

Fever as Fervour: Mesmerism, Religion, Gender and Class in Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët*

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Baudelaire – in the introduction to *Révélation magnétique* (1848), his translation of Poe's *Mesmeric Revelation* (1844) – refers to Balzac as a 'grand esprit dévoré du légitime orgueil encyclopédique' ('great mind consumed by a legitimate encyclopedic pride'; [all translations are mine]), noting the latter's attempts, in such novels as *Louis Lambert* (1832) and *Séraphîta* (1834-35), to fuse within 'un système unitaire et définitif' ('a unitary and definitive system') the ideas of Swedenborg, Mesmer, Marat, Goethe and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1975-76, II p.248).¹ Balzac is displaying the 'manie philosophique' ('philosophical mania') that, according to Baudelaire, can be taken as one of the three marks of a great writer. This mania is itself the product of an 'esprit primitif de *chercherie*' ('primitive spirit of inquiry'): Balzac and Poe, from their positions within literature, set themselves up as rivals to the 'naturalistes enragés [qui] examinent l'âme à la loupe, comme les médecins le corps, et tuent leurs yeux à trouver le ressort' (p.248).² Balzac's approach, like Poe's in *Mesmeric Revelation*, proves mystical rather than materialist, illuminist rather than scientific, deductive rather than inductive. Thus, in *Ursule Mirouët* (1841), a novel not mentioned by Baudelaire, the magnetic powers of a Mesmerism conflated with Swedenborgianism are shown to emanate directly from God (Balzac, 1976-81, III p.827). Balzac presents this mystical form of Mesmerism as the basis of a future unity in the natural sciences (p.824), a unity also being worked towards by Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (p.823); God is appealed to directly to reveal the divine science that underpins all human knowledge

¹ See in this context also Robb, 1988, pp.87-88 and more generally.

² 'Rabid naturalists [who] examine the soul with a magnifying glass, as doctors examine the body, and strain their sight looking for the hidden spring.'

(p.840), and this appeal is answered: ‘les clartés éternelles [...] expliquaient de plus en plus les difficultés de tout genre’ (p.909).³

In their pursuit of the ‘rêve caressé’ (‘cherished dream’) of philosophical unity, Balzac and Poe produce some strange results:

Il est certain que ces esprits spécialement littéraires font, quand ils s’y mettent, de singulières chevauchées à travers la philosophie. Ils font de trouées soudaines, et ont de brusques échappées par des chemins qui sont bien à eux. (Baudelaire, 1975-76, II p.248)⁴

Certainly, Balzac sought to inform *La Comédie humaine* with a bewildering variety of imported discourses, whether religious, (pseudo) scientific, medical, political, legal, commercial or literary. Rarely, however, does Balzac achieve an effect of unity. Instead there is an excess in his eclecticism to match the excesses of his style. Thus Baudelaire notes of Balzac’s characterization in an article on Gautier (1859):

Chacun, chez Balzac, même les portières, a du génie. Toutes les âmes sont des armes chargées de volonté jusqu’à la gueule [...] Son goût prodigieux du détail, qui tient à une ambition immodérée de tout voir, de tout faire voir, de tout deviner, de tout faire deviner, l’obligeait d’ailleurs à marquer avec plus de force les lignes principales pour sauver la perspective de l’ensemble.’ (p.120)⁵

Baudelaire concludes that these ‘défauts de Balzac’ (‘faults of Balzac’; p.120) in fact constitute his greatest virtues. If the longed-for unity never

³ ‘The light of heaven [...] increasingly illuminated difficulties of every type.’ In the overtly Swedenborgian *Séraphita*, the eponymous androgyne declares that ‘la Science est une et vous l’avez partagée’ (‘Science is one and you have divided it.’) See Balzac, 1976-81, XI p.823.

⁴ ‘It is certain that when these specifically literary minds put themselves to it, they take some peculiar gallops through philosophy. They dart suddenly through gaps and escape abruptly down paths all their own.’

⁵ ‘Everyone in Balzac has genius – even the door-keepers. All his minds are weapons loaded to the muzzle with will [...] Moreover, his prodigious appetite for detail, which stems from an immoderate ambition to see everything, to show everything, to understand everything, to allow his reader to understand everything, obliged him to trace the main outlines more strongly in order to save the perspective of the whole.’

gets beyond the stage of ‘rêve caressé’ (‘cherished dream’), the systems Balzac creates at least allow him to hold his works of fiction together.

It is surprising that Baudelaire should make no mention of *Ursule Mirouët* given that its action hinges precisely on a Mesmeric revelation.⁶ The novel combines a number of seemingly disparate medical discourses, invoking Gall (phrenology) and Lavater (physiognomy) in its opening pages (Balzac, 1975-76, III pp.770-71) before passing to a lengthy digression staging the opposition of orthodox Enlightenment science, represented by the elderly Dr Minoret, and Mesmerism, initially represented by a former friend, the unfortunately named Dr Bouvard (pp.821-41). Minoret and Bouvard had fallen out over Mesmer before the Revolution when the former had been complicit in the persecution of the latter, a professional persecution presented in religious terms:

Parmi le petit nombre des croyants se trouvèrent des médecins. Ces dissidents furent, jusqu’à leur mort, persécutés par leurs confrères. Le corps respectable des médecins de Paris déploya contre les mesmériens les rigueurs des guerres religieuses [...] Les docteurs orthodoxes refusaient de consulter avec les docteurs qui tenaient pour l’hérésie mesmérénne. (p.823)⁷

When the two doctors meet again, now both old men, the ground has shifted. The discredited figure of Mesmer has been replaced by an unnamed divine who combines Mesmer’s method with Swedenborgian mysticism.⁸ Thus Mesmer is reduced to the status of (venal) pioneer, defeated ‘par son inaptitude à chercher les côtés d’une science à triple face’ (p.822).⁹ In

⁶See Darnton, 1968, pp.155–57 on Mesmerism in *Ursule Mirouët* and also Marcus, 1995 for a more general account of Mesmerism in *La Comédie humaine*.

⁷‘Amongst the small number of believers there were some doctors. Until their deaths these dissidents were persecuted by their colleagues. The respectable fellowship of Paris doctors deployed all the rigours of the wars of religion against the Mesmerists [...] Orthodox doctors refused to confer with doctors who favoured the Mesmerist heresy.’

⁸Madeleine Fargeaud identifies the unnamed divine as Louis Chambellan, an acquaintance of Balzac who combined Mesmerism with Swedenborgianism (Balzac, 1976-81, III p.758). See also Fargeaud, 1965, pp.20-22, as well as more generally, and Fargeaud, 1968, pp.192-226.

⁹‘Through his inability to inquire into the facets of a science with three aspects.’

particular, Mesmer fails to recognize that he is practising ‘la science favorite de Jésus et l’une des puissances divines remises aux apôtres’ (p.822).¹⁰ This insight is also denied to the religious and medical establishments of the eighteenth century. It is finally afforded to Dr Minoret, who is converted to both Mesmerism and Catholicism after witnessing the latest manifestation of a power already responsible for a string of modern miracles:

Ce grand inconnu, qui vit encore, guérissait par lui-même à distance les maladies les plus cruelles, les plus invétérées, soudainement et radicalement, comme jadis le Sauveur des hommes. (p.826)¹¹

Minoret’s exemplary life, his persecution of the heretical Bouvard apart (p.823), has earned him the opportunity, denied to so many of us, to witness a direct manifestation of divine power. Minoret’s conversion is important because it leads to the main action of the novel concerning the inheritance of his estate. His decision to leave part of his wealth to Ursule, the daughter of his deceased wife’s natural half-brother, rather than to his legitimate heirs as defined by the *code civil*, is attributed to his conversion, allegedly the result of Ursule’s conniving.

The Mesmeric revelation is therefore an important element in a plot which also makes great symbolic play of legitimacy, property rights and usurpation: the action of the novel straddles the July Revolution. The religious miracle that constitutes the Mesmeric revelation prepares the ground for the later supernatural revelations, conveyed by the ghost of Dr Minoret, that finally resolve the plot of inheritance. More importantly, the digression also serves to recontextualize issues of gender and class later explored more fully in the representation of Ursule’s fevers. It is this representation that will finally give the novel its unity and justify its

¹⁰‘The chosen science of Jesus and one of the divine powers entrusted to the Apostles.’

¹¹‘This great but unknown man, who is still alive, personally cured the cruellest, most deep-rooted diseases from a distance, as suddenly and radically as the Saviour of Mankind once used to do.’

prominent place in *La Comédie humaine*, alongside *Eugénie Grandet* at the head of the *Scènes de la vie de province*.

The main body of this article will explore the ways in which Balzac's Mesmeric revelation – and more particularly his foregrounding of a female, working-class hypnotic subject, referred to only as l'inconnue – also lays bare the gender and class implications of his representation of Ursule's fevers, seen as evidence of her fervour. However, in order to make sense of these fevers, it will first be necessary to set out their broader context by briefly looking at Balzac's representations of illness and suffering – as configured in relation to questions of religion, gender and class – in two of his earlier novels, *Eugénie Grandet* and *Le Médecin de campagne*.

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Eugénie Grandet (1833) had already established the figure of the suffering woman, whether in the form of Eugénie herself or her mother, as the embodiment of Catholic piety. Eugénie's peasant-origins are of course foregrounded in the novel: she will famously deploy the stubbornness inherited from her peasant father in her revolt against his avarice and demonstrate his hard-nosed practicality, albeit to charitable ends, when she takes over the management of the land he spent his life acquiring. Her life of toil and suffering offers one model of the Christian life. *Le Médecin de campagne* (also published in 1833) offers another in the form of the young woman known as la Fosseuse, a contraction of *fossoyeuse* in a reference to her day-labourer father's inherited part-time occupation as a gravedigger. Ursule Mirouët will, in some respects, represent a conflation of these two models.

La Fosseuse, the daughter of a peasant and of a former chambermaid to a countess (Balzac, 1976-81, IX p.486), bears many of the physical characteristics of a *paysanne* (p.482). At the same time, she is marked out by Dr Benassis as unsuited to her rustic environment. La

Fosseuse is incapable of work, or else work-shy, and seemingly addicted to the superfluous and the (decoratively) extravagant; Benassis judges her to be sick, although her symptoms offer few clues as to the nature of this illness (the son of Genestas, the novel's other main protagonist, will also suffer from an apparently amorphous illness, although in his case Benassis will correctly diagnose excessive masturbation). From a Catholic reactionary perspective, the undiagnosability of the ailments that afflict la Fosseuse can easily be explained. The Savoyan theosopher Joseph de Maistre, much admired by Balzac and invoked in the context of another initially undiagnosable illness in the second part of *L'Envers de l'histoire contemporaine*, notes for instance that all disease is a punishment from God: 's'il n'y avoit point de mal moral sur la terre, il n'y auroit point de mal physique' ('if there were no moral evil on earth, there would be no physical illness'; Maistre, 1993, I p.108); specific diseases proceed from specific sins: 'une infinité de maladies sont le produit immédiat de certains désordres' ('an infinite number of illnesses are the immediate product of certain moral disorders'; p.108); thus:

Il y a [...] des maladies caractérisées, comme l'hydropisie, la phthisie, l'apoplexie, etc., et d'autres qui ne peuvent être désignées que par les noms généraux de malaises, d'incommodités, de douleurs, de fièvres *innommées*, etc. Or, plus l'homme est vertueux, et plus il est à l'abri des maladies *qui ont des noms*. (p.110)¹²

La Fosseuse, as an innocent, will not be afflicted by named diseases; she has not committed the sins – masturbation can be taken as one bathetic example – that would bring on such diseases. Rather she battles the *nameless* diseases that bespeak the general sinfulness of her society and age. The resigned

¹²There are distinctive diseases such as dropsy, consumption, apoplexy, etc., and others that can only be identified by the general terms of malaise, discomfort, pain and *nameless* fevers, etc. Now the more virtuous the man, the more immune he is from illnesses *that have names*.'

suffering of la Fosseuse, her acceptance of her frailty and weakness, will serve to expiate not her sins but those of her fellow citizens.

Given Benassis's efforts to foster industry in his canton, it appears surprising that he should have such a high regard for, and do so much to establish, a young woman who is more generally perceived as a dreamer and a malingerer, and who, in the recent past, has been a pauper. Benassis offers the following solution to this mystery:

Ah! les gens du canton ne la plaignent point, [...] ils la trouvent au contraire bien heureuse; mais il existe cette différence entre elle et les autres femmes, qu'à celles-ci Dieu a donné la force, à elle la faiblesse; et ils ne voient pas cela. (Balzac 1976-81, IX p.488)¹³

Eugénie Grandet inherits the strength of character of her father; her practice of Catholic charity will be as rigorous and strong-minded as her father's practice of greed; her disappointment in love will not break her. La Fosseuse, by contrast, can offer only her weakness of character – 'cette pauvre fille est toujours souffrante. Chez elle l'âme tue le corps' ('this poor girl is always suffering. In her case, the soul kills the body'; p.477) – predictably identified with femininity:

La pauvre fille souffrait de tout, de sa paresse, de sa bonté, de sa coquetterie; car elle est coquette, friande, curieuse; enfin elle est femme, elle se laisse aller à ses impressions et à ses goûts avec une naïveté d'enfant. (p.479)¹⁴

Thus, 'une vive passion trahie la rendrait folle' (p.480).¹⁵ Eugénie inhabits her peasant body; la Fosseuse is displaced within it, just as she is a 'plante depaysée' ('plant in alien soil') within her remote canton (p.477).

¹³ 'Oh! the people of the canton do not pity her [...] on the contrary, they think her quite lucky; but there is this difference between her and the other women: God has given them strength and her weakness, and they do not see that.'

¹⁴ 'Everything was a cause of suffering to her – her laziness, her kindness, her coquetry; for she is coquettish, dainty, inquisitive; in short, she is a woman, carried away by her impressions and tastes with all the naivety of a child.'

¹⁵ 'A passionate love betrayed would drive her mad.'

The role of la Fosseuse in her community is not to work and suffer, in the manner of Eugénie, but simply to suffer, even though, by the local standards, there is nothing wrong with her. La Fosseuse is a one-woman religious order, serving a redemptive purpose that can only be understood in a Catholic context. There is no place in Balzac's novel for Protestant denunciations of religious idleness: no community can be complete without the poor, the ill and the idle, for, by virtue of their suffering, they possess the innocence required to intercede with God on the community's behalf and expiate the sins of the active, not least the inevitable sins engendered by the practice of utilitarian capitalism. Hence also the special status of the 'crétins' who Benassis endeavours to cure, but who at the same time perform an important function within the canton:

Là où se trouvent des crétins, la population croit que la présence d'un être de cette espèce porte bonheur à la famille. Cette croyance sert à rendre douce une vie qui, dans le sein des villes, serait condamnée aux rigueurs d'une fausse philanthropie et à la discipline d'un hospice. [...] Au moins sont-ils libres et respectés comme doit l'être le malheur. (pp.402-03)¹⁶

La Fosseuse is born to be idle, hence her natural affinity with the nobility. During her stay as a child in a noble household, and subsequent brief employment as a maid (in a reliving of her mother's destiny), she innocently contracts aristocratic tastes and habits which lead to her being dismissed and thus made homeless and destitute. Towards the end of the novel, a transformed Fosseuse – 'ce n'était plus la paysanne de la veille, mais une élégante et gracieuse femme de Paris' ('she was no longer the peasant girl of the previous day, but an elegant and graceful woman of Paris'; p.586) – will comment to the approving Benassis and Genestas:

¹⁶ 'Wherever cretins exist, the local population believes that the presence of one of these beings brings luck to a family. This belief serves to sweeten lives which, in a town, would be condemned to the rigours of a misguided philanthropy and the discipline of a hospice. [...] Here, at least, they are free and receive the respect due to misfortune.'

Quand ma maîtresse m'a renvoyée pour avoir mis sa méchante robe de bal, j'ai eu pitié d'elle, je lui ai pardonné; et foi d'honnête fille, si vous me permettez de vous parler franchement, je me suis crue bien meilleure qu'elle ne l'était, quoiqu'elle fût comtesse. (p.590)¹⁷

La Fosseuse is laying claim to a new kind of aristocracy, an aristocracy of the heart. To this extent, Balzac is drawing on the *parvenu* tradition of Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne*, to which he at times appears to allude. The ambiguity of Marianne's birth has, however, been done away with. La Fosseuse will never claim to be the displaced and therefore misplaced daughter of aristocrats; she claims instead to be superior to the nobility on account of the suffering and poverty that attend her practice of idleness. La Fosseuse will not be identified with the old nobility; rather she and her kind form a new aristocracy that will take over the Providential functions of the old nobility in French national life. The aristocracy, after all, needs reinventing in the wake of the July Revolution.

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L'inconnu, the Swedenborgian Mesmerist in *Ursule Mirouët*, is credited with effecting direct cures by the thousand (Balzac, 1976-81, III p.826); the miracle he is shown performing for Dr Minoret, however, involves little intervention on his part. It is instead an unnamed woman whose demonstration of the power of second sight will destroy Minoret's faith in the sensualism of Locke and Condillac, the basis of his scientific thought (p.838). L'inconnue is already 'dans le sommeil somnambulique' ('in a hypnotic trance'; p.827) when Minoret is introduced into the room of l'inconnu:

'Elle dort!' dit Minoret en examinant la femme qui lui parut appartenir à la classe inférieure.

¹⁷'When my mistress turned me out for trying on her horrid ball-dress, I felt sorry for her and forgave her; and, honestly, if you will allow me to speak plainly, I thought myself much the better woman, countess though she was.'

‘Son corps est en quelque sorte annulé,’ répondit le swedenborgiste. ‘Les ignorants prennent cet état pour le sommeil.’ (p.828)¹⁸

The woman’s class is her only distinguishing feature; when she goes on to speak, Minoret is astonished by the elevation of her sentiments and language – ‘Et c’est une femme du peuple qui parle ainsi?’ (‘Can it be a working-class woman who speaks thus?’; p.830) – and also by her uncanny ability to mimic the speech and mannerisms of his niece, Ursule (pp.831, 833-34), who has of course been brought up in a quite different environment by the doting Minoret and his distinguished friends who together see to her education. The body of l’inconnue has indeed been annulled by her speech, even more so than the peasant body of la Fosseuse by her dress and manners. L’inconnue transcends the class origins that determine her physical characteristics, her speech, her mannerisms and, implicitly, her morals: she will replicate ‘les gestes candides et les saintes inspirations’ (‘the artless gestures and holy inspirations’) of Ursule, pictured as an ‘enfant’ (‘child’), that is to say, still a virgin (p.834).

L’inconnue uses her second sight to reveal Ursule’s first thoughts of love, thoughts identified with the red of blushing and the red ink Ursule uses to mark Savinien, the printed name of the man she loves, in her almanach (she also marks Denis, the name Minoret shares with Diderot, and Jean, the name of her priest and spiritual father). Ursule’s capacity for love is still unitary: she does not differentiate between her various father figures and her future lover, although this soon changes. Her purity, however, will never come into question. She will transcend her body and also the class-determined sexual behaviour that she might be held to have inherited from her biological family: Ursule may be the half-niece of Minoret’s virtuous

¹⁸“‘She’s asleep!’” said Minoret as he examined the woman, who seemed to him to belong to the lower class. “Her body is as it were annulled,” the Swedenborgian replied. “The uninitiated mistake this state for sleep.”

wife, after whom she is named; she is also, however, the daughter of Joseph Mirouët, an itinerant musician born out of wedlock.

Ursule floats in the same classless atmosphere as l'inconnue, living with the bourgeois doctor, the classless priest and Minoret's two aristocratic friends, one representing the *noblesse de robe* and the other the *noblesse d'épée*. She falls in love with Savinien de Portenduère, descended from a long line of distinguished admirals on his father's side, ancient Breton nobility on that of his punctilious mother. Ursule, too, will demonstrate a gift for second sight in the course of the novel's denouement: she will communicate with the dead (Denis Minoret) in the manner of Swedenborg himself (p.824). The two plots of the novel will coalesce in the figures of l'inconnue and Ursule: on the one hand, the plot of Mesmerism and religion, on the other, the plots of class (inheritance) and gender (marriage).

Ursule, in the manner of l'inconnue will be required to shed her body and her class-inheritance if she is to marry Savinien; the latter will also have to abandon all aristocratic pretension – or rather persuade his mother to allow him to do so – if he is to find a place in the new France of Louis-Philippe. Savinien's brief career in the navy – he starts on the lowest rung of the officer class – prepares the ground for his marriage to Ursule, for it is he who is actually unsuitable given an earlier incarceration for non-payment of debts. Dr Minoret is a *bourgeois*, but he is also an eighteenth-century new man, elevated socially by his Enlightenment learning; Ursule, similarly, is a new woman, elevated, however, not just by her own learning but also, and more importantly in a post-Revolutionary age, by her piety:

Ursule devint la pieuse et mystique jeune fille dont le caractère fut toujours au-dessus des événements, et dont le cœur domina tout adversité. (p.817)¹⁹

¹⁹'Ursule became the pious, mystical girl whose character was always above events and whose heart overcame all adversity.'

Thus Savinien declares:

Vous avez toutes les distinctions que je souhaite dans celle qui doit porter mon nom. L'éducation que vous avez reçue et la dignité de votre cœur vous mettent à la hauteur des situations les plus élevées. (pp.893-94).²⁰

Ursule possesses a 'noblesse innée' ('innate nobility'; p.884) which has nevertheless not been inherited from her biological family, and which, initially at least, fails to impress Savinien's mother. The latter appears to make little distinction between the virtuous and disinterested Ursule and the various scheming heirs of Denis Minoret as laid down by the *code civil*. All are upstart peasants: Ursule's wish to marry Savinien mirrors the slow acquisition by Minoret-Levrault, head of the peasant-heirs, of the estate of the ruined Marquis du Rouvre. Savinien attempts to reason with his mother, noting that 'il n'y a plus de Famille aujourd'hui, ma mère, [...] il n'y a plus que des individus' (p.884).²¹ In this new world, Ursule is uniquely placed, for she possesses the virtues of aristocracy, virtues that nobles, such as the Marquis du Rouvre, or the countess who dismisses la Fosseuse, have in any case lost. When Denis Minoret points out that Ursule 'ne sera noble que par le cœur' ('will only be noble of heart'), Savinien replies: 'Eh! docteur, [...] il n'y a plus de noblesse aujourd'hui, il n'y a plus qu'une aristocratie.' (p.877)²² Ursule's nobility of heart will, however, have to be put to the test; she will have to get past Mme de Portenduère, the maternal dragon guarding Savinien.

The miracle of mimicry performed by l'inconnue takes as its script Ursule's nightly prayer for the conversion of Denis Minoret. Ursule is shown defining herself as a servant of God, 'qui mourrait avec joie comme

²⁰'You have all the distinctions I could hope for in the woman who is to bear my name. Your education and nobility of heart raise you to the level of the most elevated of social stations.'

²¹'There's no such thing as Family nowadays, mother, [...] there are only individuals.'

²²'But doctor, there's no such thing as a nobility today, there's only an aristocracy.' The duchesse de Maufigneuse makes the same point in *Le Cabinet des antiques* (Balzac, 1976-81, IV p.1092).

votre Fils pour glorifier votre nom' ('who, like your Son, would gladly die to glorify your name'); she asks not only for the gift of Grace, immediately granted to the doctor once he abandons his scientific pride, but also that he be preserved from all harm: 'faites-moi souffrir en sa place!' (p.834).²³ Ursule's test will therefore take the form of illness and suffering; she will, albeit implausibly, run the risk of dying.

Ursule is both weak and strong. In the manner of la Fosseuse, she is oversensitive. The narrator observes of Dr Minoret that Ursule's:

excessive sensibilité, souvent éprouvée, lui avait appris qu'une expression dure, un air froid ou des alternatives de douceur et de brusquerie pouvaient la tuer. (p.908)²⁴

At the same time, she manages to withstand her sudden, if brief, impoverishment without complaint. Her economy, modesty and pious resignation suggest great reserves of mental strength, particularly given her upbringing surrounded by elderly men eager to satisfy her every whim (p.931). Ursule is 'facile à la douleur' ('prone to pain'; p.938), a suitable subject for suffering just as l'inconnue is a suitable subject for hypnosis. Thus Ursule will contract a series of medically inexplicable fevers that, following Maistre's analysis, testify to her sanctity by virtue of their undiagnosability.

Ursule receives a series of poison-pen letters, written by Goupil, the ambivalent ally of the heirs, eager to be rid of Ursule and the threat she represents to their financial interests. Goupil intuitively senses the weakness of Ursule:

Sans rien savoir de cette constitution délicate comme celle d'une fleur, [il] avait trouvé, par l'instinct du méchant, le poison qui devait la flétrir, la tuer. (p.944)²⁵

²³Let me suffer in his stead!

²⁴Excessive sensitivity, often experienced, had taught him that a harsh word, a stern glance or alternating kindness and severity could kill her.'

²⁵With his instinct for evil, Goupil, though knowing nothing of a constitution as delicate as a flower, had discovered the poison that would wither and kill her.'

Already, Savinien's departure to the navy had made her ill:

Elle fut en proie à une maladie sans cause sensible. Semblable à ces beaux fruits attaqués par un ver, une pensée lui rongait le cœur. (p.900)²⁶

The illness had stimulated her powers as a medium, allowing her in her dreams accurately to predict the arrival of letters from Savinien. Ursule is already turning into a second version of l'inconnue, with God acting directly rather than through the intercessions of l'inconnu: 'elle crut fermement que ses rêves étaient une faveur de Dieu' (p.901).²⁷ Ursule's expulsion from her room in Minoret's house upon the latter's death, ostensibly to prevent her stealing the chattels, prompts a worsening of her state:

Ursule était au lit en proie à une fièvre nerveuse autant causée par l'insulte que les héritiers lui avaient faite que par sa profonde affliction. (p.922)²⁸

The poison-pen letters have an even greater impact. Minoret's loyal (peasant) servant, la Bougival, 'l'aperçut alternativement rouge comme si la fièvre la dévorait, et violette comme si le frisson succédait à la fièvre' (p.938).²⁹ The fabrication, contained in one of Goupil's letters, that Mme de Portenduère is about to ask the hand of Mlle du Rouvre in marriage on Savinien's behalf, produces a spectacular scientific effect:

²⁶'She fell victim to a disease seemingly without physical cause. Just as a beautiful fruit is attacked by a worm, so one thought gnawed at her heart.'

²⁷'She firmly believed that her dreams were a grace from God.'

²⁸'Ursule was confined to bed with a nervous fever caused just as much by the heirs' insult to her as by her deep sorrow.'

²⁹'Saw her by turns red as if consumed by fever and blue as if shivering had followed the fever.' Fargeaud points out that Balzac relies, in his descriptions of Ursule's nervous fevers, on contemporary medical treatises, most notably Dr Chomel's *Des fièvres et des maladies pestilentielles* of 1821 (Balzac 1976-81, III p.1630). See also more generally on Balzacian fevers Le Yaouanc, 1959, pp.254-56 and Borel, 1971, pp.30-36.

Ursule eut un petit tressaillement nerveux qui fit frissonner l'abbé Chaperon comme s'il avait reçu la décharge d'une bouteille de Leyde. (p.939)³⁰

Goupil steps up his campaign by anonymously making love to Ursule and arranging for a series of stunts designed to cast doubt on her virtue. Ursule's delicacy, already bathetic, begins to appear absurd in this increasingly bizarre context. For their part, the other women of Nemours begin to envy all the male attention Ursule is receiving (p.945). The latter, however, becomes more and more distressed:

Cette suave jeune fille gardait une attitude de martyre: elle restait dans un profond silence, levait les yeux au ciel et ne pleurait plus, elle attendait les coups en priant avec ferveur et en implorant celui qui lui donnerait la mort. (p.946)³¹

At the moment when the new doctor manages to alleviate the symptoms of her fervent 'fièvre nerveuse' ('nervous fever'; p.946), Goupil arranges for a ladder to be found propped up against Ursule's bedroom-window:

Depuis le jour où la plus infâme calomnie avait souillé sa vie, Ursule, en proie à l'une de ces maladies inexplicables dont le siège est dans l'âme [the same category of illness that afflicts la Fosseuse], marchait rapidement à la mort. [...] Son innocence avait trop de délicatesse pour survivre à une pareille meurtrissure. Elle ne se plaignait plus, elle gardait un douloureux sourire sur les lèvres, et ses yeux se levaient souvent vers le ciel comme pour appeler de l'injustice des hommes au Souverain des anges. (pp.949-50)³²

³⁰'Ursule's slight nervous tremble made Abbé Chaperon shudder as if he had received a discharge from a Leyden jar [an electric capacitor].'

³¹'This sweet girl maintained a martyr's attitude: she remained in deep silence, raising her eyes to heaven, and no longer cried; she awaited the blows in fervent prayer, imploring for the one from whom death would come.'

³²'Since the day when her life had been sullied by the vilest slander, Ursule, suffering from one of those inexplicable illnesses whose seat is in the soul, was rapidly marching towards death. [...] Her innocence had too much delicacy to survive such bruising. She no longer complained, she maintained a sorrowful smile upon her lips, and her eyes often looked up to heaven as if to appeal against the injustice of mankind to the Lord of the angels.'

It is at this point that Mme de Portenduère begins to relent, thereby threatening Ursule's life in a different way, this time through an excess of joy at the renewed prospect of marriage to Savinien (p.951). Ursule's slow recovery, prompted also by the unmasking of Goupil, results in further extraordinary phenomena,

dont les effets furent d'ailleurs terribles et de nature à occuper la science, si la science avait été mise dans une pareille confiance. (p.959)³³

In particular, Ursule begins to experience the supernatural dreams that will lead to the theft of her part of the inheritance by Minoret-Levrault being exposed by the ghost of Denis Minoret, the latter 'resplendissant comme le Sauveur pendant sa transfiguration' ('radiant like the Saviour during his transfiguration'; p.960), having already shown her his last will and testament written in sunbeams (p.959).

Through her fevers, Ursule has attained the status of a Swedenborgian mystical medium. It is this status that marks her out as a favourite of God, and that qualifies her as a member of the new aristocracy, as opposed to the old nobility. Ursule's new status has come at a price: through her suffering she has expiated not her own sins, for she is almost entirely innocent, but rather those of her biological ancestors and, more broadly, those of the heirs that persecute her and that are shown to be complicit, politically, with the overthrow of Charles X. Ursule is special not because she is after all descended from nobility, but because she recognizes she should suffer for being the daughter of a 'bâtard' ('bastard'; p.859), as her uncle bluntly puts it when revealing to her for the first time the (otherwise open) family secret. As Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet would note in *De la douleur*:

³³'Terrible, moreover, in their effects, and of a kind to merit scientific investigation, had science been allowed into such a secret.'

Les hommes n'ont ordinairement de valeur que de deux manières: ou ils ont beaucoup reçu de la vertu des ancêtres, ou tout acquis par la douleur. (1849, p.42)³⁴

Zélie Minoret-Levrault, by contrast, cannot accept that her son should suffer for the sins of his father, protesting against God's will and going mad when this son is Providentially killed in accordance with Ursule's unheeded prophecy. Minoret-Levrault, for his part, will accept God's judgment on his theft of Ursule's inheritance, performing acts of charity, making ample restitution to Ursule – both in cash and by signing over the Rouvre estates – and even serving as her steward.

Suffering – along with a certain amount of self-hatred – will allow Ursule simultaneously to expiate inherited sin and cast off inherited class identity in a *parvenu* fantasy that obviously appealed to Balzac, by this stage complete with his spurious *particule*. Balzac has created a variant of the Romantic self-hating courtesan, purified by love, that at times features in his other fiction; the combination of chastity and suffering – as opposed to promiscuity and suffering – allows for social as well as moral purification, and hence survival. It is the next step up in a tiered process of expiation, purification and elevation that possesses many neo-Platonic, Swedenborgian, illuminist and millenarian resonances – Dr Minoret, upon his conversion, will be moved to study Plotinus and Saint-Martin – and that anticipates the social and spiritual hierarchies described in *De la douleur* (Saint-Bonnet, 1849, pp.121-22, 133-51). The fever and the fervour of Ursule, or rather her fever as evidence of a fervour pleasing to God, raises her up socially. This elevation is, in its turn, proof of God's Providential hand in human affairs. As the ruined Mlle du Rouvre fails to find a husband, so Ursule de Portenduère will set an example of what the new aristocracy should represent, at least if France is once again to become a community. Thus Ursule will go on further to dispense charity and perform the role of

³⁴'Men only ordinarily possess merit in two ways: either they received much of the virtue of their ancestors, or acquired it all through suffering.'

ideal aristocrat in *Le Cousin Pons*. Ursule, displaced by birth in the manner of La Fosseuse, has found her place in a society, which, in Balzac's circular argument, finds itself in her. Maistre points out that the Romans referred to fever as 'la *purificatrice*, ou l'*expiatrice*' ('the *purifier*, or the *expiator*'; 1993, I p.147). Such purification serves not only to elevate the individual, but also society as a whole, for it is the sins of society rather than those of the individual that are being expiated. The unitary system of (natural) philosophy created by Balzac's eccentric fusion of Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism and Catholicism will serve to explain Ursule's fevers and to give them meaning; in the process it will hold together the novel's otherwise disparate narratives of science, religion, gender and class.

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