early life of their heroes. Consequently, the motives behind their actions and thoughts were left unexplained and aroused one's curiosity. Speaking of the period of the Empire and of the Restoration, Bardèche says:

2. Ernst Curtius, Balzac (Paris: Grasset, 1933), p. 32.

3. Ibid., p. 32.

" Les romans de cette époque sont des romans sans exposition, reposant sur un élément d'intrigue essentiel: le mystère du passé."⁴.

And so with Balzac's presentation of Vautrin, about whom we are told but little, and that in snatches only. This restraint was calculated to heighten certain aspects of the character and to keep the reader's imagination fertile and alive with conjectures.

Collin's parents and early life are almost completely obscure, yet we know, by the end of the Vautrin trilogy, that he was an illegitimate child. As we have seen, Collin's history is not given all in a piece, but is doled out over the whole length of his adventures. That he too, like the Romantic heroes, had an unfortunate experience in love, is hinted in Le Père Goriot, while details concerning his education and upbringing are reserved for the final chapters of Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes. This restraint in exposing the life of the protagonist is one of the primary techniques the author uses in building a sense of mystery.

Ambiguity is another key factor in Balzac's character exposure. It is sprinkled liberally throughout with details being conveyed by inference alone. Balzac's use of the unnamed and un-namable element suspended just out of the reader's sight is also extensive in the Vautrin cycle, and serves much the same purpose of enhancing the "tall, dark, stranger"

4. Maurice Bardèche, Balzac romancier (Paris:Plon, 1967),p.36.

mystique.

Balzac reserves the Radcliffian technique of simply not giving information for use in connection with Vautrin's criminal activities. These latter are alluded to with alarming abundance, crimes both committed and projected, but the author's method of imprecise suggestion and even concealment, supplies a whole mythical aura of the darkest evil deeds around the character and further heightens his mysteriousness.

Finally, there is of course the mystery over which, in Curtius' words, Balzac has thrown the splendid mantle of art.⁵ Though the unforewarned reader may misinterpret or simply miss this part of Vautrin, attentive reading of the three novels shows Balzac's mantle to be of "diaphanous stuff". Further discussion of Vautrin's ambiguous amorous leanings is reserved for Chapter Four, though it is pertinent to cite this as an example of restraint and inference which increases our interest in the character.

An atmosphere of mystery is thus produced by omitting the kind of formal biography found in La Cousine Bette. Examination of the complete cycle however, shows that the personal history is adequate, that it is of a nature to justify satisfactorily Vautrin's actions, and that Balzac succeeds

5. See Curtius, p. 159.

in combining realism with mystery in his handling of Vautrin's biography.

Having examined from an external point of view some of the author's more successful means of character development in the Vautrin trilogy, let us turn to consider features within Vautrin that also convey a sense of mystery and power. What interaction can be discerned between the two elements? Is Vautrin a more arresting figure as a result of this combination? In order to answer these questions, we must discover how conscious Vautrin was of his ability to convey mystery and power and how he used his mastery of them to intimidate and confuse his challengers.

Powerful Vautrin

It is Paul Vernière who names the desire for power as Vautrin's chief motivating force. Though Balzac nowhere refers to his character as a génie in this sense, Vautrin does say in Illusions perdues that he likes power for power's sake,⁶ and it is true that power forms an essential tool or means in his desire for revenge. Vernière says:

" Comme Maxime de Trailles, comme Madame de Maufrigneuse, comme du Tillet, comme Rastignac, défiant la société des hauteurs du Père-Lachaise, Vautrin est, avant tout, pour Balzac, l'incarnation de cet instinct de puissance qui donne la clef et qui forme

6. Honoré de Balzac, Illusions perdues (Paris:Garnier-Flammarion, 1966),p.598. (Henceforth, this edition will be quoted.)

z l'unité réelle de La Comédie humaine.
N'allons pas croire que Balzac a pour seule intention de peindre la société de son temps. Cette société, il veut avant tout la dominer, comme romancier, comme dandy, comme grand homme. Et jamais il n'a mieux su la fustiger que par sa création de Vautrin."⁷

Vautrin then dominates the criminal world and the society in which he moves through his power, for better, for worse, for good and for evil.

So Prioult says that Vautrin:

"...présente ce trait bien caractéristique des héros balzaciens qu'il organise non seulement sa propre existence, mais encore celle de son entourage, en vue des fins qu'il poursuit; il impose aux autres sa volonté rudement lorsqu'il s'agit de bandits dont il est le maître incontesté, avec plus de discrétion, mais non moins de tenacité, pour ce qui est de Lucien de Rubempré ou de Esther van Gobseck."⁸

Clearly, Vautrin is fully conscious of his intimidating powers and is ready to use them to manipulate others. In particular, he has a subtle genius for persuasion born of personal magnetism. By drawing people to him, or even by repulsing them, his superior power is evident. (For example, see infra p.77, the description of his first meeting with Lucien.) His ability to do so is a direct result of his knowledge of two prominent scientists of his era: Lavater and Mesmer.

Among scientific writers who influenced Balzac's ideas were Nacquart, Gall and Lavater. Doctor Nacquart's

7. Paul Vernière, "Balzac et la genèse de Vautrin." Revue d'histoire littéraire, (janvier-mars, 1948), pp.67-68.

8. Prioult, p. 102.

Traité sur la nouvelle physiologie du cerveau ou Exposition de la doctrine du docteur Gall sur les structures et les fonctions de cet organe appeared in 1808. Nacquart claimed that "la physiologie du cerveau est la vraie philosophie de l'homme." ⁹. He reduced psychology to physiology and placed man in the hands of a scientific determinism by trying to give the social sciences the same precision that characterizes the physical sciences. The original thesis of Doctor Gall, upon which Nacquart expounded was phrenology, a science which claimed that the brain could be mapped into zones, and that the formation of the skull would indicate the character and the temperament of the individual. Doctor Lavater's contribution to the science of the time was physiognomy, a new science whose basic principle was that a person's character and even his destiny, could be read from his physical features. Balzac's fascination with these 'findings' is evident in the careful physical descriptions that he gives of his characters, as he introduces them, in an attempt to reveal their psychology. Along with the importance of the environment of the individual, the idea that man is psychologically what he is physically---that is, man's inner self is revealed by his exterior appearance-- forms one of the principal doctrines in the formation of La Comédie humaine.

9. Bernard Guyon, La Pensée politique et sociale de Balzac (Paris: Colin, 1967), p.42.

Vautrin's use of Lavater's theories is witnessed in words such as the following:

"Vous êtes fille, vous resterez fille, vous mourrez fille; car malgré les séduisantes théories des éleveurs des bêtes, on ne peut devenir ici-bas que ce qu'on est...l'homme aux bosses a raison. Vous avez la bosse de l'amour."¹⁰

At least a part of Collin's skill in handling people then, his ability to "read thoughts", and his rapid evaluation of character must be attributed to his knowledge of Lavater. Vautrin has as thorough an acquaintance with Lavater as Balzac does himself and he makes ample use of this knowledge each time he assumes a new disguise. One of the main problems in studying the character, in fact, is the distinction which must be made between Collin as Vautrin, Collin as Herrera and Collin as Collin. It should be remembered that Vautrin's rather vulgar conduct in the Vauquer boarding house, along with his wig and dyed sideburns, is part of his disguise as a retired businessman. Collin is revealed only through the conversations with Rastignac, and even then, he remains concealed behind this disguise, since he never tells the young Rastignac who he is. He is glimpsed again at the moment of his unmasking, when he becomes enraged and as suddenly, seizes control of himself again. One would like to think that the offer to send the boarders

10. Honoré de Balzac, Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes(Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968), p.112. (Henceforth, this edition will be quoted as Splendeurs.)

some figs from Provence is part of Collin rather than Vautrin, but one cannot be sure. The same skillful use of physiognomy and the art of disguise is apparent with the introduction of Carlos Herrera, at the end of Illusions perdues. As long as he wishes, Collin ressembles a priest. Yet, it is not long before Lucien feels that something is amiss because of the contrast between Carlos' bearing, and the ideas which he expresses. This should not be interpreted as a lack of skill on Collin's part, but rather as a sign that he thinks he has found the instrument he wants in the person of Lucien de Rubempré. If this is so, there is no further need to mention the disguise, and it is , in fact, quickly discarded as far as Lucien is concerned. And so we see that, whereas Balzac, in his role of commentator, usually reserves for himself the right to discuss the theories of Lavater and Gall, in the case of Vautrin, he shares this right with a character in order to illustrate the source of one of Vautrin's most powerful weapons: a penetrating knowledge of human nature.

Closely associated with physiognomy in Balzac's mind is the idea of animal magnetism, as expounded by Mesmer, who enjoyed a great vogue in Europe prior to the turn of the century. This was bound to appeal to Balzac's underlying mysticism and he made such use of it that it might be said to be one of the trade-marks of his strong characters. Lav-

ater also was a proponent of the new force, and if Balzac had not already become acquainted with the phenomenon in other literary works, he would have found ample discussion of it in Lavater. It is there defined as a force:

"...que nous appelons lumière, fluide magnétique ou électrique,...L'oeil du génie semble avoir des émanations qui agissent agissent physiquement et immédiatement sur d'autres yeux." 11.

Curtius rightly assigns primary importance to this factor in Balzac's mind:

"Mais ce qui l'intéressait par-dessus tout, c'était le 'regard magnétique', ce 'rayon chargé d'âme', par lequel l'être qui en est doué peut soumettre à son entière volonté d'autres personnes. Il n'y a presque pas un seul livre de Balzac où ce regard ne joue un rôle plus ou moins mystérieux. Toutes les natures fortes chez Balzac soumettent leurs adversaires par ce regard qui décharge le fluide de leur volonté." 12.

So here then is the second secret inner source of Vautrin's power over others. A brief look at some of Balzac's earlier works will indicate how important this feature was in the development of his strong characters.

Balzac's work, from Sténie in 1819-1820, to Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes in 1847, is shot through with magnetism. Jacob Del Ryès says "mon regard tue"¹³, and, speaking of Sténie, he says, "Quelque chose de plus qu'humain

11. Johann Lavater, L'Art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie (Paris:Nile Ed., Augmentée par M.Moreau, 1806-1809), vi, 93.

12. Curtius, op cit., p.62.

13. Honoré de Balzac, Sténie (Paris:Conard, 1930), p.78.

s'échappe d'elle, ce fluide incompréhensible qui part des yeux, qui s'exhale d'elle et que tu rangeras où tu voudras..."¹⁴

The elder Beringheld wore dark glasses, which should be compared to Carlos' Herrera's double green lenses, worn to hide his shining eyes. Since there is relatively little variation in the way Balzac uses magnetism throughout his whole career, it will suffice to give but a few examples,--this one concerning La Femme de trente ans:

" Balzac se souviendra encore de cet aventurier/mandarin lorsqu'il écrira La Femme: le capitaine Parisien, seul maître à bord de l'Othello, n'est autre qu'Argow, mais héritier des théories balzaciennes sur le magnétisme et l'hypnose ou, du moins, disciple de cet abbé Faria qui, d'après Monsieur de Jouy, a défrayé quelque temps la chronique parisienne."¹⁵

A passage in Une Ténébreuse Affaire is particularly interesting since it shows how closely this magnetism is linked in Balzac's mind with power, whether for good or evil:

" Depuis trois quarts d'heure, cet homme avait dans le geste et dans le regard une autorité despotique irrésistible, puisée à la source commune et inconnue où puisent leurs pouvoirs extraordinaires et les grandssgénéraux sur le champ de bataille où ils enflament les masses, et les grands orateurs qui entraînent les assemblés et, disons le aussi, les grands criminels dans leurs coups audacieux! Il semble alors qu'il s'exhale de la tête et que la parole porte une influence invincible que le geste injecte le vouloir de l'homme chez autrui."¹⁶

14. Ibid., p.53.

15. Prioult, op cit., p.380.

16. Geoffroy Atkinson, Les Idées de Balzac d'après 'La Comédie humaine' (Genève:Droz, 1949-1950), III, 96.

Billy confirms the importance of this phenomenon in Balzac's work when he speaks of:

" Le regard magnétique, fascinateur, dont il se croyait doué, dont il l'était réellement sans doute et qu'il a prêté à beaucoup de ses personnages, particulièrement à Vautrin... le regard froidement fascinateur que certains hommes éminemment magnétiques ont le don de lancer et qui, dit-on, calme les fous furieux dans les maisons d'aliénés." 17.

Indeed Vautrin had recourse to this cold, penetrating gaze on several occasions as he attempted to calm an hysterical Lucien or Eugène.

And so we conclude that Vautrin has the same physical powers shared by some of these earlier creations of Balzac's and we sense that he knows how to use them to control others. Indeed, Bardèche says:

" Toute sa théorie de la matérialité de la pensée a pour fondement les phénomènes psychiques qui tenaient tant de place dans l'oeuvre de 1820, et qui expliquent les actions des êtres doués de pouvoirs exceptionnels, les sorciers, les possédés, les gens à seconde vue et les démoniaques de toute espèce." 18

Vautrin thus appears mysterious, satanic, with divinatory powers and, facing his stare, men, women and walls are reduced to shadows of their former selves. As far as physiognomy is concerned, the major emphasis is placed on his "regard devinateur", on his "profondeur immobile d'un sphinx qui sait, voit tout, et ne dit rien."^{18a}

17. Andre Billy, La Vie de Balzac (Paris:Flammarion, 1944), pp. 217-218.

18. Bardèche, op cit., p. 367.

18a. Goriot, p. 104.

The Physiognomy of Vautrin

The importance of Balzac's art of portraiture is closely allied to his belief that external features mirror the inner self. Billy suggests that Balzac's early novels and those which later compose La Comédie humaine, have a common theoretical basis:

" La préoccupation d'une psychologie fondée en physionomie."¹⁹

" La réalité la plus triviale ou la plus fortuite lui apparaîtra toujours comme rentrant dans un système occulte et résultant d'une mystérieuse combinaison des forces qui dépassent l'entendement commun."²⁰

Consequently, as with all of Balzac's characters, it is important to pay close attention to the small details that reveal the essential being.

Balzac tends to be vague in relation to his description of Vautrin himself. One has only to refer to the text to see that Balzac is extremely restrained in this instance, preferring to give striking details rather than revealing essentials. For example, the first description of him is limited to scarcely three lines in the Pléiade edition. It is buried between the typical lengthy description of Madame Vauquer and Mademoiselle Michonneau: "...un homme âgé d'environ quarante ans, qui portait une perruque noire, se teignait les

19. Billy, op cit., p.63.

20. Ibid., p.65.

21. Balzac, Goriot p.31.

favoris, se disait ancien négociant, et s'appelait M.Vautrin."²¹

As a description of Vautrin, this is excellent, for Balzac has not merely given a list of things constituting the disguise and not the man. But this kind of brevity is rare in Balzac, and, in fact, does not last long. After painting a rather detailed portrait of Victorine Taillefer, and one in less detail of Rastignac, Balzac places Vautrin as a kind of transition between youthful idealism and cynical old age, seemingly because he combines elements of each in his complex personality.

In his description of Vautrin, Balzac landed on what could be called a poetic technique of portraiture: portraiture by suggestion rather than by precise and numerous detail. Fernand Roux has noted the difference between the description of Vautrin and the usual Balzacian description, without however, seeing the full significance of the former. After discussing detail in description, he says:

" Procède-t-il autrement, prenez garde!
Son imagination vous emportera bien vite
dans le monde des rêves ou des cauchemars;
elle vous ouvrira le ciel devant Séraphita
ou les enfers devant Vautrin; vous visiterez
des pays de contours vagues que l'on ne voit
qu'en songe."²²

We will see however, that a double objective was accomplished by the reticence, only one of which was to make Vautrin

21. Balzac, Goriot p.31.

22. Fernand Roux, "Balzac juriconsulte et criminaliste," Archives d'anthropologie criminelle, (Paris; 1906), xxi, 323.

mysterious.

In Le Père Goriot we are first introduced to Vautrin, the physical figure, followed by a more general representation of the character, going beyond the physical and supplementing it. The ambiguity of the man is immediately apparent:

" A la manière dont il lançait un jet de salive, il annonçait un sang froid imperturbable qui ne devait pas le faire reculer devant un crime pour sortir d'une situation équivoque. Comme un juge sévère, son oeil semblait aller au fond de toutes les questions, de toutes les consciences, de tous les sentiments... il savait ou devinait les affaires de ceux qui l'entouraient, tandis que nul ne pouvait pénétrer ni ses pensées, ni ses occupations. Quoiqu'il eût jeté son apparente bonhommie, sa constante complaisance et sa gaieté comme une barrière entre les autres et lui, souvent il laissait percer l'épouvantable profondeur de son caractère." 23

Faguet's extension of this description is interesting because of the elements of uneasiness, discomfiture and intrigue that it reveals between the lines of Balzac's portrait:

" Vautrin est un bandit et c'est un homme de puissante volonté. Mais il importe, pour la conduite de son roman, que l'auteur ne dise pas tout de suite qu'il est un bandit. A cause de cela, il le présente seulement d'abord comme un homme inquiétant'... Il est secret; on ne sait rien de lui, ni de ce qu'il fait, et des personnages plus éveillés que ceux de la pension Vauquer en concevraient quelque ombrage; inconsciemment, du reste, ils sont tous un peu terrorisés sinon de sentir qu'ils ne savent rien de lui, du moins de sentir qu'il devine tout.

23. Goriot p. 36.

sinon de sentir qu'ils ne savent rien de lui, du moins de sentir qu'il devine tout d'eux. De plus, il a un certain regard profond et pénétrant et une certaine dureté de physionomie quand il ne rit pas, qui font contraste avec ses manières accomodantes et qui, à de moins engourdis, feraient soupçonner qu'elles sont factices. Et enfin, il est bien adroit à démonter les serrures. Tous ces traits constituent le 'personnage inquiétant', non tout à fait pour les pensionnaires, mais pour le lecteur, en le mettant sur la voie de soupçonner le forban, ce qui est ce que veut l'auteur. En attendant, le portrait est achevé; on a d'orès et déjà l'impression d'un homme énergique et adroit, résolu et habile, maître de lui, autonome, sans préjugés et sans manies et qui ne peut guère être autre chose qu'un bandit ou un policier. Le portrait, fort sombre, tracé à grandes lignes précises et creusées, est de toute beauté." 24

Yet Vautrin, in comparison with other Balzac figures, actually is slighted from the viewpoint of physiognomy. His few outstanding characteristics are well remembered: the eyes; the powerful build, the strong hands tufted with reddish hair. One recalls also that the sight of Vautrin's unwigged head produced a terrifying effect in the Vauquer boarding house and in the Conciergerie during his interview with Granville. But when one tries to recall details explaining why the head was so horrible to look on, one is hard put to find reasons. The fact is, that with admirable restraint, Balzac did not give them. Fernand Roux notes:

24. Emile Faguet, Balzac (Paris: Hachette, Grands Ecrivains français, 1913), pp. 83-84.

" Seul peut-être de tous les portraits de La Comédie humaine, celui de Vautrin est dépourvu d'intérêt. Les mains, -- ces mains elles-mêmes qui pour Balzac, décèlent tant de choses!...n'indiquent chez le forçat qu'une puissance brutale. Dans les quatre ou cinq volumes où Vautrin apparaît, vous chercheriez en vain de lui un croquis quelque peu net. Sa poitrine velue, ses muscles gros et courts, qui rappellent ceux d'Hercule Farnèse, la puissance de volonté qui s'échappe de son regard, constituent des traits généreux, formules presque en termes abstraits, insusceptibles de déterminer une individualité."²⁵

What Roux sees as inadequacy in description could very likely be the result of Balzac's desire to identify himself with his creation. He certainly does so in ideas, why should he not also in physique? If Balzac succeeds to some degree in masking his own person and personality behind Vautrin, he also succeeds in furthering the air of mystery surrounding the master criminal. Concluding our remarks on the mysterious and powerful Vautrin, we turn to what can be considered the purpose of such endowments: using them to Satanic ends.

Satanic Soul

Balzac says of his creation:

" ...cet homme qui ne fut plus un homme, mais le type de toute une nation dégénérée, d'un peuple sauvage et logique, brutal et souple. En un moment Collin devint un poème infernal où se peignirent tous les sentiments humains, moins un seul, celui

25. Roux, p.323.

26. Goriot p.186.

du repentir. Son regard était celui de l'archange déchu qui veut toujours la guerre." 26

Estève has written too:

" La Comédie humaine aura...les Philippe Bridau, les Vautrin, les Gobseck, incarnations modernes et réalistes de cette énergie malfaisante que Byron avait symbolisée dans Lara et dans Manfred." 27

It is apparent indeed that Vautrin was the romantic hero, endowed with Byronic deviltry, So we come to a question that has often been raised: is Vautrin an incarnation of Satan, a half-divine being who discerns where others are powerless to see? In studying the elements of mystery and power in Vautrin's nature, it would be inappropriate to neglect those elements of demonology which Balzac attributed to him, though they perhaps are of less appeal today than in a period dominated by the mists and shadows of romanticism. No doubt he bears many resemblances with Melmoth in Melmoth réconcilié. Both suggest an intrusion of the supernatural into the world of drab routine, poisoning souls with calculated misanthropy and denying distinctions between good and evil.

In fact, we count well over fifty references to the Devil in the three novels, including Vautrin being called "diable supérieur". Esther exclaims jestingly at first: "Vous me faites l'effet d'un démon!", only to inquire later:

"Est-ce le diable?"²⁸ Balzac does not conceal his

26. Goriot p. 186.

27. Edmond Estève, Byron et le romantisme français (Paris:Boivin et Cie., 1929), p. 493.

"Est-ce le diable?"²⁸. Balzac does not conceal his terrified fascination with the "archange déchu" he has created. The reader is harried and haunted by an extensive miasma of epithets: "terrible mentor", "terrible athlète", "terrible prêtre", "terrible juge", "génie de la corruption", "génie du mal", "féroce conducteur", "féroce calculateur", "Machiavel du bagne", not to mention numerous references to demonology.

Not only was Vautrin a spiritual incarnation of Satan, but he bore him a physical resemblance as well. For instance, Balzac liked to attribute a symbolic colour to the features, eyes and hair of his most excessive characters. The red hair, colour of life and fire, befits someone he calls a "poète infernal". Indications of Satan become even stronger as his allusions become more pointed, especially when he associates his role with that of Destiny: "Je me charge du rôle de la Providence;" or "Voici quarante ans...que nous remplaçons le Destin." And finally, there is Rastignac's neat delineation: "Dieu et Satan se sont entendus pour fondre Vautrin." Certainly these signs point to a demonic essence of unusual proportions who justifies Balzac's dictum that: "Tous les grands hommes sont des monstres." His behaviour also as an energy of life, an avenging force of reason, and a power breaking the fetters that enchain human thought, give him the pride and strength of an "infernal génie".

28. Splendeurs pp.108,112 and for the following page.

This semi-demonic soul, combining mystery, power and Satanic overtones springs from Balzac's fascination with the man motivated by passion:

" Paris! il s'y rencontre des hommes à passions..
Ces gens-là n'ont soif que d'une certaine
eau prise à une certaine fontaine...pour
en boire, ils vendraient leur âme au diable..
Cette fontaine est le jeu, la Bourse, la musique..."²⁹

Balzac's characters are open to these powerful temptations, extensions of the Archfiend on earth, where life, far from being what it appears on the surface, conceals its inner substance in the shadows of the legendary spirits of darkness. "S'il importe d'être sublime en quelque genre , c'est surtout en mal."³⁰ In fact, Vautrin derives the pride of Lucifer in being "seul contre le gouvernement avec son tas de tribunaux, de gendarmes, de budgets"³¹, and, though he leaves the Vauquer home in handcuffs, is remorselessly happy to add:"et je les roule". His promise to send the other pensionnaires figs from Provence, while consistent with the behaviour of a farceur, leaves the foretaste of a different and disquieting promise --his return. A momentary triumph of order cannot efface the permanence of evil.

Illusions perdues provides a very specific example of Vautrin's satanic soul in his dealings with Lucien. There is clearly a demonic pact underneath the realistic events.

29. Goriot p. 61.

30. Denis Diderot, Le Neveu de Rameau(Paris:Fabre,1950), p.61.

31. Goriot p.187.

The usual exchange of gold at the conclusion of the pact has as its counterpart in Lucien's dealings with Herrera when Lucien, after signing the pact, suddenly finds himself in possession of a large enough sum of money to undo some of the damage he had caused at home. There is a virtual reversal of the customary pact with the devil however. In the usual sense, the human partner who delivers his soul to the devil gains the power of passing into other people's bodies, usually those younger and wealthier than himself. Vautrin represents the genius of Evil and Lucien makes a pact with him, but in this case, it is the devil who attempts to find a new life through the body of his victim. Vautrin indeed claims to have the power of almost complete identification with Lucien, much as Goriot claims it in respect to his daughters. This identification with another personality and the ability to derive happiness through another's pleasures is perhaps just a more realistic version of the mystic passing of one personality into the body of another such as Balzac no doubt read in the Arabian Nights. This transubstantiation however, will be left to Chapter Four.

There is a lineage of this kind of Satanic power, or will to dominate, in Balzac's total production. L'Héritière de Birague marked the evil figure of the Abbé de la Bletterie, Le Corrupteur showed the moral dissolution of a young man, Argow le pirate produced a plotting social climber, La Peau de chagrin disclosed a dejected youth unwittingly engaged in

a Faustian pact, Ferragus presented a veritable rebel, and La Fille aux yeux d'or introduced a devil and his disciple, the Abbé de Maronis and de Marsay. But none soars like Vautrin. De Marsay, the "corsaire en gants jaunes" of impeccable behaviour and impenetrability is in a sense Vautrin's ideal, what he would like Rastignac and Rubempré to become --the dispassionate, evil being par excellence who can appear to respect the laws and yet be a "professeur des scélératesses".³² However, he remains a symbol of an incarnation, an exquisitely handsome Dorian Gray who can with impunity refuse obedience to society. Vautrin, on the other hand, is the spirit who has given himself wings to swoop down upon the infernal throng of Paris but not into it, not only because he cannot, but because he already exercises great power there. He is not the prototype of the individual who lives in the margin of society and the law, as many have described him. Rather, he is outside of society, happy to enjoy "la royauté que lui donnaient le cynisme de ses pensées, de ses actes, et la force d'une organisation faite à tout!" Curtius continues:

" Vautrin devient donc finalement pour Balzac le type des natures démoniaques, qui résument toutes les forces humaines. L'énergie, toutes les énergies amassées et condensées dans une figure grandiose, il fallait que Balzac réalisât dans son oeuvre ce beau spectacle; et il créa Vautrin, le révolté, le surhomme, ange fascinant du mal, Vautrin est l'enfant préféré de son imagination

32. Félicien Marceau, Balzac et son monde Edition revue et augmentée, (Paris:Gallimard,1970), p.278.

33.

d'artiste et de sa volonté de puissance, o
son propre portrait, mais esquissé par la main
de son démon." 33.

Conclusion

In studying the aura of mystery and power with which Balzac surrounds his criminal hero, we have shown that it is through the process of weaving together several elements that the novelist arrived at his end. We have, in this chapter, attempted to show how mystery and power and awe were created by withholding certain information in some cases and by the use of implication in others--for example, regarding Vautrin's criminal activities. Demonology and the theme of the outlaw hero were both popular fields which Balzac did not hesitate to exploit. By cleverly attributing knowledge of physiognomy and magnetism to Vautrin, rather than reserving it for himself as author-commentator, Balzac gave Vautrin power over people and skill in handling them. Finally, we have seen how the mystery and power-loving side of Balzac's own nature entered into the formation of his criminal hero. We have suggested too that in producing mystery through a minimal physical description of Vautrin, and through the device of implied criminality, Balzac arrived, perhaps unwittingly, at other ends which contribute largely to the success of his character. Thus, the sum of the elements discussed herein makes up the essential character background for the next chapter: an analysis of Vautrin as a "génie de la révolte".

CHAPTER THREE: SPIRIT OF REVOLT

Introduction

In discussing Vautrin as an embodiment of revolt, several questions must be considered: is Vautrin really a reflection of Balzac's own social theories, a medium through which the author expresses his views, or is Vautrin's lawless behaviour justified by his unfortunate treatment by ^m~~s~~¹ociety? Is his character development rounded enough to make his sense of revolt realistic? To answer these key questions, we shall examine some of Balzac's views of society, as expressed by himself and by characters in his preceding novels. Having established the relevance of his theories to the development of Vautrin, we shall attempt to show the reasons behind Vautrin's own indignant outcries. As Vautrin appears well-equipped for revolt, we shall observe how he executes his anti-social plans. Finally, the intimate bond between Balzac and his creation will be explored while an attempt will be made to convey that Vautrin is not just a mouth-piece but an end in himself. We shall begin by tracing the growth of rebellious prototypes of Vautrin in Balzac's

work.

Balzac the Anti-Socialist

Balzac's early novels expressed certain well-defined social principles. Le Tartare ou le retour de l'exilé, by Auguste de Viellerglé, (1822), uses as an epigraph for the second chapter, a quotation from Lord R'hoone's Essâis philosophiques, a work of which we have no further information, which states: "L'homme de la nature a des passions plus fortes et surtout plus vraies que l'homme civilisé. Rien n'altère la justesse de ses jugements."² Balzac's basic philosophy in his early works puts into direct opposition Nature and Civilization, and he expresses a general protest against all social laws, as seen in Physiologie du mariage. The "man of nature" has not yet learned to be a hypocrite; he has not been corrupted by man-made laws and false society.

La Dernière Fée, a tale from Balzac's Juvenalia, is a sharp and bitter criticism of the inhumanity of man. In this story, Abel is a young man who, by some miracle, has been preserved from the tainted society around him. He is an example of the "man of nature" who is still capable of pure passion and a natural simplicity. The "dernière fée", a wealthy English duchess, has grown weary of the world and its ways, and seeks the joys of a true love away from a pretentious society. This fairy tale satirizes the society of the duchess by placing it

2. As quoted in Guyon, p.161.

in contrast with the ideal and natural world of Abel. The fairy explains the rules of her world, showing how absurd the laws are, and how they lead, more often than not, to undesirable ends. She expounds on the cruelty of society, the lack of concern for others and the general indifference of mankind for his fellow-beings. She scorns the importance attached to such status symbols as uniforms, ribbons and badges, thereby severing drastically with traditional values. Such preference for man's natural gifts becomes more and more evident in Balzac's writings.

Balzac was also ~~greatly~~ influenced by the expression of anarchy in Byron's rebels. A stronger influence on this same subject came from William Godwin. In the preface to Annette ou le criminel, suite du Vicaire des Ardennes, he calls Caleb Williams by Godwin a masterpiece. William Godwin presented his theories in a work called Enquiry concerning political justice and its influence on morale and happiness, and illustrated them in the novel Caleb Williams. Godwin expressed, the extreme end of intellectualism as it concerns society and morality. The end result of his philosophy was a total anarchy, the doing away with the existing social order by an all-powerful logic. The intellectual search for truth and justice was the only basis for his system. Intellectualism was to conquer emotion and lead man to the highest goal, the common good. The distribution of wealth, forms of government, standards of living, and social customs were to be remodelled on the principle of

full rights of equality and liberty for all in a society founded upon reason. In Caleb Williams, Godwin declares all government to be a necessary evil, which it is hoped one day will disappear and no longer be necessary. He sees man as his own natural enemy, the only animal that seeks the destruction of its own kind. Caleb Williams and Falkland represent the two types into which Godwin considers society to be divided - the slaves and the master. He condemns society for being like this, and he defends the type of man who resists its dictations.

Godwin represented Balzac's own personal vision of the world, and Caleb Williams provided Balzac with the arguments to justify the criminal's struggle against organized society. The thief, who steals without a license, as it were, is in open war against the man who steals with the sanction of the law. Balzac inherited from Byron and Godwin a secret sympathy for anarchy which is thinly veiled throughout his works (and this) despite the fact that generally he claims to support authority and proudly states that he is writing:

"...à la lueur de deux Vérités éternelles:
la Religion et la Monarchie, deux nécessités
que les événements contemporains proclament,
et vers lesquelles tout écrivain de bon sens
doit ramener notre pays." 3.

Balzac's criticism of society and social laws lead from Argow le Pirate and similar early works that glorify the rebel, through the Code des gens honnêtes, and Physiologie du mariage

3. Balzac, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Conard, 1940), Vol. 1, xxxi.

into the novels of La Comédie humaine. The final expression of Balzac's scorn and condemnation of society reaches its peak in the figure of Vautrin as traced through Le Père Goriot, Illusions perdues and Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes. Pathos for the plight of the individual at the mercy of an impersonal social order, and a feeling of disgust for that social order which forces men to live outside the law, prevail throughout Le Père Goriot and in part sets the tone of Balzac's thoughts through the rest of La Comédie humaine. We shall now turn to a closer examination of Balzac's specific thoughts on society and his sympathies with anti-socialists.

Balzac evolved with keen enjoyment a social philosophy in defence of thieves and illustrates in several pages of the Code all the provocative understanding which characterizes any tirade by Vautrin. He talks of their special contribution to the social order, of the need to judge them with impartiality because judges and victims alike are of no mind to do so, and of their rare attributes:

" ...un homme rare; la nature l'a conçu en enfant gâté; elle a rassemblé sur lui toutes sortes de perfections: un sang-froid imperturbable, une audace à toute épreuve, l'art de saisir l'occasion, si rapide et si lente, la prestesse, le courage, une bonne constitution, des yeux perçants, des mains agiles, une physionomie heureuse et mobile. Tous ces avantages ne sont rien pour le voleur; ils forment cependant le somme des talents d'un Annibal, d'un Catalina, d'un Marius, d'un César."⁴

4. Guyon, p. 210.

In addition to all this, the criminal must be a judge of character, an accomplished liar and able to foresee events. He must have a lively mind and be able to seize every available opportunity and use it to his advantage. He must be an actor in all classes of society. Balzac's interest in the criminal and his admiration of him do not stop with the individual criminal but extend to the brotherhood of criminals organized to win over society. Though Vautrin embodies the above qualities, we would do well to compare him to a fellow spirit, Gobseck, Balzac's second greatest génie criminel.

Gobseck is one of the principal reproductions of the above category of beings, superior in intelligence and energy, who, in Balzac's mind, are by definition set apart from society. Gobseck says: "...je possède le monde sans fatigue et le monde n'a pas la moindre prise sur moi."⁵ Bardèche points out that this sentiment is an addition dating from 1836, not present in the original 1830 text of Gobseck. He continues, showing some of that part of Vautrin which is added to Gobseck's character:

"Toute la confession de Derville rajoutée dans la réédition (1836), est, en réalité, une écho de l'oeuvre récente de Balzac dans les Scènes de la vie privée: ce sont les théories de Vautrin, qui, exprimées l'année précédente dans Le Père Goriot, ont suggéré à Balzac les théories de Gobseck. Et l'approfondissement de Gobseck est, à cette date, un reflet de la création de Vautrin."⁶

Barrière describes the usurer as follows in the same novel:

5. Bardèche, p. 288.

6. Ibid, p. 289.

" Goriot a pour l'humanité un mépris sans bornes. Il exerce par son or un pouvoir illimité. Son existence est pour lui-même une perpétuelle étude de tous les mouvements ignobles du coeur humain, inspirés par l'argent; il puise dans ses observations des joies analogues à celles de Satan dans son acharnement à damner les hommes."⁷

His power arises from money and his scorn from his obviously distorted experience of life. In the latter sense, he can be compared with many of the embittered characters of the Comédie humaine, to the vicomtesse de Beauséant after her disillusionment in Le Père Goriot, to Ferragus, to Maître Cornelius and to de Marsay, : "...sorte de galérien des hautes classes, dans la nature duquel Balzac a tout mêlé: génie du vice et génie de la science, génie de la politique et génie de l'amour sensuel."⁸. Parallel with these more or less honourable members of society, we find Balzac expressing admiration of and sympathy for criminals, insofar as they represent vital energy, and referring to them as "...ces grands hommes manqués, que la société marque d'avance au fer chaud, en les appelant des mauvais sujets."⁹. Perhaps part of his sympathy for the exceptional individual who is discriminated against can be found in a view of the prevailing social situation and mood.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, many writers including Balzac, were influenced by the example of Napoleon which was still fresh in their minds.

" ...the Napoleonic legend, the ceaseless ambition of the Emperor, still travailed in the minds of many writers. Béranger, Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, all revered Bonaparte, all dreamed or labored along Napoleon's lines

7. Pierre Barrière, Honoré de Balzac et la tradition littéraire classique (Paris: Hachette, 1928), p.258.

8. Ibid., p.183.

9. Balzac, Les Marana (Pléiade), ix, 792.

labored along Napoleonic lines. A whole new order of personalities and ideas came into being after Waterloo."¹⁰.

Vautrin is proof of this influence. Brunetiere referred to him as "ce déchaînement d'énergie brutale provoqué par l'exemple° de Napoléon et de sa prodigieuse fortune."¹¹. The fantastic history of Napoleon was the most vivid image of the spirit of Vautrin: the greatest demonstration of revolt the world had ever seen.

However, from the very inception of the Restoration, when the former social order was reinstated, the individual was restricted to the class and position into which he had been born. There was much discontentment among the young men for they were inspired by the history of Napoleon on the one hand, and restricted to their inherited social position on the other. Vautrin tells Rastignac in Le Père Goriot, that in France there must be at least fifty thousand young men who were attempting to make a quick fortune. They spent a great deal of energy and the struggle was merciless. These young men were obliged to endeavour to destroy each other like "des araignées dans un pot", because there were not fifty thousand good positions available.¹². Even Vautrin was subject to these same laws of the jungle if he wished to succeed in the renewed class consciousness.

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10. Ethel Dargan and George Weinberg, The Evolution of Balzac's 'Comédie humaine' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p.52
11. Ferdinand Brunetière, Honoré de Balzac (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1906) p.220.
12. Goriot, p.110.

And so, Balzac used his anti-social characters to demonstrate the injustice of French society during the transition period between pre-revolutionary days of the aristocracy and the modern French society. As a result of the frustrating sociological conditions, it had become popular for writers to treat criminals, usurers, prostitutes and the like, as enemies of an unfair society. As we shall see, through the study of Balzac's greatest anti-social hero, Vautrin, these enemies were idealistic and possessed dignity. They often spoke of the futility of honesty and the lack of reward for earnest effort and fidelity. Balzac made heroes and heroines of them because he regarded them as enemies of a society which he considered evil.

Balzac recognized genius in the thief and he blamed society and an inexplicable fate for having prevented the thief from becoming a great man. Some of those who are considered to be great men are those who are in some sense outlaws or rebels to an existing social order, but who somehow were able to reach the top and conquer the very society that would have been the first to condemn them. The criminal, like Vautrin, recognizing genius within himself, knows that he has the ability to climb the social scale but, since society scorns his poverty, he has to turn to crime as a quick way to become rich. During this time, he builds up a scorn for society and, as he lacks moral strength, he is doomed to fail in his quest for social recog-

nition. This criminal element formed a real part of the society which Balzac attempted to paint and, as such, it gave him the opportunity to attack society for its own weaknesses. For society, making criminals by the very laws it enacts to prevent them, causes an inevitable class struggle between the "have" and the "have-not" elements in a materialistic system.

Vautrin the Anarchist

Vautrin's character formation points up poverty, unhappiness and multiple disadvantages in his youth, coupled with insight and an ambition which no set of circumstances could restrict. Though subject to all the irregularities of the average human being, he displayed remarkable control over himself and others, simulating the man devoid of vicissitudes.

His most basic personal motivation was probably the frustration he encountered in society. By the rules of the game, Vautrin could not realize his own ambitions because he had been born with severe disadvantages. Later, he could not hope to advance himself to a significant position because of the roughness of his manner, his lack of formal education and his unsuited physical appearance. Also, he was hindered by a criminal record acquired early in life. As we have noted, the glorious days of the Napoleonic era when a man like Vautrin might have held some significant rank in the Emperor's army, or might have made his way to fame and fortune regardless of his lowly birth, were no more. The Restoration government of the 1830's attempt-

ed to return society to pre-Napoleonic conditions.

Vautrin's reaction to finding himself discriminated against in so many ways, was to turn on society and condemn it for its narrow-minded prejudices. After convincing himself that he was above life in society, his aim was to gain social power by society's own means - wealth and prestige. The intermediary of a socially acceptable protégé through whom he could gain vicarious enjoyment of all the pleasures denied him personally was his vehicle. Vautrin desired to take revenge on society by forcing someone else into a successful position despite the status quo of social organization. To these ends, he recruited Eugène de Rastignac and Lucien de Rubempré. As their demonic preceptor, Vautrin teaches them that society has gradually usurped, through its law structure, so many rights over the individual, that a strong freedom-loving individual finds he is forced to fight it on terms outside society's law. "Il n'y a plus de lois, il n'y a que des mœurs."¹³.

By his dreadful presence then, Vautrin registers a protest against an oppressive society. Part of his protest is derived from his ancestor, Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

" Collin ici présent est un homme moins lâche que les autres et qui proteste contre les profondes déceptions de l'état social, comme dit Jean-Jacques Rousseau, dont je me glorifie d'être l'élève."¹⁴.

13. Goriot, p.115.

14. Ibid., p.187.

Above all, he is a rebel; when arrested, his first reaction is to insult the police as minions of an unjust system,

" Nous avons moins d'infamie sur l'épaule que vous n'en avez dans le cœur, membres flasques d'une société gangrenée...Je suis seul contre le gouvernement avec son tas de tribunaux, de gendarmes, de budgets et je les roule." 15.

He wants to "fouetter la haute société",¹⁶ convince it of its own pettiness. This rebellion isn't based on mere anarchy though. If he feels bitterness towards society, it is because he is convinced that it is born of cowardice and based on stupidity, on mediocre virtues. The struggle of the superior man in society is mainly against narrow-mindedness and mediocrity. Vautrin tells Rastignac that one must make one's way persistently in one direction without being swayed by the many harassing difficulties imposed by the bigoted world. Though he does not blame people for being as they are, one must nevertheless struggle against envy, mediocrity, calumny and every living being.

Vautrin helps to illustrate one of Balzac's conceptions of society. According to Vautrin, the individual is faced with a major decision which he must make at some point in his life. He must either submit himself to society and choose what Vautrin calls "stupide obéissance" to the rules of the "bourbier", or refuse to cooperate and adopt a forceful atti-

15. Ibid., p.186.

16. Ibid., p. 37.

tude of revolt. It is impossible to mix the two and remain honest with oneself. With the former, one accepts authority; with the latter, one obeys none. One's personal authority lies in revolt itself. Vautrin says of himself:

"Après avoir examiné les choses d'ici-bas, j'ai vu qu'il n'y avait que deux parties à prendre: ou une stupide obéissance ou la révolte." "Je n'obéis à rien, est-ce clair?"¹⁷.

He reveals his distaste for those surrounding him in passages such as the following:

"Si Vautrin méprise tous ces gens-là, ce n'est pas parce qu'ils se sont aliénés, c'est parce qu'ils sont incapables de se fixer un but éclatant, qu'ils agissent en sot et se comportent en aveugles."¹⁸.

"...il y a de la bassesse à ne pas oser, à ne pas vouloir, à se satisfaire de joies médiocres, à se contenter de plaisirs vulgaires. Il faut être à la hauteur de ses ambitions, quelles qu'elles soient. 'Tout ou rien', voilà ma devise."¹⁹.

If one chooses revolt, then one goes into the fray against social convention. According to Vautrin, this is the only honourable decision to make. Once this decision has been made, firm anti-social action should begin immediately. As for Vautrin, he is well equipped for revolt and feels able to command this debased world "et d'imiter la Providence qui nous tue à tort et à travers."

Even without his self assurance and bitter truths, Vautrin makes a profoundly disturbing impression. For all his

17. Goriot, p.107.

18. Andre Allemand, Unité et structure de l'univers balzacien (Paris: Plon, 1965), p.148.

19. Goriot, p.133.

indomitable manner, his philosophy may be subconsciously the outcome of a disabused, sadly ironic awareness:

"L'exploitation suprême et désespérée d'une humanité qu'on aurait voulu mais que rien ne peut faire meilleure. Il faut relire avec soin l'indoctrination de Rastignac ou de Rubempré. Philinte aurait le même ton."20.

"Je considère les actions comme des moyens, et ne vois que le but!"21.

To be a wily lion that kills and is not killed, tricks and is not tricked, leaves behind conscience and heart, wears a mask to deceive men and exploit women, and that can, as at Lacedaemon, "saisir sa fortune sans être vu, pour mériter la couronne," this is the brand of Machiavellism needed to succeed. The crown of success is obtained in one of two ways:

"Il faut entrer dans cette masse d'hommes comme un boulet de canon, ou s'y glisser comme une peste."22.

Vautrin's way is the latter, to produce the effect of the former. For man in general, Vautrin feels no compassion:

"Qu'est-ce un homme pour moi? Ça! fit-il, en faisant claquer l'ongle de son pouce sous une de ses dents."23.

He did however, feel strongly for his friends as individuals. Vautrin was a forceful personality. Persons of this kind are noted for strength in friendships as well as in enmity. Vautrin believed it is better to be frank in these matters than to use pretense and subterfuge:

20. Gabriel Teuler, Du Côté de Balzac (Paris:Plon,1933), p.48.

21. Goriot,p.154.

22. Ibid.,p.110.

23. Ibid.,p.154.

"Voulez-vous connaître mon caractère? Je suis bon avec ceux qui me font du bien ou dont le coeur parle au mien. A ceux-là tout est permis. Ils peuvent me donner des coups de pied dans les os ou les jambes sans que je leur dise: Prends garde! Mais, nom d'une pipe! Je suis méchant comme le diable avec ceux qui me tracassent ou qui ne me reviennent pas." 24.

Ambition was also a guiding star in Vautrin's scheme. He believed ambition to be a rare thing, given to few. The ambitious man is superior to others, he felt. He is strong, determined, and has enormous value. Vautrin believed that it is tiresome always to want something and never to be satisfied. As for his own ambition, he declared: "[J'ai] le sang fiévreux des lions et un appétit à faire vingt sottises par jour." 25. What he expounds to Rastignac in the garden:

"Parvenir! parvenir à tout prix...Il n'y a pas de principes, il n'y a que des événements; il n'y a pas de lois, il n'y a que des circonstances; et l'homme supérieur épouse les événements et les circonstances pour les conduire..." 26.

is elaborated in his sermon to Rubempre on the highway:

"Ne voyez dans les hommes, et surtout dans les femmes, que des instruments; mais ne leur laissez pas voir. Adorez comme Dieu même celui qui, placé plus haut que vous, peut vous être utile, et ne le quittez pas qu'il n'ait payé très cher votre servilité, soyez enfin âpre comme le Juif et bas comme lui: faites pour la puissance tout ce qu'il fait pour l'argent. Mais aussi, n'ayez pas plus de souci de l'homme tombé que s'il n'avait jamais existé. Savez-vous pourquoi vous devez vous conduire ainsi?...Vous voulez

24. Ibid., p. 106.

25. Ibid., p. 329.

26. Ibid., pp. 114-115.

dominer le monde, n'est-ce pas? il faut commencer par obéir au monde et le bien étudier...Or, le monde, la société, les hommes pris dans leur ensemble, sont fatalistes: ils adorent l'événement...Aujourd'hui...le succès est la raison suprême de toutes les actions, quelles qu'elles soient. Le fait n'est donc plus rien en lui-même, il est tout entier dans l'idée que les autres s'en forment... Ayez de beaux dehors! cachez l'envers de votre vie, et présentez un endroit très brillant... Les grands commettent presque autant de lâchetés que les misérables; mais ils les commettent dans l'ombre et font parade de leur vertu: ils restent grands. Les petits déploient leurs vertus dans l'ombre, ils exposent leurs misères au grand jour: ils sont méprisés... Que devez-vous donc mettre dans cette belle tête? ...Uniquement que voici: Se donner un but éclatant et cacher ses moyens d'arriver, tout en cachant sa marche...Soyez homme, soyez chasseur, mettez-vous à l'affût, embusquez-vous dans le monde parisien, attendez une proie et un hasard, ne ménagez ni votre personne, ni ce qu'on appelle la dignité; car nous obéissons tous à quelque chose, à un vice, à une nécessité; mais observez la loi suprême! le secret."27.

One either succeeds by an "éclat de génie" or by the skill of corruption. One must enter the human masses like a cannon-ball or slip in like the plague. "L'honnêteté ne sert à rien."28. Vautrin's philosophical treatise as expounded to Rastignac gives us opportunity to see how Balzac might have conceived of revolt in its darkest and stealthiest form. The author's frustration and dislike of certain social elements are revealed herein. Vautrin seems to echo some of Balzac's own fulminations against Paris, a mud pit of which he says, with heavy irony:"Ceux qui s'y crottent en voiture sont d'honnêtes gens, ceux qui s'y crottent à pied sont des fripons."29.

27. Balzac,

27. Balzac, Illusions perdues pp. 591-596.

28. Goriot, p.111.

29. Ibid., p.62.

If this is true, then the only law is force, the law of the jungle, where Illinois, Hurons or Mohicans know that the supreme rule is to be abler and stronger than the rest. In the following chapter a more detailed examination of Vautrin's liaisons with extensions of himself will take place. In the meantime, let us conclude by summarizing the intimate bond between author and creation as evidenced in this chapter.

Balzac and Vautrin

It appears to be self-evident that any writer can best depict those individuals into whose character he has the clearest insight. One's understanding goes further when one is on familiar ground and one understands better the person whose ideas resemble one's own:

" Il n'y a point de roman sans une certaine modestie du romancier, sans un certain effacement, sans une certaine identification du romancier avec son personnage. Cette identification, le romancier à thèse en est incapable. Tandis que, chez Balzac, elle est constante. La thèse est volontaire. Chez Balzac, il s'agit de quelque chose qui se mêle au flux créateur exactement comme les rêves, les souvenirs, les nostalgies dont tous les romanciers nourrissent leurs personnages. Je ne crois pas au romancier catholique ni d'ailleurs, au romancier communiste. En ce sens que j' imagine mal un romancier véritable se disant: "je vais écrire un roman catholique ou communiste," si cette foi, cette doctrine sont pour lui ce pain des anges dont il se nourrit chaque jour, il ne pourra pas faire que son roman n'ait pas une certaine couleur. Ainsi de la conception

du monde chez Balzac. Elle est en lui, elle s'est fait chair." 30

If this is true, the vividness of Balzac's anti-social character is then the result of his understanding of Vautrin and of Vautrin's position in society.

Lacking great wealth and noble birth, Balzac could never hope to attain a high rank in aristocratic circles. Moreover, he was corpulent, talked too much in a loud voice and had the mannerisms of a bourgeois of peasant origin. It is probable that at times Balzac entertained thoughts of revolt that he healthily channeled into his literature. In Thus, in a sense, Vautrin, along with Hulot, Gobseck, Bridau, Maxime de Trailles and others, served as a form of release to Balzac's own feelings of revolt. Along with Samuel Rogers, we too can perhaps "see projected in him(Vautrin) his creator's suppressed revolt against society."³¹.

However, our interpretation of Vautrin's role in the Comédie humaine would be incomplete if we saw him merely as a mouthpiece for Balzac's political and social ideas --even though he performs this function quite often. He is unlike the devil in Soulié's Mémoires du diable(1836-1838), who is "not an end in himself; he is a means to an end. He is little more than a literary device, a vehicle for the social satire with which four-fifths of the book is

30. Marceau, op cit., pp.242-244.

31. Balzac and the Novel (Madison:University of Wisconsin Press, 1953), p. 117.

taken up."³² Vautrin is an end in himself, as well as being the vehicle for some of Balzac's more radical ideas on society and is therefore a fuller and more richly developed character. He has his own life and history.

Vautrin the Anti-Hero

The genius of Balzac manifests itself in the life-like portrayal of his characters and in the heroic defiance which they at times show society. An unforgettable example of this defiance is the extraordinary gesture of Rastignac's shaking his fist at the city of Paris, which reminds us of the nostalgic confession which Balzac made to Victor Ratier, July 21, 1830:

" Oh! mener une vie de mohican! courir sur les rochers, nager en mer, respirer en plein air le soleil! Oh! que j'ai conçu le sauvage! Oh! que j'ai admirablement compris les aventuriers, les vies d'opposition!..."³³

To be sure, Balzac does enjoy moralizing and making positive declarations of principles as, for example, we can see in this passage from the Avant-Propos of La Comédie humaine:

" L'homme n'est ni bon ni méchant, il naît avec des instincts et des aptitudes; la société, loin de la dépraver, comme l'a prétendu Jean-Jacques Rousseau, le perfectionne le rend meilleur; mais l'intérêt développe alors énormément ses penchants mauvais."³⁴

But can't we perhaps sense the novelists delight at having

32. Harold March, Frédéric Soulié (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931), pp. 175-176.

33. Prioult, pp. 376-377.

34. Balzac, Avant-Propos to La Comédie humaine, in Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Conard, 1912), Vol. I, xxx.

created in Vautrin "un homme moins lâche que les autres, et qui proteste contre les profondes déceptions du contrat social?"³⁵ And doesn't this delight of the creator override mere moral considerations?

Vautrin was taken from romantic antecedents and carefully developed by Balzac. As a creation of fantasy springing from the Gothic novel, the romantic rebel, and the hero-villain, Vautrin matured by means of Balzac's observations and experiences into a realistic character; however, Balzac intended this great creation to be even more than that. He wanted him to be a symbol of the social corruption of the age. What better way to convince his readers of the deplorable state than by creating a character with whom they could sympathize and whose revolt takes on heroic proportions?

At the very least, Vautrin served as an outlet for many of Balzac's more radical ideas on politics, society and morals. Since Vautrin was clearly and repeatedly labelled "bad" by his creator, Balzac probably felt safe in giving vent through him to many of his own pent-up emotions. Guyon indicates that Balzac practised "condemning" his immoral characters as early as Le Corrupteur where, in a footnote, he seems to warn his readers against pernicious ideas put forth by the "vicieux Edouard". Guyon adds:

35, Bardèche, op.cit., p. 338.

" Mais il est piquant de comparer cette note aux préfaces-plaidoyers que le romancier rédigea plus tard, en réponse à l'accusation "d'immoralité", lancée contre son oeuvre. Dans les deux cas, il use des mêmes arguments, dans les deux cas sa sincérité nous paraît très suspecte. Il n'approuvera les actions du forçat Vautrin, mais il les admire en artiste et la philosophie qu'expriment ses héros s'apparente si étrangement à la sienne propre, les discours qu'il place dans leur bouche ont un accent de conviction si passionnée que le moins qu'on puisse dire est qu'ils expriment une des tentations majeures de son esprit." 36.

Balzac felt himself to be above the ordinary run of men because of his genius and he felt superior people were exempt from the ordinary system of laws and moral conduct. Whereas, this manifested itself in Balzac's own life, chiefly in his evasion of duty in the National Guard, (and his imprisonment!), Vautrin was free to overlook any and all laws and customs and to speak with fire of the injustices of society.

Balzac attributed many crimes to his hero in order to heighten the feeling of mystery and power surrounding him. In doing this he accomplished a double purpose for he also made it easy for the reader to sympathize with Vautrin. This may properly be considered a part of Balzac's literary craftsmanship in portraying the moral side of Vautrin's character. Though Vautrin speaks much of crime and much is hinted about his criminal activities, Balzac

36. Guyon, *op. cit.* p. 745. as every reader should know.

purposely gives very little specific information about them. His comments on Vautrin vary according to the feeling he wishes to produce at a given moment and it seems to matter little that the comments are diametrically opposed. Vautrin "s'était interdit de jamais commettre un assassinat par lui-même."³⁷ But in another situation he is a man "qui tuait comme un ouvrier boit."³⁸ In the light of such contradiction, one must resort to an actual count and evaluation of the convict's crimes. Vautrin was innocent of the forgery for which he was imprisoned originally. He instigated Taillefer's death in Le Père Goriot, but through such remote means that the reader is scarcely offended, especially since it seems to be righting a wrong done to the sympathetic young heroine. Balzac's system of expiation is at work here too. Originally named Mauricey, the robber and murderer in L'Auberge rouge was renamed Taillefer and became the father of Victorine. In Balzac's mind, the death of Taillefer junior, is justified by the fact that his father's wealth was ill-gotten. The son, furthermore, never appears in the novel and is unknown to the reader. Vautrin's next crime concerns the real Carlos Herrera. But Balzac nowhere says explicitly that Vautrin killed him and the whole affair has the flavour of the mandarin episode in Goriot. The reader is willing to sacrifice an unknown personnage for the pleasure of seeing Vautrin succeed in his manoeuvre. He is directly responsible for the death of Contenson, whom he

37. Balzac, Splendeurs, p. 176. Contenson was threatened.

38. Ibid., p. 329.

and was

toppled off a roof. But Contenson was threatening our hero's well-being and was furthermore a spy and a stool-pigeon -- an altogether unsavoury character whose death is not likely to weigh on one's conscience. He instigates Peyrade's death, but Peyrade too represents "the enemy" and therefore is rightly done in. The spy's character is revealed and his daughter's fate prepared for and somehow, ironically justified when Peyrade curses Baron Nucingen: "Sacré baron! tu sauras de quel bois je me chauffe, en trouvant un matin ta fille déshonorée...Mais aime-t-il sa fille?"³⁹

As for Lydie Peyrade, who "ressemblait à ces anges plus mystiques que réels," Guyon's words in connection with the fate of Auguste de Malincourt at the hands of the Treize might, with only slight alteration, be applied to her case:

"...mais ce jeune étourdi nous est indifférent. La véritable intérêt du récit est ailleurs: dans la crise grave qui éclate au sein d'un ménage jusque-là parfaitement heureux."⁴⁰

Vautrin writes Esther's will after her suicide. But this is done in Lucien's interest and Vautrin has someone else do the actual forgery.

This is the complete record of Vautrin's reported crimes, spread out over three novels of which two are exceptionally long. Through this skillful trickery, as well as through a curious effect of juxtaposition well formulated

39. Balzac, Splendeurs p.192.

40. Guyon, p.560.

by Le Breton, Balzac succeeds in maintaining, (not diminishing) the favourable impression he wants Vautrin to leave.

Le Breton says of the convict hero,

" Il représente la corruption effrontée, celle qui s'avoue, en face de l'autre, celle qui se cache; et tel est le roman de Balzac qu'en effet Vautrin le révolté, Vautrin le bandit, semble le personnage sympathique au milieu de tant de bourgeois ou de mondains corrompus. Il joue franc jeu." 41

So we see by a careful juxtaposition of values, and by playing down his crimes, Vautrin's dramatic stand in the face of oppression wins our admiration. In Goriot for example, even when the horror of Vautrin's crimes was revealed, most of the convives of the Maison Vauquer sympathized with him. Madame Vauquer herself had become attached to Vautrin to the extent that, after his arrest, she forced the two persons who had betrayed him, to leave her boarding house. They had aided in carrying out social "justice", yet nearly all those who knew Vautrin and the conditions under which he had been arrested would have preferred to see punished his betrayers. However, not everyone condones Vautrin's revolt; Brunetière says of Balzac that: "dans son oeuvre, le crime ou le vice ne sont pas assez souvent punis, ni la vertu suffisamment récompensée."⁴²

Nevertheless, despite Brunetière's view, the roman-

41. André Le Breton, Balzac, l'homme et l'oeuvre (Paris:Boivin et Cie, 1925), p. 63.

42. Brunetière, pp. 220-221.

tic idea of the superior individual struggling alone against society is well represented by Vautrin. When the odds are great, but one is strong and lucky enough to win, is it not inspiring? The "lone-wolf" concept appeals to the human mind.

The anti-social characters in Balzac's novels were acutely aware of the distressful social conditions. It appeared ridiculous to them to accept this harsh fate. Without sufficient capital to launch themselves into an honest career, and considering it absolutely necessary to succeed, they found the means to acquire wealth in the only way available to them. Their crimes were often great but sometimes they were of such impressive boldness that they inspired admiration and awe. The shrewd individual who, with questionable and ruthless tactics, amasses a large fortune, is often admired grudgingly. People give way under the impact of the force of genius. They hate it and try to condemn it because it is selfish but in time, if it persists, they are obliged to recognize it. They worship it because they have not been able to deny or destroy it. Nothing is quite as acceptable as success. Not only the success of Vautrin's revolt, but also something basic to human nature can help us define his attraction. As we see in this quotation from Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes, this universal attraction can be well described in terms which evoke

Baudelaire, Balzac's contemporary and admirer: "C'est la plante vénéneuse aux riches couleurs qui fascine l'enfant dans les bois. C'est la poésie du mal."⁴³

Conclusion

On many levels of society in La Comédie humaine one sees characters in a state of revolt. It would be easy to name other examples of revolt in the Comédie humaine, but as Le Breton has written, "Vautrin is his masterpiece and his greatest incarnation or personification of revolt."⁴⁴

Although he can control it, Collin cannot rub out love from his life. To be sure, where there is love, there is natural weakness, and the fascinating enigma of the character lies in the paradox that Vautrin, the indomitable spirit (of revolt), cannot exist fully without the human frailty of Collin. He forms a part of Balzac's grand system of dynamics and magnetics where everything is aspiration and respiration, attraction and repulsion. The following chapter illustrates the duality of this love force within Vautrin that brings about his ultimate downfall. The neglect of his motivating force, the loosening of his iron will and the weakening of his power over his pawn, all contribute to the disintegration of a supposedly infallible anarchist.

43. Splendeurs, p. 500. p. 500.

44. Le Breton, p. 246.

CHAPTER FOUR: PATERNAL OR HOMOSEXUAL?

Introduction

Given his mastery over others and his determination and intelligence, why does Vautrin fail in his revolt? The controlled emotions, the flawless disguises, the untraceable past deeds, all these elements of his arsenal and more are finally neutralized with disastrous results. In this chapter, we shall investigate Vautrin's need for love and the vulnerability of his particular amorous desires. Perhaps in view of this chink in his otherwise impenetrable armour, we shall find that his ultimate downfall is inescapable. To seek the causes of Vautrin's human frailty, we shall begin with a look at Balzac's views on women and powerful men and then study Vautrin's need for love and the choices before him. The conclusion of this chapter will analyse Vautrin's breakdown, its causes and effects.

Warnings by Balzac Exemplified by Vautrin

Balzac held some strong views on the impossibility of mixing business with pleasure if one was truly ambitious. Power is desired by many, yet few obtain it. The reason, in Balzac's view is that the energies it demands are often diverted to the opposite sex. He who desires power must necessarily rid himself of women. Balzac ob-

served that the lust for power was frequently dissipated by love's capriciousness, He noticed that the straight and upward mobility of power was constantly warped by the periodic invasion of desire. Vautrin served to illustrate this theory. In Vautrin's life there is no place for female love. This is the secret of his titanic power and, as we shall see, the entrance of love into his life will be the cause of his downfall.

Vautrin has only contempt for the weak ones who allow their ambitions to be thwarted by love, who forgo power for the favours of a woman:

" Les voilà donc, ces gens qui décident de nos destinées et de celles de nos peuples!... Un soupir poussé à travers par une femelle leur retourne l'intelligence comme un gant! Ils perdent la tête pour une oeillade! Une jupe mise un peu plus haut, un peu plus bas, et ils courent par tout Paris, au désespoir. Les fantaisies d'une femme réagissent sur tout l'état. Oh! combien de force n'acquiert pas un homme quand il est soustrait comme moi à cette tyrannie d'enfant, à ces probités renversées par la passion, à ces méchancetés candides, à ces ruses de sauvage! La femme, avec son génie de bourreau, ses talents pour la torture, est, et sera toujours la perte de l'homme."¹

Thus the anti-feminism that Balzac personified in Vautrin had a double significance. Firstly, it was a reaction against the ecstatic cult of the period for women, and sec-

1. Splendeurs et misères p. 629.

only, it expressed the basic formula that ruled the world of Balzac: he who desires power with all his being must first renounce love. But can this drastic resolution be sustained by man? Would it not destroy his very being?

" L'homme a l'horreur de la solitude... la première pensée de l'homme, qu'il soit lépreux ou forçat, infâme ou malade, est d'avoir un complice de sa destinée. A satisfaire ce sentiment, qui est la vie même, il emploie toutes ses forces, toute sa puissance, la verve de sa vie Sans ce désir souverain, Satan aurait-il pu trouver ses compagnons?"²

Vautrin recognizes that not even he can escape this law.

Knowing Vautrin's bias against entanglements with women, let us turn to an obvious alternative: homosexual love. It would have been very difficult for Balzac to portray homosexuality frankly and openly. Early nineteenth century standards of taste did not allow too vivid a portrayal of sexuality in general and were even more prudish where sexual aberrations were concerned. Balzac therefore makes no overly explicit portrayal of homosexuality and he was careful to assign whatever abnormality existed to a convict, not only because of the convict's social situation outside the bounds of respectability, but also because of the possible perversion fostered by the nature of life within the prison walls.

2. Illusions, pp. 601-602. 601-602.

There are hints or allusions to the taboo in Ferragus, Sarrasine, Une passion dans le désert, in the strange relationship between Paquita Valdes and Euphemia Porraberril in La Fille aux yeux d'or and in the fond friendship between Lisbeth and Madame Marneffe in La Cousine Bette. However, in two instances that Vautrin himself suggests, there is another possible source of this aspect of his character. Those two instances are recorded below.

In Le Père Goriot, when Vautrin is trying to persuade Rastignac to marry Victorine Taillefer, he exclaims:

"Eh bien! pour moi qui ai bien creusé la vie, il n'existe qu'un seul sentiment réel, une amitié d'homme à homme. Pierre et Jaffier, voilà ma passion. Je sais Venise sauvée par coeur."³

And as Carlos Herrera in Illusions perdues, when he first meets Lucien de Rubempré, Vautrin asks him:

"EEnfant...as-tu médité la Venise sauvée d'Otway? As-tu compris cette amitié profonde d'homme à homme, qui lie Pierre à Jaffier, qui fait pour eux d'une femme une bagatelle et qui change entre eux tous les termes sociaux?"⁴

Venise sauvée to which Vautrin refers is the 1682 drama Venice Preserved or a Plot Discovered by Thomas Otway based on La Conjuration des Espagnols contre Venise, (1618), by St-Réal. Venice Preserved is the story of Jaffier, a Venetian noble-

3. Goriot, p. 155. p. 155.

4. Illusions, p. 60. p. 601.

man who has joined a plot against the Senate. Priuli, a senator and Jaffier's father-in-law, has refused to help Jaffier in the time of need. Pierre, a soldier, has persuaded Jaffier to avenge himself against the Senate of Venice, which has control of the city and is using its power for its own ends. As proof of his loyalty to the conspiracy, Jaffier left Belvidera, his wife, with Renault, the leader of the group. Insulted by Renault, Belvidera fled to Jaffier who confided the plot to her. She begged him to save her father's life by informing the Senate of the plans. Jaffier promised to do so if he could be assured that all his friends would go free. The Senate agreed, but once the group was arrested, the Senate condemned the thirty-three conspirators to death. Driven to despair by this breach of promise on the part of the Senate, Jaffier was determined to free his friends even to the point of threatening Belvidera with her death unless her father pardoned them all. Priuli agreed to free them, but it was too late. On the scaffold, Jaffier is reconciled with Pierre, who had accused him of being a traitor and a coward, stabbed Pierre and then committed suicide, thus freeing both of them from the dishonourable death of a traitor to the State. When she heard that Jaffier was dead, Belvidera died of a broken heart.

From Venice Preserved stems Vautrin's literary homo-

sexuality. Pierre and Jaffier express not only a deep and eternal friendship, but also symbolize a revolt against society in which the end justifies the means -- one of Vautrin's own basic principles.

Vautrin's Duality

What Vautrin seeks above all in his friendships, is a person capable of being his companion, with whom he can spend his life:

" Apprends ceci, grave-le dans ta cervelle encore si molle; l'homme a l'horreur de la solitude. Et de toutes les solitudes, la solitude morale est celle qui éprouve le plus."⁵

The motivating force in this quest of friendship is this fear of solitude, typical of most fathers. Vautrin wants and needs an accomplice. After Goriot, the entire portrayal of Vautrin is tinged with sadness and his most exuberant outbursts against society and mankind can be interpreted in terms of resentment against the very isolation and superiority of which he at other times boasts. His attachments are therefore not to be reduced to mere perversions. Rather they reveal a complex need.

Balzac underlines the need to communicate with the chosen associate. Vautrin is searching for reflections of himself: his protégés come from the same moral mould. Lucien

5. Splendeurs p. 601; p. 601.

and Eugène are both intelligent young men, poor and ambitious. This is all that is necessary to attract Vautrin. They share a thirst for pleasure and power. When Rastignac returns to the Pension Vauquer enflamed with a desire to succeed in society, Vautrin immediately recognizes their common bond. "Bravo! ai-je dit, voilà un gaillard qui me va!" Disguised as Carlos Herrera, he repeats the same thing to Lucien: "Savez-vous pourquoi je fais ce petit discours d'histoire? C'est que je vous crois une ambition démesurée."⁶ In reality, he seeks someone like himself. Just as Grandet wanted a miserly daughter, so Vautrin wants his chosen son to be ambitious and unscrupulous. To ensure this, he poses as a teacher before his protégés. No doubt his teachings are surprising. But one senses in him a sincere desire to benefit his student by his own experiences. Vautrin readies his protégés for revolt. In showing them the hidden aspects of society, he hopes to change them into beings who place themselves above society and established law. Corrupted, he seeks to corrupt. In particular, he succours young men undergoing a moral crisis for to him they represent "une belle proie pour le diable"⁷

Vautrin's search for friendship drives him to seek alternatives to women. That Vautrin despises women and be-

6. Illusion, p. 591; p. 591.

7. Goriot, p. 153; p. 153.

believes in their beauty as a mask for man's destruction is undeniable. A woman is an usurer who would disembowel her own mother, a tiger who looks into mirrors, an inferior being who is motivated by animal instinct. Vautrin, on the contrary, dominates his organs as a result of the bond between effect and cause; his philosophy of the weaker sex is occasioned by his physiology. Even in the sphere of love, Vautrin is outside the general laws of sexuality. "Apprenez un secret: il n'aime pas les femmes."⁸ The ambiguity surrounding his gender is heightened by subtle inferences. For example, above the Vauquer door, one reads a droll inscription: "Pension bourgeoise des deux sexes et autres."⁹ "Et autres" points to dilapidated beings, "mollusques" or larvae of the human species like Mademoiselle Michonneau or Monsieur Poirot. But it also points to Vautrin in three respects: the father-mother admixture, the sexlessness of a fallen angel, and the homosexual. A closer look at the relationships that Vautrin develops in the trilogy will clarify which of these categories Vautrin belongs to.

The first of Vautrin's attachments is traced back to a period spent in prison where he joined up with a young hoodlum, Théodore Calvi, whose feminine nickname was "la belle Madeleine". In slang, Calvi was also known as Vautrin's "tante", a feminine noun that conjures up a mutual love and

8. Gérriot, p. 160.

9. Ibid., p. 27.

affection. Balzac feels it necessary to explain the term as referring to the third sex, leaving us in no doubt as to their relationship.

In Vautrin's second relationship, the "coeur de bronze" brings as much devotion to Rastignac as he had to Calvi. However, Rastignac refuses to understand Vautrin's advances, or at least turns a blind eye. He wished neither to explore "les motifs de l'amitié que lui portait cet homme extraordinaire, ni l'avenir d'une semblable union."¹⁰ Others however, had no difficulty in perceiving Vautrin's intentions. A comment by Mademoiselle Michonneau, after Vautrin's arrest opens Eugène's eyes: "Monsieur [de Rastignac] soutient Collin..., il n'est pas difficile de savoir pourquoi."¹¹ Finally the truth dawns on Rastignac, who resolves to avoid any such entanglement. Vautrin's "regard vénimeux jeta une horrible lumière dans l'âme de Rastignac,"¹² who understood "toutes les perfidies" in it. The end of Illusions perdues brings us to Vautrin's final and most important attachment, and leaves no doubt as to his intentions; Lucien states that he has "vendu sa vie" and is nothing but "la créature" of Herrera. Because Lucien occupies Vautrin's existence for such a long and intense period, let us look at their first encounter as an example of Vautrin's technique of attracting and en-

10. Goriot p.116.

11. Ibid., p.189.

12. Ibid., p.189.

ting prospective "companions".

The third protégé whom Carlos adopts is Lucien Chardon, or Lucien de Rubempré, as he prefers to be called. In 1822, begins the longest association in Vautrin's career and the most fruitful in events. Without going into details about Lucien's previous experiences in the provinces and in Paris, suffice it to say that this would-be poet was a victim of his own vanity. In Paris he got himself into such an unsavoury position that he was forced to beat a retreat to his home and family, thus putting himself directly on Carlos' route from Rochefort to Paris. Part of the letter he left for his sister after upsetting her life and before slinking away into the night to drown himself, reveals Lucien's character. It will be seen that he is a ready-made subject for Carlos to exploit.

" O ma chère Eve, je me juge plus sévèrement que qui que ce soit car je me condamne absolument et sans pitié pour moi-même. La lutte à Paris exige une force constante, et mon vouloir ne va que par accès: ma cervelle est intermittente. L'avenir m'effraye tant, que je ne veux pas de l'avenir, et le présent m'est insupportable. J'ai voulu vous revoir, j'aurais mieux fait de m'expatrier à jamais. Mais l'expatriation sans moyens d'existence, serait une folie et je ne l'ajouterai pas à toutes les autres. La mort me semble préférable à une vie incomplète et, dans quelque position que je me suppose, mon excessive vanité me ferait commettre des sottises. Certains êtres sont comme des zéros, il leur faut un chiffre qui les précède, et leur néant acquiert alors une valeur déculpée.

J

Je ne puis acquérir de valeur que par un mariage avec une volonté forte, impitoyable. Madame de Bargeton était bien ma femme, j'ai manqué ma vie en n'abandonnant pas Coralie pour elle. David et toi vous pourriez être d'excellents pilotes pour moi; mais vous n'êtes pas assez forts pour dompter ma faiblesse qui se dérobe en quelque sorte à la domination. J'aime une vie facile, sans ennuis; et, pour me débarrasser d'une contrariété, je suis d'une lâcheté qui peut m'en mener très loin. Je suis né prince. J'ai plus de dextérité d'esprit qu'il ne faut pour parvenir, mais je n'en ai que pendant un moment, et le prix dans une carrière parcourue par tant d'ambitieux est à celui qui n'en déploie que le nécessaire et qui s'en trouve encore assez au bout de la journée. Je ferais le mal comme je viens de le faire ici, avec les meilleures intentions du monde. Il y a des hommes-chênes, je ne suis peut-être qu'un arbuste élégant et j'ai la prétention d'être un cèdre. Voilà mon bilan écrit. Ce désaccord entre mes moyens et mes désirs, ce défaut d'équilibre annulera toujours mes efforts."¹³

The significant passage, of course, is that concerning the nature of certain people who require domination by a stronger personality in order to amount to anything more than a cipher. What is interesting is the fact that at the end of Lucien's career, one of the "grandes dames" of Paris refers to his relationship with Collin as a marriage, and here Lucien realizes that his only hope lies in a marriage not specifically with a woman, but with a "volonté forte et impitoyable".¹⁴ Carlos is indeed this, and their relationship is indeed a kind of marriage and lasts, in fact, until death doth them part.

13. Illusion pp. 581-582.

14. Ibid., p. 581.

After this introduction, we are ready for Herrera. Were Balzac a less subtle author, Collin would have appeared at this moment, in a clap of thunder to claim the hand of his "âme soeur". As it is, he only appears some three pages later in his priest's robes. Collin is first struck by Lucien's personal beauty, for his poet's vanity has caused him to don his finest outfit to commit suicide:

" En entendant Lucien qui sauta de la vigne sur la route, l'inconnu se retourna, parut comme saisi de la beauté profondément mélancolique du poète, de son bouquet symbolique et de sa mise élégante. Le voyageur ressemblait à un chasseur qui trouve une proie longtemps et inutilement cherchée."¹⁵

After talking for a while, and presumably weighing the qualifications of not just Calvi and the poet, but of a third candidate for his attentions --for we must include Rastignac in this -- Vautrin chose Lucien. Beside the long separation from his Vauquer boarding-house acquaintance, a year during which his influence was not directly exercised, Eugène had shown himself to be too independent, moral and unpliant for Collin's purpose. Despite Théodore's charms, because of Calvi's criminal nature Collin could foresee in the renewal of that association only a string of crimes ending necessarily on the scaffold. To the aging convict, the poet offered something new and very attractive. "La vie avec Lucien, garçon pur de toute condamnation et qui ne se reprochent que des peccadilles, se levait d'ailleurs belle et magnifique

15. Illusions p. 584.

comme le soleil d'une journée d'été."¹⁶

Rubempré doesn't hesitate. He has no choice, or at least very little. Between suicide and adroit temptation, he chooses the easiest way and follows the path drawn by his strange mentor. His success is stunning. In a few years, the former despairing poet is on the point of marrying the wealthy and titled Clothilde de Grandlieu. Everything breaks down at the last minute, but one senses that, in large measure, Lucien's final catastrophe is imposed by considerations of public taste; after all, the success of the Rubempré-Herrera plot would have been too immoral for many readers of 1840.

The duality of Vautrin is now made clear in his relationship with the poet. The Vautrin who wants his protégé to be like him and who uses his intelligence and power to slowly bring about this transformation, acts very like a father, "peu curieux de se replanter ici par bouture"; the same man who denies himself physical paternity is obsessed by the desire to live on. He wants to preserve his essence, not his flesh. As he says to Esther:

" On me riverait pour le restant de mes jours à mon ancienne chaîne, il me semble que je pourrais y rester tranquille en me disant: 'il est au bal, il est à la cour.' Mon âme et ma pensée triompheraient pendant que ma guenille serait livrée aux argousins."¹⁷

¹⁶ Splendeurs p. 495.
¹⁷ Ibid., p.249.

It is truly his soul that Vautrin wishes to impart to his protégés so that he might continue to live beyond his own life-span.

Vautrin is the first to emphasize the paternal aspect of his love. Ironically, he calls himself "Papa Vautrin", he smiles at Rubempré "d'un air paternellement railleur", and it is with a "maternelle" solicitude that he takes Lucien's arm, at their first meeting. The abundance of such terms used to describe him underline this undeniable aspect of his feeling.

Speaking of Vautrin's drive toward moral paternity, Curtius says:

"...il fait passer de sa propre vie dans celle de ses créatures. Ainsi il s'étend démesurément. Inutile de dire que ce double dynamisme --créer une vie nouvelle en faisant appel aux puissances de son esprit et transfuser sa propre expérience à des créatures nées de soi -- appartient à ce que Balzac a le plus profondément éprouvé en lui-même."¹⁸

Most striking is the similarity between his love for Eugène and for Lucien, and Goriot's love for his daughters. They conceive love in the same way. Goriot lives through his daughters because he has created them. This ability to enjoy life vicariously is basic to Vautrin. He tells Lucien that man has a fear of being alone and that he must have an alter ego:

18. Curtius, p. 159.

" J'aime à me devouer, j'ai ce vice-là. Je vis par le dévouement...Je veux aimer ma creature, la façonner, la pétrir à mon usage, afin de l'aimer comme un père aime son enfant... je me réjouirai de ses succès auprès des femmes, je dirai:--ce beau jeune homme, c'est moi! Ce marquis de Rubempré, je l'ai créé et mis au monde aristocratique; sa grandeur est mon oeuvre, il se tait ou parle à ma voix, il me consulte en tout."¹⁹

Vautrin is a social outcast who can no longer enter society nor enjoy its pleasures. Lucien must taste them for him. "Je roulerai dans ton tillbury, mon garçon." As Goriot lived for and through his daughters, "Ma vie à moi est dans mes deux filles"²⁰, so Vautrin lived for and through Lucien. Vautrin shared Lucien's life which he created, and all that Lucien accomplished in society, Vautrin accomplished. Lucien represents the life that Carlos Herrera would have wanted: as a cynic, corrupt and criminal, the soul of this spiritual father is reborn in Lucien. He is able to fulfill all that was denied the other. Being young, handsome and famous, women adore him and he is to marry into one of the most noble families in France. Through him, Vautrin has been able to enter a world forever closed to himself. As Allemand notes:

" Il [Vautrin] n'a pas seulement le génie de la corruption, il s'incarne dans les êtres qu'il choisit, il se les assimile. Il aime à jouer, mais ne s'intéresse qu'au grand jeu. Rastignac hésite à signer le pacte que lui propose ce démon: une circonstance fortuite le sauvera. Lucien se laisse entortiller: il ne sera plus désormais que la créature de Vautrin, sa chose; non pas

19. Illusions p. 602.

20. Goriot p. 130.

n'importe quelle chose, mais celle qui lui représente en altérité, celle qui lui manque pour être tout à fait lui-même. Vautrin se dédouble. Il vit par interposition de personne, il agira de même. Il réalisera à travers vers Lucien les projets qui jusqu'ici lui étaient interdits."²¹

And so, the paternalistic leanings within a homosexual relationship enable Vautrin to enjoy a two-fold love. Because of the essence of self that he transmits to Lucien, he is also able to lead a double life.

The Unmaking of Vautrin

Lucien is Vautrin's heir, having inherited Vautrin's nature. As an ideal son, Lucien embodies all of Vautrin's dreams. "Je suis un grand poète. Mes poésies, je ne les écris pas: elles consistent en actions."²² Vautrin, the man who spoke thus to Rastignac, has created through Lucien his most beautiful poem. He has transformed a dream of himself into flesh and blood. Lucien is the clay from which Vautrin tries to mould a better self. All of his hopes, desires, ambitions and love are instilled in Lucien.

Lucien is his creation. Behind Vautrin's feelings for Lucien lies a will to power which stops just short of the divine. Vautrin confesses: "J'ai appris à imiter la Providence." "Quand j'ai été père, j'ai compris Dieu,"²³

21. André Allemand, Illusions (Paris: Pléiade, 1950), p.1028.

22. Goriot p. 112.

23. Ibid., p.130.

Goriot used to say. Vautrin feels capable of replacing God and creating his own son. The theme of creating is always upon his lips.

" Je vous ai pêché; je vous ai rendu la vie,
et vous m'appartenez comme la créature est
au créateur...comme le corps est à l'âme!"²⁴

The very notion of creating, a reflection of tremendous pride, conveys a passionate desire for power: "J'aime le pouvoir pour le pouvoir, moi!"²⁵ As Lucien is an image of Vautrin, so it is a relationship between creator and creature, similar to that between man and God, as well as the two other aspects of the relationship previously discussed.

" Je vous maintiendrai, moi, d'une main puissante, dans la voie du pouvoir...et vous brillerez, vous paraderiez, pendant que, courbé dans la boue des fondations, j'assumerai le brillant édifice de votre fortune."²⁶

The very day that this iron will deserts him, Lucien dies as if only the presence of Vautrin at his side can make him go on living. Separated for forty-eight hours, he commits suicide. After all, Vautrin is not God. He is a superman, but his will, as powerful as it is, cannot stand in the face of fate. Similarly, in living through Lucien, Vautrin is also vulnerable through him.. In signing the demonic pact, Lucien receives from Vautrin the strength of purpose that he lacks and, in exchange, fends Vautrin with a reflection of his human side. Each discovers in the other a com-

24. Illusions pl. 597.

25. Ibid., p. 598.

26. Ibid., p. 597.

plement of reality that is indispensable to his own personal fulfillment. Accordingly, when Vautrin learns of Lucien's suicide, he collapses, crumbles and is completely overwhelmed. The strength, the energy, the life that he unceasingly injected into the poet's soul, seeps from him fruitlessly. The death of Lucien not only staggers his being, it deprives him, in a very real sense, of his reason for being.

It is the doctor who hastens to treat him who tells Collin that Lucien has hanged himself in his cell.

" Jamais tigre trouvant ses petits enlevés
n'a frappé les jungles de l'Inde d'un cri
aussi épouvantable que le fut celui de
Jacques Collin, qui se dressa sur ses pieds
comme le tigre sur ses pattes, qui lança
sur le docteur un regard brûlant, comme l'
l'éclair de la foudre quand elle tombe; puis
il s'affaissa sur son lit de camp en disant:
'Oh! mon fils!'

-- Pauvre homme! s'écria le médecin ému de
ce terrible effort de la nature.

En effet, cette explosion fut suivie d'une
si complète faiblesse, que ces mots: 'Oh!
mon fils!' furent comme un murmure."27

However strong his emotion is, Jacques Collin does not forget his disguise and instinctively masks his reactions to fit the gauge of his present identity. The idea that this may have been a trap to unmask him apparently does not enter his mind. This shows another side of his character --a side whose existence may heretofore have been open to question but

27. Splendeurs p. 496.

which is now clearly revealed.

"'Si vous avez des enfants, Messieurs', dit Jacques Collin, 'vous comprendrez mon imbécillité, j'y vois à peine clair...Ce coup est pour moi bien plus que la mort, mais vous ne pouvez pas savoir ce que je dis...vous n'êtes père, si vous l'êtes, que d'une manière...je suis mère, aussi!...Je...je suis fou, je le sens.'" 28

He spends the night with Lucien's body, and is found in the morning kneeling beside the bed, clasping Lucien's cold hand and apparently praying.

" En voyant cet homme, les porteurs s'arrêtèrent un moment, car il ressemblait à une de ces figures de pierre agenouillée pour l'éternité sur les tombeaux du moyen âge, par le génie des tailleurs d'images. Ce faux prêtre, aux yeux clairs comme ceux des tigres et raidi par une immobilité surnaturelle, imposa tellement à ces gens, qu'ils lui dirent avec douceur de se lever.

-- Pourquoi? demanda-t-il timidement.

Cet audacieux Trompe-la-Mort était devenu faible comme un enfant." 29

Conclusion

Lucien's death marks an important stage in Vautrin's life. With his passing, Vautrin seems to lose all interest in continuing to live. His despair is overwhelming. For Vautrin is a lonely man and it is the loneliness and his unsuccessful attempts to overcome it which lead to his undoing. The basic drive for companionship, for society, was too great to allow him to maintain his lofty detachment, essential to

28. Splendeurs p. 497.

29. Ibid., p. 498.

carrying out his project of revenge. As Corentin says, "...si vous n'aviez pas eu ce petit imbécile à défendre, vous nous auriez roussés."³⁰ One feels that it is, paradoxically, with an immense sense of liberation, that Vautrin finally abandons his struggle against society and submits to its laws, indeed, becomes an agent for their reinforcement. It is paradoxical, but understandable, By giving up egotistic individualism, he sheds all the responsibility for his deeds. Although Vautrin's aim in his criminal activities is not so lofty as Schiller's Moor, nor is his renunciation so flamboyantly expressed, he could have understood without difficulty Karl Moor's awakening to the fact that his position outside of society was untenable:

" Ah! misérable fou, qui me suis imaginé perfectionner le monde par le crime, et rétablir les lois par la licence! J'appelais cela la vengeance et le bon droit...Je prétendais, ô Providence! rendre le fil à ton glaive émoussé, et réparer ta partialité. Mais... ô puerile vanité!...maintenant me voici au terme d'une vie abominable, et je reconnais avec des grincements de dents, que deux hommes tels que moi renverseraient tout l'édifice du monde moral."³¹

Vautrin becomes but a shadow of his former self. He abandons his most obsessive ambition; Trompe-la-Mort, the outlaw, the soul of satanic revolt, joins ranks with society.

30. Ibid., p. 612.

31. Frédéric Schiller, Les Brigands (New York: Unger, 1961), p.58.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE MASTER'S TOUCH

Introduction

No matter how impartial an artist may try to be, he cannot create realism without deception. This deception will be accepted, however, if it manages, by suggesting intensity and immediateness, to interest us directly and vividly in the event depicted. Let us see to what extent this view of realism is relevant to the creation of Vautrin; and to what extent reality has been deformed; the extent to which Vautrin is removed from his creator; how much more intense he is as a result of Balzac's skill in reproducing reality.

Balzac's Use of Realism

There are several factors from Balzac's own personality which appear in Vautrin's character, contributing to the impression of reality and life. As Wilson says, in distilled style,

" The real elements, of course, of any work of fiction, are the elements of the author's personality: his imagination embodies in the images of characters, situations and scenes the fundamental conflicts of his nature or the cycle of phases through which it habitually passes. His personnages are personifications of the author's various impulses and emotions: and the relations between them in his stories are really the relations between these." ¹

¹ Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York: Scribner, 1950), p.176.

Though in some cases Balzac may have, as he said,² succeeded in becoming his character, it seems fairly obvious that in this case the character became Balzac. Billy indicates a whole unexplored and perhaps unexplorable, aspect of Balzac's work,

" Sur la vie de Balzac telle qu'elle apparaît dans ses ouvrages, il y aurait un gros livre à écrire. Balzac, qui passe pour le romancier le plus transcendant à son oeuvre, si l'on ose employer le langage des théologiens, y est peut-être le plus immanent. Dans chaque personnage, dans chaque épisode de la Comédie humaine, un examen approfondi décèle sa présence. Madame Bovary, c'est moi, disait Flaubert l'impassible. Balzac n'est pas impassible, il intervient visiblement dans ses récits, mais combien plus souvent encore invisiblement? Combien plus souvent il se peint même sans le vouloir?" ³

Thus, by living in his work and through it, Balzac is able to endow Vautrin with a particularly life-like appearance.

Perhaps the most striking device by which Vautrin is made to live is so atypical of Balzac's method that it appears to be accidental. We refer to the imprecise manner in which Vautrin is described physically. This technique has been considered earlier in this essay as a means of creating an "air of mystery" veiling both the character and his creator. Granted, Balzac was likely aware of at least this much of what he was doing. Speaking of settings more than of people, Balzac wrote in an unpublished Avertissement for Le Dernier Chouan(1828):

2. Balzac, Oeuvres complètes (Conard, 1940), x1, 289.

3. Billy, p. 304.

"...je n'ai pas eu peu à combattre dans mon penchant à ne quitter un tableau qu'après avoir longtemps tourné autour, l'avoir léché en tous sens,... Alors les imaginations ardentes me reprocheront de ne leur rien laisser à deviner; mais cette faute...appartient peut-être à notre littérature moderne; elle n'a plus que l'immense vérité des détails;..."⁴

Judging from the rest of his work, Balzac didn't put up much of a struggle against this penchant. There are enumerable lines illustrating his unwillingness to leave a great deal to the reader's imaginative faculty. This proved irritating to Le Breton, who comments acidly on Béatrix:

" Ces portraits sont vrais, ils sont puissants, ils sont ce qu'il y a de meilleur ou même tout ce qu'il y a de bon dans Béatrix; mais quel lecteur a la patience de les lire tous? Il y en a trop, et dans chacun d'eux il y a trop de détails, trop de minuties, le seul portrait physique de Camille Maupin remplit plusieurs pages; vingt-cinq lignes pour ses yeux, quinze pour son nez, autant pour sa bouche, pour son menton, pour ses oreilles..."⁵

Though aware of the dangers connected with scenic description, Balzac was apparently unaware that a vague suggestion of physiological traits allows the reader to use his own imagination, in the strict sense of the word. Yet procuring the reader's participation in the visualization of a character is one of the most important elements in producing a feeling of authenticity and realism. Bardèche approaches this idea when he speaks of the "other" existence of Balzac's

4. Spoelberch de Lovenjoul, Histoire des oeuvres de Honoré de Balzac ascribed by Bardèche, p. 224.

5. Le Breton, p.126.

characters,

" Car, chaque personnage dans l'oeuvre de Balzac est vu deux fois, dans le roman qui lui est consacré d'abord, et là il apparaît comme tous personnages de roman, et dans la perspective de la Comédie humaine, et cette vision peut être sinon différente, du moins bien plus complète et bien plus profonde. ...alors, quelque part, dans un espace de la Comédie humaine qui ne porte point de titre et qui en est la contrée la plus précieuse, se lève un immatériel portrait...que ni l'une ni l'autre des oeuvres de Balzac ne nous ont donne,..." 6

In considering Le Breton's comments regarding Gobseck, Hulot and Claës, one should remember that Vautrin was intended as a secondary figure, though he emerged as a central figure.

" Mais ils ne sont pas des êtres réels. Ils sont beaucoup moins réels, en tout cas, que les personnages de second plan que Balzac a fait apparaître derrière eux. Seuls, ceux-ci sont de l'humanité vivante. Dans Eugénie Grandet, la grosse Nanon n'était-elle pas plus vraie que Grandet lui-même? Il en est toujours ainsi chez Balzac: la vérité est bien moins dans le héros du livre que dans les silhouettes épisodiques." 7

Jules Bertaut too, has distinguished between the portraits of the main and subordinate characters, while maintaining that both groups were treated by Balzac "avec la même minutie, avec le même souci constant de copier le réel."⁸ That he has had a reaction similar to Le Breton's is shown when he writes,

" Seulement, lorsque les protagonistes ne dépassent pas la taille ordinaire de l'humanité,

6. Bardèche, Op.Cit., p.526.

lorsque l'imagination du romancier n'intervient pas pour les gonfler, ils paraissent d'autant plus vrais, d'une vérité photographique, si l'on peut dire." 9

Having mentioned "vérité photographique", Bertaut's next remark approaches contradiction, for he says, "C'est ainsi que le groupe des habitués de la table de Madame Vauquer forme un admirable ensemble aux traits précis, parfois très appuyés et voisins de la caricature,..." This curious juxtaposition of photography and caricature continues the thorny question of reality in art without resolving it, but certainly, without damaging Le Breton's assertion either. The description of Vautrin will be found to consist largely of delineations of his disguises or of his actions, plus a minimum of tangible physical details: his red hair, his strong, hairy hands, a passing reference to the Farnesian Hercules and mainly his eyes -- and not even his eyes in themselves, but rather the effect of his eyes. Just as it was first Vautrin's disguise which was described in Goriot, similarly it is Vautrin's apparel which receives first mention at the end of Illusions. Lucien sees "un voyageur vêtu tout en noir, les cheveux poudrés, chaussé de souliers de veau d'Orléans à boucles d'argent, brun de visage, et couturé comme si, dans son enfance, il fut tombé dans le feu."¹⁰ Later comes the classic list of physical characteristics:

9. Ibid., p. 59.

10. Illusions p. 584.

" Gros et court, de larges mains, un large buste, une force herculéenne, un regard terrible, mais adouci par une mansuétude de commande; un teint de bronze que ne laissait rien passer du dedans au dehors, inspiraient beaucoup plus la répulsion que l'attachement." 11

In Splendeurs, Vautrin first appears as "un masque assassin, gros et court, roulant sur lui-même comme un tonneau."¹² Later we are told that "des plis profonds que les vieilles cicatrices d'une horrible petite vérole rendaient hideux et semblables à des ornières déchirées, sillonnaient sa figure olivâtre et cuite par le soleil."¹³ We are shown again "son buste d'athlète, ses mains de vieux soldat, sa carrure, ses fortes épaules ..." ¹⁴ When Lucien knocks Carlos down, his wig falls off and "un crâne poli comme une tête de mort rendit à cet homme sa vraie physionomie; elle était épouvantable."¹⁵ The lack of description here is perhaps paralleled in descriptions of Madame de Sérisy, who was "une blonde de moyenne taille, conservée comme les blondes qui se sont conservées, ..." ¹⁶ and of Goriot, who shows Eugène "une tête dont les cheveux blancs étaient épars et qui menaçait par tout ce qui pouvait exprimer la menace."¹⁷ Edmund Wilson has stressed Proust's emphasis on "the futility of trying to represent reality by collecting and organizing the data of the external

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11. Ibid., p. 599.
 12. Splendeurs, p. 52.
 13. Ibid., p. 79.
 14. Ibid., p. 79.
 15. Ibid., p. 401.
 16. Ibid., p. 401.
 17. Goriot, p.

world."¹⁸ Suggestion allows the reader to imagine, to practise self-identification or to make a combination of both.

A striking difference in tone marks Vautrin's appearance in Goriot and in the two later novels. There are two possible ways to account for the disappearance of what Balzac calls Vautrin's "grosse gaieté". The first is based on Balzac's method of composition and would assume that under Balzac's hand Vautrin evolved in the course of formation, for better or for worse, into the predominantly grave and almost tragic figure of Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes. The second is based on the finished portrait, as it were, and assumes that the "grosse gaieté" is part and parcel of the convict's disguise at the Maison Vauquer. The second assumption does not invalidate the first, nor is it invalidated by it, and seems, for aesthetic reasons, a fairer way of judging Balzac's work. When he makes Vautrin a genius at disguise he also accounts for differences in the various incarnations. To support this, one should recall that all of the essential elements of Vautrin's character, other than gaiety, are present in Goriot. An evaluation of the total effect of a portrait must be based on the surface colours rather than on the lower layers of construction. Jean-Louis Bory has commented perceptively on the confusion which is created by Balzac's

18. Wilson, Op.Cit., p.178.

peculiar use of disguise as an element of the obscurity which surrounds the criminal hero. Distinguishing from the masks and cloaks of the romanticists, he says:

" L'identité du héros n'est plus inaccessible -- je connais ce monsieur, c'est un prêtre, il s'appelle Carlos Herrera, il vient d'Espagne -- mais elle est fluide, parce qu'elle est à chaque instant truquée. Le farceur de table d'hôte, dont je sais le nom, l'âge, la nationalité, les goûts, se métamorphose en cet abbé, dont je sais le nom, l'âge, la nationalité, les goûts. Mais le lien entre le farceur et l'abbé, Jacques Collin, voilà ce que je ne connais pas et que je ne puis pas connaître tant que l'autre me tient par son stratagème..."¹⁹

Balzac himself gives strong indications that Vautrin's joviality is only part of his disguise when he says:

" Des gens moins superficiels...ne se seraient pas arrêtés à l'impression douteuse que leur causait Vautrin..."

Quoiqu'il eût jeté son *apparente* (italics ours) bonhomie, sa constante complaisance et sa gaieté comme une barrière entre les autres et lui, souvent il laissait percer l'épouvantable profondeur de son caractère."²⁰

Disguise or impression, the fact remains that Vautrin's lively speech, sprinkled with rather salty comments, contributes much to the favourable impression he makes upon fellow-boarders and readers alike. Discussing the inmates of Parisian boarding houses in Balzac's time, Jules Bertaut says:

" ...il en est un que l'on trouve presque invariablement dans toutes les descriptions que l'on nous en fait, c'est le Farceur de table d'hôte." ²¹

19. Jean-Louis Bory, Balzac et les ténèbres (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1947), p.107.
20. Goriot p. 36.
21. Bertaut, p.52.

He quotes from one of these descriptions and remarks on the striking resemblance to Vautrin.

" Le farceur de table d'hôte est généralement un gros homme vulgaire, haut en couleurs, de caractère jovial, familier avec les pensionnaires masculins, galant avec les dames et libertin avec la bonne. Grand mangeur, grand buveur, grand amateur de chansons, il n'hésite pas à en fredonner une au dessert. C'est lui qui lance le quolibet, le mot pour rire, le calembour et le coq-à-l'âne. C'est lui qui poursuit de ses moqueries un souffre-douleur qu'il a choisi parmi les hôtes et qui sera la cible vivante sur laquelle il décochera ses flèches. C'est lui qui montera les scies, qui inventera les petites plaisanteries quotidiennes,... C'est lui qui demandera à célébrer toutes les fêtes par la montée d'une bonne bouteille. C'est lui qui réglera et qui finalement fera payer aux autres son écot. Toujours le premier à rire et le dernier à payer." 22

That Balzac was not unfamiliar with this character is shown when he has the unnamed painter say to Vautrin "Vous devriez poser pour un Hercule-Farceur."²³ It would seem that Vautrin chose a disguise which he felt himself capable of carrying out for an extended period of time, just as he later chose that of a priest, thereby imposing a formidable shield between society and himself. "Sa voix de basse-taille," undisguised in Goriot and recognized even through a Spanish accent in Splendeurs by Madame Michonneau-Poiret and Bibi-Lupin, was "en harmonie avec sa grosse gaieté."²⁴

22. Bertaut, Op.Cit., p.52-53.

23. Goriot p.168.

24. Splendeurs p.483.

His speech itself is generally direct and forceful,²⁵ devoid of "style" and peppered with interjectory words and phrases such as "Connu, connu," "merci," "Bien obligé", "Bah!," "pouah!",²⁶ One of his picturesque comparisons is "malheureux comme les pierres d'égout..."²⁷ and his calling Mademoiselle Michonneau "la Vénus du Père-Lachaise" and Pôîret "le dieu des jardins"²⁸ is unforgettable. Though the tone of Vautrin's language changes, its occasional abundance does not, and if he is fond of short expressive words, he is also as adept at lengthy speeches in Illusions and Splendeurs as he is in Goriot. Balzac does not hesitate to pen page after page of Nucingen's painful patois, but Vautrin's thick Spanish accent is not transcribed. The author abandons the use of phonetic spelling as much, one feels, out of respect for his character as because such distortions "nuiraient à la rapidité d'un dénouement".²⁹ Balzac does try to introduce another element of force into Vautrin's speech by having him use underworld slang, and he expatiates on the strength of imagery inherent in this vocabulary. The effectiveness of

25. "Personne n'a remarqué, et cependant cela saute aux yeux et aux oreilles combien la langue de Napoléon 1^{er}, cette langue par petites phrases de commandement, la langue conservée par Las Casas dans Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène, et encore mieux dans les Entretiens de Roederer, a été prise et mise par Balzac dans la bouche de ses types militaires, gouvernementaux, humanitaires depuis les tirad^{es} de ses hommes d'état jusqu'aux tirades de Vautrin, Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, Journal, (Paris: Flammarion and Fasquelle, n.d. Edition définitive), I, 198-199

26. Goriot p. 109.

27. Ibid., p. 29.

28. Ibid., p. 168.

29. Splendeurs p. 231.

the device is almost nullified by the necessity of including parenthetical translations which are certainly indispensable though almost as trying as Nucingen's Alsatian French.

A more successful life-giving device is that of the veiled allusions as used between Rastignac and Vautrin. While these allusions are understood by the reader and the two parties concerned, they are not understood by the others in the boarding house. When Vautrin finds Eugène and Victorine talking together after dinner, he says "Il y aurait donc promesses de mariage entre Monsieur le chevalier de Rastignac et Mademoiselle Victorine Taillefer?"³⁰ Rastignac is extremely embarrassed to have Vautrin interpret this conversation as a sign of capitulation to Vautrin's scheme. Later, Vautrin has arranged the duel between Franchessini and Victorine's brother and is happy at the prospect of obtaining his commission out of the dowry. To Madame Valquer's comment on his cheerfulness, Vautrin, in his role as businessman, replies:

--Je suis toujours gai quand j'ai fait de bonnes affaires.

--Des affaires? dit Eugène.

--Eh! bien, oui. J'ai livré une partie de marchandise qui me vaudra de bons droits de commission." ³¹

The interview between Vautrin and Corentin in Granville's

30. Goriot p. 52.

31. Ibid., p. 168.

office is almost as loaded with cutting remarks as is that between Madame de Beauséant and Madame de Langeais in Goriot.³² Vautrin acknowledges defeat but tells Corentin that it was a costly victory. "Oui, répondit Corentin, en acceptant la plaisanterie; si vous avez perdu votre reine, moi j'ai perdu mes deux tours..."³³ And again, "Monsieur, monsieur, dit Jacques Collin, vous m'accablez...De votre part, ces éloges feraient perdre la tête...-- Ils sont mérités!"³⁴

In passing, one should also mention Vautrin's gestures, many of which merely illustrate his herculean strength, but most of which have, again, to do with the role he is playing in his disguises. At the age of fifty, he has no difficulty in hoisting himself through a skylight to escape pursuit, and does so with as much ease as he embraced Madame Vauquer's large circumference. On the pretence of embracing Corentin, he picks him up bodily and sets him outside Granville's office. His Herculean strength even has a negative value when it is compared to the strength of the drug administered by Mademoiselle Michonneau and when Vautrin allows Lucien to knock him down. He seems to forget his usual restraint when he

32. Ibid., p. 82.

33. Splendeurs p. 611.

34. Ibid., p. 612.

pushes Goriot's hat down over his ears. But since this occurs in a slapstick episode, we can assume either that Balzac was carried away with his portrayal of the Farceur or that Vautrin was reinforcing his disguise. One recalls also the scene in the prison courtyard during which Vautrin gives all the appearances of being a priest unctuously consoling the wretched while he is in reality discussing dastardly criminal affairs in energetic underworld slang. The effect is heightened by the fact that some of his reactions are perfectly genuine, as, for example, when he learns that Calvi is about to be executed. While Camusot is questioning Vautrin and telling him the life-history of his aunt Jacqueline, Vautrin is careful to think about his happy childhood -- "méditation qui lui donnait un air véritablement étonné. Malgré l'habilité de sa diction interrogative, Camusot n'arracha pas un mouvement à cette physionomie placide".³⁵ In sum, we are inclined to agree generally with Bertaut's evaluation of Balzac's rendition of Vautrin's words and gestures.

"Admirens que Balzac ne l'ait pas doué de la faconde dont l'eût doté plus d'un écrivain de son temps, et, à part le monologue devant Rastignac, lui ait conservé une sobriété de paroles et de gestes qui en fait un personnage véridique dans l'exceptionnel et sincère dans l'outrance."³⁶

35. Ibid., p. 418.

36. Bertaut, pp. 86-87.

Turning from the physical to the moral aspects of the character, we find that Balzac has given Vautrin the motivation which other rebel heroes lack and which distinguishes him from them. Not only is the motivation adequate, but it is based on what may be called external issues: the plight of the transgressor of laws -- both as convict and as ex-convict; the state of mind of the illegitimate child; that of the homosexual and finally the whole pattern of social hypocrisy and inconsistency. Though Balzac liked to consider himself, and is indeed most often considered, a social historian, he should be regarded also as a social reformer because of the insistence with which he spoke of the evils of branding, of the law concerning "contrainte par corps", a subject also treated by Appert³⁷, and of the corrupting influence of the prisons. The characters Jacques Farrabesche and Maxence Gilet both provide the occasion for diatribes against the corruption and immorality of prisons and Vautrin acts out in his adventures what is said in connection with the others. The implication is that if Vautrin were not corrupt before going to prison, he would have had ample motive for being so after his release or escape. The sorry plight of the ex-convict was known

37. Benjamin Appert, Bagnes, prisons et criminels (Paris: Guibert, 1836), pp.134-148.

to Balzac through reading Benjamin Appert, Victor Hugo and Vidocq. Society, by its use of the brand mark and the yellow work-card, refused to be satisfied with the penalty it had itself assigned for a given offense, and by making it impossible for ex-convicts to earn a decent living, forced them back into crime. It is this kind of illogicality as well as the barbarity which society displays for the illegitimate child and for the homosexual which infuriates Vautrin. Because he is in this threefold manner rejected by society and because he is acutely aware of the waste of his intellectual faculties, Vautrin in turn rejects society. However, his need for love is greater than his hatred of the evil that society represents and we have seen how this need underlies all his actions.

In Vautrin's portrait, Balzac has gone to great lengths to make his character as realistic as possible by attributing to him idiosyncracies in gesture, speech and tone and has taken great care to prepare us for any deviations in this portrait by emphasizing Vautrin's mastery of disguise. That the relationship between author and creature is close is unquestionable but that this reality had to be to some extent deformed was a necessary form of self-protection. In conclusion however, Balzac's

efforts in realism have been rewarded by the creation of a more intense characterization.

Balzac and Symbolism

How much should be said of symbolism in connection with an author who died in 1850? Perhaps a great deal. Perhaps this is the "real" symbolism since it is, or may be, unconscious. In any case, there would seem to be, in the first pages of Goriot, too many words pointing to Vautrin to let this aspect of Balzac's technique go unnoticed. Indeed, Balzac seems to invite examination of his text in this light when he says of Madame Vauquer's statue of Love:

" A voir le vernis écaillé qui la couvre, les amateurs de symboles y découvriront un mythe de l'amour parisien qu'on guérit à quelques pas de là."³⁸

Many words express confinement, restraint -- the confinement and restraint of a prison whose presence is invoked directly when Balzac refers to Madame Vauquer's position in relation to the pension saying: "Le bain ne va pas sans l'argousin, vous n'imaginerez pas l'un sans l'autre."³⁹ Certainly also le bain ne va pas sans le bagnard. Confinement is even indicated by Balzac's calling the rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève "un cadre de bronze, le seul qui convienne à ce récit, auquel on ne saurait trop préparer l'intelligence par des couleurs brunes, par des idées graves;..."(Italics ours). The walk is "bordée de ger-

38. Goriot pp. 27-30 and on the following two pages.

anisms"; the courtyard, which has no part in the story, is an enclosure "large d'environ vingt pieds," and mention is made of the engraving in the dining room, "encadrées en bois noir." Surely one could never be so aware of walls any place but in a prison -- even Latin walls-- for when one finishes the story, "peut-être ara-t-on versé quelques larmes intra muros et extra." In the street grass grows along the walls, and the walls smell prison-like. The garden is flanked by the façade and along the façade is an area of pebbles. There is a wall opposite the street and at night a solid door blocks off the street. The garden is as wide as the façade is long, and is "encaissé par le mur de la rue et le mur mitoyen" of the neighbouring house. Each of these walls is decorated with espaliers and vines and along each wall is a pathway. The façade is four stories high. With small violence to Lôvelace, stone walls may not a prison make --even the twelve references to them in the first four pages of Goriot -- nor iron bars a cage, although there are ne enough references to the latter to strongly suggest a prison -- beginning with the "porte à claire-voie" opening onto the street. The same "porte à claire voie est remplacée par une porte pleine" at nightfall. "Les cinq croisées percées à chaque étage ont de petites carreaux et sont garnies de jalousies dont aucune n'est relevée

de la même manière, en sorte que toutes leurs lignes jurent entre elles". On the streetside of the house the "deux croisées...ont pour ornement des barreaux en fer grillagés". One enters the house through a "porte-fenêtre" with its suggestion of bars and one sees again the two "croisées de la rue" with their iron bars. The furniture is sadly upholstered in "étoffe de crin à raies alternativement mates et luisantes". Again, on the panel "d'entre les croisées grillagées", is the scene of Calypso's feast for Ulysses' sons. The mantelpiece is decorated with "fleurs artificielles, vieilles et encagées," and the living room "sent la renfermé". In a corner of the dining room is a "boite à cases" with its vertical and horizontal lines, "qui sert à garder les serviettes". The dining room is separated from the kitchen by "la cage d'un escalier dont les marches sont en bois et en carreaux". In the enclosed courtyard hangs "le garde-manger" and at the end of it the shed "à scier le bois". The boarding house, like a prison, "admet les hommes et des femmes, des jeunes gens et des vieillards". Balzac complains here that the word "drame" has been treated in a "manière...tortionnaire." A Parisian wandering into this street would only see "de la joyeuse jeunesse contrainte à travailler," and the young boarders believe themselves superior to their position by mocking Madame Vauquer's dinner, "auquel la misère les condamne." In

the dining room are pieces of furniture "proscrits partout, mais placés là comme le sont les débris de la civilisation aux Incurables." If all the preceding are slanted toward producing a feeling of confinement, restraint and prison, what of the famous wallpaper and the statue of Love? In Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes, Balzac calls Vautrin Lucien's mentor.³⁹ and in Illusions perdues, Vautrin referring to man's "désir souverain"⁴⁰ for companionship, says: "Il y a là tout un poème à faire qui serait l'avant-scène du Paradis perdu, qui n'est que l'apologie de la Révolte. --Celui-là serait l'Illiade de la corruption, dit Lucien."⁴¹ It is Minerva (Vautrin... connaissait tout d'ailleurs...) in the guise of Mentor who leads Telemachus in search of his father. The statue of Love --"qui que tu sois, voici ton maître:/ Il l'est, le fut ou le doit être."⁴² Scaly as it is, it can represent Vautrin's as well as Goriot's feelings -- both pathological. And we should not forget the famous sign: "Pension bourgeoise des deux sexes et autres" hanging over the "porte-bâtarde"!

Compared to this compact mass of suggestive images or symbols paving the way for Vautrin, the preparation accorded his entrance in Illusions perdues is vastly inferior through its obviousness. One recalls Lucien's

39. Splendeurs p.196.

40. Illusions p. 602.

41. Ibid., p. 602.

42. Goriot p. 27.

letter to his sister in which he wrote "Je ne puis acquérir de valeur que par un mariage avec une volonté forte, impitoyable."⁴³ and Vautrin's entrance two or three pages later. Perhaps Balzac felt that extensive preparation was no longer necessary for Vautrin to appear in Illusions perdues and in Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes. It is almost certain that some mysterious process of association with the prison and prisoner images in the first pages of Le Père Goriot makes the presence of the escaped convict in this boarding house as natural and believable as artistic talent is capable of making it.

Conclusion

Balzac's deviation from his usual mode of description is a first clue indicating his differing approach to Vautrin. The lack of details, so atypical of the author, nevertheless achieves a strong sense of realism by encouraging the reader's imaginative participation. We smell Vautrin, hear his awful voice, we are struck by his gestures, feel his penetrating gaze and are overwhelmed by a tremendous aura of power. It is but another step to fill in any missing details. The suggestion and intensity typical of Balzac's efforts in realism are also evident in his first attempts at a form of symbolism.

Because Vautrin is such a prominent underworld figure
43. Illusions p.581.

ure, it seems natural that Balzac's symbolism should be derived from penitentiary imagery and include terms of restraint and repression. Through their use we are subtly prepared for the disclosure of Vautrin's true calling. Combining realism with early attempts at symbolism, Balzac achieves one of his most successfully realistic characters.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUDING NOTES

The first chapter of our study set out to find the sources of Balzac's Vautrin. By asking ourselves whether or not Vautrin was an innovation, we arrived at several possible literary prototypes, dominated by the influence of Ann Radcliffe, Byron, Goethe and Schiller in particular. In their works, it was possible to discern a remarkable similarity in the physical and metaphysical make-up of their most successful characters and the make-up of Vautrin.

Dark, sinister deeds are cloaked in an aura of chilling mystery which no one dares question once they have been mesmerized by the penetrating glare of Conrad Moor, Schedoni, the Giaour and Vautrin. He shares the fearsome and rebellious spirit of a Conrad, the social corruption of a Karl Moor and the deep longing to escape it all in some paradise that characterizes René. Vautrin shares all these characteristics with his predecessors as well as an ability to rise to heroic proportions as a villain as do Melmoth, Ferragus and Satan. At times Vautrin seems deserving of our sympathy as a champion wrong-doer and dresser of wrongs operating against an evil, corrupt society, on his own or as a leader of adventurers linked by a common cause. Just

how many can claim to be at least partial prototypes of this remarkable figure of literature, is really not the question. We have shown that he shares many of his outstanding characteristics with his literary predecessors and it only remains for us to see how Balzac synthesized these influences with those of the real life prototypes of nineteenth-century society.

Both in life patterns and physical appearance, Vautrin bears a strong resemblance to two legendary figures of reformed criminality of Balzac's time. Vidocq and Coignard share not only lengthy criminal records with Balzac's "Machiavel du bagne", but they also distinguished themselves by eventually applying their knowledge of the underworld in the service of Law and Order. As reformed criminals all three rose to great heights as they had done in their buccaneer days. That Balzac was a master at combining both the literary influences with the sensational reality of his day in the creation of Vautrin there can be no doubt. As our study progresses however we find that there is much more to this complex creation than a mere synthesizing of outside influences.

Chapter Two succeeds in exploring the complexity of Vautrin's make-up. Combined with prototypes, literary and historical, are character attributes developed by Balzac's personal creative ability. Two of these

prominent features of Vautrin's character are elaborated upon in this chapter: mystery and power. Reflecting the author's taste for secret machinations and his fascination by the theories of Gall, Lavater and Mesmer, are Vautrin's attributes of mysteriousness and an aura of power. The techniques used to convey these attributes are examined in detail as is their influences on Vautrin's fellow characters. In fact, they are only revealed to us through two sources: either viewed as a technique of the author's, or as reacted to by the recipients, victims or whatever. In other words the restraint used in giving details of Vautrin's former life, the omission of a cataloguing of his crimes, and the ambiguousness of his relationships with young men are techniques of the author's, used to perpetuate a sense of mystery and power. On the other hand, the portrait of those other Vautrinesque features that convey a sense of mystery and power, such as his physical appearance, his financial resources or his motivations, are revealed clearly by Vautrin himself. Rather, we gain our impression of them through the impression they make on his fellows. A clever heightening of emotional reaction is thereby attained by the author.

Finally, because of the recurring similarities and ambiguous references, we felt it relevant to draw a

parallel between Vautrin and Satan. There is much evidence to support a demonic interpretation of Vautrin. This possibility is demonstrated by our detailed study of the mystery and power which dominates the persona of Vautrin.

Having introduced all the more important aspects of Vautrin's character, we then explored his "raison d'être", his "passion". Beginning with a look at Balzac's own emancipated ideas on social responsibility to the individual. We see that his motivation can in part be traced to his strong dislike of the bourgeoisie and his own personal failure in several aspects of social behaviour. His own social awareness increased his desire to alert others to the ills and evils infecting society. The creation of Vautrin came as a natural result of this desire.

Particularly influenced by Godwin's Caleb Williams, and his ideas on the justification of the criminal's struggle against society, Balzac's anti-social ideas are voiced through Vautrin among others. The passing of the great Napoleonic era also greatly influenced the creation of Vautrin. Through him, Balzac expresses the frustration of those not born to power and riches but who have been stimulated by Napoleon's example.

Having explored Balzac's reasons for creating an

anti-social mouthpiece, we turn to Vautrin in order to establish his right to exist as a separate entity. There can be no question that he was fully justified in his anarchy. The deplorable life he led, fraught with social injustices, makes his revolt a believable one. For him there are but two possibilities: stupid obedience to an oppressive order or open revolt. He accomplishes the latter most effectively through the use of intermediaries such as Eugene and Lucien. Their triumph and success in the social world, despite all odds, come to represent Vautrin's triumph. Using stolen money and blackmail Vautrin creates the all-important image for his protégés - power and wealth; proving that society forgives the means by which these two gods materialize themselves. Claiming forcefully that honesty has no social value, Vautrin combines his skill at corruption and an "éclat de génie" to complete his revenge.

We have thus clearly shown the intimate link between Vautrin and his creator through the similarity of their social consciousness. Vautrin's success as a spirit of revolt is largely due to the natural understanding that Balzac had for his motivations. We have been careful to stress however, that while Vautrin expresses many of Balzac's frustrations and reforming

ideas, he is well able to stand apart from his creator. His anarchy not only seems justifiable, but the success of his revolt wins our admiration.

Dealing with Vautrin's amorous inclinations, Chapter Four expresses another aspect of Vautrin's revolt. In examining the major reasons for Vautrin's failure to overthrow society, we are faced with his overwhelming need of companionship and love. This flaw in an otherwise indestructible will to power, results in his ultimate downfall. However, because he is a homosexual, the form of this love is a revolt in itself and, even as he loses his fight against society, he might have been able to lose with a smile. The reason he doesn't lies in the dual nature of his love. His homosexuality is closely allied to a strong paternal drive so that in losing Eugene, Lucien and almost Calvi, he loses not only a willing agent but a lover and a son.

Exploring the reasons for this innovative character trait, we find that there are several possible sources. First, a literary precedent was set by Venice Preserved in which an intimate bond between two men is portrayed. Secondly, we find in Balzac's own writings ample evidence of his previous attempts to portray relationships between members of the same sex, though in a much less overt manner. Most important perhaps, is Balzac's strong belief

that women and power don't mix. Having set out to portray an almost completely successful figure of revolt, he had to justify the removal of distracting feminine lures. Hence the solution found in a paternal or homo--sexual relationship.

Vautrin, it appears, opts for homosexuality in his love for Calvi, Eugène and Lucien, while Balzac, perhaps to be less offensive to his readers, emphasises the paternal side of Vautrin's relationships with young men. Either option leaves Vautrin with a certain vulnerability. It would seem that he is only attackable through this weakness and indeed, it is as a result of his love for Lucien that he gives himself up to the forces of Law and Order.

Our final chapter explored the realism with which Balzac endows Vautrin. Making him come alive through characteristics of speech, gesture and attitude yet allowing for Vautrin's chameleon-like changes by stressing his command of disguises, Balzac involves his reader totally in his creation. He heightens Vautrin's importance by attributing symbolism to his descriptions, actions and words. Balzac's use of symbolism enables us to see more of the inner emotions and forces that a mere portrayal would.

In summary, Balzac shares Lucien's reaction compounded of scorn and admiration, so that the reader will

detest his actions but pay tribute to the source which galvanizes them.

"C'est qu'ordinairement la grandeur de caractère résulte de la balance de plusieurs qualités opposées." ¹

explained Rameau's nephew. Like all of the great figures in world literature, Vautrin moves ultimately from the limitations imposed by his creator and clears his own path to immorality.

Balzac considered Vautrin one of his warmest characters. He has put into him some of the fervour that burned at the centre of his own being. To keep up appearances, Balzac seems at times to condemn his creation but behind the moral chastisement however, there is a strong sense of sympathy. As an example of the forces which attract us to that immoral figure of revolt, let us re-read Lucien's farewell letter, a letter which Balzac thought well enough of to put twice before the reader's eyes in Splendeurs:

"... Il y a la postérité de Caïn et celle de l'Abel, comme vous disiez quelquefois. Caïn, dans le grand drame de l'Humanité, c'est l'opposition. Vous descendez d'Adam par cette ligne en qui le diable a continué de souffler le feu dont la première étincelle avait été jetée sur Eve. Parmi les démons de cette filiation, il s'en trouve, de temps en temps, de terribles, à organisations vastes, qui résument toutes les forces humaines et qui ressemblent à ces fiévreux animaux du désert dont la vie exige les espaces immenses qu'ils y trouvent. Ces gens-là sont dangereux dans la société comme des lions le seraient en pleine Normandie: il leur faut une pâture, ils dévorent les

1. Diderot, Le Neveu de Rameau (Genève: Jean Fabre), 1950; p.73.

hommes vulgaires et broutent les écus des niais; leurs jeux sont si périlleux qu'ils finissent par tuer l'humble chien dont ils se sont fait un compagnon, une idole. Quand Dieu le veut, ces êtres mystérieux sont Moïse, Attila, Charlemagne, Mahomet ou Napoléon; mais quand il laisse rouiller au fond de l'océan d'une génération ces instruments gigantesques, ils ne sont plus que Pugatcheff, Robespierre, Louvel et l'abbé Carlos Herrera. Doués d'un immense pouvoir sur les âmes tendres, ils les attirent et les broient. C'est grand, c'est beau dans son genre. C'est la plante vénéneuse aux riches couleurs qui fascinent les enfants dans les bois. C'est la poésie du mal. Des hommes comme vous autres doivent habiter des antres et n'en pas sortir. Tu m'as fait vivre de cette vie gigantesque, et j'ai bien mon compte de l'existence. Ainsi, je puis retirer ma tête des noeuds gordiens de ta politique, pour la donner au noeud coulant de ma cravate...

Adieu donc, adieu, grandiose statue du mal et de la corruption, adieu, vous qui, dans la bonne voie, eussiez été plus que Ximènes, plus que Richelieu;...

Ne me regrettez pas: mon mépris pour vous était égal à mon admiration." 2

Each reader of the Comédie humaine can, with the marvelous freedom accorded readers, choose one or another character as his favorite. But there is probably none more solidly imposing than this figure as ambiguous and complex as human beings are complex and ambiguous, and to whom Balzac refers as this "Alpe froide, blanche et voisine du ciel, inaltérable et sourcilleuse, aux flancs de granit, et cependant bienfaisant".³ Just as his creator says "... les plus étonnants coups de

2. Splendeurs pp. 500-501. (Letter also on pp. 463-465.)

3. Ibid., p. 82.

foudre avaient pu seuls le changer, si toutefois une pareille nature était susceptible de changement",⁴, so does one suspect that readers for a long time to come will continue to regard with feelings as mixed as those expressed in Lucien's letter, this figure standing at the end of Balzac's work and dominating it all.

4. Ibid., p. 339.

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APPENDIX

BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH OF VAUTRIN¹

Fausse identité prise par Jacques Collin, sous laquelle il est le plus connu. Né en 1779, fit ses études au collège des Oratoriens jusqu'à la rhétorique (S&M) et débuta commis dans une banque où le plaça sa tante, Jacqueline Collin, qui l'avait élevé. Il y endossa la responsabilité d'un faux en écriture (S&M), commis "par un très beau jeune homme qu'il aimait beaucoup, jeune Italien assez joueur qui entra dans l'armée" (le colonel Franchessini) (PG). Condamné pour ce délit à cinq ans de travaux forcés (S&M), il fut envoyé au bagne et s'en évada. Dissimulant son identité sous celle d'un sieur Vautrin, rentier, il se trouvait à Paris en 1815 pensionnaire à la pension Vauquer, rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. Il y resta jusqu'en 1820. La propriétaire avait si grande confiance en lui qu'il était le seul à posséder un passe-partout, ses "affaires" l'obligeant à rentrer parfois tard dans la nuit (PG). En 1818, la police, qui recherchait toujours le forçat Trompe-la-Mort, commença à s'intéresser à M. Vautrin et le surveilla discrètement. En 1819, à peu près sûr de son fait, Bibi-Lupin, chef de la Sûreté, s'abouchait avec deux pensionnaires de la pension Vauquer, M. Poirer et Mlle. Michonneau, afin de l'espionner plus efficacement (PG). Vers cette époque, le jeune baron de Rastignac prit pension à la maison Vauquer. Devinant sa dévorante ambition, Vautrin essaya de se l'attacher et tenta de lui faire épouser Victorine Taillefer qu'il rendit héritière des millions paternels.

1. Fernand Lotte, Dictionnaire biographique des personnages fictifs de la Comédie humaine (Paris: Corti, 1952), pp.629-631.

en faisant tuer son frère en duel par un breteur qui lui avait des obligations: le colonel Franchessini. Drogué par Vautrin, Rastignac ne pouvait intervenir à temps pour éviter le combat, mais ayant encore "quelques langes tâchés de vertu", il éluda le pacte. Peu après, le 15 février 1820, arrêté par Bibi-Lupin, Vautrin retournait au bagne de Rochefort (S&M). Il ne tardait pas à s'en evader avec son camarade de chaîne, Théodore Calvi, dit Madeleine, les bagnards ayant tout fait pour faciliter la fuite de leur "dab". Passé en Espagne et cherchant à se refaire une autre personnalité, il s'inclina pour l'état ecclésiastique. Dans une embuscade, il tue l'abbé Carlos Herrera, chanoine de la cathédrale de Tolède, qui venait d'être chargé d'une mission diplomatique en France comme envoyé secret de S.M. Ferdinand VII à S.M. Louis XVIII. Devant le cadavre du prêtre, à l'aide de réactifs chimiques, il changea son visage afin de lui ressembler, et se fit des blessures au dos pour effacer les indésirables lettres T.F., irrécusables témoins de son passé, apprit l'espagnol "et autant de latin qu'un prêtre andalou en devait savoir". A Barcelone, en confession, une dévote lui révéla qu'elle possédait un trésor dû à un crime qu'elle avait commis. Continuant à jouer son rôle, il ne consentit à lui donner l'absolution que lorsqu'elle le lui eut remis; il promit de le restituer aux ayants droits. Riche des pesetas de sa pénitente et du trésor de Carlos Herrera, il rentrait en France sous les traits de sa victime par la diligence (S&M). Le 15 septembre, 1822, sur la route d'Angoulême à Poitiers, près de Marsac, il rencontra Lucien de Rubempré, ruminant des projets de suicide. Il eut tôt fait de dissuader cet indécis, se l'attacha comme secrétaire particulier et l'emmena avec lui à Paris, après un mélancolique coup d'oeil donné en passant à la vieille demeure des Rastignac (IP). Sur Rubempré il reporta l'affection presque paternelle qu'il avait vouée au précédent et subvint

à ses besoins pendant six ans. Les deux hommes habitèrent d'abord rue Cassette, puis quai Malaquais; il faisait passer Lucien pour son fils naturel. Après avoir vainement tenté de l'éloigner de la courtisane Esther Gobseck qu'il jugeait nuisible à ses projets, il finit par consentir à la lui laisser pour maîtresse, tout en intriguant dans l'ombre pour lui ménager un riche mariage avec Clotilde de Grandlieu. Vers 1829, ses ressources commençant à s'épuiser, il décide "de vendre" Esther Gobseck au baron de Nucingen et dût se livrer à une série de manoeuvres qui attirèrent l'attention de la police. Il prit un moment le pseudonyme de William Barker, riche négociant anglais, dans le but d'extorquer une signature à Ceriset dont il connaissait le passé. Sur le point d'aboutir, ses projets furent contrecarrés par la police, alertée par Nucingen, au début de 1830. Le 13 mai 1830, Lucien de Rubempré était arrêté sur la route de Fontainebleau, et lui-même à Paris, puis écroués à la Conciergerie sous l'inculpation de vol et d'assassinat sur la personne d'Esther Gobseck (S&M). En cet extrême danger, cet homme extraordinaire parvenait encore à sauver la situation et évitait la peine capitale à son ancien camarade de bagné Madeleine, "pour lequel il confectionnait jadis de si belles patarasses". Détenteur de lettres d'amour qui compromettait gravement l'honneur de plusieurs familles de haute noblesse, il traita presque d'égal à égal avec le procureur général, M. de Granville en vue de leur restitution. Il ne put malheureusement empêcher le suicide de celui qu'il aimait comme fils, le faible Lucien de Rubempré (S&M). Corentin le demanda comme second, mais il refusa cette offre dangereuse, se trouvant séparé de lui "par trois longueurs de cadavres", et devint l'adjoint de Bibi-Lupin sous le nom de Vautrin. A la fin de 1830, il le remplaçait à la tête de la police de sûreté, place qu'il occupa pendant quinze ans: il prit sa retraite en 1845 (S&M).

Dans ses nouvelles fonctions, il s'acquitta admirablement de sa tâche, et en quelques mois il avait fait arrêter les assassins des rentiers Cröttat (S&M). En 1843, chef de la police de Sûreté, il recevait la visite du député Victorin Hulot qui le priaît de débarrasser sa famille de Mme. Crevel. Il y consentit et quelques mois plus tard, déguisé en "pauvre prêtre", il se présentait au domicile du député, lui réclamant la somme convenue, quarante mille francs, "pour (une) oeuvre pie, un couvent ruiné dans le Levant". Banquier des trois bagnes, "dab" des Dix-Mille et des Grands Fanandels, Vautrin était universellement connu dans le monde de la pègre sous le parlant pseudonyme de Trompe-la-Mort (S&M-PG). Il fut très probablement l'un des "Treize". On lit en effet, dans la Préface aux Treize : "Un jour l'un d'eux, après avoir lu Venise sauvée (livre que Jacques Collin se vantait de "savoir par coeur") et admiré l'union sublime de Pierre et de Jaffier (...) vint à songer aux vertus particulières des gens jetés en dehors de l'ordre social, à la probité des bagnes, etc." Cette supposition est corroborée par le fait que le comte Henri de Marsay, autre Treize, était fort au courant des activités de Vautrin, comme nous l'apprend dans une lettre, écrite sur un ton mi-badin mi-sérieux, à Paul de Manerville (CM). Comme beaucoup de bagnards, Jacques Collin "n'aimait pas les femmes" (PG) et appartenait au "troisième sexe" (S&M). Il n'en était toutefois devenu homosexuel qu'en 1800, à l'âge de vingt et un ans, après une vivè deception sentimentale, "ayant cru à l'amour d'une femme qui le bafoua" (PG). Il reporta alors son affection sur le jeune Italien (Franchessini), pour lequel il endossa la responsabilité du faux en écriture qui devait le conduire pour la première fois au bagne. Vautrin savait tout faire et, il était très fort tireur au pistolet : "A trente-cinq pas, il mettait cinq fois de suite sa balle dans un as de pique...en renfonçant chaque balle nouvelle sur l'autre.." Son rêve était de devenir planteur en Floride...(PG). Peut-être le réalisera-t-il après avoir pris sa retraite.