

## Realism's Others



# Realism's Others

Edited by

Geoffrey Baker and Eva Aldea

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

---

**P U B L I S H I N G**

Realism's Others, Edited by Geoffrey Baker and Eva Aldea

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2010 by Geoffrey Baker and Eva Aldea and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2319-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2319-7

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Introduction .....	ix
Geoffrey Baker	
A Vision of Realism: Empiricism and Empire in Honoré de Balzac's <i>La Peau de chagrin</i> .....	1
Geoffrey Baker	
Novel, Nation, and the Jews: The End of Realism in <i>Daniel Deronda</i> .....	27
Mikhal Dekel	
German Realism's Proximal Others: Franz Grillparzer's <i>The Poor Fiddler</i> and Theodor Storm's <i>Ein Doppelgänger</i> .....	49
Katra A. Byram	
American Realism's Transcendental Other .....	69
Daniel S. Malachuk	
German Realism's Other: The Space of Modernity .....	91
John B. Lyon	
American Literary Realism and Chinese Exclusion: HT Tsiang and Theodore Dreiser, 1930 .....	107
Richard Jean So	
Socialist Realism and Abram Tertz's <i>Fantastic Stories</i> .....	129
Pavla Veselá	
The Specific and the Singular: The Double Bind of Magical Realism....	145
Eva Aldea	
The Magic of Race: Representation of the Other in Carpentier and Morrison .....	167
Daniel Bautista	

Alan Sillitoe: Realism, Representation and the (Ir)responsibility of Writing .....	189
Nick Bentley	
A Realism of Internal Others: Richard Yates' <i>Revolutionary Road</i> .....	209
Leif Bull	
Is Metafiction an Other Realism? The Strange Case of Paul Auster and Mr Blank .....	227
Will Slocombe	
Surviving the Family Romance? The Realist Labor of Incest in <i>Bastard Out of Carolina</i> .....	247
Gillian Harkins	
Others in "Self-conscious" Biography: A. S. Byatt's <i>The Biographer's Tale</i> .....	277
Katsura Sako	
Contributors .....	293
Index .....	295

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection began as a panel at the 2006 meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association at Princeton University. The panel's topic over its three days of meeting was the idea, broadly understood, of realism's others: characters, spaces, notions, or narrative modes often conceived of as others of or within realist narrative. Additional essays were included along the way, and the original contributions to the conference panel have of course been fleshed out. The completion of the manuscript was substantially aided by a grant from the California State University, Chico. Additional copyediting was done by Maren Fox-Galassi, who also designed and formatted the book.

Geoffrey Baker's essay previously appeared in slightly different form in *Realism's Empire: Empiricism and Enchantment in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Ohio State UP, 2009) and is reprinted with permission.

Nick Bentley's essay previously appeared in *Radical Fictions: The English Novel in the 1950s* (Peter Lang, 2007) and is reprinted with permission.

Gillian Harkins' essay previously appeared in *Southern Literary Journal* 40.1 (2007): 114–139. It is reprinted with permission.

Richard Jean So's essay previously appeared in *Genre* 39.4 (2008): 1–25. It is reprinted with permission.





# INTRODUCTION: REALISM AS OTHER, AND REALISM'S OTHERS

## GEOFFREY BAKER

IN A 1962 RADIO ADDRESS titled "Commitment," Theodor Adorno attacks the realist political aesthetics of Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1947) Vigorously defending instead the anti-realism of authors like Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, and the political potential of that anti-realism, Adorno's case embeds itself firmly in mid-twentieth-century experience. Despite this sense of contemporary historical exigency, though, "Commitment" encapsulates a number of distinct but related charges laid against literary realism over the course of the previous century. Adorno writes:

Newspapers and magazines of the radical Right constantly stir up indignation against what is unnatural, over-intellectual, morbid [ungesund] and decadent: they know their readers. The insights of social psychology into the authoritarian personality confirm them. The basic features of this type include conformism [Konventionalismus], respect for a petrified façade of opinion and society, and resistance to impulses that disturb its order or evoke inner elements of the unconscious that cannot be admitted. This hostility to anything alien or alienating [Fremd und Befremdend] can accommodate itself much more easily to literary realism of any provenance, even if it proclaims itself critical or socialist, than to works which swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities... (179)

With characteristic elitism (note the defense of intellectualism), Adorno argues that, regardless of its own allegiances or agendas, realism's form itself readily coexists with "conformism," "hostility to anything alien or alienating," and a reluctance to "admit" "elements of the unconscious." In this and other defenses of high modernism, Adorno becomes an articulate opponent<sup>1</sup> of the very literary mode so endorsed by Sartre and others for its ability to convey information about contemporary political issues. If one recalls Friedrich Engels's reading of Balzac's realism<sup>2</sup>, which Engels

praises for its ability to reveal the hard truths about an aristocracy that Balzac nevertheless wanted personally to admire, one sees a version of Sartre's case for realism—the very case that Adorno scorns—at the roots of realism itself.

While Adorno is most interested in exploring and deploring the politics of realism as a form in this and other essays, though, his basic observations about it had become familiar much earlier in the twentieth century. Take Adorno's notion that realism refuses "elements of the unconscious," for example. Already in Virginia Woolf's essay on "Modern Fiction," in 1925, she tars a whole older generation of writers as "materialists" for their (realist) focus on the physical, external world rather than on the "spirit" (104). Describing as fraught any "reality" on which such a materialistic approach to description might be based, Woolf suggests instead that one "look within," that one "examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" (106). "Modern Fiction" holds that realist narrative strategies cannot accurately capture reality as the twentieth century has come to understand and experience it: fragmented, relative to one's own perception, and complex. While Woolf champions a new sort of fiction that accommodates the unconscious and internal, Alejo Carpentier in the 1940s similarly calls for a narrative mode that accommodates what is alien (Adorno's word *Fremd*) or alienating to Europe and to European ontologies he describes as secular. "To begin with," Carpentier claims, "the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith" (86). Carpentier's elaboration of the marvelous real emphasizes, against the "bureaucratic" experimentations of the European surrealists (87), "the virginity of the land," a specifically American "ontology," the "Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man," and ethnic mixture (*mestizajes*) (88). These values of the marvelous real clearly oppose those of a realism antipathetic to what is alien, as Adorno sees it, and their sentiments are echoed famously by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which reads the realist enterprise as a perfect narrative apparatus of imperialism: realism is, in Said's understanding of it, mercilessly normative, empirical, and disciplinary (72). If Woolf's modernism critiques realism in one way, then, by admitting the unconscious and the internal, Carpentier's magical realism does so in another, by grounding a new narrative mode in what cannot belong to or be known entirely by a European mindset, according to Carpentier.

These are just a few ways in which Adorno's objections to realism are anticipated by two important moments in modernism and a nascent postmodernism, both of which underscore essential areas into which realism allegedly does not venture. Yet even as these areas—the unconscious, the

foreign, the supernatural—are declared “other” to realist narrative, this act of othering or exclusion at the level of content still does not capture all of the concerns Adorno and others have raised in terms of the form of realism. The charges—and the tendency amongst defenders of realism to resist them directly—become especially acute after Adorno. George Levine, in his 1981 book *The Realistic Imagination*, blames “the antireferential bias of our criticism and...the method of radical deconstruction that has become a commonplace” (3), but the lingering influence of modernist and especially Adornian anti-realism is still discernible in the thirty years since then. Eric Downing has pointed out, in a study of German realist fiction, that even prominent Germanists such as Robert Holub and Russell Berman construct and critique realism as “a heavily normed discourse, or style, that purports to universal, transparent, natural, and ahistorical status, and that simultaneously and necessarily excludes or represses both self-consciousness and otherness” (11–12). Katherine Kearns also understands these criticisms well, when she writes that realism is “often charged with blind-siding social, political, and epistemological complexities, with throwing its considerable materialistic weight against all that would challenge or suborn the status quo” (7). Kearns and others, though, have actually leaned on deconstructive reading strategies in order to rescue realism from its apparent simplicity. She points out that realism cannot really be monological, since everything textual is of at least two minds when examined deconstructively. Lilian Furst, too, offers a more nuanced picture: “The realist novel must be taken at one and the same time as a record (more or less faithful, as the case may be) of a past social situation *and* as a texture made of verbal signs” (24). Yet these sorts of defenses have paled alongside the influence of pronouncements by thinkers like Roland Barthes, who equates the “reality effect” not with deconstructive aperture but rather with the sort of absoluteness and closure which Adorno fears. Even as Barthes defends realist narrative against accusations of referential naïveté, he upbraids it as “regressive” because of its attempt to construct a “referential fullness” [plénitude référentielle] within itself (90), an idea also suggested by Pierre Macherey’s chapter on Balzac’s *Les Paysans* in *A Theory of Literary Production*.

It is probably unnecessary to rehearse the long history of attacks against and defenses of realism. Raymond Tallis treats some of this in his strident *In Defence of Realism*, and there is always Sartre’s *What Is Literature?*, with its extended diatribe against the surrealists. It is to Furst’s idea of realism as a mixed mode that one might turn in order to ground a productive means of reading realist texts’ various approaches to

otherness, and to reading, in relation to realism, texts often seen as the others of realism: magical-realist or postmodern works, for example. In the quote already cited above, Furst claims that we must see realism "at one and the same time as a record (more or less faithful, as the case may be) of a past social situation *and* as a texture made of verbal signs," and she thus offers readers the possibility of working both with stereotypes of realism-as-mimesis and with the complications that always arise when one looks closely at any text, including those labeled realist or those that merely mobilize an idea of realism in order to set themselves against it (24). Levine, too, in *The Realistic Imagination*, declares that "realism posits 'mixed' conditions" and thus seems to suggest that realist texts be scrutinized as possibly at odds with themselves (4). Marshall Brown's important 1981 essay on realism strives, similarly, to give "a flexible historical picture" (233) of realist narrative and of definitions of realism. Brown explains realist narrative as a product of "interplay" between "Jakobson's metonymic or sequential order" and "metaphorical or substitutional order" (231); as "the ordered or hierarchical intersection of contrasting codes" (233); and as "a structure of ordered negations perceived within the text quite independently of any relationship between the text and what is assumed to be its 'world'" (237). Brown's emphasis is on the internal struggles of realist texts, struggles that the essays in this collection take very much to heart. Focusing less on accepting popular assumptions about realism, these essays instead examine the processes whereby texts' claims to or claims against or theories of realism see them struggle to create or understand certain types of alterity: of nationality, of gender, of social class, of space, of epistemology, of language, of aesthetic mode, of ontology, and of political persuasion. Despite the preoccupations of this introduction, this volume's primary goal is neither to defend realism nor to catalogue attacks against it, but rather to ask how realism works in relation to these modes that have so often been opposed to it, or how realism functions in relation to people or phenomena declared alien to it. The process whereby different versions of alterity are apparently required, generated, recognized, and deployed by narratives is made explicit by all of the authors presented here. They register powerfully the role of others within realism, the role of others to realism, and the otherness of realism.

## Notes

1. Adorno is certainly not the first opponent. Consider Friedrich Nietzsche's unpublished complaint that realism's interest in—and particular political view of—the world required a delight in all things ugly and was to no avail:

There is no pessimistic art... Art affirms [bejaht]. [The Book of] Job affirms.

But Zola? But the Goncourts?

—the things they show are ugly: but that they show these things reveals a desire for the ugly...

—helps nothing! (13.241)

2. In an 1888 letter to author Margaret Harkness, Engels writes of Balzac's commitment to the real and its ability to get at truth even against the author's own expressed political allegiances.

The realism I allude to may crop out even in spite of the author's opinions. Let me refer to an example. Balzac, whom I consider a far greater master of realism than all the Zolas *passés, présents et à venir*, in "La Comédie humaine" gives us a most wonderfully realistic history of French 'Society.' . . . Well, Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy on the inevitable decay of good society, his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply—the nobles. . . . That Balzac thus was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he saw the necessity of the downfall of his favourite nobles, and described them as people deserving no better fate; and that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found—that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac. (91–92)

## Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. "Commitment." *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates between Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*. Ed. Fredric Jameson. London: New Left Books, 1977. 177–95.
- Barthes, Roland. "L'effet de réel." *Littérature et réalité*. R. Barthes, L. Bersani, Ph. Hamon, M. Riffaterre, and I. Watt. Paris: Seuil, 1982. 81–90.
- Brown, Marshall. "The Logic of Realism: A Hegelian Approach." *PMLA* 96.2 (1981): 224–41.

- Carpentier, Alejo. "On the Marvelous Real in America." Trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995. 75–88.
- Downing, Eric. *Double Exposures: Repetition and Realism in Nineteenth-Century German Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Engels, Friedrich. "Engels to Margaret Harkness in London." *On Literature and Art*. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976. 89–92.
- Furst, Lilian R. *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.
- Levine, George. *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- Kearns, Katherine. *Nineteenth-Century Realism: Through the Looking-Glass*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Trans. Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge, 1985.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*. Ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." *Collected Essays*, vol. 2. London: The Hogarth Press, 1966. 103–110.

A VISION OF REALISM:  
EMPIRICISM AND EMPIRE IN HONORÉ  
DE BALZAC'S *LA PEAU DE CHAGRIN*

GEOFFREY BAKER

Museums which emerged during the nineteenth century, especially ethnographic and natural history museums, were formed by collections brought to the West from the rest of the world.

—Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*

Without empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

A PASSAGE IN Edward Said's *Orientalism* contains a brief but complicated definition of the book's primary topic:

Philosophically, then, the kind of language, thought, and vision that I have been calling Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism; anyone employing Orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality. Rhetorically speaking, Orientalism is absolutely anatomical and enumerative: to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things Oriental into manageable parts. Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind, say, from ordinary historical knowledge. These are a few of the results, I think, of imaginative geography and of the dramatic boundaries it draws. (72)

There is a paradox here in the idea that Orientalism is driven by impulses both secular, empirical, enumerative *and* non-secular, non-historical,

paranoid. This paradox is, of course, not lost on Said. More importantly, though, the conflicting energies in this definition aptly frame the two linked historical developments on which this chapter focuses: the crystallization of an empirical epistemology, emblemized by the rise of the museum; and the contemporaneous birth of realist narrative. They also recall the indispensable role that imperialism and its understanding of space played in both of these births, which were registered in the shifting role of material things.

Several scholars have already begun the work of theorizing collecting's and collections' relation to narrative. Mieke Bal builds usefully on the "subjective presence in narratives," which serves to "focalise" what is narrated and is, Bal argues, analogous to the selection and organization inherent in the act of collecting (98). While Bal has used the idea of collecting to interrogate "very characteristic feature[s] of narrative" such as chronology (101), James Clifford has, in a quite different way, used literary theory (Bakhtin's, for example) in order to question or reformulate accepted anthropological stances on collecting (236). The present effort cannot attempt to engage the ties between objects and narrative on so large or general a scope. Instead, I will put Said's paradoxical Orientalism to a reading of the transformation of the private collection (and especially the *cabinet de curiosités* and the *Wunderkammer*) into the public museum at the outset of the nineteenth century, with all of the shifts that attended or contributed to this transformation: rarity, for example, cedes ground to representativeness, and the anachronic anecdote loses its place to organic history. This reassessment of the museum's history is essential to a reading of Honoré de Balzac's 1831 novel, *La Peau de chagrin* (translated variously as *The Magic Skin*, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, or *The Fateful Skin*), which is named after the near-Eastern talisman that the protagonist, Raphaël de Valentin, purchases in an antique shop in Paris. Beginning with the narrator's longwinded descriptions of the shop's vast and varied collection, the novel wears both its exoticism and its materialism on its sleeve. However, rather than independently reify the two Orientalisms articulated in the quote by Said above, *La Peau de chagrin* instead puts them into explicit conflict with each other, pitting empiricism against enchantment. In so doing, Balzac's novel registers many of the same epistemological and cultural shifts visible in the changing role of collected objects in early nineteenth-century Europe. Moreover, the importance of the collection in the nineteenth-century novel extends beyond Balzac, and it testifies to the growing importance of and perceived relationship between history and empiricism. Finally, moving beyond the novel's mere reflection of social realities, Balzac's simultaneous awareness and



wariness of these cultural shifts offer a new context for understanding the rise of realism, a concern all at once central to the idea of the museum, the development of Balzac's narrative style, and Said's notion of Orientalism.

## **The Orientalist Paradox and the Object(s) of Empire**

A brief examination of Said's paradoxical Orientalism—which is both empirical and paranoid, both enumerative and imaginative—highlights the importance of its constitutive tension. Shortly after the definition of Orientalism cited above, Said emboldens his terms, claiming that “these two aspects of Orientalism are not incongruent, since by use of them both Europe could advance securely and unmetaphorically upon the Orient” (73). This is modest, even guarded language (note the cautious double negative of “not incongruent”), but the chary tone is probably warranted by the tendency, in debates over imperialism and its complex epistemological foundations, to see in empire either a violent manifestation of relentless secularization or an outgrowth or variety of religion itself, as Said more often seems to see it. Patrick Brantlinger, too, in *Rule of Darkness*, sees affinities between imperialism and occult religious practices popular during the age of empire. Other theorists of imperialism and anti-imperialism have, by contrast, related the colonial drive not to religious impulses but rather to the sort of secular/scientific motivations that Said also describes. Shifting these motivations to the plane of colonial policy, historian Bernard Cohn enumerates the “‘investigative modalities’ devised by the British to collect the facts” in India, among these “the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias” (5). Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* explicitly make these modalities players in the rise of capitalism. Horkheimer and Adorno write that “The program of the Enlightenment”—which is to them, one recalls, not simply a historical period but rather a transhistorical epistemology and the logical engine of capitalism—“was the disenchantment [Entzauberung] of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge [Wissen] for fancy [Einbildung]” (9). Similarly, when Anderson writes of how “Cairo and Mecca were beginning to be visualized in a strange new way, no longer simply as sites in a sacred Muslim geography, but also as dots on paper sheets which included dots for Paris, Moscow, Manila and Caracas,” he sees in the rise of the imperial market a challenge to the force that informs Said's second, non-secular Orientalism (170–1).

Said may not have dwelt on the paradox that he adduces between empire's two epistemologies, but others have emboldened the tension and even scripted it as a duel. Partha Chatterjee, for example, sees in imperial culture and in anticolonial nationalism a division between

two domains—the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the “outside,” of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. (6)

It is in this “inner” domain, Chatterjee claims, the domain of the “spiritual,” that the East can gain leverage against the West. Ashis Nandy, like Chatterjee, most specifically scripts the differences as a contest between styles of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> “Resistance,” Nandy asserts, “takes many forms in the savage world. It may take the form of a full-blooded rejection of the modern world's deepest faith, scientific rationality” (“Shamans” 269). Shamanism, Nandy claims, is “the repressed self of the society,” an alternative to drily empirical Western thought, because the former can “articulate[e] some possibilities...which the ‘sane,’ the ‘mature’ and the ‘rational’ cannot self-consciously express or seriously pursue” (“Shamans” 266). Dipesh Chakrabarty amplifies Nandy's claims through his strikingly similar complaint that historiography's ardent secularism sets troubling “limits to the ways the past can be narrated” (Chakrabarty 89). This is but a cursory invocation of a longer debate, but it frames an investigation of the unstable terrain of the collection of objects at the outset of the nineteenth century. What is ultimately at stake between the secularists and the anti-secularists, between the models of empiricism and those of enchantment, is the same thing that organizes, especially in the 1820s and 1830s, the codification of the museum: the narration of the past and the best means of accomplishing it. Not coincidentally, the novel and the rise of realism are equally invested in this problem.

A glance at the changing status of collections at the turn of the nineteenth century in Europe reveals a moment of fundamental renegotiation that evinced itself in four major and related ways. Cobbling together episodes from the many and varied attempts to account for these renegotiations can be illuminating. First, Henning Bock's descriptions of sixteenth-century *Kunstammer* and their slow metamorphosis into the public museums of nineteenth-century Berlin re-enact the growing importance of public access to collections in post-Revolutionary Europe

(113).<sup>2</sup> Bock largely credits Wilhelm von Humboldt with this important change in the German context, but Humboldt's ambivalence toward the overall project of collecting casts an interesting shadow. Krzysztof Pomian's discussion of the earliest printed catalogs of objects for sale testifies to a drift from private, noble holdings toward commercial interests in valued objects (*Collectors* 39). This commercial interest then tapers off as the collective public becomes a proprietor and the trade in collections of artifacts wanes palpably in the 1820s, thanks to the growth of the market for art (Pomian, "De la collection" 22). Similarly, following the establishment of the Archives Nationales in France in 1794, the administration of collections becomes an increasingly public project.

Second—and, according to Pomian, completely related—the content-emphasis of a collection becomes less invested in the presentation of rarity (the *curiosités* and the *Wunder* of the older collections) and more interested in the value of the general, the representative. In his book-length study of *Collectors and Curiosities*, Pomian sees curiosity—interest in rarity—itself as an opponent of rational science. Tony Bennett's history of the museum builds on Pomian's narrative of epistemological crisis, moving it past the historical scope of Pomian's book and into the nineteenth century. According to Bennett, Pomian's work tethers the *cabinet de curiosités* to a "pre-scientific rationality in its commitment to a view of nature's infinite variability and diversity" (Bennett 39):

[T]he cabinet of curiosities, in its design and in its social relations, reflects its role as a storehouse of a knowledge that is, at once, rare and exclusive, intelligible only to those with the time, inclination and cultural training to be able to decipher the relationship in which each object stands to the whole. The initial challenge to the principles of curiosity, Pomian argues, came from the changing focus of natural history displays which, through the eighteenth century, came increasingly to accord priority of attention to the normal, the commonplace and the close-at-hand at the expense of the exceptional and the exotic. (41)<sup>3</sup>

Bennett picks up here where Pomian must leave off, and the former's attention to the early part of the nineteenth century bears most directly on the collection's development into the museum and the museum's relationship to realist narrative, which one can see at work in Balzac's novel.

Third, internal divisions within collections begin to express exterior geographical or cultural divisions. Pomian reminds us that, "in 1826, the Département des Sculptures antiques du Louvre is split into two divisions, one of which brings together *Greek, Roman and Medieval Monuments* and

the other *Egyptian and Oriental Antiquities*" ("De la collection" 24). This new distinction is symptomatic of a new cartographical role adopted by the museum collection, which Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has compared to "the drawing of a map" (*Museums* 18). Like maps, she argues in a manner reminiscent of Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, museums "created cultural unities from disperse experiences": "A major function of museums during the modernist period was the mapping of the world through the collection of artifacts." Hooper-Greenhill's dates for this "modernist period"—1820 to 1975—are intriguing (16). They correspond roughly, on the early end, to Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Fourier's *Description de l'Égypte* (1809), which Said uses as a beginning in *Orientalism* (42–3). If 1809 marks a decisive starting point for this historiographic and ethnographic process, Franco Moretti has made very similar claims for the literary evocations of it. In *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, he reads a cluster of novels written between 1803 and 1818 precisely as Hooper-Greenhill reads the museum—as the encapsulation, mapping, and reinforcement of geographical divides.

Finally, this newly introduced East/West schism in the Louvre's collection mirrors the overall development, within the world of collections and the collections of the world, toward the order and coherence which organize the museological project precisely at the advent of literary realism. Susan Crane has recounted Goethe's visits to major Rhine- and Main-region collections of art and antiquities in a manner that highlights, albeit anecdotally, an increasing focus on ordered collections as against what Goethe called a "chaos of ruins" (qtd. in Crane, "Curious Cabinets" 77). In 1813, Goethe expressed his disappointment at the disorder that reigned in the collection of Ferdinand Franz Wallraf, a professor in Bonn who assembled his possessions, according to Goethe, "without any methodical sensibility or love of order" (76).<sup>4</sup> Two years later, on the other hand, Goethe praised collector Franz Pick, Wallraf's apparent opposite in collecting practices. In Goethe's words, Pick

has conscientiously collected each and every antique thing that came into his hands, which would be enough of a service, but he has served an even greater purpose in that he has earnestly and wittily, sensitively and cleverly brought order to a chaos of ruins, enlivened them and made them useful and enjoyable... . One looks through the collection with ever changing interests, which each time necessarily take a historical direction. (77)

Goethe's admiration of the collection-as-history here is crucial and prefigures later, explicitly history-minded exhibitions. Crane reminds us that E.H. Toelken, the director of Berlin's royal antiquities collection, in

1835 excluded objects empty of contextual, historical value. “The new museums” of this time, Crane writes, “wanted to represent history through selected historical objects, which historical value was not determined by sheer age or uniqueness” (“Curious Cabinets” 75). The material object—carefully “selected”—thus becomes the vessel of historical meaning.

Somewhere in between Goethe’s cries for order in 1813 and 1815, and Toelken’s 1835 demands for historicized objects, a collector in Balzac’s Paris would come to his own similar conclusion on collecting. Stephen Bann and Bennett have both rhapsodized this important moment as an “epistemological break” (Bann 71), but it has a special significance in the scope of this essay, because the transformation Bann and Bennett find so compelling happens to bookend, historically speaking, *La Peau de chagrin*’s 1831 publication, in which Balzac’s narrative performs an identical metamorphosis. Bann and Bennett refer to the collection of Alexandre Du Sommerard, eventual curator of Paris’s Musée de Cluny. Balzac was more than aware of Du Sommerard, which makes all the more interesting the thematic links between Balzac’s novels and the idea of collecting.<sup>5</sup> Before his move to “the late Gothic town-house of the Abbots of Cluny,” Bann recounts, Du Sommerard’s collection of antiques was a model of disorder (69). *L’Antiquaire*, an 1825 painting by the artist Charles Caius Renoux (1795–1846), depicts Du Sommerard in the midst of his chaotic collection “of objects crammed into a small space, with armour and fire-arms invading the carpet.” All of this changed with his move to Cluny, according to Bann, who draws from contemporary journalistic evaluations of Du Sommerard’s improved display: “Du Sommerard’s collection, as displayed in the Hôtel de Cluny from the early 1830s, was not only a striking spectacle. It was a new experience” (70). Bann attributes the transformation of this collection to “a discernible shift in the character of historical discourse,” a concern to which Du Sommerard’s own correspondence attests (78). Calling Sir Walter Scott “the great Scottish painter,” Du Sommerard praises the writer’s efforts to rekindle interest in the medieval period and argues that “the same means, a methodical collection of the brilliant remains [dépouilles] of our ancestors, would contribute a lively interest to the reading of our chronicles” (qtd. in Bann 67). Du Sommerard’s word *dépouilles* and the idea of remains figure repeatedly in Balzac’s *Peau de chagrin*, but even more arresting is Du Sommerard’s claiming of narrative as a model for the museum.

The language mirrors Goethe’s in its praise of method and history, but the objects here are still servants of or visual aids to history. In this sense, Du Sommerard does not go as far as Friedrich Kruse had just a few years prior. In 1822, Kruse, “one of the founders of the Thuringen-Saxon

historical association for the study of national antiquity, quoted a fellow co-founder approvingly: ‘antiquity does not give us history, collecting does’” (qtd. in Crane, “Story, History” 188).<sup>6</sup> Du Sommerard’s reverence for his version of history introduced order to his collection, but he left it up to the chroniclers like Scott to shoulder the narrative. Balzac’s own narrated collection, in *La Peau de chagrin*, can be only partially accounted for in the space between the chaotic Du Sommerard collection of 1825 and the immaculately curated one of the 1830s, because this later assemblage restricted itself to one historical period. What Du Sommerard’s collections lack—namely, narrative—was already being bestowed upon objects by Kruse and another important figure who identified himself by his production—namely, natural history—rather than by his objects of study. When Baron Georges Cuvier’s stagist theories of a natural history derived from the fossil record are added to Du Sommerard’s ordered Parisian collection, the collision of organized antiques and the historicizing extrapolations of a narrative voice approximates what seems to happen in the antiquities shop at the outset of Balzac’s *Peau de chagrin*, which subjects the material content to a coherent narrative form.<sup>7</sup>

However, the developments of knowledge that participate in this transition do not come without certain costs; even direct participants in this process felt this. A brief assessment of these perceived losses demonstrates how the birth of the museum and the death of the collection of curiosities are inseparable from the paradox of Said’s with which we began, and from the related debate surrounding the function of empiricism and enchantment in the imperial project. Hooper-Greenhill’s claim that “Museums which emerged during the nineteenth century, especially ethnographic and natural history museums, were formed by collections brought to the West from the rest of the world,” can be even more strongly stated (18).<sup>8</sup> As Paula Findlen reminds us, the natural history *museums* were not the only beneficiaries of “the new material abundance that flowed into European cities from all corners of the world”; rather, all of “early modern natural history” was the “product” of these objects acquired by the empire (301). Yet where science advanced, the imagination retreated. The process of what sociologist Max Weber would in 1918 label *Entzauberung*—“disenchantment,” the eradication of mystery through reason and scientific progress (139)—had begun to make itself felt. The museum represents a major part of this process, because it is premised on the most empirical of epistemologies; by presenting the object itself, the museum’s sole purpose is, precisely, to leave nothing to the imagination, leading one scholar bluntly to call the museum “a way of seeing” (Alpers 27). Wilhelm von Humboldt, despite his crucial role in opening collections to the public in

Berlin, was already conscious of the damage being done by such progress by 1804, when Goethe quotes his lament that archaeological knowledge was being won only “at the cost of the imagination” (12.109). This sentiment is loudly echoed in an 1831 introduction to *La Peau de chagrin*.

## Seeing as Knowing: Realism and the Matter of Disenchantment

The negative standard to which natural history is opposed is very often the credulous mystifications of “romance” ...

—Michael McKeon, *Origins of the English Novel*

The dyad of empiricism and enchantment, when mapped onto the shifting status and purpose of the collection of objects in nineteenth-century Europe, becomes troubled, and Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin* makes this trouble a central theme. That this theme is no small, peripheral concern in the novel is amplified by the passionate language of its second preface, which frames the opposition in terms of competing narrative methodologies. At the head of a collection called *Philosophical Novels and Stories* (*Romans et contes philosophiques*), of which *La Peau de chagrin* was to be the prize piece, Balzac’s friend Philarète Chasles sees precisely this problem: “Where is the marvelous? What has faith become? Analysis consumes society by explaining it [ronge la société en l’expliquant]: the more the world ages, the more difficult [pénible] a task narration is” (Balzac 10.1186). The essay goes on to claim the marriage of empirical observation and active imagination as Balzac’s greatest early achievement. It should probably be noted here, as Pierre Citron has done elsewhere, that there is reason to believe that Balzac penned this introduction himself, only to have Chasles sign off on it (10.1185). In the same month, Sainte-Beuve also described *La Peau de chagrin* as a bizarre mix of the scientific and the spiritual, calling it “*fetid and putrid*, spiritual, rotten, illuminated, sparkling and marvelous in its way of seizing the tiniest things and making them shine, of stringing together imperceptible pearls and making them ring out in a clatter of atoms” (1.263, emphases his). Marcel Proust would later claim that Sainte-Beuve had “misunderstood” Balzac (194), but Proust, like Chasles and Sainte-Beuve, cannot avoid marveling at the *Comédie humaine*’s provocative mélange of the senses and the imagination, “this medium-sized reality, too chimerical for life, too down-to-earth [terre à terre] for literature” (202). Balzac’s grappling with these two modes underwrites, one could argue, much of his work, but *La Peau de chagrin* makes the duel between them its fulcrum.

The strange cohabitation—within a near-Eastern talisman found in an antique shop—of the material and the spiritual in the novel asserts itself from the outset. Raphaël de Valentin, a young student in Paris, gambles away his last napoleon, then wanders along the Seine entertaining thoughts of suicide. He enters an antique shop run by an ancient man and two assistants, and exits later in possession of a donkey skin with the alleged power to grant wishes in exchange for years off of the wisher's life. Raphaël, putting his new powers to constructive use, wishes for an orgiastic feast and, in the second of the novel's four parts, this feast takes place while Raphaël narrates his romantic woes, his unrequited love for a woman called Foedora, to his friend Émile. This second part ends with the announcement that Raphaël has inherited a fortune from a long-lost Irish uncle in Calcutta, just as Raphaël's faithful friend Pauline will later become wealthy when her father returns from the Indies a beneficiary of the colonial project. Part Three sees Raphaël safely ensconced in a mansion, hermetically sealed off from anything that could provoke desire in him and thus, through the alleged machinations of the Magic Skin, reduce his life. He throws the skin away only to see it brought back to him, and he finally parades it past a series of scientists, each of whom attempts in turn, and unsuccessfully, to explain the Skin through his own branch of empirical science. Despondent, Raphaël goes to a spa town, wins a duel, returns to Paris, and dies, the trusty Pauline weeping over his body.

So, what does one make of the Magic Skin and of an early novel by a writer seen by some critics<sup>9</sup> as the first novelist of realism? Answers have varied wildly, but two of the most prominent examples illustrate clearly the complex relationship between even the most opposed readings of *La Peau de chagrin*. For example, Tzvetan Todorov begins his famous book on *The Fantastic* with *La Peau de chagrin* and even discusses it in some depth, but Henri Mitterand also uses it as his starting point, in a book on realism. The opposition in these two critics' readings—between the realist enumerative and the fantastic imaginative—recalls the paradox of Said's that is unable to cleanly separate empiricism from enchantment. In very different ways, both Todorov and Mitterand are reading the same material, colonial object, and they both start in the antiquities shop where the object is found. Here, at unavoidable length, is the most famous passage in this episode—the narration of the collection, which is itself perhaps the most famous part of the novel. This is largely the same chunk of text in which Mitterand and Todorov are so interested:

A crowd of sorrowing faces, gracious and terrible, obscure and clear, far and near, gathered in numbers, in myriads, in whole generations. Egypt, rigid and mysterious, arose from her sands in the form of a mummy



swathed in black bandages; then the Pharaohs swallowed up nations, that they might build themselves a tomb; and he beheld Moses and the Hebrews and the desert, and a solemn antique world. Fresh and smooth, a marble statue spoke to him from a twisted column of the pleasure-loving myths of Greece and Ionia. Ah! who would not have smiled with him to see, against the earthen red background, the brown-faced maiden dancing with gleeful reverence before the god Priapus, wrought in the fine clay of an Etruscan vase? The Latin queen caressed her chimera. The whims of Imperial Rome were there in life, the bath was disclosed, the toilette of a languid Julia, dreaming, waiting for her Tibullus. Strong with the might of Arabic talismans, the head of Cicero evoked memories of a free Rome, and unrolled before him the scrolls of Titus Livius. The young man beheld *Senatus Populusque Romanus*; consuls, lictors, togas with purple fringes; the fighting in the Forum, the angry people, passed in review before him like the cloudy faces of a dream. [Mitterand stops citing here.] Then Christian Rome dominated these images. A painter had laid heaven open; he beheld the Virgin Mary wrapped in a golden cloud among the angels, shining more brightly than the sun, receiving the prayers of sufferers, on whom this second Eve Regenerate smiles pityingly. At the touch of a mosaic, made of various lavas from Vesuvius and Etna, his fancy fled to the hot tawny south of Italy. He was present at Borgia's orgies, he roved among the Abruzzi, sought for Italian love intrigues, grew ardent over pale faces and dark, almond-shaped eyes. He shivered over midnight adventures, cut short by the cool thrust of a jealous blade, as he saw a mediaeval dagger with a hilt wrought like lace, and spots of rust like splashes of blood upon it. India and its religions took the shape of the idol with his peaked cap of fantastic form, with little bells, clad in silk and gold. Close by, a mat, as pretty as the bayadere who once lay upon it, still gave out a faint scent of sandal wood. His soul was awakened by a goggle-eyed Chinese monster, with mouth awry and twisted limbs, the invention of a people who, grown weary of an ever-unified beauty, find an indescribable pleasure in the fecundity of ugliness. A salt-cellar from Benvenuto Cellini's workshop carried him back to the Renaissance at its height, to the time when there was no restraint on art or morals, when torture was the sport of sovereigns; and from their councils, churchmen with courtesans' arms about them issued decrees of chastity for simple priests. On a cameo he saw the conquests of Alexander, the massacres of Pizarro in a matchbox, and religious wars disorderly, fanatical, and cruel, in the shadows of a helmet. Joyous pictures of chivalry were called up by a suit of Milanese armor, brightly polished and richly wrought; a paladin's eyes seemed to sparkle yet under the visor. (Balzac 10.70–71)

Balzac's enumeration and description of these objects culminates in the arrival of the Magic Skin. The text quickly marks the shop off as a locus of enchantment, as Raphaël is said to "leave real life, climb by degrees

toward an ideal world,” but this enchantment is contained within material objects and will finally be subsumed within scientific discourse (Balzac 10.70). First described as a “chaos of antiquities” [chaos d’antiquités]—a phrase that recalls Goethe’s assessment of Wallraf’s chaotic collection as well as the idea of cosmological beginnings—the rational gazes of Raphaël and the narrator serve to organize chaos into material history, to give form to the store’s inchoate content (Balzac 10.69). Once this process has begun, the individual artifacts in the room become recognizable points in a distinctly occidental historiography: Egyptian mummies reference the Hebrew Exodus, whence we move to Greece and Rome, witness the advent of Christianity fading into the Italian Renaissance, at which point Europe encounters the Orient, and India and China enter the picture. Images of violent empire ensue, first through Alexander and then Pizarro. Finally, moving into the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the anatomist and collector Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731) collides with artists like Jean Goujon (ca. 1510–ca. 1565) and images of newly acquired territories like Tahiti and Illinois (Balzac 10.72). A number of critics have ignored the manner in which Raphaël and Balzac’s narrator organize the chaos merely by perusing *in a certain sequence* the objects presented. Nicole Cazauran sees the store having “neither order nor reason” (93), Mitterand writes of “the incoherence of the scene [tableau]” (28), Leo Bersani opines that “continuous historical time” is “undermined by a mass of unrelated objects from different periods and different places” (71), and Samuel Weber claims that “the tableau is as confused as the casino is clear” (35). David Bell specifically warns against the idea of order in the shop, writing instead of a “semantics of disorder” (*Circumstances* 187).<sup>10</sup> In effect, though, the antiques create a roughly chronological history of civilization as seen through Western eyes. The one glaring anachronism here is, importantly, Alexander’s imperial expansion, which is grouped alongside Pizarro’s “massacres”; in placing these thematically similar events together, out of sequence, Balzac highlights the theme of (imperial) violence rather than its mere historical place. The narrator will, shortly thereafter, laud paleontologist Cuvier, whose stagist interpretations of the fossil record are accurately reconstructed in the stagist, material-based history offered by the antiquities in *La Peau de chagrin*.

The emphasis on collected material here is only part of a broader empiricism being contested within the novel, and the fascinating owner of the antique shop merits a closer look. He is, on a superficial level, both the purveyor of the collection and the one who offers to Raphaël the titular object that will dictate the course of the novel. Moreover, as the shopkeeper tells his own history, he awakens Balzac’s readers to the duel

of ideas they are to witness. In a lengthy speech in which he opposes *pouvoir* (to be able) and *vouloir* (to want), *voir* (to see) and *savoir* (to know), the merchant reveals that he has traveled the world, wanted everything, experienced everything, seen everything, and known everything (10.85–87). Critics have focused on the opposition of *pouvoir* and *vouloir*, largely because they come up more frequently in the speech, and probably also because it is revealed later in the novel that Raphaël is the author of a treatise on the will (*volonté*). The shopkeeper, however, scorns these concerns: “What is madness, if not an excess of desire or power?” (Balzac 10.87). And if *voir* and *savoir* are not dealt with as extensively within the shopkeeper’s harangue, it is because they are more important questions within the overall novel’s wrestling with an empirical—and especially optical—epistemology. “Is not to see, to know?” [*Voir, n’est-ce pas savoir?*], the old man asks Raphaël (Balzac 10.86). This fundamental question of vision and knowledge drives *La Peau de chagrin* even if Raphaël is not yet aware of it: “I want to live with excess!” he cries, seizing the Magic Skin, choosing *vouloir* and *pouvoir* over *voir* and *savoir* (Balzac 10.87). “Is not to see, to know?,” though, is the same question answered by the development of the museum as a tool for or repository of knowledge. The shop’s owner finishes his lecture by degrading vision and interrogating the empirical predilection he adduces earlier. His proposition that vision is knowledge presupposes both a sensory epistemology and the notion that *savoir* is an unquestioned good, which Balzac’s novel will relentlessly problematize and finally question outright.

There is another level, though, to Balzac’s simultaneous deployment and wariness of scientific models and the urge for clarity. The mode of natural history most closely associated with Cuvier—who is lauded by *La Peau de chagrin* as well as by Balzac’s master preface to the *Comédie humaine*—wielded its narrative powers in the interest of explanation, as a means of linking diachronic events or objects causally. The relevance for typical understandings of realist narrative is clear: if a causal explanation trusts the possible and prizes the probable,<sup>11</sup> the sort of aesthetic probability often termed *vraisemblance* can be understood as a causally acceptable set of narrative moments, what Preston Dargan calls “harmony” and “accumulation” in his essay on Balzac’s realism (1), a notion echoed more recently in Dällenbach’s idea of the “regularity and insistence” of Balzac’s descriptions (28). Buchanan has discussed the Enlightenment roots of this variety of historiography, and she points to its adoption by antiquarians in the early nineteenth century as a means of vindicating a hobby being slowly supplanted by art collection (171). Many authors make merely superficial metaphorical reference to scientific practice, Buchanan

declares, in their efforts “to link antiquarianism with the associations brought to mind by science,” and one could include Scott’s 1816 novel, *The Antiquary* (172). Other authors, however, lean on scientific imagery in what amounts to “a statement of methodological intent,” and, although Buchanan does not elaborate on this group, one would have to number Balzac among them. Indeed, a number of Balzac’s admirers have envisioned him as the sort of explainer that Cuvier aspired to be; Proust’s pithy comment is useful here, that Balzac’s “style does not suggest, does not reflect [reflète]: it explains” (207). Such appreciations complicate Martin Kemp’s argument, in *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art*, that *explanation* has been the property of science as against art’s penchant for *illusion*. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen counter that “both groups [i.e., scientists and artists] were engaged in a struggle to make sensory knowledge of nature authoritative” (14). Balzac’s *Peau de chagrin* contributes to this exchange by contextualizing the moment at which the artist begins to shamelessly envision herself or himself as a scientist or natural historian, the moment at which the artist attempts to explain *and* entertain—or to reveal the fruits of empirical observation and the active imagination, to return to the language of Chasles’s introduction to the novel.

Coherence is the immediate consequence of *La Peau de chagrin*’s catalogue of the merchant’s antique collection, as the quasi-mystical ecstasy of exotic and ancient things is apparently brought under the historian’s umbrella. This scene merely serves as precursor to a more sustained duel between history and mystery, though. Raphaël, hesitating, “remained in the philosophical doubt recommended by Descartes, and was thus, in spite of himself, under the power of those inexplicable hallucinations whose mysteries are condemned by our pride or that our impotent science strives in vain to analyze” (Balzac 10.77). This is strong language, but Balzac’s narrator overturns it moments later, depicting reason’s disenchantment as even stronger. The narrator rationalizes away Raphaël’s reaction through a variety of biologizing and psychologizing sluices:

If he let himself be momentarily dominated by a belief worthy of children listening to their nurses’ tales, one must attribute this error to the veil stretched over his life and his understanding by his meditations, to the exhaustion of his irritated nerves, to the violent drama whose scenes had just heaped on him all the horrid pleasures contained in a piece of opium. This vision had taken place in Paris, on the Quai Voltaire, in the nineteenth century, times and places where magic should be impossible. (Balzac 10.79)

This sort of moment is repeated later in the century. The butler Gabriel Betteredge in Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone* (1868), for example, protests another character's idea of "a conspiracy of living rogues, set loose on us by the vengeance of a dead man" (33). "Whoever heard the like of it," Betteredge asks, "in the nineteenth century, mind; in an age of progress, and in a country which rejoices in the blessings of the British constitution?" (Collins 33) As in *La Peau de chagrin*, magic's impossibility is explained by the narrative present and the characteristics of the narrative's domestic space. Raphaël's reasoned dismissal turns to history in order to conclude with the observation that Napoleon had had similarly emotional effects on people, and that those effects were certainly not magical. Raphaël awakens from his reveries, "bec[omes] a man again, recognize[s] in the old man a creature of flesh, quite alive, in no way phantasmagorical, and live[s] again in the real world" (Balzac 10.79). At this point, the narrative has been tempted by and resisted mystery, and the talisman is imported into the text.

The elderly shopkeeper offers the Magic Skin to Raphaël as a means of curing his woes, but Balzac goes to great lengths to make it clear that this object is something entirely other. It is interesting that, in the writing of the novel, geographical and cultural specificity seems to have been far less important to Balzac's envisioning the Skin than the mere fact of its Eastern origin. In early drafts of *La Peau de chagrin*, the talisman was said to be engraved in Sanskrit. The lengthy Arabic citation engraved on the Skin and reproduced by the text of the novel today was a later addition, one that Balzac borrowed from an Orientalist friend in Vienna; the Arabic text went prominently into the novel, but Balzac forgot to change, in subsequent editions, the word "sanskrit" to "arabe" (10.84). Scholars have long since noted this carelessness for its own sake—Alois Richard Nykl was the first, in 1919—but clearly it reveals as well that the crucial thing for Balzac was simply that the Skin come from *an* outside. If one wishes to push the angle of imperialism in the novel, then the shift from Sanskrit to Arabic strengthens the case by dint of France's interests in the Middle East at the time. The narrator further separates the talisman from the Western tradition by contrasting Eastern fables with figures like the Sphinx and the Griffin, "whose existence is in some way mythologically admitted" (Balzac 10.83). Balzac waffled, in the various editions of *La Peau de chagrin* that were published in the 1830s, between referring to these canonical figures as "mythologically" or "scientifically" admitted, just as he would later strike the adjective "orientale" in favor of "talismanique" (10.1250). Such slippage suggests a notion of science as the property of

the West—one recalls similar views amongst postcolonial critics—as much as it hints at an elision of things Oriental and things supernatural.

The status of the Magic Skin remains in question throughout the novel: Is it a natural object or a supernatural phenomenon? The glow that seems to emanate from it is quickly explained away “mathematically” by Raphaël, before he has even taken it out of the shop (Balzac 10.82). When he tries to scrape the Arabic writing off of the talisman and is unable to do so, he also accounts for this strange fact scientifically, by claiming that “the industry of the Orient has some secrets that are truly unique to it” (Balzac 10.83). He says this in a worried tone, though, his certainty in science shaken, and with good cause, for, before he has gotten far from the shop, his first wish—for a dinner feast—seems to have been granted. Other fulfilled wishes follow in the forms of wealth, and then victory in a duel, yet in the granting of this first wish Raphaël sees a “natural” stringing-together of events rather than “the accomplishment of his wishes,” and he is not the only one to betray skepticism (Balzac 10.92). Todorov maintains that

None of Raphaël's desires is realized in an unlikely fashion. The banquet he requests had already been arranged by his friends; the money comes to him in the form of a legacy; the death of his adversary in a duel can be explained by the fear Raphaël's own calm provokes [he is only calm, of course, because he is already convinced of his own impending doom]; lastly, Raphaël's own death is due, apparently, to phthisis and not to supernatural causes. Only the skin's extraordinary properties openly confirm the intervention of the marvelous. (68)

Todorov asserts here what the novel bears out as well: that there is nothing in the events of *La Peau de chagrin* that does not conform to an empirical notion of what is possible and can be explained through natural causes, an observation that could potentially drain the magic out of both Balzac's novel and the text inscribed in Arabic on the talisman.

The material, however, does maintain its mystery. *La Peau de chagrin* uses its central, Oriental object to claim a path between the epistemology of enumerative empiricism that constructs the collection, and the epistemology of imaginative mysticism that describes a talisman outside of history. The passage of Todorov's cited above can be read as a partial concession to the material base of the fantastic that Todorov wants to see in Balzac. But Mitterand—the scholar of realism—makes a similar concession in the other direction, labeling Balzac's particular realism in *La Peau de chagrin* a “fantastique des choses” (11). The critical unease here and elsewhere<sup>12</sup> is apt in assessments of a novel that exhibits its own