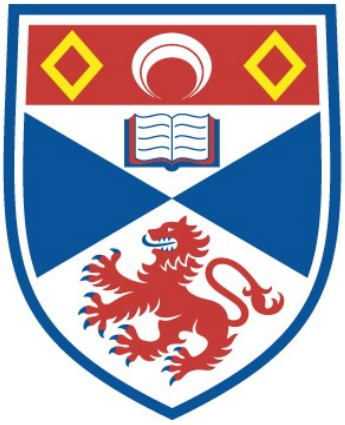
READING THE FANTASTIC : THE NARRATIVE FICTION OF BARBEY D'AUREVILLY

Andrew Patrick McKeown

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



1996

Reading the Fantastic: the narrative fiction of Barbey d'Aurevilly

Andrew Patrick McKeown

A thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of St Andrews

February 1996

Th C 6

Declaration

I, Andrew Patrick McKeown, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 75,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

date 28.02.96 signature of candidate ..

I was admitted as a research student in October 1991 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in October 1992; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1991 and 1996.

date 28.02.96 signature of candidat

Certification

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

date 28/2/96 signature of supervisor ..

Copyright

In submitting this thesis to the University of St Andrews I understand that I am giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not being affected thereby. I also understand that the title and abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any bona fide library or research worker.

date 28.02.96 signature of candidate ..

Abstract

Although Barbey's handling of the Fantastic has certainly not been overlooked, studies tend to examine this subject from a conceptual or thematic perspective. This has left unexplored the relationship between the Fantastic and Barbey's way of writing; this study aims to fill that gap by offering a stylistic analysis of the Fantastic.

The thesis approaches the question by first attempting to define how the Fantastic works, and concludes by proposing the principle of a dynamic flux between writing of the real and the unreal. From this premise, the study of Barbey's Fantastic questions first the presence of realist discourse in the texts, and offers a *critique* of the traditional view which suggests that Barbey borrows from nineteenth-century realist orthodoxy. In its place, a broader form of *mimesis* is proposed. Following this, the thesis examines how Barbey's fiction works at counterpoint to the mimetic code, undermining and destabilising the illusion of *vraisemblance*. In so doing, the peculiarities of narrative technique are promoted as germane to the voicing of textual doubt. Then, Barbey's rhetoric is considered, offering a reading of how verbal exorbitance weakens the relationship with the *signified*. After this, Barbey's attempts to re-write *differences* are examined, a trend which provokes a crisis in the differential foundations of human understanding.

The thesis concludes by examining how these principles work within the *nouvelle Léa*. This discussion indicates how the Fantastic demands to be read as a whole textual entity and not as a sporadic mode, and suggests that it is only in endless and unchecked interpretation-- reading-- that the meaning of the Fantastic is to be grasped.

Acknowledgements

Work of this sort inevitably casts a wide net and picks up many debts in its course. Among those to whom I am indebted, I would like to thank the following in particular: Professor Malcolm Scott, my supervisor, whose good-humoured encouragement and advice proved indispensable in the preparation of this thesis; M. Philippe Berthier, whose suggestions regarding critical works were gratefully received; the Librarian and staff at both the St Andrews University Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris; the School of Modern Languages, St Andrews, whose financial assistance helped to make research materially possible; Mr Joe Carson, for his good-natured help with word-processing; Mr Nigel Saint, for his help with references; my family, whose support benefited me in numerous ways; finally, Sophie Dieuzeide, who, while tirelessly correcting the final draft, also offered the support and companionship which made the seclusion of research bearable.

Abbreviations

To avoid the tedium of copious notes, abbreviated details of texts and page numbers accompany quotations wherever possible in the text. Details of editions used are to be found in the Bibliography. These abbreviated forms are as follows:

B	--	*La Revue des Lettres Modernes-- Série Barbey d'Aurevilly*, 15 vols.
CG	--	Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Correspondance générale*, 9 vols.
OH	--	----*Les œuvres et les hommes*, 26 vols.
ORC	--	----*Œuvres romanesques complètes*, 2 vols.

References to individual fictional works are shortened as follows:

Cachet	--	*Le Cachet d'onyx.*
Léa	--	*Léa.*
Bague	--	*La Bague d'Annibal.*
Maîtresse	--	*Une vieille maîtresse.*
Ensorcelée	--	*L'Ensorcelée.*
Prêtre	--	*Un prêtre marié.*
Diaboliques	--	*Les Diaboliques.*
Rideau	--	*Le Rideau cramoisi.*
Don Juan	--	*Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan.*
Bonheur	--	*Le Bonheur dans le crime.*
Dessous	--	*Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist.*
Dîner	--	*A un dîner d'athées.*
Vengeance	--	*La vengeance d'une femme.*

Histoire -- *Une histoire sans nom.*

Page -- *Une page d'histoire.*

Note to the text: on matters of style, the text conforms to the guidelines set out in the *MHRA Style Book,* 4th edn (Leeds: Maney & Son, 1991).

Contents

Introduction

Anthologies of Fantastic literature, such as that compiled by Pierre-Georges Castex[1], inevitably create the impression that the genre is defined by momentary appearances of the Supernatural, its gallery of ghosts and groaning gravestones. Of course, these supernatural moments are a crucial defining feature. But it would be wrong, and drastically reductive, to assume that the Fantastic is limited to such moments of the unreal. It is the hypothesis of this study that the literary Fantastic, as seen in the works of Barbey d'Aurevilly, possesses a discrete textual language, an organic unity where the principal characteristics of the supernatural moment (to be defined fully below) are, in a sense, felt as after-shock, emanating outwards across the entire text. As such, momentary manifestations of the unreal, the Supernatural, are seen to re-define notionally neutral elements of the text, producing in their interaction a challenging form of discourse capable of mediating the conflict between real and unreal: I call this form of discourse the Fantastic.

The Fantastic was born in the shape of a luckless ass. Although Lucius' transformation into a hapless donkey, in Apuleius'

---

1 *Anthologie du conte fantastique français*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex (Paris: Corti, 1963).

Metamorphoses, no doubt drew on countless ancient fables and a timeless oral tradition, critics nevertheless see in this text the catalyst of a relationship between fantasy and everyday reality by which the modern Fantastic has become known:

> Écrivant les *Métamorphoses*, Apulée donnait ainsi, assurément à son insu, ses lettres de noblesse [...] au genre à venir du fantastique [...].[2]

While other writers and other texts, such as Petronius and the *Satyricon*, may compete for the title of founding Fantastic text, Apuleius' distillation of the real and the unreal within a prototype form of narrative fiction is generally agreed to have provided the first distinctive essay in the genre. In addition to its defining duality, the *Metamorphoses* also established the principal themes on which later writers would base their vision of the Fantastic:

> [...] [les] pouvoirs surnaturels, la force du rêve envahissant le réel, les avatars du sujet transformé, la puissance de l'illusion.[3]

As Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* illustrates, in origin there was nothing necessarily malevolent in the Fantastic: the hero's bawdy adventures, though unfortunate, are resolved in equanimity in the blessings of the goddess Isis, who takes pity on Lucius and turns him back into a man. However, from the late Roman period to the nineteenth-century context in which this study is set, the relationship between the real and the unreal changed as the nature of supernatural power was drastically transformed. The Christian epic, which adopted the duality of the early Fantastic, replaced Apuleius' optimism with an appreciably crueller depiction of other worlds. *Sir Gawain and the Green*

---

[2] Jean-Luc Steinmetz, *La littérature fantastique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), p. 37.
[3] Steinmetz, *La littérature fantastique*, p. 37.

Knight, for example, describes a punishing and blood-thirsty version of the Supernatural and it is only by stealth that Gawain avoids gory destruction. If Rabelais' *Gargantua* still echoes the humour of Apuleius' Fantastic, the genre was nonetheless moving inexorably towards a more wanton mode of the Supernatural. In the *histoires prodigieuses* popularised by Boaistuau and Rosset, the optimistic relationship with unseen powers dissolved altogether and was replaced by a more lugubrious vision which the Elizabethan theatre in England, in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, did much to foster. While the mix of fantasy and reality remained occasionally light-hearted, in, for example, Lesage's *Le Diable boiteux*, by the end of the eighteenth century the Fantastic text was all but monopolised by supernatural malefactors. In Beckford, Walpole, Radcliffe and especially Lewis, the Anglo-Saxon world offered ever bleaker visions of the unknown. In France, the impact of the new gothic form was initially attenuated by the more suggestive works of Hoffmann who provided direct inspiration for those writers principally associated with the French Fantastic: Gautier, Nodier, Mérimée and Nerval. Nevertheless, in the second half of the nineteenth century, French writers looked increasingly to Edgar Poe's more febrile version of the Fantastic; the morbid works of Villiers and Maupassant on which the century ended are in many ways a tribute to him.

The evolution towards a more punishing form of the Supernatural coincides with the emergence of Barbey d'Aurevilly. In his critical works, Barbey demonstrated an unequivocal sympathy for the gothic forms imported from northern Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century: Anne Radcliffe, he wrote, was a 'femme de génie' (CG III, 112). Barbey saw in this new wave the means to challenge and

subvert what he considered to be the ruling materialist orthodoxy which, of course, the novel itself was now allied to:

> Au Nord comme au Midi, l'Europe, dégoûtée de matérialisme et de littérature *positive*, avait soif de surnaturel, la vraie poésie. (OH XII, 186).

His antipathies naturally directed him towards a particular and decidedly partisan relationship with the Fantastic. While Gautier and Nodier praised (and often imitated) Hoffmann, Barbey was somewhat sceptical of his talents, seeing in the German writer a reluctance to deal directly in the Supernatural:

> Chez lui, le fantastique demeure à l'état subjectif et vague, et par là, sans qu'il le sût, la notion s'en trouve altérée. (OH XII, 191).

For similar reasons, Barbey was noticeably lukewarm in his reception of Gautier (OH IV, 295-308), Mérimée (OH IV, 323-36) and Gogol (OH IV, 367-80).

The writer who fully stimulated Barbey's imagination was Edgar Poe, 'Le premier et le meilleur, à sa manière, de cette littérature effrénée et solitaire' (OH IV, 339). He saw in Poe the fulfilment of the 'comédie de terreur' that Anne Radcliffe had brought to the Fantastic (OH XII, 191), and it was Poe who typified its ability to delve into the unseen forces of an extra-material dimension:

> Le génie panique d'Edgar Poe [...] la peur et ses transes, la curiosité et ses soifs, la peur et la curiosité du surnaturel dont on doute [...]. (OH IV, 344).

There was, however, in the American's dealings with the Supernatural an important and defining sticking-point: the rational explanation. In his discussion of *The Gold Bug*, Barbey attacks the writer's decision to explain the seemingly inexplicable powers of the scarab, tracing this

return to the order of reason to Poe's unbreakable ties with the utilitarian and, above all, Protestant heritage of America:

> Dans *le Scarabée d'or*, après avoir commencé par les vertiges de l'Incompréhensible, Edgar Poe finit par s'asseoir paisiblement dans les explications naturelles. Cet esprit, pétri par le protestantisme, fait [...] ce que le protestantisme fait à propos de tout: au lieu de se *confier*, il se *défie*, et il en appelle à la Raison qui glose et explique. (OH XII, 357-58).

In Poe, Barbey saw a true talent thwarted by 'les folies d'une époque et d'un pays matérialiste' (OH IV, 344), producing a form of the Fantastic whose interest was purely momentary: 'Tout cela [...] n'a qu'une prise d'un moment sur l'imagination' (OH IV, 344).

His critical interest in the genre demonstrates, therefore, two overriding considerations. In his praise of the Anglo-Saxon gothic form, Barbey points to the theme of horror that his own fiction enshrines: hearts roasting on a spit (*Ensorcelée*), mutilated genitals (*Dîner*) and internal organs perforated by needles (*Histoire*). More importantly, his analysis of Poe indicates how, in his view, the Fantastic should be composed, namely by sustaining throughout the text what he called the 'foi au surnaturel' (OH XII, 190). The exclusion of rational explanations, anticipating later definitions of the Fantastic, is, without doubt, the essence of Barbey's aesthetic.[4]

Barbey's own Fantastic writing has attracted challenging and perceptive interpretations. The antagonism towards Poe's Protestantism and what he sees as the destruction of mystery that goes with it, unerringly suggests a religious dimension in Barbey's Fantastic. Indeed,

---

[4] Barbey's 'foi au surnaturel' echoes the 'surnaturel accepté' on which Tzvetan Todorov bases his definition of the Fantastic: Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 29.

in preparation of *Ensorcelée*, he assured his friends that his 'fantastique nouveau' would produce 'un effet catholique' (CG III, 112). This relationship forms the basis of Malcolm Scott's penetrating recent study.[5] While the Fantastic has retained its primordial duality throughout its colourful evolution, the novel, at least until the nineteenth century, has moved increasingly toward an exclusive relationship with the material and non-spiritual side of reality. This divergence represents the problematic of Scott's investigation: how does the novel voice spiritual meaning given its anti-spiritual tendency? Scott's solution is to be found in the Fantastic itself, operating as a mode within otherwise realist discourse, enabling writers like Barbey to pursue the supernatural element of religious experience while simultaneously keeping their feet on solid realist ground.

Other responses to Barbey's Fantastic have chosen to describe its thematic significance. For Philippe Berthier, the Supernatural represents a direct link to Swedenborgian philosophy which Barbey assimilated largely via Balzac.[6] In this context, Berthier describes how Barbey employs visionary forms of consciousness (such as Calixte's sleepwalking in *Prêtre*) to articulate a spiritual communication with other worlds-- the *correspondances* adopted by other writers later in the century. Aside from Barbey's interest in the obscure philosophies that were very much the spirit of the age in the Romantic period, Berthier also points out that the originality of Barbey's Fantastic is to be found in his treatment of Norman folklore and superstition. In many ways, the 'return' to Normandy marks a watershed in Barbey's fiction, allowing him to indulge his 'foi au surnaturel' in what he considered to be a concrete setting, where the non-rational was paradoxically part of

---

[5] Malcolm Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
[6] Philippe Berthier, *Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'imagination* (Geneva: Droz, 1978), p. 255.

everyday reality. Berthier underlines this discovery as central to Barbey's Fantastic, providing the themes of magic and witchcraft which he would later transplant, symbolically but no less effectively, to the salons of *Diaboliques*.

Whereas Scott and Berthier examine Barbey's Fantastic as part of a serious and authentic literary credo, others are apt to deflate the question by treating the Supernatural as little more than a stylistic effect: 'Ce n'est plus une thèse, c'est un climat'.[7] According to Pierre Colla, Barbey's Fantastic suffers from what he sees as a conflict between 'sincérité' and 'affectation'[8]; as such, its meaning is relegated to simple shock tactics:

> Or la recherche de l'effet est un trait évident de l'art aurevillien. Le mystérieux et l'inquiétant lui fournissent le moyen d'y arriver.[9]

Even more damning, the Fantastic is merely 'la «couleur locale» des récits du Cotentin'.[10] Colla's reading of Barbey is no doubt an easy target: in criticising the *possibility* of a rational explanation in *Ensorcelée*, he patently misses the duality of fact and fancy that the Fantastic has always clung to:

> [...] il espère donner à son fantastique un cachet «nouveau». Mais il n'a pas osé soutenir jusqu'au bout cette attitude et s'est toujours ménagé, au cours du roman, la possibilité de se retrancher dans les bornes du rationnel.[11]

Colla's approach is, however, sadly symptomatic: far too often, both in and outside the Fantastic context, Barbey struggles for credibility.

---

[7] Pierre Colla, *L'Univers tragique de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Brussels: La Renaissance du livre, 1965), p. 79.
[8] Colla, *L'Univers tragique de Barbey d'Aurevilly*, p. 80.
[9] Colla, *L'Univers tragique de Barbey d'Aurevilly*, p. 81.
[10] Colla, *L'Univers tragique de Barbey d'Aurevilly*, p. 85.
[11] Colla, *L'Univers tragique de Barbey d'Aurevilly*, p. 87.

In terms of his work as a whole, Barbey has proved good sport for the sneering of the critical establishment. Berthier's apologetic opening question to his doctoral thesis on Barbey shows the extent of the pejorative accepted wisdom: 'Faut-il s'excuser?' he asks, as if his subject were somehow unworthy of discussion.[12] Barbey's literary minnow's crisis of credibility dates back at least as far as Flaubert:

> [...] lisez donc [...] les *Diaboliques* de mon ennemi Barbey d'Aurevilly. C'est à se tordre de rire.[13]

He himself was convinced that the reputation of his fictional output suffered because of the vigour of his critical blasts and even claimed that the *procès* initiated against the *Diaboliques* was a conspiracy set up by his enemies:

> J'avais été dénoncé au Procureur Général par des ennemis comme j'ai le bonheur d'en avoir et qui voulaient faire payer au Romancier la rigueur du Critique. (CG VII, 262).

He was, no doubt, largely to blame for the acrimony which coloured the blast and counter-blast in the circles he shared with Flaubert, Hugo and Zola. This has left us with an enduring image of unfettered boorishness on which, sadly, both man and work are too often judged as one. As Berthier's question points out, not without some form of cap-touching to good taste do we approach Barbey d'Aurevilly.

In the twentieth century, Barbey has, until recently, fared little better. In Mario Praz's view, voiced in 1933, he is a 'licentious writer', an opinion which smacks of the moral piety and censoriousness that we might otherwise expect of nineteenth-century cardinals drawing up the

---

12 Berthier, *Imagination*, p. XI.
13 Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance* 9 vols (Paris: Conard, 1926-33), VII, 224.

Index.[14] For Richard Griffiths, on the other hand, Barbey is simply not to be taken seriously at all. His Catholicism was 'one more pose among many',[15] forming, in Griffiths' view, yet another of the affectations in 'that elaborate world of make-believe' that Barbey created.[16] In what is an unremitting carve-up, Griffiths distils Barbey's life and work into a brief and tasteless draught of 'dilettantism'; in his estimation, Barbey was even guilty of 'false dandyism'.[17] Significantly, he also rounds on Barbey's style, petitioning the gods of good taste in his *critique* of verbal flamboyance:

> Barbey is as intransigent and violent as Veuillot in his opinions, yet the highly-coloured nature of his style weakens rather than strengthens his effect.[18]

However, the appearance of Griffiths' book in 1966 represents, quite literally, the last word on old-school Barbey thinking. While he was putting Barbey to the sword, Jacques Petit was resurrecting the enigmatic writer by providing what had always been missing: a reliable and complete corpus of both fictional and critical writing. From manuscript form in many cases, Petit assembled not only two *Pléiade* volumes of narrative fiction and poetry, but, more Herculean still, he also initiated both the collected correspondence and the reprint of Barbey's famously irreverent journalism in twenty-six volumes. This meant that the state of ignorance on which the Praz/Griffiths orthodoxy had played could now be challenged. Certainly, in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, Peter Yarrow had already initiated the process by showing that there was something politically and religiously interesting in Barbey

---

[14] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 347.
[15] Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution* (London: Constable, 1966), p. 98-99.
[16] Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, p. 98.
[17] Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, p. 98.
[18] Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, p. 84.

beyond the dogmas of morals and taste.[19] Equally, Brian Rogers demonstrated that the exaggerated forms of Barbey's fiction are of interest to the critic in so far as they voice the conflicts of an emotional underworld which others such as Baudelaire had also described.[20]

The 1960s, then, witnessed the birth of a mini Barbey revival on both sides of the channel. On the strength of this, in the 1970s, Barbey's texts became the centre of attention for new schools of deconstructionist criticism. Focusing on the ambiguities of his narrative technique, Pierre Tranouez and others re-read Barbey in the light of the *nouveau roman*, proposing stimulating interpretations of what they saw as a self-reflexive and self-destructive form of discourse. Equally important in that decade was the appearance of Berthier's *Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'imagination*, which threw new light on Barbey's treatment of identity, the duality of body and spirit and, most engagingly, the troubled nature of sexuality. In the 1980s, the Barbey industry had grown to trans-Atlantic proportions; embracing the difficult nature of realism in his work, Naomi Schor re-assessed Barbey's position in the nineteenth century, offering new readings of his depiction of women.[21] This rapport with the realist doctrines of his age also supplied the starting-point for Malcolm Scott's enquiry into the Catholic meaning of Barbey's fiction, a discussion which convincingly overturns Griffiths' accusation of 'dilettantism'. The colloquium organised to mark the centenary of Barbey's death in 1989 typified the renewed interest that he has enjoyed since the 1960s: with contributions from North America, Europe, Africa and the Near East, Barbey was no longer the unfashionable literary minnow.

---

[19] Peter Yarrow, *La pensée religieuse et politique de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Geneva: Droz, 1961).
[20] Brian Rogers, *The Novels and Stories of Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Geneva: Droz, 1967).
[21] Naomi Schor, *Breaking the chain. Women, Theory and French Realist fiction* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985).

As it stands today, Barbey scholarship is very much a broad church. Although the prose continues to command most interest, his poetic innovations have also recently attracted attention, relating his work to the evolution of the prose-poem.[22] While his journalism still depends on Petit's major analysis,[23] new avenues of enquiry have opened up which embrace both public and private writing, namely the subject of autobiography.[24] Within the present context, the question of 'Barbey d'Aurevilly and the Fantastic' has been examined by Scott: the central premise of his study is, however, the religious significance of the Supernatural. As for the wider context, 'the Fantastic and Barbey d'Aurevilly', the neglect is too manifest: all major studies of the genre, such as that provided by Pierre-Georges Castex, overlook Barbey in favour of more orthodox figures such as Nerval and Maupassant.[25] There is, then, distinct scope for study of the Fantastic as seen through the prism of Barbey's handling of the genre.

Focusing on Barbey alone, rather than on a number of writers, enables us to examine in depth a fictional output that has largely been ignored by Fantastic scholarship. Furthermore, it allows us to draw into the subject areas of Barbey's work which are often misjudged or are problematic. The Fantastic's ambiguous half-interest in reality, for example, provides the premise for discussion of Barbey's realism. This subject has, in other contexts, already been examined; both Schor and Scott locate Barbey within the evolution of the Balzacian narrative mode.

---

[22] Nichola Haxell, 'Hermaphrodites and Winged Monsters: Images of prose-poetic creation in the writings of Barbey d'Aurevilly', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 4 (1986), 354-64.
[23] Jacques Petit, *Barbey d'Aurevilly critique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1963).
[24] Norbert Dodille, *Le texte autobiographique de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Geneva: Droz, 1987).
[25] Pierre-Georges Castex, *Le conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant* (Paris: Corti, 1951).

Clearly, the duality of the Fantastic depends on some form of realism. In search of this, I will show how Barbey's texts are, in fact, difficult exempla of the nineteenth-century realist creed and are, as a consequence, more comfortably defined in the wider context of *mimesis*. In a similar way, whereas others have defined his narratives as a prototype of the *nouveau roman*, discussing its self-conscious and unreliable properties, I apply that reading to the ambiguities of enunciation that the duality of the Fantastic demands. In addition, Barbey's much maligned prose-style offers new and positive meanings within the Fantastic. Griffiths' accusation of 'false dandyism' is a particularly telling and, in fact, nonsensical remark: dandyism *is* artifice and artificiality. Given that the Fantastic questions rational and 'authentic' verbal meaning in its dealings with fantasy, the artificiality of Barbey's writing patently offers fresh and challenging modes of expression for Fantastic discourse. Finally, the moral and sexual confusion that has occupied the interests of Barbey scholarship, often leading to pious condemnation, is, in fact, central to the Fantastic. Analysing how Barbey challenges traditionally fixed concepts, I will show that the dispolarity in his texts sustains the Supernatural in its attempt to subvert our understanding of reality as a pattern of fixed differences.

Above all, the Fantastic is employed as a point of critical mass, drawing in divergent areas of Barbey studies and producing in that fusion a new and unified meaning for elements that have so far remained disparate and often misunderstood. Having first defined how the Fantastic works, the four elements I indicate above are discussed following the logical pattern implied in that definition. In broad terms, the Fantastic is defined as a dynamic flux between real and unreal. This dichotomy enables us to comment first on the realism in Barbey's work.

Following this, I examine how the unreal is made fictionally possible, in narrative structure, rhetorical style and ambiguous re-casting of differences. In its progression, the argument traces the establishment and subsequent dismantling of reliable meaning.

As stated in the opening paragraph to this introduction, the Fantastic is analysed not solely in terms of supernatural moments but more broadly as a discrete literary language, where its defining antinomy of real versus unreal is uncovered in aspects of discourse which, in isolation, would not be deemed Fantastic but which, in context, can be seen to refract and express the duality of the genre.

In selecting the Fantastic as the point of focus for this study, I leave to one side those of Barbey's texts which are devoid of the Supernatural; this means that *L'Amour impossible*, *Le Chevalier des Touches* and *Ce qui ne meurt pas* are not examined in this thesis. Texts which relate to the Fantastic in terms of gothic horror, that is, *Cachet*, *Bague* and *Page*, are discussed only in support of elements they share with what I define as Barbey's Fantastic corpus: this body of work is indicated in the preceding note on abbreviations.

Finally, a word on the title of the thesis: 'Reading the Fantastic'. Rather than approach the subject from a thematic or historically descriptive angle, I examine instead how the Fantastic generates its meaning and how, in a precise sense, it ensures that it functions as a Fantastic text. This starting-point leads us to investigate the relationship between text and reader; as a challenging form of literary illusion, the Fantastic questions fictional conventions which, themselves, depend on the conventions of interpretation. In this sense, the inevitable question, 'What is the Fantastic?' is more exactly expressed as 'How do we read the Fantastic?' This question is answered in the discussion that follows.

1

Dynamics

[...] cette fraction de la littérature dont le propre est de jouer sur les limites du vérifiable, du possible et de l'impossible.[1]

[...] le récit fantastique est le lieu où s'exerce parfaitement le travail du langage.[2]

To read Barbey d'Aurevilly in the context of the Fantastic necessarily prompts investigation into what is meant by that term. Such enquiry and indeed any attempt at genre definition is of course beset by pitfalls; nevertheless, if, as is the case, we feel free to speak and write of 'the Fantastic' then it is logical to presume that a literary entity of that name exists and that, moreover, it is sufficiently specific and distinct from other literary species as to command a definable make-up of its own: 'Il est constant qu'il y a des préceptes, puisqu'il y a un art'.[3] If we accept this basic working hypothesis then it is reasonable to conclude that the Fantastic, as a verbal and textual entity, possesses its own literary DNA, its own type of *discourse.*

Before setting off in search of this, let us first clarify what is meant by discourse. Classical rules break discourse down into six principal parts-- exordium, proposition, narration, demonstration, refutation and peroration. While certain of these categories will later prove useful (in

---

[1] Max Milner, *La fantasmagorie: essai sur l'optique fantastique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), p. 254.
[2] Irène Bessière, *Le récit fantastique: la poétique de l'incertain* (Paris: Larousse, 1974), p. 13.
[3] Pierre Corneille, 'Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique', in *Writings on the Theatre*, ed. by H. Barnwell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 1-27 (p. 1).

particular, narration and peroration), it is not the aim of this study to define Fantastic discourse by rigorously following Classical divisions. For the purposes of this argument, discourse is understood in broader terms as the way in which a text is constructed or written: how? as opposed to what? As such, it seeks to identify from within the fiction how the Fantastic guarantees its performance *as Fantastic* and borrows the principle of definition put forward by Pierre Larthomas in his discussion of the theatre:

> Il faut bien qu'il y ait dans toutes ces œuvres [...], malgré leur diversité, des éléments communs, qui assurent à leur style son efficacité. Ce sont ces éléments que l'on peut essayer de définir.[4]

* * *

In search of the structures of the Fantastic, rather than beginning this enquiry on a conceptual basis-- an approach widely adopted elsewhere[5]-- I propose instead to proceed from the analysis of commonly agreed definitions. One theory repeatedly formulated is the dialectic between literary spiritualism and exterior materialism, pitting the irrational against the progress of Science and Reason:

> C'est juste au moment où le positivisme bat son plein, que le mysticisme s'éveille et que les folies de l'occulte commencent.[6]

This approach habitually treats the genre as the effect of social, political and ideological causalities in accordance with a line of reasoning articulated by Peter Penzoldt in the following terms: 'Where there is

---

[4] Pierre Larthomas, *Le langage dramatique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972), p. 12.
[5] See, for example, Steinmetz, *La littérature fantastique*, pp. 3-6.
[6] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1988), p. 17.

action there is reaction'.[7] Charles Nodier, writing in 1830, suggests a correlation with a decline in institutional religion, implying that the anti-rational dimension of the genre compensates for the increasingly empiricist trend of society:

> L'apparition des fables recommence au moment où finit l'empire de ces vérités réelles ou convenues qui prêtent un reste d'âme au mécanisme usé de la civilisation. Voilà ce qui a rendu le fantastique si populaire en France depuis quelques années et ce qui en fait la seule littérature essentielle de la décadence ou de la transition où nous sommes parvenus.[8]

Similarly, more recent commentators such as Pierre-Georges Castex cite the legacy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the rise of physical sciences as the impetus behind the Fantastic 'reaction':

> Même au siècle où se répandent les lumières de la «philosophie», des hommes appartenant à toutes les classes de la société aspirent à l'illumination d'une vérité secrète; mécontents des certitudes qu'apporte la science, ils veulent déchiffrer par d'autres voies le mystère universel, et leur curiosité maintient en faveur les doctrines ésotériques.[9]

Irène Bessière on the other hand seems to claim that the Fantastic answers the sense of uncertainty created by post-revolutionary upheavals offering an antidote of mysticism to the perceived evils of the Republican, lay state:

> [...] l'époque romantique post-révolutionnaire avoue son malaise et sa nostalgie de l'équilibre supposé du passé par l'élection de l'invraisemblable et du merveilleux [...].[10]

Other schools of thought suggest that Fantastic literature constitutes a form of Romantic escape in the face of a changing and inhospitable world:

---

[7] Peter Penzoldt, *The supernatural in fiction* (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1952), p.5.
[8] Charles Nodier, 'Du fantastique en littérature', *La Revue de Paris*, 28 November 1830.
[9] Castex, *Le conte fantastique*, p. 13.
[10] Bessière, *Le récit fantastique*, p. 42.

> La génération de 1830 est une génération à la fois inquiète et déçue; sa mélancolie trouve un aliment dans la désillusion qu'entraîne la faillite des idéaux politiques, dans le désarroi que provoque la crise des croyances religieuses, dans le dégoût qu'inspire la tyrannie de l'argent. Beaucoup d'écrivains, sans doute, se refusent au désespoir et, tout en constatant les vices de leur siècle, proclament leur résolution de préparer activement des temps meilleurs. Mais d'autres se détournent d'une réalité dont ils trouvent le spectacle insupportable; ceux-là cherchent souvent dans le mythe une diversion, une consolation, ou encore une image de leur tourment.[11]

Claims similar to the ones made above are to be found in liberal supply in most writing on the Fantastic. The argument that literary forms are shaped by external stimuli is not without its problems, particularly so here, where the implication is that the Fantastic defines itself exclusively in opposition to nineteenth-century European civilisation. How in these circumstances do we explain the presence of the genre in other historical contexts such as the Antique world, which clearly do not share the historical specificity of nineteenth-century Europe, while at the same time demonstrating a marked interest in the Supernatural? It is true that the two periods witnessed a tangible revolution in the progress of human science but this very similarity would seem to suggest that the argument of historical contexts is far too broad to be of much use. Moreover, while the temptation to join the dots between literature, history and society may well prove alluring, it is notoriously 'text-free' (as the examples given above demonstrate) and tells us little of how any given fiction works.

If, however, we apply the spiritualism/materialism dialectic to the text itself, the argument takes on a new pertinence. Rather than suggesting that the struggle as outlined above straddles literature and society and proposing instead that this antagonism is conducted intra-muros, within Fantastic texts, then such a claim would prove more

---

[11] Castex, *Le conte fantastique*, p. 400.

appropriate to our search for the *language* of the Fantastic, and would furthermore pose challenging questions as to the scope and nature of that language.

Consider the following example taken from Barbey's *Rideau*:

> Et il releva la glace qu'il avait baissée, soit qu'il craignît que les sons de sa voix ne s'en allassent par là, et qu'on n'entendît, du dehors, ce qu'il allait raconter, quoiqu'il n'y eût personne autour de cette voiture, immobile et comme abandonnée; soit que ce régulier coup de balai, qui allait et revenait, et qui raclait avec tant d'appesantissement le pavé de la grande cour de l'hôtel, lui semblât un accompagnement importun de son histoire [...].(ORC 2, 24).

The movement of the 'balai' in this extract strongly suggests the marking of Time-- and therefore Space-- and as such indicates a will on the part of the author to imitate reality. That the Fantastic displays such a strong mimetic urge is a point on which there is much critical consensus. Reflecting the confident nineteenth-century appetite for literary diktat, Prosper Mérimée underlines the importance of the realist code in the following categoric terms:

> On sait la recette d'un bon conte fantastique: commencez par des portraits bien arrêtés de personnages bizarres, mais possibles, et donnez à leurs traits la réalité la plus minutieuse. Du bizarre au merveilleux, la transition est insensible et le lecteur se trouvera en plein fantastique avant qu'il ne se soit aperçu que le monde réel est loin derrière lui.[12]

> [...] il ne faut pas oublier que lorsqu'on raconte quelque chose de surnaturel, on ne saurait trop multiplier les détails de la réalité matérielle.[13]

> [...] Hoffmann, dans ses contes fantastiques, amène le merveilleux après une peinture exacte et minutieuse de la vie réelle [...].[14]

---

[12] Prosper Mérimée, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Trahard and Champion, 11 vols (Paris: Champion, 1927-1933), X, 10.
[13] Prosper Mérimée, *Correspondance générale*, ed. by Parturier, 17 vols (Paris: Le Divan, 1941), V, 238.
[14] Mérimée, *Correspondance*, X, 102.

No less equal in conviction, Théophile Gautier also sees the value of *vraisemblance* as central to the articulation of the Fantastic:

> C'est donc à cette réalité dans le fantastique [...] qu'Hoffmann doit la promptitude et la durée de son succès.[15]

For Guy de Maupassant, the language of the genre must overlap with the verifiable domain of the natural world:

> L'extraordinaire puissance terrifiante d'Hoffmann et d'Edgar Poe vient de cette habileté savante, de cette façon particulière de coudoyer le fantastique, et de troubler, avec *des faits naturels* où reste pourtant quelque chose d'inexpliqué et de presque impossible.[16]

For Charles Nodier, the Fantastic is conjugated according to the precepts of Reason, returning us to materialist certainties and the alliances they form in literature with mimetic representation:

> Il y a l'histoire fantastique vraie, qui est la première de toutes parce qu'elle ébranle profondément le cœur sans coûter de sacrifices à la raison [...].[17]

In their various rhetorical voices all the foregoing commentators draw our attention to the mimetic dimension of the genre. However, as the extract presented above reminds us, such confident appropriation of exterior reality is matched by an equally demonstrative urge to propose other, non-material worlds: note how the mimetic focalisation in Barbey's text is considered unwelcome, 'importun', burdensome, 'apesantissement', and is negated in the closing of the window, sealing off the narrative from the outside, real world, implying that what follows is divorced from that context.[18] In this way, the movement of the

---

[15] Théophile Gautier, *Chronique de Paris*, 14 August 1836.
[16] Guy de Maupassant, 'Le Fantastique', *Le Gaulois*, 7 October 1883.
[17] Charles Nodier, *Contes* (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p. 330.
[18] What in fact follows is the account of Alberte's relationship with Brassard and her apparently inexplicable death.

passage re-enacts the tension between the empirically verifiable, the materialist, and the non-verifiable dimension of the Supernatural.

Such points of articulation between the two codes illustrate in emblematic form the broader antagonism on which the Fantastic appears to be based. On the one hand, it assures us of its materialist faith in the form of recognizable, mimetic representation:

> La lande de Lessay est une des plus considérables de cette portion de la Normandie qu'on appelle la presqu'île du Cotentin. Pays de culture, de vallées fertiles, d'herbages verdoyants, de rivières poissonneuses, le Cotentin, cette Tempé de la France, cette terre grasse et remuée, a pourtant, comme la Bretagne, sa voisine, la Pauvresse-aux-Genêts, de ces parties stériles et nues où l'homme passe et où rien ne vient, sinon une herbe rare et quelques bruyères desséchées. (ORC 1, 555).

On other occasions, however, it dispels any such certainty in the promotion of what is blatantly unreal, as here in the presentation of a ghost:

> «Il prit sa tête de mort dans ses mains d'*esquelette*, comme un homme perdu qui cherche à se rappeler une chose qui peut le sauver et qui ne se la rappelle pas! Une espèce de *courroux* lui creva la poitrine... Il voulut consacrer, mais il laissa choir le calice sur l'autel... Il le touchait comme s'il lui eût dévoré les mains. Il avait l'air de devenir fou. Vère! un mort fou! Est-ce que les morts peuvent devenir fous jamais?» (ORC 1, 739-40).

Examples of this sort are, of course, only an indication of the dynamics at work within the Fantastic. In this sense, the foregoing selection does not aim to offer an exhaustive examination of how the Fantastic uses and then abuses the empirical knowledge on which materialist philosophy is founded-- this will naturally form the basis of later discussions. These examples nevertheless point to a form of literary discourse which takes the dialectic materialism/spiritualism as its organising principle. Inscribing such a conflict within the text and allowing both codes to co-exist, when they are by nature and by design mutually exclusive, is of

course an area of some ambiguity: how exactly is their uneasy congress maintained?

In addition to this challenging problematic, a further thorny question is raised by the presence of anti-materialist discourse within the novel form. There is some justification for saying that this form (on which Barbey's work largely depends) is coextensive with the seen world, empirical knowledge and materialist culture-- the triumph of Humanistic Reason:

> The novel's history has often been presented as that of a literary form germinating in the man-centred culture of the Renaissance, nourished in the rich soil of the Enlightenment, and coming to its nineteenth-century flowering as the characteristic art of an age of science.[19]

Taking definable reality as its definitive constituency, the novel is thereby obliged to order itself along lines most capable of overlapping with that goal, which is why its evolution mirrors the evolution of mimetic representation. From this perspective, the Fantastic's interest in undefinable 'reality' suggests that it runs at countercurrent to the very principles of novelistic discourse:

> [...] the very notion of an invisible, spiritual order was a threat to the novel's claim to represent totality [...] to its pursuit of a sense-based realism.[20]

This state of affairs implies that the Fantastic is a form of anti-literature, paradoxically working to undermine its own foundations, sabotaging its very DNA.

* * *

[19] Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul*, p. 1.
[20] Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul*, p. 2.

The premise with which we began this discussion therefore poses a dual problematic: how does the Fantastic reconcile two mutually contradictory codes and how does it voice that which the novel seems designed to stifle-- the non-materialist? To begin with the first question, the apparent counterpoint between rational and non-rational can be made intelligible if we read the Fantastic as the language of the subconscious where real and un-real rub shoulders with impunity. In support of this proposition, nineteenth-century commentators systematically look to the lawlessness of dreamworlds in order to justify the contradictions inherent in the genre. For Nodier, the Fantastic,

> [...] laisse l'âme suspendue dans un doute rêveur et mélancolique, l'endort comme une mélodie, et la berce comme un rêve.[21]

For Maupassant, however, the experience is decidedly less comforting: 'Une confusion pénible et enfiévrante comme un cauchemar'.[22] For both writers, as for Barbey and Gautier, here discussing the work of Hoffmann, the real/unreal dialectic is understandable only in terms of the subconscious:

> [...] on éprouve, quand on a lu ce dormeur éveillé, un effet analogue à l'effet de ces songes qui sont encore quelque chose au réveil et qui finissent bientôt par se ronger et n'être plus! (OH XII, 198).

> En lisant ces *Contes* [...] vous éprouvez comme l'impression d'un rêve persistant à travers la veille, et la lecture évoque en vous une foule d'images qui se succèdent et s'évanouissent comme des ombres légères, mais qui semblent sortir de votre propre cœur.[23]

---

[21] Nodier, *Contes*, p. 330.
[22] Maupassant, *Le Fantastique.*
[23] Théophile Gautier, *La Presse*, 24 March 1851.

In appropriating the intelligibility of the dreamworld as the 'grammatical' structure of the genre, comments such as these unerringly direct us towards a *causal* relationship between the Fantastic and the subconscious, the one being a product of the other:

> Il avait souvent le cauchemar [...] et c'est peut-être ce qui a donné aux belles productions de son burin je ne sais quelle physionomie fantastique [...].[24]

Nodier's comments on Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzioni* are particularly significant in so far as they suggest that the subconscious form reads through into the fictional expression from the author's mind. This in turn implies that we may no longer grasp the dream structure naively but must instead interpret it as defined by certain psychical determinants, as Barbey himself seems to do in his assessment of Edgar Poe: 'Le paraboliste acharné de l'enfer qu'il avait dans le cœur' (OH XII, 380).

In the light of these remarks our attempts to reconcile the real/unreal dialectic would seem to conclude on the question of psychoanalysis. Certainly, the semantic tensions in the term 'fantastic'-- where that which appeals, 'great', 'sensational', is synthesised with that which appals, 'grotesque', 'frightening'-- express an antagonistic coexistence of polarities where the successful voicing of one side of the equation implies the repression of the other: attractive and yet obscurely repellent and vice versa. Ambiguous words such as this, whose business seems to be the articulation of psychological uncertainty, repression and sublimation are familiar material to psychoanalytical readings of the Fantastic. In an essay principally devoted to Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, Freud argues that the 'heimlich' element in the term 'unheimlich' (uncanny)-- on the one hand what is familiar and agreeable and on the

---

[24] Charles Nodier, 'Les *Carceri d'invenzioni*', in *Piranèse et les Romantiques français*, ed. by Luzius Keller (Paris: Corti, 1966), pp. 62-65 (p. 62).

other what is concealed and kept out of sight-- demonstrates similar tensions of expression and repression, a linguistic re-enactment of what we might call psychomachia and which, in his view, can be explained as follows:

> [...] this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.[25]

From this premise Freud contends that the meaning of *Der Sandmann* is to be seized in that which it attempts to smother, arguing by way of conclusion that Hoffman's tale recounts the familiar yet repressed fear of castration in adolescent males.

If somewhat crudely expressed, an approach such as Freud's, applied to the Fantastic, is in many ways alluring. It would enable us to read the real/unreal dialectic as a mirror of psychological processes where the tensions between the conscious ('real') and the subconscious ('unreal') in the human subject are reconstituted. From here, we would then seek to uncover what exactly this tension is repressing or sublimating. Moreover, the linguistic antinomy to be seen in the term 'fantastic' appears to gesture in the direction of expression/repression, that is, the very meat and drink of psychoanalysis. Can we then safely say that the dialectic problem resolves itself in the 'Freudian' approach? To respond to this question we must first define more precisely its scope and method.

While Freud's debt to Marx and Engels was unavowed, the ability to analyse psychological processes empirically owes much to Marx's faith in the defining relationship between Man and the material:

---

[25] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), XVII, 241.

> The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their [men's] material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.[26]

Within these intellectual parameters, Rosemary Jackson proposes that,

> The forms taken by any particular fantastic text are determined by a number of forces which intersect and interact in different ways in each individual work. Recognition of these forces involves placing authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants [...].[27]

Rejecting in this way any sense of transcendental literary meaning, she concludes :

> A fantastic text tells of an indomitable desire, a longing for that which does not yet exist, or which has not been allowed to exist, the unheard of, the unseen [...].[28]

The end-product of such theorising can be seen in a psychoanalytical reading of Edgar Poe's *The Gold Bug*. In what is a remarkable study of his entire œuvre, Marie Bonaparte, one of Freud's students, offers the following evaluation:

> In *The Gold Bug*, we find that the earth replaces, for Poe, the mother with whom, at two, in his early anal-erotic phase, he visited the shores where later Legrand was to discover Captain Kidd's treasure. And in the same way that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* might be described as an epic search for *milk* on the mother's body-- symbolised by oceans of fluid, that being the form of substance dominant in the babe's oral-erotic stage-- so the story of Legrand is an epic search for the mother's *faeces*, inside her body, symbolised here by the earth, since solids are the dominant substance in the child's anal-erotic phase.[29]

For Bonaparte, Poe's *Gold Bug* re-states in displaced form a personal longing. In her reading, the early death of Poe's mother (approximately

---

[26] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. by R. Pascal (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1947), p. 14.
[27] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 3.
[28] Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 91.
[29] Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe-- A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* (London: Hogarth Press, 1971), p. 366.

at the onset of his anal-erotic stage) put a premature seal on the infant's curiosity for her faeces, which in turn produced a trauma that the author seeks to exteriorise in the text: 'Poe's consolation was to compensate himself for reality by turning to fiction'.[30]

Attempts made by psychoanalysis to define literature as psychological civil war make for what is undeniably fascinating reading. What is more, if literature re-states human experience in what is unarguably a rather oblique way, drawing on metaphor, irony and so on, then the case for a method which treats obliqueness or what it calls sublimation as the primary function of literature is clearly a strong one: only the irredeemably round-headed would reject outright interpretations such as those seen above. Nevertheless when they suggest that the referential function of literary language is essentially narcissistic, a sort of cerebral infighting between words and the subconscious where the subject is eternally condemned to his own hall of mirrors leaving the text incapable of talking about anything else, writers like Bonaparte drastically narrow the field of literary enquiry. In addition, Marx's rather absolutist stance that psychological processes are empirically verifiable is by no means certain-- which gives the wit to the ancient joke about psychoanalysis not being 'testicle'.

Despite these reservations, it cannot be denied that the real/unreal dialectic *can* be made plainly intelligible as a description of subconscious self-expression.[31] This discussion does not, however, promote the 'logical' conclusion to that fact-- the psychoanalytical reading-- not simply for reasons of personal choice but because,

---

[30] Bonaparte, *Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 368.

[31] For many, the Fantastic is in fact the starting-point of literature's relationship with the unconscious: 'Rien n'interdit [...] de définir la littérature fantastique comme celle où se marque l'émergence de la question de l'inconscient'. Jean Bellemin-Noël, 'Des formes fantastiques aux thèmes fantasmatiques', *Littérature*, 2 (1971), 103-18 (p. 118).

remembering our aim to describe the language of the Fantastic, there exists a more recognisably *linguistic* way to solve the conundrum.

The tension between the real and the unreal on which this argument has focused is, in one sense, a rather misleading presentation of the subject in hand. Whereas literature is capable of engaging our faith or scepticism in respect of what it says, it cannot in any way stake a claim on what is real or not; posing the question 'true or false?' is as meaningless applied to Zola as it is to Edgar Poe:

> [...] lorsqu'un livre commence par une phrase comme 'Jean était dans la chambre couché sur son lit' nous n'avons pas le droit de nous demander si cela est vrai ou faux; une telle question n'a pas de sens. Le langage littéraire est un langage conventionnel où l'épreuve de vérité est impossible: la vérité est une relation entre les mots et les choses que ceux-ci désignent; or, en littérature, ces 'choses' n'existent pas.[32]

Having said this, literature *is* capable of testing the validity of its own, in-house re-make of reality, *vraisemblance*, that is, those elements of a work which credibly mimic the exterior world and which bestow on the text a coherent illusion of reality. With this important clarification in mind, our enquiry is more specifically a question of resolving the tension between *vraisemblance* and its counterpart, *invraisemblance*.

For many of the nineteenth-century writers whose insights have contributed to this discussion, the counterpoint we seek to explain is in fact irreducible. In their view, this very irreducibility is the 'answer' to the tensions the Fantastic sets in motion. Accordingly, they stress how both codes are allowed to flourish in blissful disharmony from start to finish, how the Fantastic baffles its reader, defining his relationship with the text as ambiguous and making meaning a question of dual (if not multiple) possibility. Charles Nodier hints towards this in the following declaration:

---

[32] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 87.

> Il y a l'histoire fantastique fausse, dont le charme résulte de la double crédulité du conteur et de l'auditoire, comme les *Contes de fées* de Perrault [...].[33]

If the Fantastic demeans its status in commanding *complete* credibility, then it is implied that the genuine article is far from sure about what it would or would not have us believe. This, too, is the suggestion in Barbey's assessment of Edgar Poe's *The Gold Bug*:

> [...] les besoins de réalité [...] détruisent l'effet fantastique [...]. Le merveilleux expliqué n'est plus du merveilleux. (OH XII, 357).

Here, the promotion of exclusively rational meaning (Captain Kidd's tortuous yet credible explanation as to the site of the buried treasure) renders the text 'redundant' precisely because it deprives the work of the dialectical feud on which, in Barbey's view, it thrives. Such indeed is the reasoning behind his dismissal of Erckmann-Chatrian:

> Si Erckmann-Chatrian avait eu la moindre puissance fantastique, il l'aurait prouvé dans cette histoire [*Hugues-le-Loup*] [...]. Malheureusement l'histoire tourne de la lycanthropie, que l'auteur a peur d'aborder et qui n'eût pas fait trembler Edgar Poe ou tout autre génie fantastique, au somnambulisme shakespearien [...]. (OH XIX, 104-05).

In these cases, Barbey tells us, the defining sense of contingency[34] disappears, leaving in its wake a literary genre capable only of investigating the *vraisemblable*:

> [...] le fantastique a disparu, et on ne voit plus à la place du rêveur qu'une nature robuste, ingénieuse, acharnée, qui lutte contre la difficulté et qui veut la vaincre. (OH XII, 358).

---

[33] Nodier, *Contes*, p. 330.

[34] In this and subsequent uses of the word, 'contingency' refers to those circumstances where meaning is subjected to two or more competing forces, in this case the tension between real and unreal.

In so saying, Barbey therefore proposes an endless helix of hesitation as the true 'answer' to the dialectic tension we seek to define:

> La curiosité de l'incertain qui veut savoir et qui rôde toujours sur la limite de deux mondes, le naturel et le surnaturel... et la peur, terreur blême de ce surnaturel qui l'attire et qui l'effraye autant qu'il l'attire [...]. (OH XII, 328).

This perspective is shared in tone as much as in content by Maupassant:

> L'écrivain a cherché les nuances, a rôdé autour du surnaturel plutôt que d'y pénétrer. Il a trouvé des effets terribles en demeurant sur la limite du possible, en jetant les âmes dans l'hésitation, dans l'effarement. Le lecteur indécis ne savait plus, perdait pied comme en une eau dont le fond manque à tout instant, se raccrochait brusquement au réel pour s'enfoncer encore tout aussitôt [...].[35]

The strength of these arguments (notwithstanding their occasional poetic self-indulgence) is such that they constitute the broad lines of modern Formalist thinking on the genre and in particular the response made by Tzvetan Todorov to the question of the real/unreal dialectic. He, too, singles out irreducibility as the focal point of Fantastic discourse. Taking Louis Vax's approach as his cue,

> Essayons [...] de délimiter le territoire du fantastique en précisant ses relations avec les domaines voisins [...].[36]

-- Todorov separates the genre from what we might call its 'close cousins'. Precisely because it is reducible, he first discards 'le fantastique-étrange', explaining that,

> Des événements qui paraissent surnaturels tout au long de l'histoire, y reçoivent à la fin une explication rationnelle.[37]

---

[35] Maupassant, *Le Fantastique.*
[36] Louis Vax, *L'Art et la littérature fantastiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), p. 5.
[37] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 49.

The rejection of ratiocination is an inevitable consequence of the demands of contingent meaning which is why Amaryll Chanady dismisses this wing of the Supernatural as 'pseudo-fantastique'.[38] It is also the motivation behind Todorov's second disinheritance, here handed out to 'l'étrange-pur':

> Dans les œuvres qui appartiennent à ce genre, on relate des événements qui peuvent parfaitement s'expliquer par les lois de la raison, mais qui sont, d'une manière ou d'une autre, incroyables, extraordinaires, choquants, singuliers, inquiétants, insolites [...].[39]

This clearly rather large branch of the family tree, which one might label 'strange but true', falls outside the scope of what, in its dialectic tension, the Fantastic implies, namely the confusing co-existence of fact and fancy. This particular second cousin, like the first, is only interested in facts however unexpected or out of the ordinary, in which sense Todorov's distinction is appropriate. Thirdly, attention is turned to 'le fantastique-merveilleux':

> [...] la classe des récits qui se présentent comme fantastiques et qui se terminent par une acceptation du surnaturel.[40]

What enables us to make a distinction here is the gradually emerging pattern that the Fantastic does not (and should not) confirm empirically its own status. To borrow our preceding terminology, we can detach 'le fantastique-merveilleux' thanks to its unchecked *irratiocination*. As much can also be said of Todorov's final grouping, the 'merveilleux-pur', under which heading he cites Perrault's *Contes*.[41] This final sub-set we can place outside the Fantastic by referring to Roger Caillois' lucid opposition:

---

[38] Amaryll Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus unresolved antinomy* (London: Garland, 1985), p. 4.
[39] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 51.
[40] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 57.
[41] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 59.

> Le féerique est un univers merveilleux qui s'ajoute au monde réel sans lui porter atteinte ni en détruire la cohérence. Le fantastique, au contraire, manifeste un scandale, une déchirure, une irruption insolite, presque insupportable dans le monde réel.[42]

Todorov's irreducibility is for some critics a source of further debate.[43] Certainly, in this discussion, it is a term that requires some explanation and, more importantly, some response to the inevitable question as to how it is brought about. For Todorov, the *irresolution* of the Fantastic is a matter of narrative technique. Basing his comments on Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, he tells us how the dynamics of reading (in the 'real' sense) are re-enacted in the text giving a fictionalised exchange between enunciator and recipient. In this way, our external perception of the work is seconded to the good offices of our avatars within it. Demonstrating how these avatars systematically fail to provide conclusive readings of the supernatural events that take place, Todorov proposes that such indeed is our predicament:

> Le fantastique implique donc une intégration du lecteur au monde des personnages; il se définit par la perception ambiguë qu'a le lecteur même des événements rapportés. Il faut préciser aussitôt que, parlant ainsi, nous avons en vue non tel ou tel lecteur particulier, réel, mais une 'fonction' de lecteur, implicite au texte (de même qu'y est implicite la fonction du narrateur). La perception de ce lecteur implicite est inscrite dans le texte, avec la même précision que le sont les mouvements des personnages.[44]

---

[42] Roger Caillois, *Images, Images* (Paris: Corti, 1966), p. 15.

[43] Christine Brooke-Rose points out that the Fantastic does not have exclusive rights on irreducible meaning and draws our attention to the framework of unanswered ambiguity in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet. From this parallel, she convincingly goes on to demonstrate that the only tangible way of dividing the two genres would be in terms of their *content*, suggesting thereby that there is nothing structurally unique at all to the Fantastic. It is certainly true that the Fantastic and the *nouveau roman* share a cynicism towards the intelligibility of experience as seen through the mediation of the novel and refuse, generally speaking, the empirical certainty and self-satisfaction that nineteenth-century novel forms display. Having said this, the Fantastic is nevertheless appreciably more accommodating of ratiocination and its literary ally, mimesis; the *nouveau roman*, however, glories in the dilapidation of these concepts, in which measure Brooke-Rose's belief in structural parallels seems over-enthusiastic. Christine Brooke-Rose, *A rhetoric of the Unreal-- studies in narrative and structure, especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[44] Todorov, *Introduction*, pp. 35-36.

This identification and the contingency of reading it sustains-- the external reader being as uncertain as the reader within-- is secured in Todorov's view by the use of the first person narrator:

> [...] la première personne 'racontante' est celle qui permet le plus aisément l'identification du lecteur au personnage, puisque, comme on sait, le pronom 'je' appartient à tous.[45]

Where the utterance of the text is itself the subject of the fiction (as is true in the case of Alphonse's accounts in *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*), a further source of inconclusion is to be detected. While the narrator's report of events enjoys certain rights which generally place him beyond suspicion, that of a character, because he is more manifestly fictitious, is appreciably more open to doubt. Drawing on this hierarchical nature of fictional *vraisemblance*, Todorov goes on to show how the inscribed narrator scrambles our expectations:

> Le discours de ce narrateur a un statut ambigu [...]: appartenant au narrateur, le discours est en deçà de l'épreuve de vérité; appartenant au personnage, il doit se soumettre à l'épreuve.[46]

As a result of these conditions, the enunciation of the Fantastic becomes the enunciation of doubt where any sense of definition or fixed meaning is outplayed in a tireless exchange of point and counterpoint. Of course, for this irreducibility to be sustained the contingency of both reading and writing must be maintained to the end-- which is why Todorov rejects rational or irrational bias in the neighbouring genres discussed above. Given this information, are we now in a position to conclude that our opening problematic is resolved in terms of irreducibility? Moreover, do Barbey's texts meet the conditions set down

---

[45] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 89.
[46] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 91.

by Todorov? The answer to the second of our questions is naturally the subject of the chapters which follow. As to the first, while the inability to offer a rational resolution to the question may well appear unsatisfactory from a Cartesian perspective, it should be remembered that it is precisely this intellectual framework which the Fantastic challenges with Barbey in the van, as this attack on Charma, the Hegelian philosopher, amply demonstrates:

> Ce n'est pas *sa* philosophie que je méprise, c'est *la philosophie elle-même ainsi que Descartes nous l'a faite.* (CG VI, 19).

Accepting then that Barbey's bent is to refute the ratiocination of Cartesian thought, it is no doubt fitting that our analysis should champion a logical paradox; it is in this sense that we carry forward the irreducible disharmony of the real and the unreal.

* * *

Whereas a good deal of critical ink has been spilled on the first part of our problematic much less has been written on the second-- the difficulties posed by non-materialist discourse. In a sense, this represents an understandable inclination, given the insistently apparent tensions between *vraisemblable* and *invraisemblable.* This imbalance does tend to suggest however that what is Fantastic about Fantastic texts is their interest in the Supernatural, over which we wrangle vainly, if appropriately, in search of understanding. Consequent to this state of affairs is the assumption that the genre defines itself exclusively in thematic terms, subject to the appearance of this or that ghost or

hobgoblin. If, on the other hand, we seek to describe the discourse of the Fantastic and to demonstrate that it functions as a structural entity, then it is patently unsatisfactory to leave the non-material dimension to the care of impressionistic theme-mongering.

Remembering, as we saw above, that the novel form tends innately towards materialist representation, both in scope and method, how then does it voice that which it seems designed to smother-- the non-materialist? A mimetic rendering of anti-mimetic discourse does indeed appear to pose an intractable problem, though such in fact is the question we must address if we are to isolate the language of the Fantastic.

Certain modes of literary expression capable of mediating between the two codes do nevertheless exist. Consider allegory, composed of recognizable realist units and yet equally fitted to propose other, unseen worlds. The following extract from the Bible can in one sense be read literally as an unproblematic rendering of one man's unfortunate experience:

> So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. [...] Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1. 15-17).

Of course, to read this narrative in such a way would miss a great deal; to reduce the signs before us to a set of material, literal premises misses the point. Instead we must pass from the literal to the figurative as is later made explicit:

> For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12. 40).

What allegory offers us therefore is the possibility of dual meaning where the primary sense is literally no more than a foil to the secondary, more profound 'other' signification. As Angus Fletcher makes plain,

> In the simplest terms, allegory says one thing and means another.[47]

The duality of the allegorical mode is, in these circumstances, something of a false promise as it never really takes its mimetic half seriously. This fact makes it impossible for us to propose allegory as a voice of the non-material within the Fantastic when, as we recall, the Fantastic is so insistent on its mimetic strengths:

> Si ce que nous lisons décrit un événement surnaturel, et qu'il faille pourtant prendre les mots non au sens littéral mais dans un autre sens qui ne renvoie à rien de surnaturel, il n'y a plus de lieu pour le fantastique.[48]

A second form of discourse equally agile between the real and the unreal is poetry:

> Votre âme est un paysage choisi
> Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
> Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
> Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.

This first strophe from Verlaine's *Clair de lune* is manifestly supplied with material props from a real, verifiable world: 'paysage', 'masques', 'luth', 'déguisements'. To assume, however, that such props establish a rapport with the world as it is, to assume that they are mimetically referential in function is clearly nonsensical: as with allegory, the poetic image transcends literal meaning in the interests of often complex figurative associations or, as Jonathan Culler puts it, 'The world as it is

---

47 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory. The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 2.
48 Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 69.

not'.[49] As such, the referential capacities of poetry, even in its harshest, concrete forms (for example, war poetry) are, in the main, far too figuratively free to be read as mimesis. In this sense, Todorov's remark is justified:

> On convient aujourd'hui que les images poétiques ne sont pas descriptives, qu'elles doivent être lues au pur niveau de la chaîne verbale qu'elles constituent, dans leur littéralité, non pas même à celui de leur référence.[50]

Accordingly, we may conclude that poetic discourse has nothing to offer the Fantastic precisely because this genre refuses all means of 'seeing as':

> Si, en lisant un texte, on refuse toute représentation et que l'on considère chaque phrase comme une pure combinaison sémantique, le fantastique ne pourra apparaître [...].[51]

If poetry is to be seen as a 'non-transitive' mode of expression set apart from the Fantastic, which has 'transitive' characteristics, then of course to maintain a hypothesis of this sort we must presume that poetry and prose never meet. This however is not the case. Some critics responding to this fact are happy to propose a poetic dimension in the Fantastic:

> [...] l'art fantastique comme la poésie font jouer cette fertilité de l'ambigu. Ils ne proposent d'ailleurs qu'un cheminement indirect pour apprivoiser ce qui échappe par nature au langage et à la représentation.[52]

More tellingly, the evolution of the prose-poem (in which Barbey participated) suggests a degree of compatibility far from the antithesis implied in our initial literal/figurative dialectic, a compatibility which, taken to extremes, produces definitions of the sort reputedly offered by

---

[49] Jonathan Culler, 'Literary Fantasy', *Cambridge Review*, 23 November 1973.
[50] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 65.
[51] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 65.
[52] Roger Caillois, *Au cœur du fantastique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 184-185.

Jeremy Bentham-- that the only difference between poetry and prose is that in prose all the lines run to the end of the page. Barbey himself, responding to Monsieur Jourdain's oversimplification in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, 'Tout ce qui n'est pas vers est prose et tout ce qui n'est pas prose est vers', is likewise convinced that the antithetical separation is invalid:

> Je n'ai jamais cru à cet Aphorisme souverain. Dans l'ordre des créations de l'esprit comme dans les créations de la Nature, il y a des créations intermédiaires entre les créations contrastantes. Le monde ne se rompt pas en *deux*, mais se relie toujours en *trois*. (CG III, 196).

Where then do these observations leave the preceding analysis? Any separation between literary genres is always tentative and it is undeniably true that poetry and prose share degrees of literal and non-literal representation. Nonetheless, to read the Fantastic as a figurative *entity*, dismissing its material premises as atavistic ciphers of something else (as psychoanalytical readings do), is to miss the point: in so doing, the 'real'/'unreal' dialectic disappears, down which black hole the Fantastic itself must follow.

What we learn from the foregoing discussion is that, in writing the non-material into the text, the Fantastic must in no way lose its hold on what it has already mimetically achieved. Perhaps the solution to our problem is therefore to be found within that self-same mimetic *strength*. Drawing on the evidence of innumerable outsize creations in Fantastic literature, Todorov directs our attention to the role of exaggeration within the genre. In his particular analysis, the enormous birds and serpents in the Sinbad narratives offer the reader a surfeit of realism, a sort of hyperbolic inflation of the world as we know it.[53] He argues that, in such circumstances, the mimetic premises of the text display two

[53] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 82.

distinct properties; in one sense, thanks to their over-charged notation, they sap conventional expectations as to what is *vraisemblable* while, in another sense, because their very notation remains mimetic in all but measure they perversely cling on to the material world which we share.

Todorov's promotion of a schizophrenic form of mimesis is without doubt a subtle argument. Nonetheless, he defends his point by stressing the absence of figurative connotations in texts such as these; in his view, the figurative 'bolt-hole' must always be explicit in the text, as with the 'moralités' which follow Perrault's *Contes*, failing which, any representation may become allegorical:

> Il faut insister sur le fait qu'on ne peut parler d'allégorie à moins d'en trouver des indications explicites à l'intérieur du texte. Sinon, on passe à la simple interprétation du lecteur; et dès lors il n'existerait pas de texte littéraire qui ne soit allégorique, car c'est le propre de la littérature d'être interprétée et réinterprétée par ses lecteurs, sans fin.[54]

Denied the figurative dimension, texts similar to those discussed by Todorov find themselves bound to a form of fiction which, if somewhat outlandish, can only be read literally which in turn confers upon these texts a quirky sort of mimesis. The flaw in his thesis is its thematic exclusivity; after all we can dispense with the non-material side of literal expression by consigning his monsters to the supernatural storehouse, returning this discussion to square one.

If, on the other hand, we apply exaggeration, additionally, to the discourse itself our argument assumes a much more positive direction. Commenting on the play performed in Act III of *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude observes, 'The lady protests too much, methinks'. The sense of her remark is of course to be grasped as a response to the fictional Queen's declaration,

---

[54] Todorov, *Introduction*, p. 79.

> Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife
> If, once a widow, ever I be a wife.[55]

Rightly perceiving that such remarks are intended for her, Gertrude's impatient judgement demonstrates how representation can lose its power of illusion when it is over-stated. From a more modern, theoretical perspective, Roland Barthes suggests that language which over-plays its intentions and which mis-reads *reference* for *referent* diminishes its capacity to communicate convincingly:

> Car s'il y a une 'santé' du langage, c'est l'arbitraire du signe qui la fonde. L'écœurant [...] c'est le recours à une fausse nature, c'est le *luxe* des formes significatives, comme dans ces objets qui décorent leur utilité d'une apparence naturelle.[56]

Gérard Genette, commenting on Barthes' work, makes the same point:

> Le mauvais signe est bouffi parce qu'il est redondant, et il est redondant parce qu'il veut être *vrai*, c'est-à-dire à la fois signe et chose [...].[57]

These observations are of a particular pertinence when set against the Fantastic and the writing of the non-material. Discourse which doggedly strives to convince us of its more than literal truth, as if the word itself were significant rather than signifying, inevitably weakens its semiotic structure; protesting too hard it dissipates the illusory correlation ordinarily sustained between words and the world on which all fiction depends. Where the sign triumphs over the signified, language loses its material bearings and becomes something of a plastic exercise. This fact has much to offer the Fantastic and would solve the question as to how language may speak non-materially.

---

55 William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 673.
56 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 212.
57 Gérard Genette, *Figures I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 197.

> [...] le fantastique doit être objectif, solide, vivant, réel enfin de sa surhumaine réalité! (OH XII, 191).

This declamatory edict from Barbey points to a super-charged rhetorical style which never in both public and private writing left his pen, as he himself admits: 'J'ai de l'expression-- et même quelquefois trop' (CG IV, 174). While the discussion of the relationship between a 'plastic' discourse and the loss of mimetic meaning properly forms the basis of later analysis, in support of our thesis some evidence is clearly required. Witness his passion for lexical preciosity. On reading Balzac's *Séraphita* he notes down words whose obscurity he finds appealing, 'immarcessible', 'nitescence',[58] underlining the logophilia in which his fiction exults: exoticisms, 'les petites miss' (ORC 2, 135), neologisms, 'puissanciellement' (ORC 2, 154), and archaisms, 'addextrée' (ORC 2, 129). What Champfleury sees as,

> [...] quel dévoiement de style, quelles prétentions, quel maniérisme, quelle volonté persistante, quel honteux abus de la langue [...].[59]

-- is equally to be noted in Barbey's use of metaphor. The following example is symptomatic of his over-charged associative discourse:

> Réginald ne s'illusionait pas. Il se disait que la vierge de son amour rendrait bientôt son corps à la terre et son âme aux éléments: bouton de rose indéplié et flétri sous l'épais tissu de ses feuilles séchées sans un ouragan que l'on pût accuser; fleur inutile que personne n'avait respirée; avorton de fleur sous l'enveloppe fanée de laquelle l'haleine la plus avide, le souffle le plus brûlant, n'eût rien trouvé peut-être à aspirer. (ORC 1, 39).

On a broader level, the unarguably obsessive interest in verbal ornamentation and textual plasticity often leads Barbey to jettison the

---

[58] Petit, *Barbey d'Aurevilly critique*, p. 539.
[59] Champfleury, '*Une vieille maîtresse*-- Lettre à M. Louis Veuillot', in *Le Réalisme* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1967), pp. 286-320 (p. 313).

fictional premise in the interests of often inappropriate-- and occasionally inaccurate-- quotations from and references to the Great and the Good: Byron (ORC 2, 268) and Beaumarchais (ORC 2, 275), Charlemagne (ORC 2, 349) and Chateaubriand (ORC 2, 288), Molière (ORC 2, 85) and Milton (ORC 2, 126) inter alios.

This brief survey of Barbey's style points to a form of logorrhea with which he is tirelessly reproached: 'Il écrit comme un ange et comme un diable, mais il ne sait pas ce qu'il dit'.[60] Judgements of the sort, if dismissive on a superficial level, are no less pertinent to our cause for they amplify Barbey's demotion of sense in favour of what can be termed the plastic quality of language; mindful of the semiotic indigestion this provokes, his discourse tends towards a degree of *immaterial* signification which the Fantastic, part real, part unreal, so ardently covets. It is moreover no accident that writers working outside the nineteenth-century materialist orthodoxy should see in Barbey something of a father figure, thanks precisely to the 'otherness' they detect in his style:

> Dans tous les cas, Barbey d'Aurevilly est un écrivain de premier ordre, intensément original, dont la gloire, longtemps dans l'ombre, monte et grandit tous les jours à l'horizon de la postérité.[61]

The second part of our problematic concludes therefore on the plasticity of Barbey's Fantastic discourse. While this analysis is specific only to Barbey there is perhaps some justification to extend these remarks to other writers in the genre, notably Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who seem to share his love of verbal preciosity. In which case, we would be in a position to legislate more broadly; we await with interest the publication of a wider study which will enable us to do so.

---

[60] Anatole France, *Le Temps*, 28 April 1889.
[61] Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres complètes*, 9 vols (Paris: Messein, 1926), V, p. 326.

* * *

In order to arrive at a synthesis of the foregoing enquiry, one final observation is unavoidable. In so far as it brings antitheses together into a strange, undivided harmony, the Fantastic is manifestly antagonistic towards the concept of *difference*. Indeed, given the weight of the evidence focusing on the structural centrality of inter-communicating opposites, where difference is in a sense abolished, it appears fitting in conclusion to define the genre as the supreme literary expression of *in-difference*. Why this should be so is a question that touches the very essence of the Fantastic.

Barbey's hostility to Descartes is, we recall, unremitting, as this attack-- through Charma-- makes clear:

> Ce n'est pas *sa* philosophie que je méprise, c'est *la philosophie elle-même ainsi que Descartes nous l'a faite*. Gymnastique très intéressante, mais elle n'est pas autre chose qu'une Gymnastique. A part la trempe qu'elle donne à l'esprit, elle ne lui donne rien. (CG VI, 19).

The reason behind such antipathy finds its source in Descartes' 'cogito' which, if it does not deny the existence of God, nevertheless proposes the deducibility of experience in empirical terms founded on Reason. This for Barbey is anathema given that it legitimises a Man-centred view of the universe to which he, the intractable Catholic, is unequivocally opposed. Cartesian thought in Barbey's view accounts for the materialist foundations of nineteenth-century society and its literary 'spokesman', Realism, for which, unsurprisingly, he has scant sympathy:

> Dans le matérialisme qui s'alourdit tous les jours sur nos têtes, dans ce réalisme, bêtise et boue, qui nous monte d'en bas et peut ensevelir du soir au matin une littérature, les poètes de la forme auront le sort des poètes de l'idée [...]. (OH XXIII, 68).

Seen from this perspective, it is only natural that Barbey, here writing to Saint-Maur, should lambast Zola, high-priest of the Cartesian schism:

> Comment êtes-vous ce matin, débarbouillé de votre repas d'hier; moi je ne le suis pas encore de Zola, dont pourtant je me suis lavé lundi. Avez-vous lu mon feuilleton? [...] Je lui ai donné un *assommement* pour son *Assommoir*. Est-ce que vous aimez le cochon que l'on sert maintenant, orné de fleurs, sur toutes les assiettes? [...]
> Quelle adorable société que celle-ci!
> et *Vive la République*. (CG VIII, 82).

Barbey's manifesto for literature makes no bones of the importance of spirituality:

> Je n'admets dans la littérature que celle qui *dégage* et *personnifie* l'essence spirituelle et la grandeur morale d'un écrivain. Je ne puis à aucun degré tolérer l'abaissement voulu des écoles nouvelles descriptives et naturalistes, où l'exercice de l'œil et de l'observation entrent davantage en vigueur que l'exercice de l'âme même, qui est seule digne de nous occuper. (CG IX, 287).

If he is to resurrect literature from the dilapidation of exclusive materialism he must in some way respond to the reasons for its perceived decline. Barbey's solution is to assail Reason itself and more precisely the differential structure on which it depends. If language functions as a system of differences by which meaning is conventionally agreed, ratiocination as a form of supra-linguistic differentiation equally relies on a framework of oppositions-- thesis and antithesis-- from which its conclusions are deduced. Discourse which undermines difference is therefore anti-rational by definition, which is of course the meaning behind the *in-difference* in Barbey's Fantastic; not only does such a mode of expression challenge the power of Reason, it also offers, thanks to its

despoiling of difference, an indivisible, unitary dimension which the Catholic writer senses as lost in the post-lapsarian world:

> [...] l'art est un symbole-- l'expression symbolique des hautes convenances d'ordre et de vérité souveraine, la prescience universelle des choses qu'il faut nommer et connaître, l'inventaire innocent du bien et du mal, de ce qu'il faut imiter et de ce qu'il faut écarter. La Création a priori recélait ce symbole. Elle l'était pour elle-même. L'art s'y trouvait d'abord et s'y résumait de main divine; mais depuis que l'abus de la liberté a précipité le monde en chute, la Création n'a plus été que le miroir brisé dans lequel les objets se déforment, s'interrompent et tremblent. Et l'art a été fragmenté comme elle. Il n'a plus attesté que l'effort suprême de la pensée pour atteindre, de la réalité fournie par l'histoire, à cet idéal de beauté impossible en ce monde, comme le bonheur même qu'il voudrait, hélas! nous donner. (OH XXVI, 235).

* * *

Bringing these remarks to a conclusion, I openly admit the bias of this study-- that the Fantastic has been defined as a *structural* sign. Obviously literary texts function on a multiplicity of levels where any separation is arbitrary and artificial; within the confines of this research, space for other readings, indeed a synthetic reading of *all* the sign structures, is simply not available. Nevertheless, and particularly so, given the apparent affinities between the Fantastic and Catholic writing, there is a pressing case to be made for research into the Fantastic as an *ideological* sign. There is certainly much to be said of the Fantastic as rearguard action fought on behalf of the dwindling European aristocracy in an effort to maintain the primacy of the Church that is, the Supernatural, as its power-base. Other lines of enquiry might see Barbey's handling of the genre as a re-enactment of the demise of the aristocratic order with fictional decadence marking socio-political

disorientation and decline.[62] It is only more recently, however, that the ideological correlation between the Fantastic and religiosity has been fully embraced which, it is to be hoped, will provide the basis for further work on the genre as spiritual discourse.[63]

The fact that this examination has been selective does not, however, jeopardize its findings within the sphere of discourse. We have seen, as Max Milner proposes in the opening title quotation, that the Fantastic is born of an innately ambiguous treatment of the relationship between the real and the unreal; above all, it is a *dynamic* flux between forces that we cannot conflate. The rapport between the two codes is, then, problematic; its resolution (of sorts) is to be found in the contingency of *utterance*, where the object of the fiction is, in a sense, unstated:

> [le fantastique] est commandé de l'intérieur par une dialectique de constitution de la réalité et de *déréalisation* propre au projet créateur de l'auteur.[64]

Furthermore, the *plasticity* of Barbey's discourse lends itself to the Fantastic thanks to its rather cynical and careless relationship with the signified. Finally, mindful of Barbey's untrammelled antipathy towards Cartesian thought, the assault on *difference* fought in his texts offers a challenging and somewhat unsettling re-appraisal of the system of binary oppositions by which reality is normally perceived.

In the broader sense, therefore, as this chapter heading points out, the Fantastic functions as a *dynamic*, a fluctuating confirmation and negation that what the text is telling us is credible as reality. A

---

[62] Pierre Schneider, 'Barbey d'Aurevilly l'extrême', *Les Temps Modernes*, 65 (1951), 1542-560.

[63] Malcolm Scott's belief that 'the Fantastic tradition had provided Barbey with a starting-point for the Catholic novel that was unavailable elsewhere in contemporary literature', does indeed suggest the question of ideological discourse. Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul*, p. 68.

[64] Bessière, *Le récit fantastique*, p. 11.

paradigmatic illustration of this can be found in the episode of the bleeding crucifix in *Prêtre* (ORC 1, 1138-41). While sleepwalking, Calixte 'sees' the cross above her bed covered with blood. On one hand, the blood can be read as a product of her fevered trance; as Barbey stresses, it is a 'vision' (ORC 1, 1140). Its contingency on her subjectivity is made explicit: ' ce sang qu'elle *croyait* voir', '*comme si* ce sang [...] faisait déjà mare autour d'elle' (ORC 1, 1140) (My italics). In this context, the reader knows he is dealing with the unreal. However, several indications in the text attempt to challenge such scepticism. First, Time is explicitly marked on two occasions, first by the narrator (ORC 1, 1137) and then by Calixte herself, 'Voilà qu'il est huit heures'(ORC 1, 1139). Although Calixte is sleepwalking, the Time she reads is identical to that of the narrator, who is not subject to the same delirium. The reality external to the vision thereby passes, somewhat curiously, to the 'reality' of the dream. Second, the passage is noticeably wedded to the realities of Space via open windows (ORC 1, 1138). Through these windows Barbey filters the sights and sounds from outside, linking the two spaces to form a unified and sensorially coherent dimension.

The cumulative effect is rather confusing. Within an insistently verifiable context that respects the laws of Time and Space, the Supernatural nevertheless happens. At no stage does the text vote in favour of either domain, as Philippe Berthier remarks:

> Le doute volontaire subsiste; Barbey ne choisit pas, et n'oblige pas son lecteur à choisir. Il se borne-- mais c'est déjà beaucoup-- à nous amener dans une région incertaine [...].[65]

In this way, the text moves in and out of the Supernatural, without designating any sense of contradiction in this movement: the reader is left in doubt.

---

[65] Berthier, *Imagination*, pp. 255-56.

Paradigms such as this are numerous in Barbey's fiction. However, there is clearly a distinction to be made between the Fantastic *moment*, such as Calixte's vision, and the Fantastic *text* in which they occur. Doubt defines the Fantastic moment; doubt itself, however, is not a momentary phenomenon: we have seen above how the indecision of the Fantastic must be maintained to the very end if the text is to work its charm. This fact enables us to look more widely at doubt and, while obviously considering *moments*, to broaden the scope of study of the Fantastic by analysing the dynamic flux across the whole textual space. In this way, as Irène Bessière suggests in the second headline quotation, we are able to examine how the language of the Fantastic is or is not capable of sustaining dependable meaning.

In the chapters which follow, the principle of the dynamic text is discussed in four parts. First, I will look at the mimetic forms assumed by Barbey's œuvre and how such forms confirm the fiction as a credible re-make of reality. Then I shall examine how the texts forestall their realist certainties, through the contingency of narrative voice. Third, I shall consider the over-indulged plasticity and semantically slight nature of Barbey's rhetorical style. Fourth and last, I will discuss the treatment of difference in his work, suggesting how the text, in the image of the oxymoron, works towards its abolition, positing an undifferentiated fluidity of meaning in which the indivisible and the absolute-- the Fantastic-- may prosper. In order to test these principles, the thesis concludes by examining the short story, *Léa*.

2

Realism

En dehors de la réalité [...], je n'aurais pas trois sous de talent. (CG IV, 196).

M. d'Aurevilly avait violemment attiré les yeux par Une vieille maîtresse *et par* l'Ensorcelée. *Ce culte de la vérité, exprimé avec une effroyable ardeur, ne pouvait que déplaire à la foule.* [1]

In Chapter One, we saw how the Fantastic balances real and unreal. This counterpoint, we remember, is first sustained by convincing the reader that the text corresponds to accepted notions of reality. In this chapter, I will therefore look at how the real is made present in Barbey's fiction.

If the presence of realist discourse can be considered as one of the principal properties of the Fantastic, the association with Barbey d'Aurevilly may at first glance appear somewhat unlikely. Given his tireless attacks on Zola-- and through him nineteenth-century realist/materialist aesthetics-- we might expect Barbey to shun all contact with the literary sacred cow of his age. His antagonism is certainly real:

> Avec le matérialisme voulu de sa préoccupation et de sa manière, M. Zola ne peut nous donner que des tempéraments, et pour ma part maintenant, je le défie de sortir jamais de l'animal. (OH XVIII, 206).

---

[1] Charles Baudelaire, '*Madame Bovary*', in *Curiosités esthétiques. L'Art romantique*, ed. by Henri Lemaitre (Paris: Garnier, 1962), pp. 641-51 (p. 644).

> M. Emile Zola croit qu'on peut être un grand artiste en fange comme on est un grand artiste en marbre. Sa spécialité à lui, c'est la fange. Il croit qu'il peut y avoir très bien un Michel-Ange de la crotte [...]. (OH XVIII, 232).

> [...] je suis dans l'impossibilité de vous faire pour le prochain et le premier numéro de la Revue, l'article sur La Terre de Zola, que vous me demandez.
> [...] Pour moi, Monsieur Zola n'est plus dans la littérature. Ce n'est plus même un systématique dans le faux... . C'est un spéculateur en cochonneries, qui écrit pour un public cochon [...]. (CG IX, 198).

Curiously, however, Barbey promotes 'Réalité' as the core of his work, as the opening title quotation makes clear. Furthermore, insistence on authenticity marks his every fictional creation, seen here in the prefatory manifesto for *Diaboliques*:

> Les Histoires sont vraies. Rien d'inventé. Tout vu. Tout touché du coude et du doigt. (ORC 2, 1292).

Equally, it is to be seen in his instructions to Trebutien, sometime friend and publisher, charged with the task of unearthing documentary information on which *Ensorcelée* is to be based:

> En votre qualité d'antiquaire, mon cher Trebutien, vous m'enverrez [...], le plus tôt qu'il vous sera loisible, tous les renseignements historiques sur l'ancienne Abbaye de *Blanchelande*. (CG II, 138).

Ironically, it is even to be seen in terms strikingly reminiscent of Zola's own vision-led approach:

> [...] j'ai montré des réalités [...]. J'ai pensé que le romancier était un historien à sa manière et qu'il n'avait qu'à rapporter ce qu'il a vu [...]. (CG I, 134-5).

Similarly, as is the case in Baudelaire's judgement seen above in the second title aperitif, critics are happy to define Barbey's writing predominantly in terms of its relationship with and claims on the real:

> [...] ce sont bel et bien des diaboliques, des histoires réelles de ce temps de progrès et d'une civilisation si délicieuse [...].[2]

Pronouncements about the real, reality and realism are inevitably problematic; especially so in the context of Catholic writing.[3] In order, therefore, to make sense of these terms, particularly their significance in Barbey's œuvre, some clarification of 'realism' is called for.

* * *

Realism can be assessed from three distinct perspectives. To begin with, it is a far reaching philosophical debate which concerns all human science from metaphysics to molecular biology and which submits to verbal bracketing only in the broadest of terms:

> Realism is an overarching ontological debate about what there is and what it's like.[4]

Secondly, realism refers to a nineteenth-century artistic movement, focusing on painting and literature and which, in response to the metaphysical *nombrilisme* of Romanticism, seeks to remove the self-indulgent 'I' from art and replace it with an honest, communal 'We',

---

[2] Bachaumont, *Le Constitutionnel*, 29 November 1874.

[3] As a Catholic apologist of sorts, Barbey's understanding of reality-- and thereby realism-- is of course an ideological posture, set against and working as a *critique* of the 'reality' appropriated by what is for him a soulless and materialistic age: 'Le XVIIIe siècle, vers la fin, eut sa littérature crapuleuse. Mais sous cette crapule, la passion-- la passion hideuse, il est vrai, mais au moins la passion-- existait, tandis que nous ne sommes plus, nous et nos livres, que de la pourriture puant dans de la glace. Nous en sommes tombés à ce degré de crapulosité que nous faisons des livres crapuleux, même sans intention d'immoralité'. (OH XIII, 320). Nevertheless, Barbey is also interested in the potential of orthodox realist techniques and it is this, rather than the religious question, which this study focuses on.

[4] Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 227.

aiming, broadly speaking, at the depiction of contemporary social reality. Not surprisingly, set in the context of bewildering scientific progress and the age of *positivisme*, nineteenth-century realism appropriates the empirical sense of purpose and conviction normally associated with Science, crowning itself at its height with the title 'Naturalism'. Thirdly and finally, embracing the entire history of artistic creation, realism is the name given to that function of art which renders the artefact *vraisemblable*, a function in literature often referred to as *mimesis*.

Which realism then is germane to Barbey's Fantastic discourse? While we are not directly concerned with the ontological debate it would be wrong to suggest that its literary cousins conduct their affairs in splendid isolation. One perspective on the philosophical problem offers the following interpretation:

> The view that the material world exists externally to us and independently of our sense experience.[5]

This particular stance, although relatively modern, is far from unassailable. Descartes' *cogito*, in so far as it defines the rapport between Man and world as a deduction subordinate to Man's intellectual capacities, obviously challenges the supposed neutrality of the above sort of realism. More recently, thanks in particular to perspicacious research in linguistics, such views have been rejected outright by those who convincingly argue that in order to mobilise reality we must first engage with it, sense it, or, most important of all in the literary context, enter into a *dialogue* with it. This puts the 'material world' mentioned above on a decidedly contingent footing, subordinate to individual, subjective human experience, relying, if ever it is to be expressed, on

---

[5] *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Paul Edwards, 10 vols (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1967), VII, pp. 77-83.

words. This fact, in turn, further muddies the waters, thanks precisely to the arbitrary conventionality by which words work:

> Qu'on prenne le signifié ou le signifiant, la langue ne comporte ni des idées ni des sons qui préexisteraient au système linguistique, mais seulement des différences conceptuelles et des différences phoniques issues de ce système.[6]

The implication of Saussure's remark is clear: if words contain neither more nor less than the meaning we assign to them and if, as is the case in literature, our only dialogue with reality is through words, then the empirical claims of any variety of fictional realism are obviously rather hard to swallow.[7]

Such an analysis is of course something of a rude distillation and does not, admittedly, aim to provide extensive coverage of the far-reaching philosophical debate on realism. Even so, the relationship between reality and words, the humble, mortal nature of their contract, is of paramount significance to this preamble and directly informs the validity of judgements we might make in the discussion of philosophy's artistic kin.

In turning next, then, to the nineteenth-century branch of the family, it is not the intention of this study to submit every writer concerned with depicting the real to the oath of Naturalism: Flaubert, for one, would doubtless have something to recite in his after-life 'gueuloir' were we to do so. Nonetheless, because Naturalism represents the apotheosis of nineteenth-century realism, and in the interests of concision, I shall concentrate my remarks on the Zolian school.

As manifested in literary terms, Naturalism itself offers an engaging case-study in the rise and fall of intellectual movements: trail-

---

[6] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1972), p. 166.
[7] Cf. Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, "When *I* use a word [...], it means just what I choose it to mean-- neither more nor less." Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 190.

setting forefathers providing the philosophical context (Taine, Bernard), an official party-line manifesto (Zola's *Le Roman expérimental*, 1880), regular meetings of the Sanhedrin (the 'Soirées de Médan'), zealous acolytes (Hennique, Céard, Alexis), followed, from within its own ranks, by criticism and repudiation (the 'Manifeste des Cinq'), even a fallen angel (Huysmans) and of course a rival theology (Symbolism). The principal tenets of the Naturalist faith, contained in the essays later collected in Zola's *Le Roman expérimental*, state that following a quasi-scientific methodology-- hypothesis, experimentation, findings-- literature is capable of framing both the psychological and social reality of human experience:

> [...] le roman expérimental est une conséquence de l'évolution scientifique du siècle; il continue et complète la physiologie, qui elle-même s'appuie sur la chimie et la physique; il substitue à l'étude de l'homme abstrait, de l'homme métaphysique, l'étude de l'homme naturel, soumis aux lois physico-chimiques et déterminé par les influences du milieu; il est en un mot la littérature de notre âge scientifique [...].[8]

According to Zola, therefore, fiction is capable of meaningful enquiry into the physical premises by which Man's estate is defined; moreover, in his view, it is fit to conduct experiments on the nature of that relationship. With such theory behind him, Zola suggests how a Naturalist text is to be realised:

> Un de nos romanciers naturalistes veut écrire un roman sur le monde des théâtres. Il part de cette idée générale, sans avoir encore un fait ni un personnage. Son premier soin sera de rassembler dans des notes tout ce qu'il peut savoir sur ce monde qu'il veut peindre. Il a connu tel auteur, il a assisté à telle scène. Voilà déjà des documents, les meilleurs, ceux qui ont mûri en lui. Puis il se mettra en campagne, il fera causer les hommes les mieux renseignés sur la matière, il collectionnera les mots, les histoires, les portraits. Ce n'est pas tout: il ira ensuite aux documents écrits, lisant tout ce qui peut lui être utile. Enfin, il visitera les lieux, vivra quelques jours dans un théâtre pour en connaître les moindres recoins, passera des soirées dans une loge d'actrice, s'imprégnera

---

[8] Emile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Garnier, 1971), p. 74.

> le plus possible de l'air ambiant. Et, une fois les documents complétés, son roman, comme je l'ai dit, s'établira de lui-même. Le romancier n'aura qu'à distribuer logiquement les faits.[9]

Any response to Zola's recipe must be tempered by recognition of the fact that he was writing at a time when society genuinely believed in the empirical powers of scientific progress; it is no surprise therefore that literature, the 'arme du siècle', should demonstrate a parallel desire to demystify its own workings and offer up 'Eurekas' which subsequent enquiry-- as we shall see-- has shown to be flawed. Notwithstanding the enchanting sense of conviction in Zola's methodology, the experimental approach does beg one vital question: the personal input of the writer in his rendering of reality.

Ferdinand Brunetière, whose antipathy towards the Naturalist ideology is voiced unequivocally in the work, *Le Roman naturaliste* (1883), seizes on the issue of subjectivity and argues that,

> [...] le romancier comme le poète [...] ne peut expérimenter que sur soi, nullement sur les autres.[10]

In so saying, he implies, no doubt correctly, that any representation of reality is a construction of its creator, subjective and contingent, and that experimentation is definitively confined to that sphere alone. Zola is aware of the individuality of the writer and attempts to counter what is a repeatedly formulated reproach in the following terms:

> Un reproche bête qu'on nous fait, à nous autres écrivains naturalistes, c'est de vouloir être uniquement des photographes. Nous avons beau déclarer que nous acceptons le tempérament, l'expression personnelle, on n'en continue pas moins à nous répondre par des arguments imbéciles sur l'impossibilité d'être strictement vrai, sur le besoin d'arranger les faits pour constituer une œuvre d'art quelconque. Eh bien! avec l'application de la méthode expérimentale au roman, toute querelle cesse. L'idée d'expérience entraîne avec elle l'idée de modification. Nous

---

[9] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, pp. 214-15.
[10] Ferdinand Brunetière, *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 February 1880.

> partons bien des faits vrais, qui sont notre base indestructible; mais, pour montrer le mécanisme des faits il faut que nous produisions et que nous dirigions les phénomènes; c'est là notre part d'invention, de génie dans l'oeuvre. Ainsi, sans avoir à recourir aux questions de forme, du style que j'examinerai plus tard, je constate dès maintenant que nous devons modifier la nature sans sortir de la nature lorsque nous employons dans nos romans la méthode expérimentale.[11]

Henry Céard (a somewhat ungrateful *protégé*) dubbed the logic of Zola's argument a 'sophisme capital'[12] and with some cause. While the question of 'tempérament' is recognised, it is by no means applied with sufficient vigour. That is, it is far from adequate to accept invention only in terms of organisation of material, 'que nous dirigions les phénomènes'. Temperament, invention, ideology, whatever their appellation, precede reality in absolute terms, so that when Zola claims, 'Nous partons bien des faits vrais', he is guilty of a capital oversight. All 'faits vrais' are prey to selective distortions (as every innocent victim on the gallows knows to his cost), and are subordinated to the subject 'in charge' of perception, a point mirrored in the syntactic hierarchy of the sentence-- notice that 'nous' precedes 'faits' and that the latter's only existence is attributable to the subject. Zola does attempt to fend off these criticisms in his essay, *L'Expression personnelle*, where he suggests that the rendering of the real is best served by those with an *intuitive sense* for such tasks:

> [...] celui qui a le sens du réel et qui exprime avec originalité la nature, en la faisant vivante de sa vie propre.[13]

Arguments like this hold but little water given that they imply reality possesses some form of inalterable independence; relying on words for its literary incarnation, reality is anything but autonomous. Once again, the debate returns to the problematics of subjectivity.

---

[11] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, pp. 65-6.
[12] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, p. 34.
[13] Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*, p. 223.

This state of affairs inevitably forms the axis around which turns all debate on the wider question of literary realism, or what is often called its mimetic function. There are critics, however, who treat the subject of mimesis as entirely unproblematic, believing that the literary representation of reality requires nothing more than sense of balance, good taste, respect for the laws of Time and Space and an honest, unhurried desire to tell the whole truth. Take, as example, Eric Auerbach's assessment of Homeric realism as manifested in *The Odyssey*:

> [...] externalised, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feelings completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense.[14]

This he sets at counterpoint with the biblical account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22. 1-14), whose narrative style is purportedly at the antipodes of realism:

> [...] the externalisation of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else is left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasised, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'.[15]

Rudely put, Auerbach defines realism as simply a question of reducing the distance between text and reader, of minimising the number of interpretative barriers, as if realism demanded nothing more than good will. In so saying, he inadvertently unearths the heart of the matter. For, in his discussion of Homer, Auerbach implies that the distance between

---

[14] Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 11.
[15] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 11-12.

the word and the world can be reduced to a finite degree zero: for him, literature, in the right hands, *can* be the honest broker of reality.

Auerbach's beliefs have two weaknesses. First, the nature of words. As we saw earlier, literature can only mobilise reality in terms of language, which, as we know from Saussure, possesses no independent, free-standing claim on the real world. In fact, language only functions in terms of difference, that is to say we grasp the meaning of a word only by isolating it from what it is *not*: 'book' means 'book' because it does *not* mean 'fish', 'car', 'candle' and so on:

> Un système linguistique est une série de différences de sons combinées avec une série de différences d'idées; [...] cette mise en regard d'un certain nombre de signes acoustiques avec autant de découpures faites dans la masse de la pensée [...].[16]

Language, then, is a supreme act of interpretation, human and subjective, as Julia Kristeva cogently remarks,

> [...] le langage est toujours un savoir, le discours est toujours une connaissance [...].[17]

The implication of such an analysis is that words and the world need a third party in order to link up; they can never meet on independent terms and, in literature, the former will forever precede the latter, as John the Evangelist is well aware:

> In the beginning was the Word [...]. (John 1. 1).

In the light of these comments the possibility of an interface-free coupling of text and worldly texture is surely illusory; Auerbach's zero must consequently move back one space.

---

[16] Saussure, *Linguistique générale*, p. 166.
[17] Julia Kristeva, 'La productivité dite texte', *Communications*, 11 (1968), 59-83 (p. 60).

Secondly, and more significantly, we must address the question of ideology. All literary activity ineluctably implies an intellectual frame in which it sits: first, that of the author and second, equally important, that of the reader, both of whom are far from disinterested parties in all literary exchange. Furthermore, narrative itself implies a degree of shared belief and understanding in relation to which the text must carefully position itself.[18] To justify this hypothesis let us examine Todorov's observations on the nature of *vraisemblance* in the detective novel:

> Un crime est accompli, il faut en découvrir l'auteur. A partir de quelques pièces isolées, on doit reconstituer un tout. Mais la loi de la reconstruction n'est jamais celle de la vraisemblance commune, au contraire, ce sont précisément les suspects qui se révèlent être innocents, et les innocents, suspects. Le coupable du roman policier est celui qui ne semble pas coupable. Le détective s'appuiera, dans son discours final, sur une logique qui mettra en relation les éléments jusqu'alors dispersés; mais cette logique relève d'un possible scientifique, et non du vraisemblable. La révélation doit obéir à deux impératifs: être possible et invraisemblable.[19]

What Todorov tells us is that the realism of the detective novel is only convincing in so far as reader and author agree to accept as precondition a number of norms, one of which, paradoxically in this case, is the *vraisemblance* of *invraisemblance*. In the same way, we accept and expect the glorification of labour in Stalinist realism, the lapidation of the Bourgeoisie in Zola, the triumph of the white settler in Hollywood westerns and so on. As soon as we detract from, or are indeed unable to enter into, the contract tendered by the author, as soon as the norms become abnormal, a work of realism disintegrates into a rather

---

[18] In his study of mimesis, Christopher Prendergast analyses the etymological links between 'narrative' and 'cognisance', drawing our attention to Aristotle's interpretation of mimetic discourse as *law-making* which of course implies a contract between sovereign and subject. Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 216-17.

[19] Tzvetan Todorov, 'Du vraisemblable que l'on ne saurait éviter', *Communications*, 11 (1968), 145-47 (p. 146).

confusing jumble. What sense would Goebbels make of Stakhanov-inspired propaganda films and how indeed might a Masai warrior receive *Au bonheur des dames*? Realism, then, it must be said rests upon a structure of ideological conventions, preaching if not to the converted at least to the willing, as Gérard Genette points out:

> Le récit vraisemblable est donc un récit dont les actions répondent, comme autant d'applications ou de cas particuliers, à un corps de maximes reçues comme vraies par le public auquel il s'adresse; mais ces maximes, du fait même qu'elles sont admises, restent le plus souvent implicites. Le rapport entre le récit vraisemblable et le système de vraisemblance auquel il s'astreint est donc essentiellement muet: les conventions de genre fonctionnent comme un système de forces et de contraintes naturelles auxquelles le récit obéit comme sans les percevoir, et *a fortiori*, sans les nommer.[20]

Such a position coherently explains Zola's brand of realism which directly informs and answers the rise of organised labour in nineteenth-century France, its political enfranchisement and the concomitant struggle for the improvement of social conditions. Once we reject this pattern the ground shifts radically; witness the transformation in Huysmans' prose following his conversion to Catholicism and the mysticism this entails. At the same time, Homer's epic poems can only be called realist within an ideological framework which accepts the principle of anthropomorphism, just as Judaeo-Christian mythology is 'un-realist' only for those who reject theistic interpretations of human experience. So it is, then, that for a second time Auerbach's zero must humble itself and retire to zero plus two.[21]

---

[20] Gérard Genette, 'Vraisemblance et motivation', *Communications*, 11 (1968), 5-21 (p. 5).
[21] As Christopher Prendergast indicates, Auerbach's history of mimesis is in itself an ideological position, celebrating the humanist culture threatened by Nazi Germany. While Prendergast's respect for the scholar is commendable, this should not detract from the implications of Auerbach's stance: that realism is always partisan. Prendergast, *Mimesis*, p. 213.

The foregoing discussion gives considerable cause for thought. Realism appears to be something of a hierarchical structure, beginning with the will to imitate or mime what is thought to be real--*vraisemblance*-- and evolving historically towards its apotheosis, Naturalism. As this discussion has shown, this impulse, irrespective of evolutionary sophistication, is definitively confined to the governorship of human subjectivity, in very precise linguistic and ideological contexts. This fact reminds us that there is nothing real about realism; as Christopher Prendergast proposes in discussion of Socrates' *Cratylus*, the realist artefact defines itself incontrovertibly in terms of its difference *from* the real:

> [...] an imitation can be deemed to exist only where there is a perceived difference from, as well as similarity to, the object being imitated; without that difference, however minimal, there is no longer an imitation [...].[22]

In a sense, therefore, realism is a paradoxical marriage of similarity to and difference from what verbal and intellectual conventions agree as real. As a consequence, it is something of a conjuring trick, a game of make-believe, proceeding from an initial *esto* and winning assent through verbal sleight of hand, or what Todorov calls the mask of the text:

> [...] on parlera de la vraisemblance d'une œuvre dans la mesure où celle-ci essaye de nous faire croire qu'elle se conforme au réel et non à ses propres lois; autrement dit le vraisemblable est le masque dont s'affublent les lois du texte, et que nous devons prendre pour une relation avec la réalité.[23]

Where then do such considerations leave us in relation to Barbey d'Aurevilly and realism? Clearly, it would make little sense to suggest that he borrows from Zolian Naturalist thinking, its would-be honesty

---

[22] Prendergast, *Mimesis*, p. 9.
[23] Tzvetan Todorov, 'Introduction', *Communications*, 11 (1968), 1-4 (p. 3).

and evangelising literary crusades. On the contrary, Barbey's antipathy is plain and unmediated: first, on intuitive grounds, seen in the preamble, and then as a result of more analytical reflection, witnessed here in his comments on nineteenth-century literary fashions:

> J'ai souvent entendu parler de la hardiesse de la littérature moderne; mais je n'ai, pour mon compte, jamais cru à cette hardiesse-là. [...] La littérature, qu'on a dit si longtemps l'expression de la société, ne l'exprime pas du tout,-- au contraire [...]. (ORC 2, 229).

Barbey's 'au contraire' is in many ways a telling remark. As we have seen in the foregoing analysis, any suggestion that literature voices external realities must take account of the fact that the very act of voicing is contingent, proceeding from the subject rather than the object. In this way Barbey's stress on society as enunciator is refreshingly clear-headed, indicating that he, too, understands that realism is a self-reflexive far more than a transitive literary act.

The realism to be found in Barbey's texts has more to do with the mimetic function of literature. In search of this, I shall develop Todorov's hypothesis of hidden relations with reality, foregrounding those laws or structures of Barbey's fiction which designate themselves as only possessing meaning in so far as they claim a relationship with reality: in short, those features which strive to dissemble their own fictive stature.

* * *

Unfortunately, while Barbey's realism has not escaped critical appraisal, much of what has been written is confusingly imprecise in its understanding of what realism actually is. Several schools of thought

promote the view that Barbey's writing of history and society is convincingly realist, concentrating their comments on a problematic, transitive type of realism which aggressively attempts to appropriate external realities. In order, therefore, to see what *is* realist in his fiction, we must first strip away this 'faux réalisme'.

A repeated flaw in discussions of this sort is the *roman à clef* argument where critics attempt to unearth real-life models and historical 'truth' within Barbey's fiction. One example among a veritable horde is provided by Philippe Teissier:

> En Brassard [...] le narrateur et héros du *Rideau cramoisi*, toute la bonne société parisienne identifia aisément le vicomte du Bonchamp, ancien officier dont le dandysme avait longtemps fait éclat.[24]

While some Parisians may have felt able to do so, one must guard against the temptation of supposing that such a 'fact' automatically confers the crown of realism upon a text, as Teissier is wont to do:

> [...] le réalisme de Barbey d'Aurevilly [...] cet enracinement [...] de ses nouvelles dans la réalité.[25]

Interpretations of this sort are flawed for two reasons. First, they imply that realism is the seamless repetition of reality which of course it is not: Brassard, however realistic, remains Brassard to the end, a fictional character, a verbal illusion. Second, and which is the crucial sticking point, strategies such as those adopted by Teissier are overburdened by ideological baggage. When a link similar to the one noted above is deemed to be realist, a very narrow contract between text and reader is invoked. If we fall outside such a select constituency (which is doubtless the case for most if not all modern readers), what then happens to the

---

[24] Philippe Teissier, 'Réalisme et fantastique dans *Les Diaboliques*', *L'École des Lettres*, 7, (1991), 21-33 (p. 22).
[25] Teissier, *Réalisme et fantastique*, p. 23.

supposed realism? Strictly speaking, it disappears or disintegrates into something else, implying that realism is the exclusive property of a very select *elite*. While realism depends on the co-operation of the cognoscenti, if it is to make much sense this contract must be drawn from as wide a base as possible.

Given the negative effects of ideological elitism (not to mention unhelpful mis-readings of realism for reality), Teissier's methodology can and should be rejected, irrespective of the numerous and otherwise interesting correlations he digs up:

> La baronne de Maistre, qui n'avait été que l'amie de Barbey, fut ainsi furieuse de se voir présentée comme son amante, ou du moins l'amante du très transparent comte Jules-Amédée-Hector Ravila de Ravilès, dans *le Plus bel Amour de Don Juan*.[26]

For similar reasons, doubt is also cast on Jacques Petit's research into the sources of Barbey's texts. Admittedly, Petit does not explicitly use the purportedly factual inspiration as a means of championing Barbey's realism; here, in reference to *Rideau*, he declines to make the link:

> [...] ce voyage en diligence, il l'a fait plusieurs fois lui-même; la ville évoquée est encore Valognes, même si l'itinéraire et l'horaire indiquent Evreux [...]. (ORC 2, 1280).

Just as here, commenting on *Don Juan*, he claims a direct rapport with reality without attempting to give that rapport a name:

> Le conteur est Barbey lui-même; il a d'ailleurs donné à son personnage ses propres prénoms. La tradition veut que l'aventure soit authentique et que l'héroïne en ait été une des filles de la baronne de Maistre. (ORC 2, 1280).

Nevertheless, as is amply seen in his introduction to *Diaboliques* in the *Pléiade* edition (ORC 2, 1271-1298), throughout this unearthing process

[26] Teissier, *Réalisme et fantastique*, p. 22.

realism is the *implied* beneficiary, as the following casual observation indicates:

> Les autres personnages sont imaginaires [...]. (ORC 2, 1285).

If we feel able to reject the real-realism link-up it is nonetheless true that Barbey himself confuses matters by insisting so repeatedly on the authenticity of his writing:

> [...] le cadavre dans la jardinière, qui est un fait dont *j'ai été le témoin* et qui appartient à la vie d'une autre femme que Mme D..., la soi-disant amie d'Edelestand. (CG III, 269).

What is more, the line is blurred still further by the systematic associations found in Barbey's writing between the fictive narrator and the author himself. Norbert Dodille's fascinating essay on onomastics proposes four patterns of fictional names suggesting, mimicking or echoing the writer's own unmistakable appellation: those centred on the aristocratic 'de' (Aloys de Synarose, *Bague*), those markedly Norman in texture (Rollon Langrune, *Prêtre*), those forming a sort of acrostic code (Baudoin d'Artinel, *Bague*) and those echoing the problematic final syllable of the original article (Marigny, *Maîtresse*).[27] What makes matters even more confusing is the repeated fictional portraiture of Byronic Dandies (Ryno de Marigny, Brassard, Marmor de Karkoël), whose eccentricity and overripe persona resemble Barbey's own exaggerated self-projection:

> Le comte de Ravila de Ravilès, qui, par parenthèse, avait toujours obéi à la consigne de ce nom impérieux, était bien l'incarnation de tous les séducteurs dont il est parlé dans les romans et dans l'histoire [...].

---

[27] Norbert Dodille, 'L'amateur de noms. Essai sur l'onomastique aurevillienne', in *La chose capitale*, ed. by Philippe Bonnefis and Alain Buisine (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille III, 1981), p. 42.

> [...] Comme d'Orsay, ce dandy taillé dans le bronze de Michel-Ange, qui fut beau jusqu'à sa dernière heure, Ravila avait cette beauté particulière à la race Juan. (ORC 2, 61-62).

While the association between fiction and reality is unarguably strong, using such 'facts' as a justification of Barbey's realism is decidedly problematic. This particular tactic implies a degree of ideological sophistication far beyond the capacities of the notional reader. If realism is a question of agreed norms, then we must reject the *roman à clef* argument precisely because the knowledge it invokes is anything but a normative condition to the act of reading.

Similarly, due to its top-heavy 'clubbishness', the social realism in Barbey's œuvre is also open to question. It is certainly true that the feudal model he creates is coherent and historically convincing. On one side of the equation, the peasant world with its impoverished tenants tied to an unmistakably pre-1789 landscape:

> [...] la cuisine de Jacques Herpin, grande pièce noire et terrée que la fumée avait bistrée aux vitres et aux murs, autrefois blanchis à la chaux, et qui n'était alors éclairée-- mais qui l'était vigoureusement de bas en haut-- que par un vaste feu de pommier et de fagot allumé sous une grosse marmite où bouillait le souper des gens. Il n'y avait autour de ce feu que le vieux Herpin, assis ou plutôt accroupi sur un tabouret [...].
> Sa femme, la jupe relevée et nouée derrière elle, allait et venait et *sabotait* autour de sa marmite, qu'elle écumait de minute en minute, et sous laquelle elle rapprochait les tisons croulés. (ORC 1, 908).

Within this landscape the peasant order is first one of labour: shepherds (*Ensorcelée*, ORC 1, 618-21), blacksmiths (Dussaucey and Pierre Cloud, *Ensorcelée*), grooms (Jean Bellet, *Prêtre*), millers (Lendormi, *Ensorcelée*) and of course tenant farmers such as Jacques Herpin seen above. Female figures, not surprisingly, are often cast in the role of washer-women (Marie Meslin, La Sansonnet, La Lampérière, *Maîtresse*), that is, again, a position of service.

Secondly, this rural social structure is characterised by the order of obedience, if not to their work then to the Catholic Church. Crowded country churches proliferate (ORC 1, 703-9, 929-40), acting as meeting-point where peasant society submits to the regimen of religious observance:

> En ce moment, toute la population de la bourgade était à l'église [...].
> [...] toutes les têtes étaient penchées sur les poitrines, toutes les oreilles étaient tendues vers cette voix qui planait, comme la foudre, sous ces voûtes émues. (ORC 2, 268-69).

On the other side of Barbey's social equation, the aristocratic world. It is not an exaggeration to say that reading Barbey's texts often feels like reading a gallic *Burke's Peerage*. The following roll-call, far from exclusive, confirms the elitist trend of his social directory: la Duchesse d'Arcos de Sierra Leone (*Vengeance*), la Comtesse d'Artelles (*Maîtresse*), le Comte d'Avice de Sortoville (*Bonheur*), le Vicomte de Brassard (*Rideau*), la Comtesse de Chiffrevas (*Don Juan*), le Duc de Coigny (*Prêtre*), la Princesse de Courtenay (*Dessous*) and so on. The order of this patrician world is suggested with remarkable clarity in the following domestic scene:

> Aux deux angles de la cheminée, dans de grands fauteuils de velours violet, deux femmes, vieilles toutes deux, au front carré, encadré de cheveux gris lissés, l'air patricien,-- physionomie de plus en plus rare, -- causaient peut-être depuis longtemps. Elles ne travaillaient pas; elles étaient oisives; mais le *rien-faire* sied à la vieillesse, surtout quand elle a cette dignité. Entre ces deux nobles et antiques cariatides, entre ces vieilles aux mains luisantes et polies comme la porcelaine dans laquelle elles allaient boire leur thé, il y avait, capricieusement assise sur un coussin de divan, à leurs pieds, une jeune fille [...]. Elle avait travaillé tout le soir en silence. Mais la soirée s'avançant toujours, fatiguée de son éternelle tapisserie, elle l'avait laissée rouler de ses mains avec une nonchalance douloureuse. Puis elle s'était levée, avait pris la bouilloire au foyer, et s'était mise à verser l'eau fumante sur les feuilles qui devaient l'ambrer doucement de leurs parfums. (ORC 1, 205-6).

Set against the peasant interior, the contrast is remarkable. Herpin's wife 'allait et venait et *sabotait*', the 'Douairières' are 'oisives'. The Herpin occupy a 'grande pièce noire' with 'tabourets' for furniture while the aristocrats' salon is bright and comfortable, 'grands fauteuils de velours violet'. Further, the peasant farmers busy themselves with eating, the 'Duchesses' seem occupied only with tea; the young girl (and at that, distractedly), is busy only with her tapestry work. Yet the most striking contrast of all is found in the emblems of the 'grosse marmite' and the 'bouilloire', the former an unmissable token of rural peasantry, the latter a clear motif of aristocratic refinement: within the two containers one might happily distil Barbey's entire social outlook.

Just as servitude and obedience characterise rural society, so leisure, the one a logical product of the other, defines the aristocratic world. The focus here is primarily on salon occupations: taking tea (ORC 1, 205-15), society dinners (*Don Juan*), card games (*Dessous*), tapestry work (ORC 2, 312), and of course the ubiquitous 'causerie', from which *Prêtre* evolves, on which *Histoire* concludes and around which are structured the first five of the six *Diaboliques*. Outside the salon, aristocratic life remains one of independent pursuits: fencing (*Bonheur*), horse riding (ORC 1, 285-90) and hunting (ORC 2, 11). Typically, it is also a life of martial distinction: Brassard's heroism on the barricades (ORC 2, 14-16), Néel de Néhou's glorious death in battle (ORC 1, 1222-23).

If the labour-leisure social model is coherent (though not immune to the forces of history), the suggestion that it is realist is far less convincing. For not only does Barbey depict pre-revolutionary society, he demonstratively promotes and attaches a positive value to that system, as Alain Toumayan cogently remarks in discussion of *Ensorcelée*:

> Or, il y a, chez Barbey, une indiscutable valorisation de la noblesse. Les convictions socio-politiques de Barbey, et de son narrateur, sont telles que même une noblesse dépravée garde une gloire et une grandeur qui manquent à la bourgeoisie et aux basses classes. Quoi qu'il en soit, une noblesse est toujours, de façon qualitative, au plus haut point de la hiérarchie sociale, morale ou politique.[28]

The literary flag-waving is uncompromising, seen most often in terms of outspoken hostility to the age which supplants the *Ancien régime*,

> [...] la baronne de Mascranny a fait de son salon une espèce de Coblentz délicieux où s'est réfugiée la conversation d'autrefois, la dernière gloire de l'esprit français, forcé d'émigrer devant les mœurs utilitaires et occupées de notre temps. (ORC 2, 130).

Moreover, this partisanship explains the brutal suppression of those figures who, in setting themselves outside Barbey's social order, inevitably threaten it. Such is the fate of Julie la Gamase (*Prêtre*). Her physical deterioration, perhaps somewhat caricatured, is no less pathetic for that:

> Quand elle était debout, sa taille était courbée comme une faucille, et le temps, qui bouffonne avec ses ravages et nos infirmités, avait pris le plaisir à la tordre en un Z bizarre. (ORC 1, 942).

Ultimately her decay is consumed in violent death (ORC 1, 1074), thanks precisely to the fact that her social eccentricity (non-religious, non-labouring) marks her out as dangerous. Similarly, La Clotte (*Ensorcelée*) is also 'suppressed' in order to preserve the order which her marginality challenges (ORC 1, 708). Those who return to the fold are of course spared, as is the case with La Malgaigne who rejects her former isolation and goes back to the Church (ORC 1, 268-9). Perhaps most telling of all,

---

[28] Alain Toumayan, *La littérature et la hantise du mal* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1987), p. 24.

those who will ultimately precipitate the downfall of Barbey's cherished order are excluded from the fiction altogether: the Bourgeoisie.[29]

This partisan projection of a reactionary social order creates an ideological stumbling-block on which the notion of realism falters. Given the need for some degree of intellectual fraternity, Barbey's unarguably repressive social straitjacket-- which is clearly not for common consumption-- is realist only for a very select few. This fact explains the manifestly lop-sided dithyrambs which his 'realism' receives:

> [...] herbager typique, curé bonasse, bavardages de commères... instantanés de la vie quotidienne qui donnent au récit son estampille d'origine, le marquent d'un sceau d'authentique et rassurante normannitude.[30]

> Mais le triomphe de Barbey peintre de la société [...] ce sont les scènes de la vie paysanne. Elles sont criantes de vérité et l'art d'éterniser l'instant y atteint son paroxysme. Barbey connaît son âme paysanne dans les moindres fibres.[31]

If critics are comfortable in their praise of peasant realism, they are unanimously silent on the question of aristocracy, oddly so, in a strictly logical sense, since, for such realism to have any coherence, the labour of one implies the leisure of the other. This imbalance is of course a tacit acceptance of the ideological narrowness of the writer's social outlook. Folkloric peasants are one thing, nostalgia for the realities of feudalism another, which is why Barbey studies are devoid of praise for his unmissable patriarchal preferences.

If Barbey's social realism is dependent on the acceptance of what are incontrovertibly elitist ideas then, in a modern democratic context at least, we are faced with an unbridgeable ideological gulf; unable to

---

[29] Barbey's rejection of contemporaneity is admirably defined by Zola: 'Vous ignorez tout de l'heure actuelle'. Émile Zola, 'Une campagne', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mitterand, 15 vols (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966-70), XIV, pp. 425-691 (p. 482).
[30] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 48.
[31] François Lecaplain, 'Réalité et surnaturel', in *Barbey d'Aurevilly: L'Ensorcelée, Les Diaboliques. La chose sans nom*, ed. by Philippe Berthier (Paris: Société des Études Romantiques, 1988), p. 54.

subscribe to the cause, the notional sense of realism disintegrates. Furthermore, the fact that certain writers sign up to Barbey's vision without equivocation, as does Georges Bernanos[32], serves only to strengthen this argument: figures on the Right, like Bernanos, who openly support a patriarchal, Church-based social vision are by nature in tune with Barbey's fiction-- they are however relatively exceptional. Realism, on the other hand, ploughs a common furrow.

The pattern of prohibitively exclusive norms may equally be applied to the treatment of history. While Barbey's fiction draws on real historical forces its focus is unequivocally narrow. Consider this presentation of blood-thirsty Republicanism in the aftermath of the Chouan rebellion, the historical framework of *Ensorcelée*:

> Il marcha au lit du Chouan, et, saisissant avec ses ongles les ligatures de son visage, il les arracha d'une telle force qu'elles craquèrent, se rompirent, et durent ramener à leurs tronçons brisés des morceaux de chair vive enlevés aux blessures qui commençaient à se fermer. [...]
> Et tous les cinq prirent de la braise rouge dans l'âtre embrasé, et ils en saupoudrèrent ce visage, qui n'était plus un visage. Le feu s'éteignit dans le sang, la braise rouge disparut dans ces plaies comme si on l'eût jetée dans un crible. (ORC 1, 597).

Clearly, Barbey's sense of history is informed by an ideological structure in which Republicanism is viewed as a negative force. However, while the post-revolutionary insurrections were indeed bloody, there is little reason to believe that Republican forces monopolised such crimes.[33] In this sense, Barbey's interest in history is myopic and realist only within a

---

[32] For Bernanos, Barbey is literary idol and mentor, 'Le grand Barbey', and presents no ideological difficulties whatsoever. Georges Bernanos, *Essais et écrits de combat*, ed. by Michel Estève (Paris: La Pléiade, 1971), p. 1046.

[33] There is one occasion in the Aurevillian corpus where the violence of the Chouans is accepted and given graphic representation, namely the infamous 'Moulin bleu' passage from *Le Chevalier des Touches* (ORC 1, 846-58). Such a concession tacitly confirms the otherwise partisan treatment of the subject, especially so given that this work was written in an attempt to counter perceived excesses elsewhere: 'Celle qui m'a demandé cette nouvelle trouve mon talent *trop féroce* et me prie d'être doux *une fois*. J'y tâcherai'. (CG III, 137).

closely defined constituency; outside the chosen circle, his historical preferences disperse in the direction of rebarbative dogma.

The intellectual structure in which the condemnation of Republican France is tirelessly implied also explains the carping tone underpinning the fictional representation of the Napoleonic wars:

> Néel [...] recevait par l'intermédiaire du préfet de la Manche un brevet qui le nommait lieutenant dans cet héroïque régiment de Chamboran [...]. l'Empereur Napoléon, qui était dans ce temps-là au faîte de sa puissance et de sa gloire, ne cessa d'envoyer jusqu'à la création des Gardes d'Honneur, aux jeunes fils des anciennes familles, de ces brevets d'officier qui prouvaient, du reste, que, pour ce grand politique, l'égalité devant la loi, qu'il avait inscrite dans ses codes, n'avait jamais été qu'un sacrifice fait par son génie aux idées de la Révolution. (ORC 1, 1222).

The references to the historically real (Napoleon, Chamboran) are unmissable; the realism which this supposes is far less clear, thanks again to the workings of an especially selective ideological filter. As a figure who offers the return to patriarchal order and discipline, Napoleon obviously meets the requisite standards of Barbey's world view, which is why he earns the distinction of 'génie'. Yet, as the source of an egalitarian legal system (at least in Barbey's view) Napoleon also stands outside those standards, which in turn explains the pejorative tone linking him to the hated Revolution.

The very ambiguity of the treatment of Napoleon confirms to the reader that a filter is at work, ordering and organising (albeit somewhat falteringly) the history which the text strives to depict. Of course, manipulation itself is not necessarily prejudicial to realism; some degree of consensus-broking is unavoidable. What is more, when history and fiction come together they inevitably adjust in order to accommodate creative subjectivity:

> Le Roman! mais c'est de l'histoire, toujours, plus ou moins, des faits souvenus, agrandis, modifiés, arrangés selon l'imagination [...]. (CG III, 54).

What *is* prejudicial is the fact that Barbey's perspective is more a question of vision, complimenting the order of reactionary nostalgia. It is this projection of an aristocratic arcadia and the unshared eccentricity of implied 'shared' beliefs which locates Barbey's history within an (almost) abstract elitism to which the universal suffrage of realism cannot subscribe.

The same is also true of the handling of the 1830 Revolutions. Though somewhat apocryphal, the following account aims at a certain historical specificity:

> [...] au premier roulement de tambour, [Brassard] ne s'en était pas moins levé pour rejoindre sa compagnie, et comme il ne lui avait pas été possible de mettre des bottes, à cause de sa blessure, il s'en était allé à l'émeute comme il s'en serait allé au bal, en chaussons vernis et en bas de soie, et c'est ainsi qu'il avait pris la tête des ses grenadiers sur la place de la Bastille, chargé qu'il était de balayer dans toute sa longueur le boulevard. (ORC 2, 15).

As with Napoleon, Barbey's affinities are divided: while he fears the threat to order posed by the July insurrections, as a *légitimiste* he is equally suspicious of the Orléans dynasty which will follow.[34] This pattern of beliefs explains Brassard's half-hearted, nonchalant commitment-- seen symbolically in the patent leather slippers and silk stockings-- and underlines the ambivalent position in which Barbey's aristocrats find themselves, threatened as they are on two fronts. If we go along with the *légitimiste* ideology then the barricade burlesque offers a perceptive insight into a particular historical problem. The humour this scene provokes suggests, of course, that we do not and that, more importantly, we reject the intellectual link-up tendered by the author. In

[34] Barbey's *légitimiste* position is seen first in his gravitation towards the de Maistre social circle and second in his collaboration on Veuillot's *L'Univers*.

these circumstances, the realism Barbey is attempting to broker loses its way and is lost in its self-sought historical siding.

Taken as a whole, Barbey's writing of history is patently a matter of manipulation. That he should find historical truth in other writers, themselves somewhat romantic in vision, underlines this very point and explains the unstinting praise for Walter Scott we find in the Memoranda:

> Étonné de tout ce qu'il y a de vrai historiquement dans le *Kenilworth* de Walter Scott. (ORC 2, 935).

Nevertheless, it is not so much the fact of manipulation which renders Barbey's history problematic as the degree to which his reading of events is prohibitively exclusive. The disdain he nurses for nineteenth-century contemporaneity is, by general admission, unchecked:

> Barbey d'Aurevilly n'était pas contemporain de lui-même. Apparemment, il inscrivit son existence entre des coordonnées très repérables, au XIXe siècle. Mais ce n'est qu'apparence. La polémique qu'il ne cessa de nourrir contre le présent, le fait que si peu de ses écrits se veuillent «du jour», par leur cadre ou leur sujet, l'absence totale de goût pour la modernité aimée de Balzac et de Baudelaire, suffiraient à manifester un désintérêt militant envers ce qu'on ne peut que difficilement appeler «son» temps [...].[35]

From this antipathy to the outspoken promotion of an aristocratic order, seen in the 'valorisation' of the remnants of that society, Barbey's history loses the democratic assent on which realism depends; Alceste-like, his 'truths' are far too extreme:

> Il ne serait pourtant pas juste de dire que M. Barbey d'Aurevilly se moque absolument de la vérité. Il a une vérité à lui, ce qui revient à peu près au même, tellement sa vérité est extraordinaire.[36]

---

[35] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 93.
[36] Zola, *Une campagne*, p. 477.

Barbey's handling of history-- and therefore Time-- being markedly coloured by certain ideological assumptions, it is no surprise that his rendering of its corollary, Space, should demonstrate similar prejudices. It is certainly true that recognizable geographical pegs are to be found in abundance in his work, drawn in particular from his native Normandy: the Cotentin peninsula, the Lessay heath, Carteret, Coutances, Valognes and so on. To prove that these literary incarnations are grounded in reality-- if indeed proof were needed-- several critics offer verbal and photographic corroboration of their actual existence.[37] In so doing, they somewhat naively presume that the fictive-factual match-up of signposts necessarily makes the textual topography realist. In a sense, however, their argument is based solely on names whereas realism is much more a question of the *relationship* between names and the world they point to. Indeed, if we consider an example of the so-called realist geography, it becomes clear how far Barbey is once again promoting his own set of exacting standards:

> Sans cette pièce d'eau qu'on appelait l'étang du Quesnay, d'une grandeur étrange et d'une forme particulière (elle avait la forme d'un cône dont la base se fût appuyée à la route), la terre et le château dont il est question n'auraient eu rien de plus remarquable que les terres et les châteaux environnants. C'eût été un beau et commode manoir, voilà tout, une noble demeure. Mais cet étang qui se prolongeait bien au-delà de ce château, assis et oublié dans son bouquet de saules, mouillés et entortillés par les crêpes blancs d'un brouillard éternel, cet étang qui s'enfonçait dans l'espace comme une avenue liquide-- à perte de vue-- frappait le Quesnay de toute une physionomie!
> Les mendiants du pays disaient avec mélancolie que cet étang-là était long et triste comme un jour sans pain. Et de fait, avec sa couleur d'un vert mordoré comme le dos de ses grenouilles, ses plaques de nénuphars jaunâtres, sa bordure hérissée de joncs, sa solitude hantée seulement par quelques sarcelles, sa barque à moitié submergée et pourrie, il avait pour tout le monde un aspect sinistre [...]. (ORC 1, 883).

---

[37] Pierre Leberruyer, *Au pays de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Coutances: Éditions Bellée, 1960); Jacques-Henry Bornecque, *Paysages extérieurs et monde intérieur dans l'œuvre de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Caen: Publications de l'Université de Caen, 1968); Robert Chouard, *Promenades en Normandie avec un guide nommé Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Condé-sur-Noireau: Éditions Charles Corlet, 1989).

The gothic fog, matched to the accent on decay and isolation ('pourrie', 'solitude'), the explicit associations with the unknown ('étrange', 'éternel', 'hantée', 'sinistre'), the suggestion of uncertain physical boundaries ('s'enfonçait dans l'espace ... à perte de vue') and especially the anthropomorphic touch ('une physionomie!') are all features of discourse whose meaning is conveyed *symbolically*. Here, the suggestion is one of an aspatial, supernatural dimension in which the ground-rules of objective reality are suppressed. Similarly, in Barbey's evocation of the 'lande de Lessay' (ORC 1, 555-58) and the Carteret coastline (ORC 1, 367-71), the material world is subordinated to the dictates of shadows and fog, an atmospheric theatre in which the Supernatural is at home and which, of course, escapes the net of those for whom the Aurevillian landscape is simply a matter of signposts.

Barbey's vision of the countryside is inevitably imbued with the ideological prejudices we note above. That this space functions as the domain of other-worldly powers is no surprise, for the social brains-trust from which he borrows demands of his fiction that the peasant order be subordinated to the aristocracy, to the Church and, most important of all, to supernatural superstitions.

The questionable realism of Barbey's countryside is similarly reflected in his urban perspectives, particularly in his treatment of Paris. Again, we recognise a multiplicity of familiar names: le pont du Carrousel, le Jardin des Plantes, le Café anglais, chez Tortoni, le faubourg Saint-Germain, le Palais-Royal, La Salpêtrière. Again, however, it would be wrong to assume that borrowing the names of places and streets confers upon Barbey's city space solid realist credentials. On one hand the Parisian chronotope appears convincing:

> Vers la fin du règne de Louis-Philippe, un jeune homme enfilait, un soir, la rue Basse-du-Rempart qui, dans ce temps-là, méritait bien son nom de rue Basse, car elle était moins élevée que le sol du boulevard, et formait une excavation toujours mal éclairée et noire, dans laquelle on descendait du boulevard par deux escaliers qui se tournaient le dos, si on peut dire cela de deux escaliers. Cette excavation, qui n'existe plus et qui se prolongeait de la rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin à la rue Caumartin, devant laquelle le terrain reprenait son niveau; cette espèce de ravin sombre, où l'on se risquait à peine le jour, était fort mal hanté quand venait la nuit. (ORC 2, 232).

Unmistakably, we are in the ninth *arrondissement* of Paris, on the exact site of the excavations initiated by Baron Haussmann for the restructuring of the French capital. Yet, set in the broader picture of Barbey's city, this apparently unproblematic specificity shifts somewhat in meaning. For Paris is also a world of aristocratic enclaves:

> J'étais, un soir de l'été dernier, chez la baronne de Mascranny, une des femmes de Paris qui aiment le plus l'esprit comme on en avait autrefois, et qui ouvre les deux battants de son salon-- un seul suffirait-- au peu qui en reste parmi nous. (ORC 2, 129).

These are set principally in the 'vertueux faubourg Saint-Germain' (ORC 2, 61), where Barbey's ubiquitous salon and the conversation it entails function as a bulwark against the tide of the ascendant Bourgeoisie and the decadence its materialism implies. Outside the confines of the salon all is disorder: the excavation site we note above is, in fact, a market-place of prostitution:

> Le Diable est le Prince des Ténèbres. Il avait là une de ses principautés. (ORC2, 232).

Similarly, beyond the patrician circle which gathers at the conclusion to *Histoire,* mob rule and terror hold sway unchecked. (ORC 2, 354-57).

Ideologically, Barbey's Paris is a 'no-go' area for realism and its attendant sensitivities. In an important sense, his cityscape breaks down into a *critique* of modernity in which outposts of aristocracy hold out against the forces of perceived disorder. It is of course no accident that

the City should be seen in such a way given that, as ultimate symbol of modernity, it represents all that Barbey loathes. His contempt for Paris in the aftermath of the Commune is, in this context, more an article of faith than mere passing disaffection:

> [...] la tristesse morne,-- la tristesse *in se* de Paris. Il est abominable: un désert de rues et de boulevards avec ses figures de communards qui passent, de communards comprimés pour l'heure, mais dont le ressort est près de repartir! (CG VII, 106).

We have seen throughout the foregoing discussion how far Barbey's treatment of reality is a matter of *preference*. To his credit, he does admit that the rendering of reality is a subjective construct, speaking of 'Les réalités et leur mécanisme humain [...]'. (ORC 2, 804-5). So saying, he offers, perhaps ironically for one so nostalgic, an understanding of the problems of realism appreciably more modern than that to be found in the works of Zola. Nevertheless, while realism depends on manipulation it is equally dependent on ideological common ground, beyond which it simply fails to make sense. This explains, at least in part, the mocking contempt Barbey has often attracted, seen here in the response made by the pro-Victor Hugo camp, daubed on the walls of the Odéon in 1862:

> Barbet d'Aurevilly, cuistre impur, fat vieilli,
> Et beaucoup plus Barbet qu'il n'est d'Aurevilly.[38]

To reject Barbey's socio-political realism (albeit for sound reasons) implies an ideological stance opposed to that promoted in the texts. Condemning his aristocratic vision is no doubt a value judgement pregnant with its own assumptions: this fact cannot be hidden. However, if we are to make sense of realism it must position itself carefully and sensitively in relation to our own way of thinking which,

---

[38] Hubert Juin, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Paris: Seghers, 1975), p. 62.

in the closing years of the twentieth century, means allying itself to a broadly agreed liberalism.[39]

* * *

Having set down what Barbey's realism is not, the way is now clear to set down what it *is*. If his handling of a transitive sort of realism where he clumsily lays hold of reality is to be doubted, his ability to create a self-reflexive realism, sustaining *vraisemblance*, is infinitely more assured. In this context, the following discussion looks at how external correlations are *suggested*, thanks to the dissembling of fictionality.

To read Barbey's fiction is indubitably something of a challenge, not least because of the somewhat baroque complexity, if not labyrinthine twists and detours, of his narrative method. Only with careful attention (and some re-reading) can we accurately follow the successive handing-on of the narrator's baton. Pascaline Mourier-Casile, invoking the same metaphor while also adding that of the *roman à tiroirs*, makes the point in the following terms:

> Narrateurs qui se passent le relais et intervertissent leurs rôles. Enchâssements et déboîtements plus ou moins complexes des niveaux narratifs.[40]

Barbey himself, commenting on the manuscript of *Prêtre* in a letter to his Norman compatriot, Trebutien, stresses this feature of his technique:

> Vous êtes un homme de si grande harmonie, un artiste si symphonique et si *pieux à l'effet d'ensemble* [...]. Je suis bien sûr que

[39] This normative obedience is, of course, a dangerous line to tread; ways in which this is mitigated are discussed in the conclusion to this chapter.
[40] *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Pascaline Mourier-Casile (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1993), p. 25.

> vous lirez comme il faut lire,-- c'est-à-dire,-- page par page, *lisant et ne parcourant* et souffrant le reploiement et le soulèvement du Rideau par l'auteur avec ses gradations voulues et réfléchies. (CG IV, 272).

Such solicitude that the reader be aware of the difficult and confusing narrative method indicates clearly that, for Barbey at least, the sinuous interchange of récits has a precise function beyond gratuitous verbal dandyism. The accumulation of narrative perspectives is in fact an indication of Barbey's concern for *vraisemblance*, for, in so constructing his fiction, he hides the hands that shape the artefact, creating the illusion of verbal autarky where the author-- and the fictionality his presence implies-- is lost. As such, Barbey's technique admirably corresponds to Flaubert's ideal:

> L'artiste doit être dans son œuvre comme Dieu dans la création, invisible et tout-puissant; qu'on le sente partout, mais qu'on ne le voie pas.[41]

An especially appropriate example of the free-standing narrative structure is provided by *Don Juan*. Part one of this *Diabolique* opens with a conversational exchange between an unidentified first-person narrator and an equally unnamed 'Madame'. In part two the primary narrator begins to recount the events of the dinner given in honour of Ravila. Part three then switches to Ravila's own report in direct speech. While part four continues from this perspective, part five interpolates the récit of the Marquise. Her account in turn accommodates the narrative of the curé de Saint-Germain-des-Prés, who himself (through the voice of the Marquise and so Ravila and *so* the primary narrator) presents the récit of her thirteen year-old daughter. The text closes with a return to Ravila's own account and focuses on the death of the girl:

---

[41] Flaubert, *Correspondance*, IV, 164.

-- Oh! elle était morte, bien jeune et mariée en province, quand sa mère me racontait cette histoire, répondit Ravila. (ORC 2, 79).

Why does Barbey go to such lengths? Why the 'Chinese whispers' narrative progression? The answer to this is two-fold. First, by increasing the number of narrative screens, the author sustains the illusion that he is hidden and that his text is somehow autonomous: the narrative ego lost in a multiplicity of alter-egos. Second, and as a consequence, the implausibility of the Marquise's daughter's claims-- that sitting in Ravila's chair made her pregnant-- is mitigated by the fact that this information comes to us third or fourth-hand, with the result that, because it is framed so artificially, such a claim makes fewer demands on the laws of plausibility and paradoxically, within the text, maintains a degree of possibility. Such is the suggestion behind the pensiveness evoked in the closing line:

-- Sans cela!...» fit la duchesse songeuse. (ORC 2, 79).

While it is no doubt true that the self-effacing fictionality engendered by narrative technique is most felt in Barbey's shorter fiction, it would be wrong to assume that the longer works are free from its influence. Texts such as *Ensorcelée* and *Prêtre,* though less densely convoluted, are no less keen to dissemble any idea of a ruling enunciator. The former, based primarily on the reported account of Maître Tainnebouy, also incorporates a number of subaltern narrators, such as Pierre Cloud (ORC1, 737-41), and a still greater number of interpolated accounts such as that of Marie Hecquet (ORC 1, 591-98). The latter, arguably more straightforward, nevertheless proceeds from the reported récit of Rollon Langrune which is in turn informed by sundry accounts from Jeanne Roussel (ORC 1, 902).

The disappearance of the author is, of course, nothing more than an illusion. This illusory invisibility is nevertheless capable of producing concrete results, seen most tellingly in the near unimpeded autonomy which texts such as *Diaboliques* appear to enjoy. Autonomy and its implied objective reality can easily be deflated: they are no more than fictional constructs after all. This, however, is the risk all fiction runs, especially realism, in which sense Barbey's illusions are no more frail than the illusions of literature itself.

The concerted effort to do away with narrative authority is further enhanced by the self-professed inadequacies of Barbey's narrators. When introducing a récit from a third party (be it in direct or reported speech) the enunciating voice commonly feels the need to offer some form of disclaimer in respect of what will follow, often stressing the insufficiency of their reporting abilities. The following remark preceding the account of Maître Tainnebouy, whose narrative forms the fictional bulk of *Ensorcelée*, makes clear the narrator's limitations:

> J'aurais pu, la mémoire fraîchement imbibée du langage de maître Tainnebouy, écrire, quand nous fûmes arrivés à la Haie-du-Puits, tout ce qu'il m'avait raconté, mais je passai mon temps à y songer, et c'est ce que j'en puis dire de mieux. Aujourd'hui que quelques années se sont écoulées, m'apportant tout ce qui complète mon histoire, je la raconterai à ma manière, qui, peut-être, ne vaudra pas celle de mon herbager cotentinais. (ORC 1, 584).

The opening narrator's comments in *Dessous* are similarly apologetic:

> Et il raconta ce qui va suivre. Mais pourrai-je rappeler, sans l'affaiblir, ce récit, nuancé par la voix et le geste, et surtout faire ressortir le contrecoup de l'impression qu'il produisit sur toutes les personnes rassemblées dans l'atmosphère sympathique de ce salon? (ORC 2, 133-4).

The effect produced is to create the impression that the interpolated récit is, in fact, some form of independent document, preceding and exterior to the text in which it is clumsily housed. It is as if the narrator were

merely glossing a narrative trove, finding and assimilating rather than inventing, producing the illusion that the text is born in reality rather than in fiction.

This elliptical inadequacy of the written text is reinforced by the impasse on which Barbey's fictions habitually conclude. The facts surrounding the ghost of Jugan are a matter beyond the grasp of the reader thanks to the dead-lock of information on which *Ensorcelée* ends:

> Plus tard, j'ai voulu justifier ma croyance, par une suite des habitudes et des manies de ce triste temps, et je revins vivre quelques mois dans les environs de Blanchelande. J'étais déterminé à passer une nuit aux trous du portail, comme Pierre Cloud, le forgeron, et à voir de mes yeux ce qu'il avait vu. Mais comme les époques étaient fort irrégulières et distantes auxquelles sonnaient les neuf coups de la messe de l'abbé de la Croix-Jugan, quoiqu'on les entendît retentir parfois encore, me dirent les anciens du pays, mes affaires m'ayant obligé à quitter la contrée, je ne pus jamais réaliser mon projet. (ORC 1, 741).

In the same way, the circumstances surrounding the death of Jeanne in *Ensorcelée* remain unexplained to the end, leaving the resolution we might expect indefinitely postponed:

> Jeanne-Madelaine s'était-elle noyée volontairement? Etait-elle victime d'un désespoir, d'un accident, ou d'un crime? (ORC 1, 692).

What commonly occurs at the notional end of Barbey's texts is a jarring interruption of what is implied to be a wider, more complete narrative. This again suggests, by ellipsis, that the texts correspond to something more than fiction, so that the frustrating final full-stop of the narrative,

> «Et après?-- lui dis-je.
> --Eh bien! voilà!-- répondit-il,-- il n'y a pas d'après! (ORC 2, 56).

-- is, in fact, a marker of greater truths that the fiction cannot contain.

Part of the success of the *vraisemblance* assured by Barbey's narrators is due to the conversational mode which they adopt. We know that Barbey initially intended *Diaboliques* to be published under the

heading 'Ricochets de conversation', as he indicates to Trebutien at the time of the first edition of *Dessous*:

> Mon intention est de donner deux ou trois Nouvelles intitulées comme cette première, *Ricochets de Conversation* avec des sous-titres différents. (CG II, 156).

Furthermore, from unedited notebooks (ORC 1, 1438-41), we know that the first sketched drafts of *Prêtre* also bore this title. Indeed, throughout his career Barbey remained faithful to the idea of narrative as conversation, a principle adopted in his first prose-work, *Cachet* (1831), in which the narrator, inscribed within the text, engages a conversation out of which a number of récits evolve. The device is omnipresent: *Léa, Bague, Maîtresse, Ensorcelée, Prêtre, Diaboliques* and *Histoire* all proceed from or conclude on a conversational premise.

In his taste for this device, Barbey reveals how far in formal terms he inherits from Balzac. The following extracts suggest a clear technical affinity:

> Je fréquentais, l'hiver dernier, une maison, la seule peut-être où maintenant, le soir, la conversation échappe à la politique et aux niaiseries de salon. Là, viennent des artistes, des poètes, des hommes d'Etat, des savants, des jeunes gens occupés ailleurs de chasse, de chevaux, de femmes, de jeu, de toilette, mais qui, dans cette réunion, prennent sur eux de dépenser leur esprit, comme ils prodiguent ailleurs leur argent ou leurs fatuités.[42]

> [...] la baronne de Mascranny a fait de son salon une espèce de Coblentz délicieux où s'est réfugiée la conversation d'autrefois [...]. Rien n'y rappelle l'article du journal et le discours politique [...]. L'esprit se contente d'y briller en mots charmants ou profonds [...]. (ORC 2, 130).

The similarities are striking. It would, however, be somewhat hasty to suggest that the latter is a work of plagiarism, even though, as Jacques

---

[42] Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, 12 vols (Paris: La Pléiade, 1976-81), XII, p. 471.

Petit claims, Barbey seems to have read the Balzac text in 1849, precisely, that is, at the time when he was writing *Dessous*.[43]

The technical parallel between the two authors is significant in that it demonstrates Barbey's interest in Balzac's mastery of realist discourse. For Barbey understands that texts such as *Échantillon de la causerie française*, where the fiction is written as a number of conversational accounts, offer great potential to the writer seeking to establish an illusion of reality. The effect is in fact two-fold. First, in defocalising the initial narrative premise, the authorial ego is dispersed, dissembling the sovereignty of fiction his presence normally dictates and creating in turn the illusion of textual autonomy. Second, given that conversation is manifestly oral discourse, the spoken nature of the narrative hints that the work is something other than the product of penmanship. Against this trademark of fictive invention, the verbal utterance betokens authenticity. From such sleight of hand Barbey's fiction assumes the guise of reality.

The accent on oral enunciation in the texts is further and most comprehensively felt in Barbey's use of his native Norman patois. There exists, oddly, and in not undistinguished quarters, some confusion as to the import, indeed, the *need*, of the Norman dialect in his fiction. Baudelaire appears uncertain of its value and, according to Barbey, on reading *Ensorcelée* seems to have suggested its complete suppression:

> Baudelaire, qui se pique de correction avait voulu joindre ses corrections aux miennes; mais presque toutes étaient des erreurs, et je les ai effacées. Rien d'étonnant. Il ne sait pas le Patois normand, qui est une langue, et même une très belle langue, et c'est sur ce patois que ses corrections avaient porté. (CG IV, 324).

[43] According to Petit, Barbey would have had intimate knowledge of this nouvelle given that at that time he was researching Balzac's entire œuvre in order to produce the *Pensées de Balzac*. (ORC 2, 1276).

Others, such as Pontmartin, see only 'solécismes' and 'barbarismes' in Barbey's patois.[44] In more recent times, the bone of contention has shed the guise of literary *bienséance* to assume another problematic form, voiced by Jacques Petit in these terms:

> Une querelle s'est élevée récemment entre les Aurevilliens; les uns tiennent qu'il faut «dérégionaliser» Barbey, les autres le veulent normand. (ORC 1, XVI).

It is tempting to wonder if wrangling such as this is really to the point. That the patois is fitting or no is a matter of taste, for which there is of course no legislating; still less pertinent is the 'regionalism' debate which, in posing the writer's identity as the focus of discussion, deflects from the *literary* significance of the dialectal borrowings. Properly put, the question is this: what function does the patois serve? The answer to this is provided by Proust:

> [...] chez Barbey d'Aurevilly [il y a] une réalité cachée révélée par une trace matérielle, la rougeur physiologique de L'Ensorcelée, d'Aimée de Spens, de la Clotte, la main du *Rideau cramoisi*, les vieux usages, les vieilles coutumes, les vieux mots, les métiers anciens et singuliers derrière lesquels il y a le Passé, l'histoire orale faite par les pâtres du terroir [...].[45]

According to Proust the Norman dialect, the 'vieux mots', the 'histoire orale', is a material pointer to an external reality, a physical memento of a dimension which precedes fiction and which directly informs it. We know that Barbey took a scholarly interest in his native dialect, studying assiduously and offering somewhat immodest criticism of the *Dictionnaire du Patois normand* compiled by his cousins Alfred and Edelestand du Méril:

---

[44] Pontmartin, '*L'Ensorcelée* par J. Barbey d'Aurevilly' in *Dernières causeries du samedi* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1860), 56-63 (p. 60).
[45] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, 3 vols (Paris: La Pléiade, 1954), III, p. 375.

> J'ai déjà lu *deux fois* le Dictionnaire de Patois d'*Edelestand*. C'est le commencement d'un peloton à dévider, mais que d'inexactitudes, même pour moi qui suis tout le contraire d'un savant. *Jeanne Roussel*, à elle seule, ma vieille bonne, en avait plus dans sa vieille tête que tout le Dictionnaire d'*Edelestand*. Que de mots que je sais et qui ne sont pas dans son livre! Du reste la prononciation variait (ou varie) de *Saint-Sauveur* à *Valognes*, mais je soutiens que je suis d'*Athènes-la-Grande* pour le Patois. (CG IV, 248).

Like Proust, Barbey understands the precise literary effect of patois, countering doubts voiced by Trebutien in the following characteristically unequivocal terms:

> J'ai pesé, dans ma misérable sagesse, ce que vous me dites sur l'emploi du Patois, et la balance, qui n'a point tremblé, n'a pas penché du côté de l'opinion que vous m'exprimez. J'ai pour moi *Walter Scott*, mais c'est un Anglais; j'ai *Burns*, mon favori *Burns*, même objection, c'est un Ecossais! -- J'ai *Balzac*, un maître et un grand Maître! Mais laissons les noms! La poésie pour moi n'existe qu'au fin fond de la réalité et la réalité parle Patois. (CG III, 108).

The meaning of this declaration is unmissable: for Barbey, patois fuses text and world seamlessly. This we know to be an impossibility. Nonetheless, the *illusion* that it is so, the will to *mimic* reality remains undiminished and constitutes the defining feature of his dialectal borrowings. To show how this works, let us consider the following extract from *Maîtresse*:

> -- Elle hante donc toujours la côte? -- fit le porte-besace, qui habitait dans les terres.
> -- Tiens! c'tte question! -- dit le pêcheur de crabes. Puis, se ravisant:
> -- Mais que je *sis* bête! -- reprit-il. -- C'est vrai, mon *bonhoûmme*. Vous n'êtes pas d'ici, que je pense. Vous v'nez jusque de Saint-Maurice.
> -- Nenni da! -- répliqua le pauvre. -- Je *sis* de Sortôville-en-Beaumont, du Hamet(i) aux Lubées, tout contre la terre de Carbonnel.
> -- Eh ben! tout de même, -- dit le pêcheur de crabes,-- Sortôville-en-Beaumont ou Saint-Maurice! Quand vous êtes couché dans vot' masure, vous n' pouvez guères *savair* ce qui se passe dans les mielles de Portbail à Carteret.
> -- Ah! j'y ons passé ben tard et en toute saison,-- fit le mendiant, se redressant sous sa sacoche, avec l'orgueil de son ubiquité de vagabond sur tous ces rivages.
> -- J'y ons passé ben tard, dans vos gueuses de mielles, si mal commodes pour mes pauvres sabots, avec leurs sables mouvants. Mais jamais je ne l'avons rencontrée qu'une seule fois, la Caroline!

et ma *finguette*! il y a bien de ça quinze ans... Vère! il y a bien quinze ans,-- répéta-t-il en cherchant dans sa vieille mémoire, comme un antiquaire dans quelque parchemin jauni. -- Dans ce temps-là, *i gn'y* avait pas une seule maison sur toute la côte où l'on n'en glosât, de la Caroline! C'était un samedi. Je m'en souviens comme si c'était hier. Je m'en allais à Portbail chercher mes croûtes de la semaine et y coucher pour la foire du lendemain. J'm'étions un peu attardé chez Bonnetard, le boulanger, qui était cabaretier *itou*(ii) et vendait du cidre, sans pass-avant, à Barneville. Un royal cidre,-- insista-t-il avec mélancolie,-- comme je n'*crais* pas en avoir *beu* une chopine depuis! Ah! ce soir-là, le temps n'était pas à la brume comme aujourd'hui. Y faisait clair dans les mielles comme dans un miroir. La lune était aussi jaune et aussi reluisante que les plats à barbe de cuivre qui dansent à la porte de la boutique d'un barbier. J'avais le cœur joyeux. J'n'pensais à rien: car c'était le bon temps. On n'avait pas chance de mourir de faim au fond d'un fossé, comme aujourd'hui, un jour ou l'autre. V'là qu'tout à coup, entre les Rivières et les moulins des buttes Saint-Georges, j'vis *queuque* chose de blanc qui remuait comme un linge dans une haie, et je m'dis à part *mai*: «Serait-ce la Caroline?... » Eh ben! vrai comme j'*sis* un *chrétian* baptisé et que j'ai nom Loquet, c'était elle! Elle était haute et blanche comme une Mille-Lorraine(iii) des lavoirs de Fierville. Elle fit pique par-dessus feuille(iv) dans la haie et vint à *mai, draite* comme v'là mon bâton,--ajouta-t-il en plantant sa gaule ferrée dans le sable, avec un geste d'un pittoresque saisissant. -- E'n'me dit mot. *Mai*, je marchais la tête basse sous mon gand *capet*. J'avais ouï dans ma jeunesse à une vieille fileuse, la grande Jeanne, qui passait pour avoir bien du *savait*(v) dans tout Sortôville, qu'y n'faut jamais parler le premier aux revenants, si on ne veut pas mourir dans l'année. J'marchais, j'marchais, mais elle était aussi vite que *mai*. E'n'me quitta qu'aux premières maisons, sous Portbail. V'là toute l'affaire,-- ajouta-t-il, en jetant par manière de conclusion un regard sur son auditoire. -- D'aucuns disent qu'elle n'd'vise jamais et ne fait de mal à personne. Pourtant, quand on l'a au bout du coude, on n'est pas à noce, ma *finguette*! Un vieux cherche-son-pain comme *mai* n'est pas bien facile à *épeurer*, mais que le diable me laboure un champ de navets dans le ventre, si, tout le temps qu'elle a été là, j'n'ai pas senti une manière de sueur *fraide* qui mouillait, sur mon dos, jusqu'à mon bissac!

(i) *Hamet*, hameau.
(ii) *Itou*, aussi.
(iii) Les Mille-Lorraines! superstition du pays. Ce sont des femmes-fées. Elles chantent la nuit, vêtues de blanc, à genoux sur la pierre polie des lavoirs. On les voit, battant leur linge au clair de lune, placées en cercle autour de l'eau étincelante. Quand un passant attardé entre dans la prairie où le lavoir qu'elles hantent est situé, elles l'arrêtent aux échaliers et le forcent à tordre leur linge; s'il s'y prend mal, elles lui cassent le bras.
(iv) Expression locale. Piquer par-dessus la feuille, probablement.
(v) Avoir du *savait* (savoir), mot du pays pour exprimer qu'on a quelque mystérieuse accointance avec le Diable. (ORC 1, 442-4).

Excerpts of this sort show that Barbey's patois is in fact something of a broad church, embracing a number of linguistic idioms and which we might roughly characterise under two rubrics: those features which attempt to reproduce the fluidity of the spoken word, without

necessarily being dialectal in nature, and those elements which expressly designate themselves as Norman patois. Of the former we immediately notice the repeated conjugational oddity, 'j'y ons passé' and the proliferation of ellipses in spelling, 'vous v'nez', 'vot' masure', 'v'là qu'tout à coup', 'E'n'me dit mot', both imitative of spoken deformations. This effect is compounded by syntactical ellipsis: 'Y faisait clair'. The accent on orality is further reinforced by the free discourse nature of the beggar's account: note the digressions on cider, barbers' shops and the repeated use of 'E'' to introduce a sentence, implying a spontaneous phrasal construction. Similarly, the extract demonstrates syntactical features characteristic of spoken accounts: grammatical 'errors', 'jamais je ne l'avons rencontrée qu'une seule fois', and the doubling up of pronoun and noun, 'où l'on n'en glosât, de la Caroline!' It is equally accommodating of colloquial expressions: 'quand on l'a au bout du coude, on n'est pas à noce.'

The distinction between colloquialism and Patois might initially appear problematic: how do we class the contractions, 'sis', 'queuque', or indeed the 'misspellings', 'chrétian', 'mai', 'bonhoûmme'? To pursue such enquiry is a fruitless venture and one which misses the point as it leads us to ask: is this or that *real* patois? That it is real or no is a red herring and one which Baudelaire seems to have fallen for in his corrections of *Ensorcelée*. The question we should address is: is it *realistic*? That it is unequivocally so is justified in two ways. First, it is to be noted that many of the lexical oddities are presented in italicised form: '*finguette*', '*itou*', '*crais*', '*beu*', etc. This typographical trick throws such words into relief, implying strangeness, uncertainty of meaning and by association exotic provenance; set in the context of a spoken account delivered by a wandering beggar in Normandy they incontrovertibly imply patois. So it is that, without ever having to justify their authenticity outside the text,

the italicised words create the illusion that they belong to a dimension from which fiction, indicating its debt, gratefully borrows.

A similar set of associations is also manifested in the footnotes, the second guarantor of realism. These footnotes are clearly far more than a concession to an ignorant Parisian readership; knowing Barbey's views on the capital any such solicitude is highly unlikely. Acting, rather, as a gloss, they suggest that the information they mediate owes its existence to something more than fiction, a point ingeniously underlined by the narrator when he adds the coy caveat to the fourth note, 'probablement'.

Assessing Barbey's use of patois and the wider oral patterns which it connotes, it becomes clear how far the success of realism is in fact dependent on a structure of absences within the text; the 'otherness' conveyed by the fictional dialect functions something like a hole which the reader fills with his knowledge of exterior reality.

This concern for 'absentee' realism is moreover given a dramatic twist in the writing of *real* holes:

> Le jour tombait depuis quelques instants dans les rues de la ville de ***. (ORC 2, 173).

Some critics, Petit in the van, confidently claim to know what the absence of designation marked by the asterisks *really* indicates. Of the above example Petit notes modestly, 'Il s'agit encore de Valognes' (ORC 2, 1322), founding his belief on extracts from the *Memoranda* which do, admittedly, demonstrate parallels with the opening of *Dîner* (ORC 2, 1110-1, 1122-4, 1569-70). The point in Barbey's punctuation is not, however, to set tests for the reader nor to ask him to pin donkeys' tails to the dots. The ostentatious anonymity that he consciously works into the

texts enables him to suggest that a *real* name is being withheld in the interests of propriety or secrecy.

From a simple typographical trick Barbey succeeds, therefore, in positing a highly convincing illusion of the real. This, in part, doubtlessly explains the disquiet among Barbey's social circle at the time of the publication of *Dessous*, when close friends, including the baronne de Maistre, accused the writer of portraying their real lives. Barbey nevertheless repeatedly declared the anonymity of his fiction:

> De plus, ce scandale, je m'en lave les mains. J'en suis très innocent. J'ai agi dans mon droit d'observateur, de moraliste, de conteur. Je n'ai nommé personne (des personnages compromis), je n'ai *abusé* d'aucune confidence. (CG III, 268-9).

The absence of names in *Diaboliques* can only reinforce this statement:

> 'la diligence de ***'. (ORC 2, 11).
> 'la ville de ***'. (ORC 2, 27).
> 'en passage à V...'. (ORC 2, 89).
> 'des femmes de V...'. (ORC 2, 105).
> 'le séjour à ***'. (ORC 2, 179).

Yet the typographical holes did little to ease the chill: Barbey's friends, like Jacques Petit, confuse realism with reality. Any link with reality proposed by any textual marker is, as I stress throughout, a matter of pure suggestion; what the fiction really contains is nothing more than a hole. In this respect, perhaps ironically, Barbey tentatively moves towards Flaubert's ideal:

> Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c'est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l'air [...].[46]

[46] Flaubert, *Correspondance*, II, 345.

* * *

The arguments I put forward, both for and against Barbey's realism, aim to be precise within what is a very demanding context. However, given the centrality of realism in Fantastic discourse what is or is not realist cannot be taken as read; for this reason, stripping away problematic areas that others have superficially seen as realist is more than warranted. For, it is only in challenging Barbey's difficult subjectivity that we are able to see through to the appreciably more reliable *vraisemblance* that he achieves.

This chapter concludes, therefore, on the nearest possible zero gravity of subjectivity, which I propose is to be found in Barbey's use of *absence*. Of course, the argument for logocentric realism is inherently difficult. Unlike pictorial representation, which physically mimes Space, verbal acts of reproduction are, above all, a matter of abstraction and intellectual codes. In this sense, verbal realism is something of a paradox:

> While in painting and in the other visual arts the illusion of an objective and absolute faithfulness to reality is conceivable, 'natural' (in Plato's terminology) verisimilitude in a verbal expression or in a literary description obviously makes no sense whatever.[47]

The irony is, however, that written texts *do* manage to assemble a sense of reality, dependent on a democratic consensus about signs themselves. If, as Christopher Prendergast maintains, the normative demands of realism are a 'repressive orthodoxy',[48] silencing detracting voices-- to

---

[47] Roman Jakobson, 'On realism in art', trans. by Karol Magassey in *Readings in Russian poetics*, ed. by Ladislev Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Michigan, MI: Ann Arbor, 1978), pp. 35-59 (p. 39).
[48] Prendergast, *Mimesis*, p. 217.

which Barbey, in part, succumbs-- this loss of liberty is nevertheless, in the context of the Fantastic, the means by which an even greater freedom is achieved. For it is only thanks to the assurances of realist discourse that the 'otherness' of the Supernatural remains possible.

3

Narration

Peut-être tout le mérite de son histoire était-il dans sa manière de la raconter... . (ORC 2, 164).

L'objet de la narration, ce que vise le texte , semble être toujours un manque.[1]

This and the chapters that follow move across the dynamic flux of the Fantastic to consider how Barbey's fiction *undermines* the claims it is making. As pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, Barbey's narrative technique has been the attention of a good deal of study, focusing on his ability to 'un-narrate' the narrative. In this chapter, this curious knack is re-read in an applied context, specifically, how the problematics of *telling* are germane to the instability of meaning sought by the Fantastic.

The study of Barbey's private writings indicates quite clearly an abiding passion for anecdotes, *racontars* and impromptu story-telling. According to Barbey, much of this he inherits from his childhood nanny cum servant, Jeanne Roussel:

> [...] Jeanne Roussel-- une vraie rhapsode populaire-- à laquelle je dois, après Dieu, le peu de poésie qui ait jamais chauffé ma cervelle [...]. (ORC 1, 884).
>
> [Ai] fait causer sur beaucoup de gens du peuple connus dans mon enfance ma vieille Jeanne [...]. (ORC 2, 784).

---

[1] Jacques Petit, *Essais de lectures des Diaboliques de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Paris: Minard, 1974), p. 45.

Drawing on her influence, Barbey is keen to promote himself as *raconteur*:

> Resté d'indolence jusqu'au souper dans le salon. [...] Raconté des histoires de spectres et d'apparitions après souper. (ORC 2, 784).

Cast in this role, the salon provides the theatre in which he may indulge his interests with characteristically immodest verve:

> Victor-Antoine, beau sujet à écrire, mais jamais je ne l'écrirai comme je l'ai parlé l'autre soir chez la baronne de M[aistre]. Quelle improvisation *sorcière* en parlant d'un *sorcier*! Je sentais des puissances inconnues d'aperçu et d'expression qui poussaient en moi à mesure que je parlais. (ORC 1, XXXIX).

While not of course proposing a deterministic correlation, Barbey's literary texts demonstrate a comparable concern for the act of narrative and its constituent dynamics. From the convolutions of third, fourth and even fifth-hand narratorial re-routing in *Diaboliques* to the simpler récit within narrative of texts such as *Histoire*, Barbey's fictional output is markedly self-conscious as regards the formal conditions under which texts are told and has consequently attracted much attention:

> Imitée quelque peu de Balzac ou suscitée par le souvenir des récits entendus dans l'enfance, la technique narrative de Barbey a forcé l'attention. Les critiques les moins sensibles aux problèmes formels n'ont pu l'ignorer [...].[2]

Critics are wont to see in Barbey's virtuosity a typically Aurevillian rhetorical inflation, stopping at narrative complexity and passing aesthetic judgement. Some tax Barbey harshly in this respect, finding fault with his delegated reporters:

---

[2] Petit, *Essais de lectures*, p. 19.

> Barbey, en mettant le récit dans la bouche d'un tiers, use d'un artifice qui gêne [...].[3]

Others reproach him on a broader front, interpreting the intricacy of his narratives as an expression of wilful obscurantism, wherein we may read his antipathy towards the Enlightenment:

> [...] tout ce qui est clair et compréhensible dans une œuvre d'imagination, M. d'Aurevilly le dédaigne et le nie comme il repousse en masse toutes les intelligences du dix-huitième siècle.[4]

However, if we go beyond such reactions and *read* the manner of narration itself, as the opening title aperitif suggests, a different and appreciably more positive vista of meaning opens up. If, indeed, we assess the confusion produced by Barbey's narrative arabesques, we are able, within the context of the Fantastic, to see how the form of enunciation is in fact crucial to the construction of ambiguity upon which the genre depends.

With this in mind, taking Jacques Petit's cue from the second title quotation, it is the hypothesis of this chapter that the narrative structure of Barbey's texts converges on a point of absence where the object of the fiction is in a sense un-stated and in which space the Fantastic resides. In order to demonstrate how this works, I will first give consideration to the *insufficiency* which Barbey's narratives cultivate. Following this, I shall assess the contingency inscribed within the narrative voices themselves, after which consideration will be given to the importance of conversation as narrative mode. From here, I propose to analyse the meaning of the oral tradition within the texts and will finally focus attention on the scope and significance of exposition and denouement.

---

[3] Roger Bésus, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1957), p. 106.
[4] Champfleury, *Une vieille maîtresse*, p. 317.

* * *

Before beginning this discussion, some clarification is required. Looking at the headings set out above, it will be clear that I propose to examine elements of Barbey's discourse which, from an altogether different perspective, are discussed in the preceding chapter. This suggests, superficially at least, a good deal of confusion. In order to resolve this apparent inconsistency, let us pause to consider the nature of the very materials which provoke this paradox.

Literary discourse, whatever its persuasion, does not exist in the same way that insects do and indeed only takes form in the re-enactment which the reader applies to its words: if it is to be prised loose from the sterile constraints of typography and printer's ink it needs first to be *read*. This basic working premise is voiced by Jean-Paul Sartre in the following terms:

> [...] l'objet littéraire, quoiqu'il se réalise *à travers* le langage, n'est jamais donné *dans* le langage.[5]

In saying this, Sartre proposes that the meaning of a literary text, while it resides undeniably within that text, only actually exists-- paradoxically-- outside of these confines in the interpretation the reader applies, which, as Terry Eagleton demonstrates, is far from straightforward. In the preface to his admirable *Literary theory: an introduction*, Eagleton makes the following invitation to the reader:

> Consider a prosaic, quite unambiguous statement like the one sometimes seen in the London underground system: 'Dogs must be carried on the escalator'. This is not perhaps quite as

[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations*, 10 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1947-76), II, p. 94.

> unambiguous as it seems at first sight: does it mean that you *must* carry a dog on the escalator? Are you likely to be banned from the escalator unless you can find some stray mongrel to clutch in your arms on the way up? [6]

In these conditions, it is difficult to imagine the incalculable problems of interpretation posed by a literary message which, unlike signs on the Underground, does not aim to be pragmatic. Perhaps the surest testimony to the variety of readings available in any one given work is the variety of literary criticism itself, to which Barbey has proved particularly vulnerable.[7]

Of course, the construction of meaning depends to a great extent on the intellectual input of the reader-- the premise discussed in Chapter Two and on which Eagleton's understanding of literature is founded.[8] For the purposes of this chapter, attention is focused not on the reader's shifting ideological variables but rather on instability itself:

> [...] elle [la littérature] décrit des objets, des personnes, rapporte des événements, et au lieu de leur imposer des significations certaines et figées, comme le fait la parole sociale (et aussi, bien sûr, la 'mauvaise' littérature), elle leur laisse, ou plutôt leur restitue, par une technique très subtile (et qui reste à étudier) d'évasion sémantique, ce sens *tremblé*, ambigu, indéfini, qui est leur vérité.[9]

Genette's remarks remind us that while certain features of Barbey's narrative technique may well contribute to what is realist about his work, as we discuss in Chapter Two, they are equally free to offer their services to the cause of other meanings. If Barbey's patois is a source of

---

[6] Terry Eagleton, *Literary theory: an introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 6-7.
[7] The reactions Barbey's work arouses are often radically different. For Léon Bloy, Barbey is little short of a genius: 'C'est un maître imagier de la Désobéissance'. 'Un brelan d'excommuniés', in *Œuvres complètes*, 15 vols (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964-75), II, pp. 250-85 (p. 260). For others, such as André Gide, he is the subject of scorn: 'Nous essayons *le Chevalier Destouches* [sic], mais au bout de vingt pages le livre me tombe des mains. [...] De part en part il n'y a que rhétorique et bluff dans cet homme-là'. André Gide, *Journal 1889-1939* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1948), p. 195.
[8] Eagleton, *Literary theory*, p. 16.
[9] Genette, *Figures I*, pp. 203-4.

vraisemblance, it is just as much a source of over-worked textual self-consciousness, undermining its credibility. This chapter aims to uncover the polysemy contained within Barbey's fiction, in the interests, on this occasion, of textual *doubt*.

* * *

Turning then to the discussion proper, let us first consider the way Barbey's narratives are structured. The successive *mise en abyme* of narrative planes is seen by many as the defining aesthetic of the Aurevillian fictional technique. Barbey's creative approach itself suggests to what extent he values the multiplication of textual perspective:

> [...] je fais des *raccords*,-- mon plan se modifiant dans ma tête à mesure que j'écris, et toutes sortes de rideaux glissant sur leurs tringles dans les cent chambres de mes rêves et me découvrant des perspectives dont je ne me doute jamais quand je commence d'écrire. (CG V, 93).

While it is, of course, possible to read negatively into this remark, reducing Barbey's manner of composition to a chaotic series of unconscious associations, it is perhaps somewhat simplistic to relegate the fictional results to mere accident. For Jacques Petit, the perspectives offered by the narrative and the problematic perceptions they entail constitute the *sign* under which Barbey's work is written. This he detects most tangibly in the motif, 'L'enfer, vu par un soupirail' (ORC 2, 133), on which he comments:

> [...] cette formule est caractéristique. Nulle autre ne pourrait plus justement, plus heureusement, définir cette œuvre romanesque dans ses intentions et dans son esthétique. (ORC 1, IX).

Lending a moral dimension to this sign, Léon Bloy echoes Petit's choice of guiding aesthetic:

> C'est un trou d'aiguille à la pellicule de civilisation qui nous cache le pandémonium dont notre vanité suppose que des cloisons d'univers nous séparent.[10]

In spite of their differences, the foregoing observations converge on a significant point of consensus: that the perspective offered by Barbey's texts challenges the reader's will to make sense of the fiction, is incomplete and resists the clarity of a unified, broader picture. Although this trait is all-pervasive, *Dessous* represents a particularly revealing example.

Anterior to the larger part of his fictional corpus, this short story, published in 1850, represents in many ways the archetype of Barbey's narrative method. The primary narrator recounts a story that he himself heard told in the salon of the Baronne de Mascranny. Acting, then, as a *metteur en scène*, the first narrator hands on to a successor who, in turn, brings to the fiction sundry other reports, in particular that of the Chevalier de Tharsis. The narrative they cumulatively produce traces the arrival of Marmor de Karkoël within a closed aristocratic circle set in an unnamed provincial town. A liaison is suggested between the enigmatic visitor and the Comtesse de Stasseville; as much is also suggested of her daughter, Herminie. The text closes with the report of a dead infant, the disappearance of Marmor and the death of the mother and daughter.

Reconstituted in this way, the text of *Dessous* appears singularly flat and devoid of focus. Yet such, in fact, is the nature of the information

---

[10] Bloy, *Un brelan d'excommuniés*, pp. 258-59.

available. The linking, accumulation and conclusion required to wed these elements into a harmonious entity are, admittedly, conspicuously suggested; they are equally conspicuously denied. Indeed, on one hand, much is intimated to suggest the murder of Herminie and her child by a jealous rival in love, her mother. The trio formed by the primary narrator, the Baronne and her daughter, Sibylle, re-enacts the internal grouping formed by Marmor, the Comtesse and Herminie. Events in the external frame suggest and pre-figure assumptions we might make of what happens *internally*. The disappearance of Sybille during the report of the narrative (ORC 2, 164) echoes Herminie's own disappearance within the récit. Moreover, when the Baronne crushes the rose she was holding (ORC 2, 171), it is difficult not to read the destruction of Herminie herself, the 'rose de Stasseville', all the more so, given the repeated gesture made by her own mother with, it is worth adding, the roses grown in the flower-pot where the dead infant (that belonging to Herminie) is concealed:

> [...] d'une passion avide, elle saisit avec ses lèvres effilées et incolores plusieurs tiges de fleurs odorantes, et elle les broya sous ses dents, avec une expression idolâtre et sauvage [...]. (ORC 2, 164).

If the flowers suggest the double murder, they also hint at Marmor's complicity:

> Était-ce un signe, une entente quelconque, une complicité, comme en ont les amants entre eux, que ces fleurs mâchées et dévorées en silence?... (ORC 2, 164).

Such meaning and any others we may supply are nevertheless superimposed; as the preceding quotation demonstrates, any unification of sense depends on the conjectural nature of the interrogative voice. The one object around which the text revolves and in which the tension

between supposition and revelation is centred is the corpse in the 'jardinière', yet this resolutely refuses to settle matters:

> D'où venait cet enfant? [...] De qui était-il? Etait-il mort de mort naturelle? L'avait-on tué?... Qui l'avait tué?... Voilà ce qu'il est impossible de savoir [...]. (ORC 2, 169).

In this way, Barbey's text converges on the denial of a revelation, tantalisingly prepared but ultimately withheld;

> Un double mouvement apparaît: tandis que peu à peu l'histoire s'ordonne, le texte la détruit.[11]

As a result, the narrative space is enclosed within an issueless impasse:

> [...] le texte se clôt sur lui-même, offert à une lecture que l'on ne pourra jamais croire 'achevée' et qui ne saurait être 'passive'.[12]

With some insistence, therefore, the narrative structure concludes on a sense of inadequacy. The 'real' story, un-narrated and in a sense invisible, only exists as a tension between the 'goutte de lumière' (ORC 2, 165), proposed by the internal narrator, and the unbiddable doubt championed by the text as a whole:

> La narration [...] ne vise pas à rendre plausible (possible) le récit, mais à le détruire, non à l'énoncer, mais à le dénoncer, à faire qu'il n'ait pas eu lieu en l'anéantissant au moment même où il s'énonce.[13]

The ability to prime and disarm meaning simultaneously is, of course, the dialectic on which the Fantastic thrives and it is in this sense that we must read the *diabolic* potential of either Marmor or the Comtesse or indeed both.

---

[11] Petit, *Essais de lectures*, p. 24.
[12] Petit, *Essais de lectures*, p. 25.
[13] Pierre Tranouez, 'La narration neutralisante. Étude de quatre *Diaboliques*', *Poétique*, 17 (1974), 39-49 (p. 39).

The inadequacy inscribed within the narrative structure is further strengthened in the pyramidal framework of récits. Similar to the visual trick in painting where part or all of the primary image is re-represented within the original frame and which thereby reproduces itself endlessly, the successive stacking of fictional accounts brings into relief the artificiality of the work as a whole where each repeated frame reminds us that it is a construct, and no more, of the already fabricated preceding image. In this way, the accumulation of texts draws attention to the fact that all representation is a question of sleight of hand whose laws conform not to reality but to their own self-imposed economy: two dimensions instead of three, or, in literature, words instead of things.

The increasingly tendentious nature of the text, produced by the exponential *mise en abyme*, can be seen at work in *Ensorcelée*. The novel begins as an analeptic account, delivered by an unnamed 'Je', of travels within the Lessay region of Normandy. This narrator then interpolates, in both direct and reported speech, the extended récit of Louis Tainnebouy, notionally his travel guide. Through this frame, the reader is successively presented with the reports, some brief others more substantial, of Clotilde Mauduit, Nônon Cocouan, Barbe Causseron, Dussaucey the blacksmith and his apprentice, Pierre Cloud. Through a separate frame, the narrative *metteur en scène* additionally houses the accounts of Jacqueline de Montsurvent. The text closes as it opens with the direct report of the primary narrator.

The significance of this structure is made plain when we recall that the core element of the supernatural in *Ensorcelée*-- Pierre Cloud's account of Jugan's return from the grave (ORC 1, 739-41)-- is precisely that which, in linear terms, is furthest from the reader, situated behind at least two screens. This has two results. First, as suggested above in the comments on visual representation, the superimposition of récits, one

inheriting from the other, draws the reader's attention to the mechanics of the text, reminding us of the ways in which literature seeks to manipulate us in order to overcome its essential weakness: fiction is not reality. Second, the Supernatural is noticeably distant from the reader and must be taken on trust from two if not more witnesses establishing a literary parallax wherein the object observed is mobile and dynamic. These two facts place Cloud's account in a decidedly ambiguous position with relation to objective truth. The *clou* suggested in his name on which the fiction would conclusively end is, ironically, illusory. They stress, above all, that the text is a matter of *invention*:

> Si son conte est par trop brutal, il en décline la responsabilité, grâce au simple stratagème d'abdiquer son rôle de narrateur en faveur d'un personnage auquel il confère [...] sa propre curiosité insatiable et sa passion de révélations. Souvent même, pour plus de sûreté, il multiplie les «cadres», et les événements nous arrivent dépersonnalisés par une succession de raconteurs qui se les sont transmis les uns aux autres. [...] Barbey atteint ainsi son but essentiel, qui est de signifier à son public: *De te fabula narratur.*[14]

Barbey's use of the récit represents, then, a governing aesthetic within his work, establishing the discourse of ambiguity which informs his fiction from first--*Bague* (1842)-- to last-- *Histoire* (1882). Contemporary research has concentrated its efforts on this subject, stressing the self-destructive nature of the writer's narrative method:

> Le discours de la narration infirme la fiction avant de s'infirmer lui-même; et le récit-- toujours oblique-- se fait dans l'expansion d'une parole qui détruit l'histoire par la façon dont elle la cherche.[15]

As this enquiry hopes to demonstrate, the intriguing use of the récit and its attendant inconsistencies has more to do with the exacting demands

---

[14] Schneider, *Barbey d'Aurevilly l'extrême*, p. 1548.
[15] Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, '*Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan*. Narration et signification', *Littérature*, 9 (1973), 118-125 (p. 125).

of the Fantastic than with wilful preciosity on the part of the writer. In this context, Jacques Petit's stance is no doubt correct:

> Voir dans le recours presque constant au 'récit d'un tiers' un simple artifice, qui aurait permis à Barbey de retrouver le ton de la causerie et les facilités du conte, fausse gravement toute étude de son œuvre [...]. (B 4, 31).

What is more, the auto-interrogation of the Aurevillian text has proved fertile ground for modern enquiry into the capacities and limitations of narrative fiction,

> [...] sous les apparences d'une forme encore traditionnelle [...] une très moderne mise en cause de littérature. (B 4, 60).

-- in which the very ability to *signify* is seen as the most central question of all:

> [...] il s'agit de signifier tout autant la production du sens que le produit lui-même. (B 9, 98).

This trend is, of course, a logical outcome given that the Fantastic is itself an enquiry into the stability of literary meaning.

The consequences of Barbey's choice of narrative structure are equally governed by the narrators themselves. To assess their position within the 'self-defeating' discourse, it is first important to clarify and classify a certain amount of terminology which should prove useful in the discussion that follows.

Commenting on Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and the *Mémoires d'un Homme de qualité* from which it is taken, Gérard Genette identifies a tripartite framework in narratives which employ a récit:

> La rédaction par M. de Renoncourt de ses *Mémoires* fictifs est un acte (littéraire) accompli à un premier niveau, que l'on dira *extradiégétique*; les événements racontés dans ces Mémoires (dont l'acte narratif de des Grieux) sont dans ce premier récit, on les qualifiera donc de *diégétiques*, ou *intradiégétiques*; les événements racontés dans le récit de des Grieux, récit au second degré, seront dits *métadiégétiques*.[16]

As such, he establishes a distinction between a narrator presenting the text (in all its forms) and a narrator spawned within the fiction, working in-house on the production of further narratives. The former he defines as the NED, *narrateur extradiégétique*, the latter as the NMD, *narrateur métadiégétique*.[17] The relationship between these poles presents two conspicuous sets of consequences which radically qualify the given content of the text.

In the first instance, as we shall see below, the control exerted over the narrative by the NED appears to falter:

> [...] cette écriture, qui s'enracine dans une absence et qui échappe largement au contrôle paternel de ses narrateurs [...].[18]

This destabilises the ring of *vraisemblance* which his quasi-authorial presence would otherwise bring to the text. Absconding from the fiction, the loss of the go-between guarantor problematises what is reported in his absence. Secondly, the overwhelming insistence on the NMD which inevitably ensues, fosters a form of discourse in which the dynamics (often oral) of story-telling weigh heavily on the reader's perceptions. Permitting enunciation to master the text in this way, the *act* of fiction and its implied manipulation and fabrication dominates. Writing about Barbey's treatment of History (although their comments equally fit the *histoire* in his works), Ruth Amossy and Iris Atar make just this point:

---

[16] Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 238-39.
[17] For a fuller demonstration of these principles, in particular Genette's use and understanding of the prefix *meta*, see *Figures III*, p. 239, note 1.
[18] Claudie Bernard, 'L'Inter-diction dans *Une histoire sans nom*', in *Barbey d'Aurevilly: Cent ans après*, ed. by Philippe Berthier (Geneva: Droz, 1990), pp. 337-60 (p. 360).

> Le caractère marginal et douteux des épisodes historiques racontés, le décentrement de l'histoire, la mise en évidence de la narration, montrent bien que l'énonciation, plus encore que l'énoncé, se voit ici privilégiée.[19]

The ambiguous position of the NED is first the result of the textually overweight nature of the NMD. *Rideau*, a text of some forty seven pages in the *Pléiade* edition, devotes more than two thirds to Brassard's narrative. *Ensorcelée* is similarly four fifths the domain of the internal récit while *Prêtre*, composed of thirty chapters, grants only one to the NED. The value of such calculations (which in varying degrees can be reproduced for most if not all of Barbey's works) is perhaps questionable, particularly so when set in isolation. Their significance is however fully grasped when we consider, in addition, how the NED *explicitly* withdraws from the fiction.

Commenting on the narrative of Rollon Langrune, the primary narrator in *Prêtre* introduces this 'secondary' text in the following terms:

> Les pages qui vont suivre ressembleront au plâtre avec lequel on essaie de lever une empreinte de la vie, et qui n'est qu'une ironie! (ORC 1, 882).

In so saying, he quite categorically admits his own shortcomings as narrative guide, problematising the faithful framing of the *métadiégèse*, an admission characteristic of the Aurevillian NED:

> Aujourd'hui que quelques années se sont écoulées, m'apportant tout ce qui complète mon histoire, je la raconterai à ma manière, qui, peut-être, ne vaudra pas celle de mon herbager cotentinais. (ORC 1, 584).

> Cette page inouïe de ses Mémoires, Ravila l'écrira-t-il un jour?... C'est une question, mais lui seul peut l'écrire... Comme je le dis à la marquise Guy de Ruy, je n'étais pas à ce souper, et si j'en vais rapporter quelques détails et l'histoire par laquelle il finit, c'est que je les tiens de Ravila lui-même [...]. (ORC 2, 64-5).

---

[19] Ruth Amossy and Iris Atar, 'L'écriture de l'Histoire chez Barbey d'Aurevilly', in *Barbey d'Aurevilly: Cent ans après*, pp. 115-27 (p. 117).

Furthermore, the controlling, authenticating influence of the narrative *extradiégèse* is, on occasion, lost altogether in the important concluding section of the text. Pierre Schneider proposes that this narratorial opt-out is in fact a universal trait in Barbey's œuvre:

> [...] le cadre ne ferme pas, ne reparaît jamais à la conclusion du récit.[20]

Such an absolute reading is perhaps somewhat over-ambitious; *Ensorcelée*, notwithstanding its other problematic convolutions, nevertheless rejoins the opening *cadre* in its closing report (ORC 1, 741). Other texts however *do* conform to Schneider's analysis, notably *Don Juan* which maintains the voice of Ravila to the very end, suppressing entirely that of the primary narrator.

Throughout, in fact, the presence of the *extradiégèse* is subsumed in the greater interests of the internal récit, marked within the text as all-consuming, 'Il nous tenait tous sous la griffe de son récit' (ORC 2, 164), and in which the act of narrative is underlined:

> [...] elles ne perdaient pas une syllabe de la voix qu'on entendait dans le salon [...]. Quand j'eus reconnu celui qui parlait, je ne m'étonnai ni de cette attention, [...] ni de l'audace de qui gardait ainsi la parole plus longtemps qu'on n'avait coutume de le faire, dans ce salon d'un ton si exquis. (ORC 2, 131-2).

As suggested earlier, the prominence of the *métadiégèse* proves harmful to the claims the text is trying to make; the form of discourse so produced is manifestly self-serving and monopolises narrative in favour of *narrating*. The accent on enunciation *per se* is largely the result of the orality in which these internal accounts are couched. This is first seen in the abundant use of direct speech, a point which many texts underline

---

[20] Schneider, *Barbey d'Aurevilly l'extrême*, p. 1548.

typographically: witness the proliferation of Ravila's *guillemets* in *Don Juan*. Further, it is often the case that the *métadiégèse* is constructed around gossip and hearsay, that is, the spoken word. Barbey himself draws attention to the unreliability of such folkloric narrative:

> [...] ces langues bien pendues qui lapent avidement toutes les nouvelles et tous les propos d'une contrée et les rejettent tellement mêlés à leurs inventions de bavardes que le Diable, avec toute sa chimie, ne saurait comment s'y prendre pour les filtrer.(ORC 1, 653).

Finally, this trend is assured in the pride of place the author assigns to his much loved Norman patois, the narrative mode typically chosen for the reporting of the Supernatural, as seen in La Malgaigne's necromancy (ORC 1, 973-74).

Given the concentration on the plasticity of the MED's account in texts such as *Prêtre*, it is possible to see how the reader is, in a sense, overwhelmed, not so much by the fiction as by the *mechanics* of the process in which he participates. Accepting that these oral mechanics are prey to deformation and exaggeration, it is easy to understand how and why readers recoil from the text-- precisely the reaction of Roger Bésus, noted above, who tires of Barbey's second-hand narratives. The point, of course, is that the text *does* seek to estrange the reader and make him question his relationship with the fiction: this is precisely how the Fantastic works.

Barbey's selection and handling of narrative voice is in many ways his literary trademark. This is perhaps surprising in the light of his repeated dithyrambs offered in honour of Balzac:

> [...] le plus grand romancier du XIXe siècle. (OH IV, 2).
>
> [...] ce grand génie multiface qu'on appelle Balzac. (OH IV, 11-2).

Surprising that is, given that Balzac stands as undisputed champion of extradiegetic discourse. While there are admittedly certain Balzacian texts from which Barbey may well have profitably learned his art (for example, *Sarrasine*), the distinctive, problematic narrative split-screen is unarguably his own:

> Ce qui d'emblée unifie les *Diaboliques*, c'est la causerie, *le dialogue de devisants*, l'anecdote racontée dans un salon [...] (My italics). [21]

In a sense, therefore, where the Fantastic demands a counterpoint between assent *to* and dissent *from* the text, it is only logical that Barbey's narrative method should condition itself in the way indicated here.

At the centre of Barbey's literary technique, as Michel Crouzet points out above, is the repeated recourse to conversation. Narrative as spoken exchange offers distinct possibilities to the Fantastic writer in search of the flux of meaning demanded by the genre. Although Barbey does not appear to refer either in public or private writing to the work of Henry James, the significance of conversation to this present discussion is ably and succintly demonstrated in the use made of this device in the latter's celebrated *The Turn of the Screw*. Consider James's opening sentence:

> The story has held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless [...].[22]

From here, the text proceeds as a spoken interchange between a number of auditors and the primary narrating voice. In dramatising the roles of scriptor and reader within the text and, importantly, in explicitly designating the auditor as a credulous, willing party to the fiction

---

[21] *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Michel Crouzet (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1989), p. 13.
[22] Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (London: Everyman, 1975), p. 3.

('breathless'), James succeeds in problematising the position and reactions of the external reader. How does he reconcile his potential scepticism in respect of the Supernatural content of the text when his alter ego within that text appears ready to subscribe to or at least be held by the claims made by the fiction? The tension produced in this conflict of interpretations obviously generates a certain fluidity in meaning which is, of course, the object of the Fantastic.

Barbey's narrative discourse is indissociably bound up with the dynamics of conversation. No reading of *Diaboliques* can fail to take note of this fact. Furthermore, as a mode within wider narratives, it colours his work from first to last. *Maîtresse* possesses a number of these spoken exchanges (ORC 1, 229-33, 258-334) as does *Ensorcelée* (ORC 1, 563-83, 604-6). *Prêtre* evolves out of a salon *causerie* (ORC 1, 873-82) just as *Histoire* concludes on a dinner conversation (ORC 2, 348-62). Not without justification, Brian Rogers sees Barbey's first fictional work, *Cachet* (1831), as setting down the conversational standard to which all his later fiction, in part or whole, conforms:

> It is as if all his works, to a greater or lesser degree, were designed to transform an agonised, personal monologue into a conversation with the reader.[23]

As with the example taken from James, the inscribed reader implied in Barbey's spoken exchanges, he who *reads* the text from within, is noticeably indulgent as regards the content of the fiction. The reaction of the Comtesse de Damnaglia at the close of *Dessous* presents the very image of fascination:

> [...] l'altière Comtesse de Damnaglia, au buste inflexible, qui rongeait toujours le bout d'ivoire, incrusté d'or, de son éventail. (ORC 2, 170).

---

[23] Rogers, *Novels and Stories*, p. 219.

Consider also the unmissable charm working on Torty's interlocutor in *Bonheur*:

> «Toute criminelle qu'elle soit, --fis-je,-- on s'intéresse à cette Hauteclaire. (ORC 2, 128).

A similar accent on fascination is further to be noted in the audience gathered to hear Gilles Bataille's account of Riculf's bloody end in *Histoire*. Perhaps lacking in salon eloquence, Bataille nevertheless captivates his listeners:

> Mais il eût été éloquent, qu'il n'aurait pas produit plus d'effet, ma parole d'honneur! (ORC 2, 356).

Those capable of such salon *aisance* are themselves equally successful in capturing the concentration of their audience, as with Ravila in *Don Juan*:

> La Comtesse de Chiffrevas regardait attentivement dans le fond d'un verre de vin du Rhin, en cristal émeraude, mystérieux comme sa pensée.(ORC 2, 79).

What emerges from this is a narrative pattern in which the fictional recipient of the text appears to be 'mesmerised' by the narrator and, as a consequence, by the text itself. The idea of *possession* is perhaps not so far-fetched; certainly, for Pierre Tranouez, the concept of an unbroken centripetal force drawing protagonist and narrative towards a zero point 'scène capitale' is one by which he defines Barbey's aesthetic:

> Je nommerai *fascination*, après Barbey qui emploie sans cesse le terme, la relation ambivalente qui unit, chaque fois, un personnage au protagoniste de la scène capitale comme elle unit, selon Buffon, le rossignol et le serpent, ou l'audacieux antique aux Gorgones-- et qui lie aussi l'auditeur à celui qui narre.[24]

---

[24] Pierre Tranouez, *Fascination et narration dans l'œuvre romanesque de Barbey d'Aurevilly: la scène capitale* (Paris: Minard, 1987), pp. 14-15.

Suggesting that the relationship between scriptor and reader is one of ambivalence, Tranouez brings out the importance of the conversational mode for this discussion. For the auditor he refers to is in fact a split persona: the one within and the one without the text. When the former manifestly lends himself to the cause of the fiction, conspicuously submitting to its charms, the latter, who judges the text from a broader perspective in which the Supernatural instinctively invites scepticism, is left in something of a quandary. How is he to square his 'real' world response with that of his fictional avatar? The two are of course irreconcilable; opting firmly for either side of the counterpoint destroys the flux of possibilities required by the Fantastic. Again therefore, Barbey's text is seen to cultivate the unavailability of fixed readings:

> Le texte narratif aurevillien, à tous les niveaux dont il se compose, représente la recherche d'un objet qui se dérobe, et il se plaît à accumuler ces niveaux pour multiplier la recherche.[25]

On a further level, conversation serves the cause of the genre in so far as it is inherently unstable; disparate and spontaneous, it dramatises the absence of linear coherence:

> La conversation, figurée par le choc des billes de billard ou l'imprévisible rebond du caillou sur l'eau, évoque à la fois le caprice [...] et la désinvolture du propos.[26]

Barbey, himself, foregrounds the sense of fragmentation it connotes:

> La conversation générale, longtemps faite d'entrain, partie de volant où chacun avait allongé son coup de raquette, s'était fragmentée, émiettée, et rien de distinct ne s'entendait plus [...]. (ORC 2, 65).

---

[25] Nabih Kanbar, 'Evolution de la figure du témoin dans *Les Diaboliques*', in *Barbey d'Aurevilly: cent ans après*, pp. 255-94 (p. 293).
[26] *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Michel Crouzet, p. 13.

Of course, some degree of harmony and structure is inevitable, without which the text would collapse into mere babble. Nevertheless, the multiplicity and *multivalency* of input (dialogue) and outcome (interpretation) implied in conversation is strongly hinted at.

The modulations of spoken exchange felt within the text are indeed the potential source of further ambiguity. According to Brian Rogers, Barbey's narratives imitate conversation on a number of levels: the use of the pause, nominal and adjectival accumulation, free syntactical construction, unexpected comparisons and associations, witticisms and cross-references to an audience all evoke this trend. Rogers concludes of this state of affairs:

> [...] Barbey punctuates his story with the natural breathing spaces, pauses for effect, drops in tension and dramatic climaxes normally associated with rhetoric.[27]

The association with rhetoric is significant. As we shall see in the following chapter, rhetorical discourse is problematic in its own right, given that it is inherently manipulatory and, by dint of that fact, carries with it its own warning signal as to the reliability of what it says. What is more, it is noticeably 'plastic' in its ostentatious play on words which again sets a question mark against its semantic efficiency.

Drawing together this discussion on the contingency produced by Barbey's conversational narrative mode, it is worth adding that the principal exponents within the texts are, thanks to caricature, hardly dependable. The Vicomte de Brassard, on whose discourse *Rideau* is based, is in many ways exceptional:

> [...] esprit, manières, physionomie, tout était large, étoffé, opulent, plein de lenteur patricienne, comme il convenait au plus magnifique dandy que j'aie connu [...]. (ORC 2, 12).

---

[27] Rogers, *Novels and Stories*, p. 223.

Yet the figure who joins battle in patent leather shoes and silk stockings (ORC 2, 15), who outdoes even the Poles at drinking (ORC 2, 16) and who in love is as prolific as William the Conqueror (ORC 2, 13) is perhaps a little overripe as a credible source of narrative information. For different reasons, as much can be said of Pierre Cloud in whose mouth the pivotal supernatural occurrence in *Ensorcelée* is voiced. The problem here is one of drink:

> Pierre Cloud, ce compagnon à Dussaucey le forgeron [...] s'était attardé un peu trop à *pinter* avec de bons garçons... (ORC 1, 737).

Remembering that this binge immediately precedes the claimed sighting of Jugan, that is, his return from the grave, Cloud's account and any spoken exchange he indulges in are evidently open to suspicion.

For a number of reasons, therefore, all of which focus on its non-pragmatic make-up, conversation is ably fitted as narrative mode for the Fantastic. Although the dynamics of its fictional presence have been comprehensively studied, rightly pointing to the relationship between the verbal cross currents and the lacunary nature of what the text is trying to say, these elements have not yet been applied to the Fantastic, itself supreme voice of absence. In this sense, then, the difficulties of Barbey's texts, 'ce non-dit, non-su, non-reconstruit',[28] generated by their *discursive* discourse, are perhaps to be re-read as central to this genre.

A distinct yet associated component of the spoken exchange is the *oral tradition* in which Barbey's œuvre is steeped. The presence of this tradition, around which much of the narrative is built, is indispensable to the Fantastic precisely because the information it relays is inherently

---

[28] Marcelle Marini, 'Ricochets de Lectures. La Fantasmatique des *Diaboliques*', *Littérature*, 10 (1973), 3-19 (pp.3-4).

prone to exaggeration. Diffuse in origin, unverifiable and untrustworthy, the legacy of the folkloric narrative is one of *doubt*.

In the first instance, inherited hearsay constitutes the defining characteristic behind the knowledge and beliefs of Barbey's Norman peasantry, that is, exactly those figures who articulate the existence of the Supernatural. Consider how the supposed occult forces of the *lande de Lessay* are presented in *Ensorcelée*: either as idle speculation, 'On parlait vaguement d'assassinats' (ORC 1, 557), or as questionable anecdotal chat:

> Si l'on en croyait les récits des charretiers qui s'y attardaient, la lande de Lessay était le théâtre des plus singulières apparitions. (ORC 1, 557).

Equally, the claimed supernatural powers of the *bergers* in the same text are attributable only to a more than vague collective (and thereby disparate) superstition:

> Espèces de pâtres bohémiens, auxquels la voix du peuple des campagnes attribue des pouvoirs occultes et la connaissance des secrets et des sortilèges. (ORC 1, 575).

In the same way, the mysterious *Criard* of *Maîtresse* exists only within the context of peasant folklore:

> Le Criard est une superstition de ces rivages. Ils racontent que la veille de quelque tempête, --d'un grand malheur inévitable,-- un homme dont jamais personne n'a vu le visage [...] parcourt les mielles et les rochers, en les emplissant de cris sinistres. (ORC 1, 414).

In many ways, in fact, Barbey's texts are a tissue of inherited 'wisdom', subject to an uncentred source of belief:

> Généralement on la disait *hantée*... (ORC 1, 958).
>
> [...] la Malgaigne, que les paysans disaient *goubelinée* depuis bien du temps. (ORC 1, 979).

The possibility that such wisdom may be challenged-- as is the case with the *Criard* (ORC 1, 415)-- serves to underline its insufficiency and, importantly, re-states the dialectic of belief/disbelief on which the greater meaning of the Fantastic text is founded.

In a second sense, received, public wisdom is responsible for the damaging myth-making that Barbey's victims are subject to. The conspiracy of rumours to which Jeanne falls prey in *Ensorcelée* is the very image of oral fragmentation:

> [...] des bruits vagues, un mot dit par-ci et par-là, des souffles plutôt que des mots, mais des souffles qui vont tout à l'heure devenir un orage, commencèrent à circuler sur la pauvre Jeanne. (ORC 1, 660).

As much is also true of the slanderous 'commérages', 'médisances' and 'calomnies' (ORC 1, 984) that Calixte is the subject of and which culminate in the unfounded charge of incest (ORC 1, 1073). How often, in fact, are Barbey's characters accused on the dubious strength of a pusillanimous 'disait-on'?:

> -- Empoisonnée!-- m'écriai-je.
> -- ...Par sa femme de chambre, Eulalie, [...] disait-on [...].(ORC 2, 116).

A good deal of the impact of Barbey's narratives depends, then, on unaccredited, public dissemination of knowledge. Without doubt, the circulation of information is central to his fiction:

> La sémiotique narrative distingue dans le récit dimension pragmatique ou pratique et dimension cognitive, la première correspondant aux événements racontés et la seconde au savoir qui circule sur ces événements. Le récit aurevillien-- dans le sens de texte narratif-- privilégie nettement la dimension cognitive, comme le montre la très grande variété de 'sujets cognitifs' qu'il comporte [...].[29]

---

[29] Kanbar, *La figure du témoin*, p. 255.

The reason why this is so is that it enables him to ask questions of the reader, challenging him on the information he receives. Given that this is undependable, Barbey cleverly draws attention to the insufficiency of his fiction which is, paradoxically, his aim. What is more, by establishing slander-- and the ensuing personal injury-- as one of the bases of the cognitive system, he deftly reminds us of the dangerous malleability of *all* words. In this way Barbey's texts consciously construct their own fault-lines, installing their own unmissable auto-criticism.

In another context, the oral tradition also opens the door to Barbey's much-cherished Norman patois. As a socio-idiolect, patois necessarily defines itself in terms of difference, contrast, if not *opposition*, when set in or against standard French; a difference considered as real-- and undesirable-- by French education practice at least since the time of Jules Ferry. Patois is, therefore, a potentially isolating mode of discourse, confronting the reader with something tangibly foreign and which requires explanatory footnotes. The ability to 'stall' the text and divorce the reader from, rather than wedding him to, what is being said is, in fact, admirably illustrated in Baudelaire's reaction to the patois in *Ensorcelée*: he, we remember, asked Barbey to remove it (CG IV, 324). Such is also the reaction of Zola who is clearly irritated by Barbey's dialect:

> *Un prêtre marié* est écrit dans un jargon insupportable qui agace et qui exaspère; le bas des pages est criblé de notes pour expliquer les mots patois qui encombrent le texte [...].[30]

Although this form of folkloric discourse tends to be scattered within Barbey's work, certain dense concentrations are available, as in the following example:

---

[30] Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, X, 54.

> Il est silencieux comme il fut dans les derniers temps de sa vie, n'ayant pas l'air de plus entendre qu'un *mourron* (i) les *ébraits* (ii) des milleloraines des élavares et les risées des *huarts* (iii) moqueurs.
>
> (i) Salamandre qui doit son nom à sa couleur.
> (ii) Cris.
> (iii) Farfadets que l'on croit occupés à *huer* les hommes et à se moquer d'eux. (ORC 1, 979).

Such excerpts convincingly demonstrate the foreignness of Norman patois. To begin with, its opacity and resistance to clear meaning are inscribed within the text itself in the form of explanatory footnotes. The italicisation deepens this rift in underlining the non-conventionality of the terms it so designates-- a point of some importance given the primacy of convention which normally underpins language. Further, even those lexical items apparently not requiring special typographical status are far from familiar: which reader, French or otherwise, immediately grasps the sense of 'élavares'?[31] Such problematics indicate that Barbey's patois is decidedly less than transparent in meaning and function and, as Zola reminds us, can be conspicuously unwelcome. Considering that in this particular case, as in numerous other examples, the 'unwelcomeness' is in fact attached to the Supernatural (la Malgaigne's report concerns the spirit of the *rompu*), then the pertinence of patois to the ambiguities of the Fantastic is all the more manifest.

Dialect and the broader oral heritage it represents are furthermore part of a spoken history characteristically open to fluctuation and change:

> Dite d'âge en âge, répétée de foyer en foyer par les aïeules, par les conteurs de jour et de nuit, cette chronique a reçu de chaque siècle une teinte différente. Semblable à ces monuments arrangés suivant le caprice des architectures de chaque époque [...] elle ferait le désespoir des commentateurs, des éplucheurs de mots, de faits et de dates.[32]

---

[31] No trace of this word is to be found in either the *Robert* or the *Larousse* dictionaries.
[32] Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, X, 311-12.

This definition of oral history is, in fact, taken from Balzac's *Jésus-Christ en Flandre* although it could just as easily have come from Barbey's novels. Balzac draws our attention to the fact that oral folklore, in its evolution, is unavoidably subject to alteration: its only fixed characteristic being the principle of change. Similarly, in his comments on the knowledge possessed by the maid Françoise, Proust confirms how the spoken inheritance is one of mutability:

> [...] une tradition à la fois antique et directe, ininterrompue, orale, déformée, méconnaissable et vivante.[33]

Barbey's rural figures are no less steeped in folkloric, hand-me-down science (for example, the myth of the *Blanche Caroline* in *Maîtresse*, ORC 1, 440-50). This state of affairs unerringly compromises the credibility of what is being handed on: as principal voice of the Supernatural, oral tradition can only, in fact, guarantee the unstaunchable fluidity of spoken history. As Barbey himself points out to Trebutien, it is an *inexact* science:

> [...] il y a bien mieux que les livres, ce sont les récits, les traditions domestiques, les choses qu'on se raconte de génération en génération, les commérages, tout ce qui peut bien ne pas avoir l'exactitude bête du fait brut [...]. (CG II, 137).

This is, of course, true with respect to Barbey's 'pastoral' fiction; the corrupting evolutionary process in salon *causerie* is perhaps less evident. On a greatly reduced time-scale, a similar pattern *is*, however, at work. Consider *Don Juan*: through how many mouths do the seemingly impossible claims of the young girl pass? In fact, this history depends on five different voices; her own, that of her priest, then of her mother, then of Ravila and finally that of the narrator. Even in those texts where the

---

[33] Proust, *A la recherche*, I, 151.

process is arguably less dense there always remains at least one hand-over: *Rideau, Bonheur, Vengeance.*

That which Philippe Berthier defines in Barbey's work as 'les inflexions charnelles de l'oral' (B 9, 89) is very much a broad church. Concentrating here on the oral tradition, it is possible to see how far Barbey borrows from the possibilities implied in that tradition, especially its unreliability. In a sense, the texts dramatise the limitations of story-telling, actively pushing us away or divorcing us from the improbabilities of the fiction, which, we know, ironically so perhaps, is a positive response in reading the Fantastic.

The final element of this discussion seeks to explain the relationship between Barbey's handling of exposition and denouement and the unreliability of the text which forms the central focus of this chapter. By delaying and then suspending the content of the fiction, Barbey succeeds in problematising its meaning.

'Une infinité de paramètres de complexité inouïe' (B 12, 78). Raphaël Brossart's assessment of how Barbey sets up his text is characteristic of the way most critics respond to this part of his work:

> Délais et retards, savamment orchestrés par l'accumulation des expansions descriptives ou discursives dont la fonction est d'exaspérer une attente qui, au dénouement, ne sera pas comblée.[34]

Setting aside the comments on denouement, which will be considered later, judgements such as these develop a theme of delay and disorientation which, in their view, Barbey's fiction mischeviously cultivates. Certainly, it is no doubt true that the Aurevillian exposition

---

[34] *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Pascaline Mourier-Casile (Paris: Pocket, 1993), p. 25.

lacks a sharply focused direction; *Maîtresse*, a key text in the evolution of Barbey's style, offers a particularly striking example of this.

Barbey's first Normandy novel opens with a series of rather long portraits: of the *douairières*, Hermangarde, the Vicomte de Prosny, Vellini and of Marigny. In addition, an in-depth analeptic account is presented of Marigny's past and his relations with Vellini and her husband, Sir Reginald Annesley. In a text therefore of some three hundred and fifty pages in the *Pléiade* edition, a whole third is devoted to establishing a gallery of portraits. Even if much of what follows is appreciably quicker in pace, the number of 'detours' hardly diminishes. Following the setting-up of a marital home for Marigny and Hermangarde, the fiction is systematically punctuated with lengthy correspondence and 'digressions' into Normandy folklore, or, equally telling, extended descriptions of Hermangarde's inactivity. In a very real sense, *Maîtresse* is a text which indulges in its own deliberations.

In a greatly crystallised form, *Diaboliques* are equally self-stalling. *Dîner* opens with an atmospheric description of a provincial church in which a mysterious figure delivers an unidentified parcel to the priest. This is followed by the introduction of Mesnilgrand senior, the by now customary portraits and aristocratic lineage. This, in turn, leads to the presentation of the *dîner* in question whose participants indulge in lengthy disquisitions on history and religion, offering sundry anecdotes to illustrate their thoughts. Within this framework, the younger Mesnilgrand delivers the récit which, on the last page, will illuminate the significance of the opening visit to the church. Importantly, however, the fate of *La Pudica* remains unexplained (ORC 2, 227) and it is only in a partial sense that the foregoing ramifications of the narrative can be said to converge on a point of unitary, coherent meaning.

To suggest that any element of a fictional work is a superfluous digression is of course nonsensical: in some form, every constituent part contributes to meaning. This in fact is the basis of this argument; even though Barbey's texts are notoriously diffuse in exposition, that very principle is significant in itself. For in postponing clarity, his fiction exhibits the ambiguity called for by the Fantastic.

It is possible to expect that a text can only defer for so long. In some cases Barbey's texts *do* close the debate they set themselves: Sombreval, for example, *is* damned (ORC 1, 1223). In the case of the Supernatural, however, the fictional denouement rarely definitively caps the preceding narrative labyrinth. What is more commonly seen is a conclusion which refuses to conclude.

The incomplete textual message is first achieved in the explicit avowal, on the part of the narrator, of his inability to close the text; the 'je ne pus jamais réaliser mon projet' (ORC 1, 741) where the narrative of *Ensorcelée* stops is more a matter of three dots than a confident full-stop. In a similar way, the last-breath handover to hearsay puts a question mark against the validity of the apparent conclusion: the ultimate voicing of an occult dimension in *Prêtre* is shrewdly delegated to the perhaps over-fertile imagination of the local peasants:

> «Quant à Sombreval, on n'en trouva pas un seul os pour le joindre au portrait-- ce qui fit dire aux paysans de la contrée que le Diable, qui a le bras long, l'avait passé à travers les boues de l'étang, pour tirer jusqu'à lui, par les pieds, le PRÊTRE MARIÉ!» (ORC 1, 1223).

The most noticeable way, however, in which the narrative scrambles its closing stake is the horrific surprise which most, if not all, of Barbey's texts espouse. The list of unpalatable end-notes demonstrates a remarkable virtuosity in the pathological: genital mutilation (*Cachet*, *Dîner*), fatal haemorrhaging (*Léa*, *Prêtre*), self-perforation of internal

organs (*Histoire*), syphilitic decay (*Vengeance*), removal of the heart (*Dîner*), gruesome public lapidation and decomposing corpses (*Ensorcelée*), not to forget babies interred in flowerpots (*Dessous*). Unarguably, Barbey is seeking to jar his reader. If Jacques Petit feels justified in diluting this effect to an aesthetic of 'étonnement' (ORC 1, XXXIV) it nevertheless remains true that the violence of such scenes is so precise, their eruption so marked against the detours of the narrative, that their presence and plausibility strike us as exaggerated. Buloz's refusal to publish *Dessous* testifies to this unacceptability:

> [...] *Buloz* me renvoie de son côté une Nouvelle avec laquelle je tourne les têtes quand je la lis (RICOCHETS DE CONVERSATION: *Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de Whist*), prétendant qu'il a les nerfs et les préjugés de son public à ménager! Il disait l'autre jour à *Pontmartin* qui lui reprochait de ne pas m'ouvrir sa revue toute grande: 'Il a un talent d'enragé, mais je ne veux pas qu'il f... le feu dans ma boutique'. (CG II, 146).

As suggested earlier by Pascaline Mourier-Casile, the conclusions Barbey puts forward are very much inadequate. If, on the one hand, they fail to complete the enquiry set in motion by the fiction, that is, the verification of the Supernatural, on the other hand they habitually indulge in morbid over-kill. In either way-- these two patterns often in fact go together-- Barbey manages to estrange his reader, denying him all sense of comfortable completion and offering only *un*comfortable questions. Seen in this context, comments such as the following miss the point: the conclusion is *designed* to frustrate:

> Nous aimons moins Le Bonheur dans le crime [...] parce que cette nouvelle ne conclut point et que cette absence de conclusion est irritante. (B 9, 39-40).

* * *

Over the last twenty-five years Barbey's narrative technique has been subjected to very close examination and has repeatedly featured in prestigious academic reviews such as *Littérature* and *Poétique*. A good deal of this research has concentrated on much of the material discussed in this chapter: the use of the récit, levels of discourse and so on. The conclusions popularly suggested are that Barbey's fictional structure is one that converges on a void or absence and in which *énonciation* becomes a matter of *dénonciation*:

> [...] un discours qui s'annule lui-même.[35]

In inspiration, this chapter follows those broad lines. It also, however, seeks to propose a new context in which the lacunary discourse can be re-read. Indeed, by proposing a correlation between the Fantastic and the ambiguities produced in narrative structure, it is hoped that this study will provide a concrete literary *application* to research that has reserved its focus largely for stylistics alone.

The conclusion to which this chapter works-- the principle of insufficiency-- is, of course, reminiscent of the aesthetics of absence on which the discussion of realism closed. That textual 'holes' should be read in two, divergent ways looks very much like an inconsistency in my argument. Yet, as the preparatory comments to this chapter intend to show, plurality of reading is by no means inconsistent with the polysemy of fictional works. It is still less inconsistent given that the Fantastic itself is a dynamic tension and, as a consequence, is *undefined*.

---

[35] Élisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck, 'Nom, corps, métaphore dans *Les Diaboliques* de Barbey d'Aurevilly', *Littérature*, 54 (1984), 3-19 (p. 6).

The principle of unreliable meaning is no doubt the key to the Fantastic; as suggested earlier, the following chapter will pursue this theme in terms of Barbey's rhetoric.

4

Rhetoric

Dieu sait [...] qu'on ne s'est pas privé d'éplucher le style aurevillien, et d'en relever le mauvais goût, le gongorisme, avec la sourcilleuse minutie de Malherbe épouillant Desportes. Il n'en reste pas moins que les mots qui viennent à l'esprit à propos de lui sont l'emportement, le relief, le muscle, la ferveur.[1]

[...] un artiste dédaigneux, conduisant la langue avec la facilité méprisante d'un écuyer consommé. Espérons qu'il se trouvera assez de gourmets d'intelligence pour en savourer la délicatesse.[2]

As Philippe Berthier suggests, there is no shortage of opinion-- usually negative-- on Barbey's style:

> Une phrase chamarrée sur toutes les coutures, bordée de rouge, galonnée d'or [...].[3]
>
> [...] il ne s'habille point à notre mode; c'est à peine s'il parle notre langue.[4]
>
> [...] il a le style coloré, l'exécution audacieuse [...] il n'a pas le sentiment de la mesure et des nuances.[5]

An old joke, in fact, relates how Barbey chose to face out from the wall in order to answer the first call of nature and that, when quizzed on this by a passer-by, retorted confidently: 'Eussiez-vous voulu que je me l'écorchasse?'[6] Exhibitionism aside, this anecdote confirms a widespread

---

1 Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 237.
2 Théophile Gautier, *La Presse*, 28 July 1851.
3 Jules Vallès, *Courrier français*, 19 August 1866.
4 Verax, *Le Gaulois*, 13 December 1874.
5 Jules Clarétie, *Le Constitutionnel*, 19 December 1874.
6 I am indebted to Mme Nicole Grisez of Coutances (Manche) for this witty and instructive anecdote.

belief-- one that, significantly, extends beyond the world of the philological fraternity-- that Barbey's style is decidedly *de trop*, a tortuous exercise in preciosity, rhetorical, ostentatious and verbose.

* * *

It is not the aim of this chapter to knock further nails in literary coffins; on the contrary, this study seeks to resurrect Barbey's rhetoric and to promote a positive meaning where others find only lack and insubstantiality or, more precisely, where others find Barbey simply 'too much'. In order to do so, some consideration must first be given to the term *rhetoric*.

From a historical perspective, rhetoric came into being in the Hellenistic period and may, according to Roland Barthes, have been the by-product of property disputes in fifth-century BC Sicily.[7] Certainly, it was roughly at this time that the first manuel of rhetoric was published, Corax's *Technè rhétorikè*, although it is to Gorgias, Sicilian ambassador in Athens, that we owe the dissemination of rhetoric within antique culture. Aristotle's *Rhétorikè* and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratorio*, two of the most significant Classical treatises on the subject, look to Gorgias as primary source of inspiration.

Within the Classical context, there is little dissent as to the meaning of rhetoric: for Quintilian, it is the *art* of speaking, 'bene dicendi scientia', for Aristotle, the competent and effective handling of the *topoi*

[7] Roland Barthes, 'L'ancienne rhétorique', in *L'aventure sémiologique* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), pp. 85-165 (p. 90).

of discourse.[8] So saying, rhetoric connotes oratory, debate and argument, that is, the desire to *persuade*:

> [...] art de la persuasion, ensemble de règles, de recettes dont la mise en œuvre permet de convaincre l'auditeur du discours (et plus tard le lecteur de l'œuvre), même si ce dont il faut le persuader est «faux».[9]

In short, therefore, rhetoric is a question of verbal flair, a gift for words. While winning words may fit neatly into accepted suppositions as to the nature of Classical rhetoric, a second and no less pertinent feature of this verbal art should not be overlooked: its social and political dimension. Barthes suggests that rhetoric 'est née de procès de propriété',[10] and is as a consequence intimately linked to a patrician, property-owning class. Shakespeare's Antony (albeit disingenuously) reminds us of this fact in his subtle *critique* of Brutus; as he makes plain, rhetoric is a patrician social birthright which he, the soldier, does not possess-- at least in theory:

> I am no orator as Brutus is,[...]
> For I have neither wit, nor words, nor *worth*,
> Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech
> To stir men's blood; I only speak right on.
> (*Julius Caesar*, III. 2. 218-24) (My italics).

In Classical terms, therefore, rhetoric represents both verbal and social power. This Classical perspective-- to which we shall return-- does not, of course, entirely satisfy the problems of definition, no more so than if it were suggested that etymology has exclusive rights on meaning, irrespective of *usage*. In fact, if rhetoric is considered within the broader context of everyday meanings, decidedly pejorative connotations are evident, sugesting nothing whatsoever of verbal aristocracy:

---

[8] For a fuller treatment of the Classical context, see Olivier Reboul, *La Rhétorique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), pp. 9-28.
[9] Barthes, *L'Ancienne Rhétorique*, p. 87.
[10] Barthes, *L'Ancienne Rhétorique*, p. 90.

> La rhétorique: terme péjoratif. Personne n'aimerait à s'entendre traiter de 'rhéteur', et c'est disqualifier un discours que d'admirer 'sa rhétorique'. De même, les rares termes de la technique rhétorique qui sont passés dans le langage courant sont presque tous péjoratifs: pathos, lieu commun, hyperbolique, digression, péroraison... [11]

Unmistakably, for the common man, rhetoric appears to have shunned its erstwhile power and pedigree, as the *OED* points out:

> [...] language characterised by artificial or ostentatious expression [...] opposed to sober argument or statement.

Interpretations like this foreground an *antithesis* of the Classical meaning and suggest, in diametrical opposition, a *misuse* of language. The capacity of discourse to persuade being thereby jeopardized, rhetoric problematises its semantic intentions and can, as Flaubert reminds us, be singularly empty of meaning:

> Mais quand on écrit de pareilles choses [lovers' recriminations], de deux choses l'une: ou on les pense, ou on ne les pense pas. *Si on ne les pense pas, si c'est une figure de rhétorique*, [...][12] (My italics).

Such a remark coincides with the common currency which authorises expressions of the sort, 'empty rhetoric', or 'mere rhetoric', and which equally provides the following deflating synonyms for the once revered art of oratory: 'hot air', 'waffle', windbaggery' and so on.

This-- for reasons of space-- unavoidably rather bald survey of a subject which has occupied intellectual enquiry from Aristotle to the present day, demonstrates, in spite of its brevity, the widely divergent and apparently contradictory meanings contained in the term 'rhetoric'. From which perspective, then, is Barbey's style to be best understood?

---

[11] Reboul, *La Rhétorique*, p. 5.
[12] Flaubert, *Correspondance*, IV, 28.

The answer is plainly expressed in both the judgements of his contemporaries and those of more modern observers. With typically mordant sarcasm, the Goncourt brothers drive home their point:

> Le style rodomont de Barbey d'Aurevilly me fait penser, je ne sais pourquoi, à ces enfants qui se font des moustaches avec du bouchon.[13]

This witty tribute patently suggests the idea of poorly disguised fabrication, implying, by association, artificiality and ostentation. Consider also the equally damning (if themselves somewhat precious) reactions of Sâr Péladan who labels Barbey's prose 'hindoue',[14] his diction a 'verbification cardinalice'.[15] If this first remark connotes a certain esotericism and the eccentricity this implies, the second demonstrably evokes the more negative ramblings of pulpit prose and may even legitimise, thanks to the associated expression, 'la pourpre cardinalice', the following unsympathetic translation: 'purple prose.' From a more modern perspective, Jean Duvignaud offers a somewhat less cryptic view:

> Barbey s'embourbe dans un langage impossible. On manque de jeter le livre, tant la marée verbale nous importune. Il faudrait tailler dans cette prose complaisante, moraliste, grotesque, pédante.[16]

There can be no doubt as to the focus of this short sample of criticism which, among a veritable welter of comparable brickbats, is united in the belief that Barbey's style is rhetorical in the sense that it is artificial, extravagant and eccentric. Before taking up this lead, however,

---

[13] Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal-- Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, ed. by Robert Ricatte, 3 vols (Paris: Laffont, 1989), I, 1143.
[14] Sâr Péladan, *L'art ochlocratique* (Paris: Dalou, 1888), p. 56.
[15] Sâr Péladan, *La victoire du mari* (Paris: Dentu, 1889), p. XXXI.
[16] Jean Duvignaud, 'Barbey d'Aurevilly', in *Tableau de la littérature française de Madame de Staël à Rimbaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 184-90 (p. 187).

one final remark on Classical rhetoric is worth making. The orality of the Aurevillian text has already been noted in previous chapters and it is perhaps useful to recall Barbey's often repeated self-professed oratorical gift:

> J'écris comme je parle et je parle mieux que je n'écris quand l'Ange de feu de la Conversation me prend aux cheveux comme le Prophète. (CG IV, 174).

It is, of course, no accident that Barbey, reactionary aristocrat and inveterate nostalgic, should cast himself in this light, nor that his fiction should dramatise oratory in the form of salon *racontars*: he, like Shakespeare's Antony, understands the social prestige that rhetoric implies. Biographical conjecture should not, it is true, unduly occupy us here; yet, it is far from irrelevant to note in passing the socio-political dimension of the oral aesthetic which so significantly informs his work. A fuller treatment of this question, which sadly cannot be undertaken here, will no doubt cast new light on the thorny problem of Barbey's prose. Such a study is anticipated with interest.

How, then, is rhetorical artificiality pertinent to the Fantastic? This question returns us to the semiotic chain mentioned in Chapter One and, precisely, to the conditions under which verbal meaning works:

> [...] s'il y a une 'santé' du langage, c'est l'arbitraire du signe qui la fonde. L'écœurant [...], c'est le recours à une fausse nature, c'est le *luxe* des formes significatives [...].[17]

These remarks point out the unalloyed, token nature of the sign within a healthy semiotic code. According to Barthes, any system which 'luxuriates' in the sign (and here we think automatically of rhetoric),

[17] Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 212.

taking their plasticity as *significant* rather than *signifying*, jeopardizes the semantic pretensions of that sign: means outplays meaning. These linguistic problematics are succinctly demonstrated in the Bible, in the episode of the Golden Calf, a motif which can be used to explain Barthes' point allegorically. For venerating the physical presence of the Golden Calf, for adoring its plasticity (that is, indulging in the sign), the Old Testament Jews were punished so as to remind them that the sign was nothing more than a cipher *pointing* to God (that is, the meaning). What the ancient Jews were guilty of was a form of semiotic 'materialism', precisely the sin that rhetoric commits.

When the semantic 'sacrifice' of rhetoric is set within the realm of the Fantastic a curiously positive effect is produced. Remembering that the latter actively strives, in part, to problematise the nature of the information it conveys, to 'un-state' its literary object, rhetoric, supremely doubtful in terms of semantics, presents itself as the very embodiment of Fantastic discourse. What many see as a fault in Barbey's work can, in fact, oddly so perhaps, be seen as a strength:

> [...] on a tendance à jeter le manteau de Noé sur l'ébriété verbale de Barbey, sur la passion de la préciosité, ses outrances, ses fautes de goût, ses disparates voyants, ses hardiesses gênantes.[...] On dit Barbey maniéré: il faut le dire 'maniériste'; le défaut est un système, un procédé créateur.[18]

It is therefore the aim of this chapter to illustrate the ways in which the Aurevillian text cultivates rhetorical structures, deliberately indulging in its own semantic undermining so as to produce a discourse which, in obedience to the demands of the Fantastic, states and yet 'refutes' its object. In short, I aim to suggest a creative aesthetic of failure and to respond, in so doing, to the following challenge:

---

[18] Michel Crouzet, 'Barbey d'Aurevilly et "l'esprit" dans *Les Diaboliques*', in *Cent ans après*, pp. 232-33.

> Quelques signes semblent indiquer qu'en réaction peut-être contre certains excès [...] on s'oriente désormais vers la prise en compte d'une dimension... scandaleusement négligée: la rhétorique. Barbey post-moderne? On est honteux en tout cas de constater que, plus d'un siècle après sa mort, il n'existe encore aucune étude sérieuse sur le style d'un homme pour qui le style était tout et qui, avant tout, est un style.[19]

Furthermore, this study hopes to fulfil both the aspirations of Théophile Gautier, as voiced in the second title quotation, and the promise indicated by Berthier some hundred or so years later:

> [...] une étude stylistique [...] appliquée à Barbey [...] serait particulièrement fructueuse.[20]

The discussion of rhetorical structures which follows will divide Barbey's discourse into three parts. First, consideration will be given to *lexis*, that is, individual linguistic units, concentrating primarily on verbs, nouns, adverbs and adjectives. Following this, under the rubric of *taxis* ('order', 'arrangement'), the distinguishing syntactical features of Barbey's work will be commented upon. Third and last, this analysis will look at *meta-taxis*, or those elements of discourse whose significance is meta-textual, for example, allusion and apostrophe. While such an approach necessarily entails a somewhat microscopic perspective, it is not possible within this study to provide exhaustive inventories, glossaries and comparative linguistic analyses. Given constraints of space, it is nevertheless hoped to isolate the principal areas of Barbey's rhetoric, supporting the guiding thesis of this chapter with the most prominent examples from his work.

---

[19] *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Philippe Berthier and Jacques-Henry Bornecque (Paris: Garnier, 1991), p. 359.
[20] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 239.

* * *

Beginning with lexis, no reader of Barbey's prose can come away from the text untouched by the decidedly baroque cocktail of his diction. Champfleury, for one, makes no bones of his attitude to Barbey's heteroclite lexical alloy:

> On ne trouverait ni chez les poëtes italiens les plus maniérés, ni chez les Espagnols, une pareille débauche de mots. M. Barbey aurait été à l'école chez *Gongora*, qu'il en serait sorti plus simple.[21]

This view is echoed in *La Presse*, where Barbey is once again likened to 'un Italien ou un Espagnol du XVIe siècle',[22] suggesting once more poor old Gongora as literary bad taste benchmark.

Such reactions rightly underline the rather mannered exoticism of the Aurevillian lexis. Remembering Péladan's observation, while precious little is to be found in the way of Hindu vocabulary, other languages undeniably hold pride of place. Consider this brief selection of anglicisms: *jockey, partner, la high life, ladies, ethereal, gentleman-like, O strange! very strange!, la fashion, remembrances, information, genuine* (ORC 1, 27, 164, 217, 223, 223, 253, 269, 275, 514, 571, 878); *really, continental England, les petites miss, whist, le confortable mot, honorability, l'harvey-sauce, tricks, slam, outlaw* (ORC 2, 11, 135, 135, 138, 139, 139, 140, 141, 144, 364).

Prominent too, particularly, but not exclusively, in *Maîtresse*, are the recurrent hispanisms: *la señora, buenas tardès* [*sic*], *conquè vamos, muchacha, mujer di partido, meneo, reina netta, caramba, carino* [*sic*], *cuchillo, es verdadero, porque no, afuera, perro del diablo, afuera, cigarro, abannico,*

---

[21] Champfleury, *Une vieille maîtresse*, p. 315.
[22] Adolphe de Lescure, *La Presse*, 22 November 1874.

hombre (ORC 1, 237, 249, 249, 266, 269, 273, 273, 286, 303, 304, 319, 382, 447, 459, 459, 459); *afrancesadas, por dios, sangre azul, otros ducados* (ORC 2, 213, 242, 246, 246). To a lesser degree, the Aurevillian text also seeks to appropriate the language of the Italian peninsula: *morbidezzes* [*sic*], *antidilettante, vaghezza, patiti, i promesi sposi, relazione* (ORC 1, 47, 56, 67, 70, 21, 224); *brio* (ORC 2, 64).

This linguistic multi-culturalism produces a number of noteworthy results. First, with regard to anglicisms, the ostentatious Englishness of Barbey's text reminds the reader of the Dandy, himself English in origin and fascinated with appearances, that is, *plasticity*, as Barbey notes in his essay on Brummell:

> *Paraître*, c'est *être* pour les Dandys [...].(ORC 2, 703).

The 'dandification' of diction is consequently of supreme importance in this chapter as it provides a particularly suitable means of glorifying the surface of words, which, as befits the Fantastic, jeopardizes their semantic depth. Second, it is noticeable that these anglicisms are occasionally assimilated erroneously: *confortable* is obviously somewhat less than comfortable as an epithet to *mot*, while the elision in *l'harvey-sauce* demonstrates a misunderstanding of the English aspirate 'h'. In a similar way, his hispanisms are often somewhat shaky: *mujer di partido* is rather jarring, principally as *di* does not exist in Spanish. It must be presumed that Barbey has in mind either *mujer de la vida* or *mujer perdida* both meaning, as befits the context, a prostitute. While some tutting on grammatical grounds is only to be expected, in the context of the Fantastic such errors are in fact a bonus as they compromise what the text is aiming to say, a sort of literary pot-hole throwing into relief the contingency on which words are founded. Third, taking the exoticisms as a whole, such multi-lingualism necessarily disperses meaning; a

literary re-enactment of the linguistic diaspora which followed the Tower of Babel, producing a discourse which tends towards opacity rather than clarity, again towards the *hiding* of meaning.

These last remarks may be extended to a further dimension of Barbey's lexis: neologisms and archaisms. The following selection is typical of the first group: *sensitif, l'uberté, sanité, façons sireniennes, impressifs, Saintes Sébastiennes, alliciantes, dumeuse, podagrerie, dépravatrice, affondé, attiferies, carapousse* (ORC 1, 27, 46, 50, 65, 141, 160, 234, 369, 377, 412, 454, 466, 644); *juanesque, irremarquable, puissanciellement, tempéramenteuse, inexilable, bouffre* (ORC 2, 62, 85, 154, 192, 194, 269). As for the second, Barbey's flair for the arcane can be seen in: *nonchaloir, adurent, gorgères, messeoir, la Maugrabine, alchools, nud, agreste, courtil, duire, en camérie, aître* (ORC 1, 23, 26, 57, 197, 248, 267, 277, 478, 633, 888, 888, 1122); *addextrée, senestrée, imbécille, souvente fois, descaler, vostre, estant, aye, marques seures* (ORC 2, 129, 129, 201, 293, 356, 376, 376, 376, 37).[23]

With regard to the neologisms, the tedency to calque on English is immediately noticeable: *sanité, impressif, sensitif.* This, of course, re-affirms the verbal dandyism whose significance was earlier commented on. As for the archaisms, the reader is confronted with a form of verbal nostalgia, suggesting a longing for some sort of linguistic arcadia, which, interestingly, gives further resonance to Barbey's claims on Classical rhetoric mentioned in the introduction. Taken together, these two tendencies are significant in this discussion precisely because of their *unfamiliarity*. On occasion, Barbey apologises for such words:

> Cet influx de la volonté sommeillante circulait-- qu'on me passe le mot, car il est bien pédant!--*puissanciellement* jusque dans ses mains [...].(ORC 2, 154).

[23] Norman patois is another way in which Barbey's texts look back; as numerous examples have already been cited, I refer the reader to previous chapters.

Notwithstanding good intentions, they frequently send the reader scurrying to the dictionary:

> N'étant pas éclairé par cet adjectif [*alliciant*], j'ai dû me déranger de ma table, aller à ma bibliothèque, ouvrir un dictionnaire, lequel ne m'a donné aucun renseignement. Il m'a fallu sortir, courir la ville, acheter un dictionnaire de Bescherelle dont le prix est de cinquante francs. Voilà où mène la conscience littéraire! L'auteur m'en saura-t-il quelque gré, surtout si j'ajoute que M. Bescherelle aîné garde le plus profond silence sur l'adjectif *alliciant*.[24]

The obscurity produced by such unfamiliarity and which, as Champfleury discovers, may remain exasperatingly unrelieved, is a curious boon to Barbey's discourse as it mobilises the deflation of meaning sought by the Fantastic. From this perspective, the Aurevillian lexis is palpably rehabilitated, making Henri Rigault's judgement-- one among a large, homogeneous band-- appear if not ill-considered certainly superficial:

> [...] ostentation intolérable de préciosité laborieuse, de mauvais goût, de paradoxes d'emprunt et d'impureté raffinée.[25]

Barbey himself believed passionately in an obscure literary order and meaning buried deep within *style*:

> Le style! [...] cache une invention intime et profonde [...], une organisation mystérieuse. (OH XIX, 69).

While he may well have anticipated other interpretations of this remark (most probably of a spiritual nature), in the context of this study his thoughts on the *organic* meaning of style are revealing. They further

---

[24] Champfleury, *Une vieille maîtresse*, p. 291. The *Trésor de la langue française* (16 vols, Éditions CNRS, 1971-94) confirms that 'alliciant' is indeed a neologism introduced into the French language in *Maîtresse*. Champfleury and most modern readers would no doubt be grateful to learn that it means 'attirant', 'séducteur'.

[25] Henri Rigault, 'De la politesse dans la critique: le Roman d'un moraliste catholique', *Le Journal des Débats*, 5 February 1858.

recommend a reading of the texts that goes beyond quibbles about bad taste and offers instead a perspective on the unitary significance of Barbey's style. In this way, given the demands of the Fantastic, we are able to read the unbridled lexical licence as a valuable source of verbal confusion.

The second facet of this lexical discussion proposes to consider the text from a typographical perspective. Even the most cursory reading of Barbey's prose cannot fail to take notice of the markedly emphatic nature of his *mise en page*. André Gide, in tones doubtlessly intended as mocking mimicry, hints at this in the following sardonic blast:

> [...] quelle aisance à la fois et quelle carrure! quelle cambrure! quel retournements des périodes, quelle abondance, quel bonheur dans le choix des mots, et quel amusement dans les images, quelle sonorité, quel nombre![26]

The butt of Gide's humour here is the tendency in Barbey's style to overstate matters, to 'over-egg' his literary cake, creating a form of verbal extravagance which, as Barthes indicates in the preamble to this chapter, chokes the semiotic arteries.

This is first expressed in the predilection for the exclamation mark. The early short-story, *Léa*, a matter of no more than nineteen pages in the *Pléiade* edition, contains no fewer than eighty-six of these typographical markings. If the value of such a statistic is diminished when expressed as a mean (a little over four per page), the accent on exclamation re-states itself unequivocally when we consider the sort of phrases Barbey habitually pins his declamatory tag to :

> Douleur amère et fatale! (ORC 1, 24).

---

[26] André Gide, *Divers, caractères* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), p. 69.

> Efforts inouïs et perdus! (ORC 1,30).
>
> De la pitié! (ORC 1, 31).
>
> Moquerie diabolique de la destinée! (ORC 1, 40).
>
> Le trahir! (ORC 1, 42).

Such interjections-- all from the narrator--, marked by their deadly seriousness and rather overplayed metaphysical angst, remind us of the mannered gestures and posturings of melodrama, that is, something we take *lightly*, a point the Goncourt brothers make with their customary dry wit:

> Il y a des jours où Barbey d'Aurevilly m'apparaît comme un personnage de Byron, un Lara, joué à Montparnasse par un de ces acteurs qui représentent les pairs de France avec un mouchoir d'invalide à carreaux bleus.[27]

While an exclamation mark is possibly to be expected in the examples above, the declamatory mania that seizes Barbey's work goes even further in attaching the tub-thumping tag to sentences where, generally speaking, its presence is less expected. *Don Juan*-- which also offers eighty-six exclamation marks over some twenty pages-- presents the following examples:

> Elle dit cela avec le charme étrange qui est en elle, cette Bohémienne! (ORC 2, 67).
>
> C'est avec du velours qu'elle égratignait! (ORC 2, 71).
>
> Toutes ces compliquées ne pouvaient croire à cette simplicité! (ORC 2, 71).
>
> [...] tout l'intérêt de son histoire ne tenait plus qu'au fil de ce mot-là! (ORC 2, 75).

Putting aside grammatical questions as to where one should or should not place an exclamation mark, which, it must be said, ultimately

---

[27] Goncourt, *Journal*, II, 1112.

only lead to individual choice, one common theme in this question becomes clear. Barbey's penchant for verbal emphasis patently suggests an unstated but no less manifest assumption that normal, unadorned discourse is somehow frail and less meaningful, as if the sentence without the three-line whip were less significant. This *frustration* with words he explicitly avows in the *Mémoranda*:

> Alors les mots m'impatientent. Ils ne sont que du crayon blanc pour faire des chairs qui demanderaient les velours lumineux ou éteints des pastels! (ORC 2, 971).

-- obliging our analysis with yet another exclamation mark. In terms of the definition proposed in the preamble to this chapter, Barbey stands verbal meaning on its head, demonstrating rather admirably what language should seek to *avoid*:

> Le mauvais signe est bouffi parce qu'il est redondant, et il est redondant parce qu'il veut être *vrai*, c'est-à-dire à la fois signe et chose [...].[28]

The obsessively demonstrative nature of Barbey's work reveals precisely this desire to be *real*, to be *true*. How often indeed do we hear him declaiming the truth of his fiction: 'Tout est vrai dans ce que j'écris' (CG IV, 196)? It also reveals a tendency to view language in a visceral way, as if it were capable of assuming the form of the very things it points to-- which of course it cannot. The over-inflation of the sign that results in these circumstances is however, consciously or no, an essential constituent of Fantastic rhetoric given that the overloaded signifier threatens meaning, on which the genre rests.

This analysis is equally fitted to Barbey's handling of italics. In normal discourse, italics are employed either to indicate stress or to point out a certain foreignness in provenance; in either case, they

---

[28] Genette, *Figures I*, p. 197.

suggest a significance that would be lost if left to the care of standard typography. With Barbey, however, they are used so widely and, apparently, so indiscriminately, that it is far from clear what he is getting at. Where indeed the deep meaning in:

> [...] le *jeté* des draperies [...]. (ORC 1, 234).
>
> Marigny, *l'aventurier* Marigny [...]. (ORC 1, 368).
>
> C'était *mauvais ton* peut-être que cette mise [...]. (ORC 1, 233)?

Whence the need for:

> [...] un *mauvais sujet* comme Marigny [...]. (ORC 1, 227).
>
> [...] une femme de chambre au port *si princesse* [...]. (ORC 1, 234).
>
> [...] comme une magicienne qui *va faire son charme* [...]. (ORC 1, 240)?

And whither the sense of:

> [...] le bonheur *trop voyant* de Mlle. de Polastron. (ORC 1, 256).
>
> Mais *le bizarre* est ce qui lui va le mieux! (ORC 1, 384).
>
> [...] son miroir *charmé* [...]. (ORC 1, 539)?

Such examples, taken here from *Maîtresse*, abound in Barbey's œuvre. Here, as elsewhere, the italicisation is somewhat unexpected, even gratuitous, reminding us of the over-enthusiastic orator's thumb and forefinger pinch. Like this hackneyed gesture, they seek to designate something of special significance, though to the untrained eye their purport may well be obscure. For Barbey, of course, words, style and form all possess a mystical meaning, an 'organisation mystérieuse', forming a link to a supernatural order which clearly goes beyond the bounds of accepted typographical norms and which as a result, in his terms, legitimises the somewhat pretentious suggestiveness of the

italicisations noted above. In our terms, such exaggerated use of typographical stress reinforces the problems of the overburdened sign, whose crisis of meaning forms the centre of this discussion.

It is furthermore from such a perspective that we should consider Barbey's love of the question mark and the interrogative constructions they entail. This particular feature, used so often in the articulation or, rather, 'half-articulation' of the Supernatural, is the Fantastic literary device *par excellence*, as it voices without verifying that which it introduces:

> J'avoue que cette dernière partie de l'histoire, cette expiation surnaturelle, me sembla plus tragique que l'histoire elle-même. Était-ce l'heure à laquelle un croyant à cette épouvantable vision me la racontait? Était-ce le théâtre de cette dramatique histoire, que nous foulions alors sous nos pieds? Étaient-ce les neuf coups entendus et dont les ondes sonores frappaient encore à nos oreilles et versaient par là le froid à nos cœurs? Était-ce enfin tout cela combiné et confondu en moi qui m'associait à l'impression vraie de cette homme si robuste de corps et d'esprit? (ORC 1, 741).

On a wider note, the interrogatives express a degree of narratorial preciosity, as in the following examples, where the narrator somewhat affectedly addresses his reader:

> L'avez-vous quelquefois rencontré, le docteur Torty? (ORC 2, 81).
>
> Que voulez-vous, Madame? (ORC 2, 82).

On other occasions, they reflect a somewhat naïve and heavy-handed attempt to create suspense:

> Jeanne-Madelaine s'était-elle noyée volontairement? Était-elle victime d'un désespoir, d'un accident, ou d'un crime? (ORC 1, 692).
>
> Pourquoi donc y entrait-il ce soir-là?... (ORC 2, 175).

While, in other circumstances, they suggest the affectations of a narrator playing on his *finesse* and impartiality:

> Y avait-il de l'affectation dans cette manière de se montrer ou de se cacher, qui excitait les imaginations curieuses?... Cela était bien possible; mais qui le savait? qui pouvait le dire? (ORC 2, 94).
>
> Qui sut jamais exactement ce qui s'agita dans cette âme? (ORC 1, 666).

Barbey's fascination with the question mark, whatever the context, has two distinct results. First, by definition, interrogatives belabour meaning: their abundance in Barbey's œuvre displaces the very concept of affirmation which words normally seek. Second, in their overwhelming number they further demonstrate, rather paradoxically perhaps, an obsession with precision, an unstinting pursuit of the right word or the perfect wording. Indeed, considering the visual impact of the text as a whole, Barbey's attitude appears obsessively mannered. What for him is textual *purity*,

> Je voudrais que nos *Diaboliques* fûssent d'une extrême pureté typographique. (CG VII, 225).

-- is for the reader textual *overload*. This over-straining of the semiotic chain nevertheless lends valuable assistance to the frailty of words on which the Fantastic plays.[29]

One of the most arresting examples of Barbey's love of stylistic eccentricity is that figure of rhetoric which, perhaps more than any other, embodies the antinomy on which his fiction rests: the *oxymoron*. Referring to *Diaboliques*, although her comments pertain equally to the

[29] A striking illustration of Barbey's attitude to words, their plastic significance and his obsession with emphasis can be found in his 'illuminated' manuscripts. In addition to his own elaborate gothic script and curious typographical markings, he actually decorates his texts with red and gold, on the assumption, it must be presumed, that they thereby mean *more*.

whole of his Fantastic corpus, Mourier-Casile assesses the significance of this *figure* in the following terms:

> L'oxymore (ou plutôt une infinie modulation de la structure oxymorique) est omniprésent dans *Les Diaboliques*. Barbey a même choisi de donner comme centre de gravité-- et de renversement-- à son recueil un récit tout entier construit sur cette figure linguistique du scandale dans la langue, de l'impossible, et pourtant actualisée, coexistence des contraires: *Le Bonheur dans le crime*.[30]

In so saying, she proposes that Barbey's entire literary aesthetic is founded on an oxymoronic framework, beginning on the individual, lexical level and from there embracing theme, structure and ideology. Given this significance, the whole of Chapter Five is devoted to the question of the oxymoron and its relevance to the dialectical tensions in Barbey's work. Nevertheless, because this figure is something of a semantic 'scandal', it is patently appropriate to make at least passing reference here in this discussion of verbal exorbitance.

From a purely lexical perspective, inasmuch as it posits a correlation between elements we would otherwise consider as irreconcilable, the oxymoron scrambles the idea of conventionality on which words rely, in a sense refuting the Cartesian basis of language:

> [...] l'oxymore maintien l'opposition et l'union, et laisse chaque élément persister dans la tension et l'unité. Le langage bascule dans une impossibilité [...].[31]

As such, it produces a form of verbal confusion where meaning is precariously balanced as a tension between opposites, a semantic interstice that resists logical analysis. The Fantastic, which actively pursues the undermining of its own enunciation, can therefore only profit from a linguistic trick which promotes obscurity:

---

30 *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Mourier-Casile, pp. 27-28.
31 Michel Crouzet, 'Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'oxymore: ou la rhétorique du diable', in *Barbey d'Aurevilly: L'Ensorcelée, Les Diaboliques. La chose sans nom*, p. 86.

'infernalement calme' (ORC 2, 41).

'bleu d'enfer' (ORC 2, 63).

'femme frêle et forte' (ORC 2, 154).

'cette guerre furieuse et lente' (ORC 2, 213).

'cette Messaline-Vierge' (ORC 2, 214).

'un crime civilisé' (ORC 2, 231).

'splendide de mauvais goût' (ORC 2, 234).

'le sublime de l'enfer'(ORC 2, 254).

'ce sublime horrible' (ORC 2, 254).

'ce sublime infernal' (ORC 2, 259).

There is, of course, as this brief sample suggests, much more to say on the question of the oxymoron; for the time being, this discussion will confine itself to the remarks made above, underlining the semantic crisis this figure provokes:

> [L'oxymore] souligne que chaque mot a le statut de ne plus pouvoir dire ce qu'il vise.[32]

Linked to the oxymoron, in so far as they too seek to establish a correlation between differences, are *metaphor* and *simile*. To begin with the former, in any writer's style the metaphor undeniably enjoys supreme importance for it is through this device that an author most tangibly articulates his vision. For Proust, the metaphor re-orders Time and Space in accordance with the infinite powers of consciousness and voices the triumph of literature over the remorseless linearity of existence:

---

[32] Crouzet, *Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'oxymore*, p. 86.

> On peut faire se succéder indéfiniment dans une description les objets qui figuraient dans le lieu décrit, la vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport... et les enfermera dans les anneaux nécessaires d'un beau style; même, ainsi que la vie, quand, en rapprochant une qualité commune à deux sensations, il dégagera leur essence commune en les réunissant l'une à l'autre pour les soustraire aux contingences du temps, dans une métaphore.[33]

For Barbey, reactionary Catholic and tireless promoter of the Supernatural, vision equates to spirituality:

> Je n'admets dans la littérature que celle qui *dégage et personnifie* l'essence spirituelle et la grandeur morale de l'écrivain. (CG IX, 287).

This set of beliefs provides for a pattern of associations which is frequently, either directly or indirectly, equally spiritual in inspiration: 'Elle était assise, comme un juste à la droite de Dieu' (ORC 2, 66). Although it is difficult to prove a deterministic relationship between the vigour of Barbey's religious convictions and the vigour of his prose, the sense of unimpeachable *purpose* is nevertheless all-pervasive. In a way, this fact helps to explain the nature of Barbey's metaphors as it accounts for the unrelenting dogmatism of his comparisons, their characteristic absence of a sense of measure or variety which, in this chapter, examining the 'failure' of language, is supremely pertinent.

Barbey's metaphors are certainly remarkable though not necessarily for the best of reasons:

> Critique littéraire, il reproche aux autres leurs métaphores et leurs vivacités de style, dans quel style et avec quelles métaphores![34]

They are indeed often remarkable for their implausibility and lack of resonance. Consider *Maîtresse*. In this, in many ways, pivotal text, Barbey

---

[33] Proust, *A la recherche*, III, 889.
[34] Goncourt, *Journal*, I, 548.

poses the relationship between the feminine and the feline, drawing on the transposition of their relative attributes to propose that there is something animal in female sexuality. Depicting his cats as dark and mystical beasts, in a word, supernatural, he suggests that this too is woman's estate.

This feline metaphoric structure focuses, naturally, on Vellini, the 'vieille maîtresse'. Borrowing the motif of electricity, the narrator suggests the association woman-cat-supernatural in the following terms:

> Deux éclairs, je crois, partirent de cette épine dorsale qui vibrait en marchant comme celle d'une nerveuse et souple panthère, et je compris, par un frisson singulier, la puissance éléctrique de l'être qui marchait ainsi devant moi. (ORC 1, 273).

Indeed, the shared attributes of feline *slinking* are pursued repeatedly in the text:

> [...] avec des mouvements si félins, ses mollesses enivrantes et provocatrices. (ORC 1, 282).

> [...] elle s'en venait tourner autour de moi avec son regard luisant et étrange et ses mouvements de jeune jaguar [...]. (ORC 1, 317).

As a consequence, physicality is stressed in Barbey's metaphoric relationship, be it in terms of lovers' caresses,

> [...] quelque chose d'horriblement fauve aux caresses dont nous nous repaissions. (ORC 1, 301).

-- or simple plastic appearance:

> [...] cette laideur de lionne. (ORC 1, 468).

This feline structure has two significant results. First, the alleged *correspondance* between women, cats and the Supernatural plays on a laboured common-place of novelistic motifs, embracing, admittedly, the heights of Edgar Poe (*The Black Cat*) but also the depths

of pulp fiction and soft pornography.[35] The link between the feminine and the feline is so crushingly stereotypical that Barbey's use of the cat as metaphor is barely to be taken seriously. Secondly, Barbey is resolutely single-minded in his comparisons and knows no sense of measure or subtlety:

> La señora imitera-t-elle cette aimable bête avec laquelle elle a peut-être plus d'un rapport de ressemblance? (ORC 1, 387).

It is accordingly no surprise that he earns the unsparing mockery of the likes of Champfleury:

> L'auteur tient à ce qu'on ne l'oublie pas; si un jour il faisait un drame avec son roman et que le parterre, dans un enthousiasme que je veux bien supposer, rappelât les acteurs:-- Tous! tous! suivant la mode du boulevard, M. Barbey exigerait que son tigre empaillé vînt recevoir, avec les principaux acteurs de sa pièce, les hommages du public.[36]

In absolute terms, Barbey's metaphor is poor; within the Fantastic, the recoil produced in the reader by the unabashed superficiality of the comparison is oddly positive. This distance, while it confounds the narrow meaning that the author seeks, confirms the crisis of meaning sought by the genre. As we know, the synaptic gap between reader and Fantastic text is characteristically confused.

If Barbey's metaphors in *Maîtresse* are consistently superficial and stereotypical, his similes veer towards another, no less indigestible extreme: pompous grandiloquence. In *Prêtre*, for example, the referent for his parallel is repeatedly drawn from either Greco-Roman or Biblical stock, a tendency which underlines the epic intentions of his œuvre. Sombreval, we note, is first likened to the renegade son of David,

---

[35] See, for example, *L'Echo des Savanes*, 18 January 1995, whose front cover sports a voluptuous half-cat, half-woman, an image which draws on precisely the same ideological bank as *Maîtresse*.
[36] Champfleury, *Une vieille maîtresse*, pp. 312-313.

Absalom (ORC 1, 887, 1214), which, at first glance, is an appropriate analogy for the apostate priest. But then he is cast in the light of Goliath (ORC 1, 887) and then Xerxes (ORC 1, 931) then Cromwell (ORC 1, 937) returning to his Greek stock in the guise of Archimedes (ORC 1, 109). Calixte's identity, unsurprisingly so considering her lineage, is equally prismatic: at first Faust's Marguerite (ORC 1, 936), she then is matched with Anne Boleyn (ORC 1, 951) only to be transported back across the continent of cultural references to assume the role of one of the Borgias (ORC 1, 951).

Even for his accolytes, Barbey's comparisons are a little heavy on the stomach:

> [...] sa langue d'un romantisme échevelé, pleine de locutions torses, de tournures inusitées, de *comparaisons outrées* [...][37] (My italics).

When the broader picture of Barbey's referential structure is considered, it is hard not to be struck by a sort of saturation bombing of cultural references in which impossible dissonances present themselves (Cromwell/Archimedes?) and where the referential function of the text is so overloaded, so cross-wired, that it produces something akin to verbal melt-down. It is surely to this that Gide sardonically refers in his earlier remark, 'quel amusement dans les images', making a point that Paul Bourget also singles out in an image of not a little pertinence to Barbey's work: 'Quelles orgies d'images'.[38]

The significance of this state of affairs to the Fantastic is self-evident: by committing his texts to a form of over-inflated inter-textuality (which will be dealt with in more depth later), where meaning is awash with a welter of competing, often discordant signs (Anne

---

[37] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A rebours* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 192.
[38] Paul Bourget, *Études et portraits*, 2 vols (Paris: Lemerre, 1889), I, p. 180.

Boleyn/the Borgias), Barbey produces a textual image so opaque and so dense that the perspective of sense is scrambled.

* * *

The 'overheating' detectable within isolated, lexical items equally characterises Barbey's work in terms of *taxis*, that is, sentence structure. Throughout his literary career Barbey shamelessly indulged in the over-complicated phrase, marked by the tireless accumulation of subordinate clauses and obsessively parenthetical digressions. Champfleury, as ever, takes up the point with the driest of wit:

> [...] M. Barbey d'Aurevilly est prodigue d'incidentes explicatives et déterminatives. Pour lui, une incidente, dont je ne conteste pas l'utilité grammaticale, est toujours grosse d'autres incidentes; elle en met au monde une immense quantité.[39]

These remarks he supports with the following exegesis of a sentence from *Maîtresse*:

> 'C'était une de ces jambes tournées pour faire vibrer,' (première incidente-- *dans les folles danses de l'amour*), 'le carillon de tous les grelots de la Fantaisie,' (seconde incidente-- *et autour desquelles l'imagination émoustillée s'enroule, frétille et se tord*), (troisième incidente greffée sur la seconde-- *en montant plus haut*), (quatrième incidente issue de la troisième génération-- *comme un pampre de flammes monte autour d'un thyrse*).[40]

It would of course be incorrect to say that the sentence with an elaborate and multi-faceted complement is, *a fortiori*, an over-worked sentence (and consequently of use to the Fantastic as home to over-fertile discourse). As the following excerpt from Proust admirably discloses,

---

[39] Champfleury, *Une vieille maîtresse*, p. 298.
[40] Champfleury, *Une vieille maîtresse*, p. 298.

the complex sentence possesses its own irrefutable precision provided it retains thematic and syntactic coherence-- here assured by the repetition of 'angoisse', its pairing with 'amour' and the subtle play on masculine and feminine pronouns this offers:

> L'angoisse que je venais d'éprouver, je pensais que Swann s'en serait bien moqué s'il avait lu ma lettre et en avait deviné le but; or, au contraire, comme je l'ai appris plus tard, une angoisse semblable fut le tourment de longues années de sa vie, et personne aussi bien que lui peut-être n'aurait pu me comprendre; lui, cette angoisse qu'il y a à sentir l'être qu'on aime dans un lieu de plaisir où l'on n'est pas, où l'on ne peut pas le rejoindre, c'est l'amour qui la lui a fait connaître, l'amour, auquel elle est en quelque sorte prédestinée, par lequel elle sera accaparée, spécialisée; mais quand, comme pour moi, elle est entrée en nous avant qu'il ait encore fait son apparition dans notre vie, elle flotte en l'attendant, vague et libre, sans affectation déterminée, au service un jour d'un sentiment, le lendemain d'un autre, tantôt de la tendresse filiale ou de l'amitié pour un camarade.[41]

Barbey, however, enjoys no such integrity:

> [Barbey] a l'emportement torrentiel de la parole oratoire. Il est vrai que le torrent-- car il faut dire aussi les défauts-- se brise parfois contre des incidentes et des parenthèses qui le ralentissent mal à propos: cela vient de ce que l'auteur veut tout dire, fixer toutes les nuances [...].[42]

In counterpoint to the Proustian phrase, Barbey's complex structures are thematically diffuse, housing disjointed digressions and are far too often pieced together by a less than elegant 'et que'. To bear out these remarks, the following sentence extracted from *Léa* is particularly appropriate:

> De peur que la sensibilité de sa fille ne fût trop ébranlée par ces premiers épanchements dans lesquels on se soulage de ces larmes oppressantes qui viennent on ne sait pas d'où..., et que toute femme qui fut jeune eut besoin de verser la tête sur l'épaule d'une autre femme pleurant ainsi et bien-aimée, ou toute seule, le front dans ses mains, Mme de Séverin se priva du plus grand bonheur pour une mère, de la seule félicité humaine que la vertu n'ait pas condamnée.(ORC 1, 29).

---

41 Proust, *A la recherche*, I, 30.
42 Alcide Dussolier, *La Revue nouvelle*, 15 May 1864.

Immediately striking in this example is the semantic confusion set in chain by the opening proposition; what exactly is it that Mme de Saint-Séverin, fearful for her daughter, deprives herself of? And what is to be made of the virtuous abstinence in the last clause? Even when returned to context, these quandaries persist. Then, consider the endless chain of 'incidentes': 'ces premiers épanchements... dans lesquels... ces larmes... qui viennent... toute femme... une autre femme... ou toute seule... le front dans ses mains'. Inevitably, the rambling digressions contained within the predicate ('De peur que... dans ses mains'), displace the complement ('Mme de Saint-Séverin... condamnée') some several clauses away from the initial proposition and, in so doing, over-balance the 'pre-text' of the phrase at the expense of the 'text.' At the end of this thematic and syntactic labyrinth very little of any real clarity emerges as to the emotional development of Léa and her mother's reaction to this; set against Proust's sentence, on not too dissimilar a subject, the lack of direction and precision in Barbey's sentence is all too manifest.

Digression, in syntactic terms, is often compounded by improbable thematic associations, whose twisting contortions find a true home in the Aurevillian phrase:

> L'homme, élancé et aussi patricien dans sa redingote noire strictement boutonnée, comme celle d'un officier de cavalerie, que s'il avait porté un de ces costumes que le Titien donne à ses portraits, ressemblait par sa tournure busquée, son air efféminé et hautain, ses moustaches aiguës comme celles d'un chat et qui à la pointe commençaient à blanchir, à un migon du temps de Henri III; et pour que la ressemblance fût plus complète, il portait des cheveux courts, qui n'empêchaient nullement de voir briller à ses oreilles deux saphirs d'un bleu sombre, qui me rappelèrent les deux émeraudes que Sbogar portait à la même place [...]. (ORC 2, 85).

This particular phrase (taken from *Bonheur*) offers a bewilderingly dense image. From the 'redingote' we pass by association to cavalry uniforms which, in turn, evoke Titian's portraits. This digression completed, we

return to the 'homme' of the predicate whose mustachioed femininity reminds the narrator of cats (no doubt to howls of appreciation from Champfleury), the which moustache is whitening at the tips (presumably, a detail of some purport), producing a figure reminiscent of the times of Henri III. Pausing for breath at a semi-colon, Barbey then adds the hairstyle and some jewellery, which, quite reasonably, remind the narrator of Sbogar's earrings.

Such thematic twists, at least in Barbey's hands, embrace numerous subordinations and conjunctions, 'comme celle... que s'il... que le Titien... comme celles... qui... pour que... qui... qui... que... ', which, in their respective 'flatness', do little for the rhythm and cadence of the sentence (remember here the syntactic variety by which Proust achieves the harmony of his phrase). Taken in tandem, these visual and structural elaborations suggest a pretentious grandiloquence where the meaning of the sentence, systematically subordinated to chaotic associations with cats and kings and stacked ever more precariously on relatives and conjunctions, sails dangerously close to farce.

Barbey's obsessive indulgence in parenthetical digressions and the accumulation of hypotheses this implies necessarily diffuses the semantic intentions of his text, from which the Fantastic profits. More precisely, in seeking to super-charge his sentences with a plethora of nuances, their supposed correlations and unified import, he, in fact, more often than not, over-burdens his phrase, which, if it avoids farce, is often prey to abstruse impenetrability. This is the price he pays for wanting to 'tout dire.' As a consequence, the sentence loses its aim, masking its superficial intentions and voicing principally its own ambiguity and contingency.

The above selection gives but a brief glimpse into the complicated world of Barbey's syntax. Undeniably, extracts tend to give a distorted view, as Barbey himself remarks:

> [...] chaque poésie a, de plus que la réussite des détails [...] une valeur très importante d'ensemble et de situation qu'il ne faut pas lui faire perdre, en la détachant. (OH IX, 48).

Nevertheless, remembering the analysis proposed in Chapter Three, sentences such as the one below faithfully repeat in paradigmatic form what, on a macro-textual level, is without doubt a real and unmistakable case of taking things too far:

> A cela près du petit souffle,-- qui n'est qu'un souffle,-- et qui passe -- comme un souffle-- dans le *René* de Chateaubriand,-- du religieux Chateaubriand,-- je ne sache pas de livre où l'inceste, si commun dans nos mœurs,-- en haut comme en bas, et peut-être plus en bas qu'en haut,-- ait jamais fait le sujet, franchement abordé, d'un récit qui pourrait tirer de ce sujet des *effets* d'une moralité vraiment tragique. (ORC 2, 229).

* * *

The heaviness to be noted in the word and sentence of Barbey's prose is similarly manifest when his œuvre is considerd in terms of *meta-taxis*. No reader of Barbey's fiction can fail to be aware of the richness of its references, its undeniably catholic taste for allusion and apostrophe. The briefest of glances at Petit's exhaustive index in the *Pléiade* edition, covering real and mythological figures from the broadest of cultural contexts, confirms such a view. If it is not the intention of this study to condemn Barbey's *demonstration* of culture *per se*, it is nevertheless true

that within a literary framework his educated asides do have their drawbacks, as Petit himself hints:

> Il a beaucoup lu, beaucoup trop lu; son récit [*Cachet*] fourmille d'allusions, de comparaisons; il cite pêle-mêle Shakespeare, 'mon ami Sheridan', Mme. de Staël, Rousseau, Byron [...]. (ORC 1, X).

These asides are so dominant within the text, so centre-stage, that the text itself is displaced. This cultural verbosity is moreover often superficial-- the references are even on occasion erroneous-- producing a discourse which, while it intends to be learned, can in fact appear 'un-learned', whose exaggerated inter-textuality is closer to the mock epic than any other literary form. This displacement and-- unintended-- debunking problematise the literariness of Barbey's fiction, promoting ambiguities of interpretation which are of course germane to this study.

This 'écriture agressivement "artiste"'[43] is admirably disclosed in *Bonheur*. In fixing the portrait of Dr. Torty, the narrator first locates him in relation to the theories of famous nineteenth-century medical practitioners-- Cabanis, Chaussier and Dubois (ORC 2, 82). Then he is likened to Moses (ORC 2, 82), with, we note, an equestrian aplomb equal to the strength of any centaur (ORC 2, 83). He is similarly at home in Fenimore Cooper's New England (ORC 2, 83), though not, the narrator points out, an Alceste-like loner (ORC 2, 83). Furthermore, he is a worthy subject for Titian's portraits (ORC 2, 85), or a charming courtier from the times of Henri III, or even a match for the be-jewelled majesty of Sbogar (ORC 2, 85). In short, he is,'comme l'entendait Brummell' (ORC 2, 85), a Dandy.

From here, the text moves on to introduce Hauteclaire and Serlon. At first 'Armide et Locuste' (ORC 2, 84), then 'Philémon et Baucis' (ORC 2, 87), this mysterious couple, to extend the staggering synthesis, are a

---

[43] Hubert Juin, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Paris: Seghers, 1975), p. 7.

worthy match to Homer's Gods (ORC 2, 87), although Hauteclaire retains a certain Egyptian charm (ORC 2, 85), not, apparently, without its Scottish side (ORC 2, 88) reminding us, quite naturally, of Saint George (ORC 2, 93). Hauteclaire then becomes Clorinda (ORC 2, 95) although Serlon cannot, as Barbey correctly observes, take up the role of Tancred who in fact slays his mate in *La Jérusalem délivrée*, leaving the reference a little lop-sided.

The text then proceeds through a royal fanfare calling on Louis XV (ORC 2, 90), Charles XII (ORC 2, 91), Assuérus (ORC 2, 102), Charlemagne (ORC 2, 104) and Louis XIV (ORC 2, 124). Keeping pace with these kings are selected literary figures: Racine (ORC 2, 84), Cooper (ORC 2, 85), Molière (ORC 2, 85), Homer (ORC 2, 87), Shakespeare (ORC 2, 88), Beaumarchais (ORC 2, 104), Mme. de Staël (ORC 2, 126) and Milton (ORC 2, 126). And, not to be outdone, artists: Titian (ORC 2, 85), Velletri (ORC 2, 95) and Canova (ORC 2, 113).

In addition to the cultural dissonances contained within his references, of which Hauteclaire provides a striking example, noticeable also is the awkwardness of Barbey's allusions. Witness first the Tancred and Clorinda comparison which only half fits the bill. Consider then the apostrophising of Louis XIV:

> Je n'en passai pas moins sans lui [Hauteclaire] donner signe de politesse, car si Louis XIV saluait des femmes de chambre dans les escaliers, ce n'étaient pas des empoisonneuses! (ORC 2, 124).

This remark is not a little confusingly gratuitous precisely because Hauteclaire *is* poisoning her mistress. Consider also the rather fatuous comment on the 'Patriciennes de V...' who, unlike the well-read narrator, 'n'avaient pas lu *le Mariage de Figaro*!' (ORC 2, 104), or indeed the final picture of Hauteclaire and Serlon, worthy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an allusion of which they, of course, are ignorant:

> Le comte et la comtesse de Savigny refont tous les jours, sans y penser, [...] le *Paradis perdu* de Milton. (ORC 2, 126).

A similar process can also be seen at work in *Histoire*. The references here begin with Rembrandt and Byron (ORC 2, 268), the latter appearing in direct reference no fewer than twenty-two times in Barbey's fiction. We then move to the sculptor Phidias (ORC 2, 272) then Socrates (ORC 2, 274), Beaumarchais (ORC 2, 275), Spartacus and Coriolanus (ORC 2, 277). Fom here to the Kings of Persia (ORC 2, 285), to Chateaubriand (ORC 2, 288) and back to the Kings of France (ORC 2, 293); from Dupaty (ORC 2, 293) to Dante (ORC 2, 298), Borea and Orythia (ORC 2, 305), Philippe II (ORC 2, 332), Charlemagne (ORC 2, 349) and Napoleon (ORC 2, 350-51). Finally, having called on the *commedia dell'arte* (ORC 2, 352), we move swiftly through Greek mythology (ORC 2, 354), Elizabethan drama (ORC 2, 360) and Judaeo-Christian parables (ORC 2, 362).

While it may seem churlish to flatten Barbey's culture to such a schematic list one cannot deny that, presented in this way, there is something a little over-enthusiastic in his allusions. What is more, they are often crassly superficial:

> Lasthénie était somnambule comme lady Macbeth... mais Mme de Férjol n'avait peut-être pas lu Shakespeare. (ORC 2, 360).

> Tout cela était à faire crier les âmes communes, qui voudraient que tout fût commun comme elles, mais les peintres et les poètes auraient, eux, raffolé de cette hâve tête de veuve qui leur eût rappelé tout au moins la mère de Spartacus ou de Coriolan. (ORC 2, 277).

Even more tellingly, they are, on occasion, holed by flaws. The allusion to Dupaty's *Voyage d'Italie* (*sic*), as a text well read in Mme de Ferjol's youth (ORC 2, 293), is a chronological impossibility as this text, correctly entitled *Lettres sur l'Italie en 1785*, post-dates, narrowly but nonetheless

indubitably, the fictional time context indicated in the novel (ORC 2, 267). Equally, Barbey's quotation from Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* (ORC 2, 288) is incorrect, as Petit points out (ORC 2, 1349). To add insult to injury, Barbey blandly remarks,'Chateaubriand, qui se connaissait en poésie' (ORC 2, 288), only to remove all credibility from his allusion by the following admission:

> Mais Chateaubriand et son Génie du Christianisme n'existaient pas au moment où s'ouvre cette histoire [...]. (ORC 2, 288-89).

It is hoped that the above analysis avoids the pitfalls of pedantry. Nor does it aim to lampoon Barbey for his errors of excess: a good deal of his creative energy draws on a passionate sense of commitment and enthusiasm in which fine-tuning is often lost:

> L'enthousiasme flambe continuellement dans ce livre [*Prêtre*] et promène sur toutes les pages sa terrible langue de feu, ondoyante et multiple [...].[44]

This said, the excesses *do* demand interpretation. This analysis hopes to show that the peculiarities of Barbey's allusions and apostrophes have a precise *literary* function beyond doubts about good taste. First, in their number, they inevitably displace the text proper, submerging it under ever more demanding Classical, Biblical and historical perspectives: what may have been intended as cultural synaesthesia tends, sadly, to inter-textual overkill. Second, in their superficiality and flair for flaws, they jeopardize the credibility of the work as a whole, turning literature perilously close to the winds of farce. Yet, in terms of the Fantastic, such defects are oddly positive for, in so far as they weaken traditional patterns of interpretation-- not least among which in the novel form is a *belief* in the text-- they thereby foreground the very principle of

[44] Léon Bloy, 'Un prêtre marié', *La Revue du monde catholique*, 10 September 1876.

ambiguity itself as the only *certain* textual property: a decidedly modern literary attribute for one so unashamedly retrograde.

To conclude this examination of Barbey's over-active rhetoric, it is no doubt fitting to offer as supreme exemplum of his style a feature of his writing apparent in almost every line: *sententiousness*. This is best defined, in Geoffrey Bennington's terminology, as 'laying down the law',[45] which, within fictional discourse, confuses the *literariness* of the text. By its very nature, sententiousness proposes itself as fact or as law and hardly as fiction. In short, it undermines the autonomy of literature, declaiming, to the work's detriment, the prefabrication of the text, as Proust suggests:

> Une œuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix.[46]

In these conditions the subtle game of *vraisemblance* which literature plays on is upset: is the text to be taken *literally* or *literarily*?

Given the extent of Barbey's heavy-handed law-making it would be impossible here to provide an exhaustive commentary on every aphorism and epigram he attaches to his fiction, or to which, more precisely, his fiction is attached. For all that, certain themes do predominate. His strictures on women are unarguably pointed and bombastic:

> Les Richelieu de notre âge portent des jupons: ils sont des femmes.(ORC 1, 62).
>
> [...] ces créatures de vif-argent qui nichent des essaims de caprices dans les plis de leurs jupes.(ORC 1, 77-78).

---

[45] Geoffrey Bennington, *Sententiousness and the novel: laying down the law in eighteenth-century French fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 3.
[46] Proust, *A la recherche*, III, 882.

> C'est la manie de tant de femmes, de croire qu'on pense à elles toujours! (ORC 1, 141). (A remark with its own self-deflating irony).
>
> [...] les femmes, lâches individuellement, en troupe sont audacieuses. (ORC 2, 61).
>
> [...] une femme, c'est l'aimant du Diable ! (ORC 2, 209). [47]

Equally crushing is Barbey's attitude to modernity and the nineteenth century, against which he wages unstinting war:

> [...] imitations tourmentées d'une époque de perroquets et de singes [...]. (ORC 1, 61).
>
> [...] notre époque, grossièrement matérialiste et utilitaire a pour prétention de faire disparaître toute espèce de friche et de broussailles aussi bien du globe que de l'âme humaine. (ORC 1, 555-56).
>
> [...] ces opinions légères qui sont les opinions françaises depuis que la France a cessé d'être la chevaleresque et catholique nation d'autrefois. (ORC 1, 1000).
>
> Est-ce que dernièrement l'Esprit ne s'est pas changé en une bête à prétention qu'on appelle l'Intelligence?... (ORC 2, 129).
>
> [...] la dernière gloire de l'esprit français, forcé d'émigrer devant les mœurs utilitaires et occupées de notre temps. (ORC 2, 130).[48]

As these examples suggest, Barbey credits himself with insightful knowledge on human psychology, where, as ever, he conducts himself with characteristic brio:

> Aimer l'œil de sa maîtresse, c'est aimer la pensée elle-même. (ORC 1, 170).
>
> [...] ce magnétisme de l'amour [...] bien souvent, rien dans la personne qui l'exerce ne le justifie. (ORC 1, 227).
>
> C'est quelquefois une si faible chose que le mystère d'organisation de la tête humaine, qu'une circonstance [...] la trouble d'abord et finit par l'asservir. (ORC 1, 621).

---

[47] Similar 'insights' may be found: ORC 1; 12, 38, 76, 82, 184, 252, 324, 896; ORC 2; 47, 63, 71, 97, 212, 215, 1253-1267.

[48] As a corollary to Barbey's anti-modernity, inevitably there is much hostility to the literature of his age ; see pp. 229-31 of *Vengeance* for a lengthy disquisition on this matter.

> L'esprit humain se venge de ses ignorances par ses erreurs. (ORC 1, 652).
>
> Quand un homme déjà sur l'âge a un enfant, il l'aime mieux que s'il était jeune, car la vanité, qui double tout, double aussi le sentiment paternel. (ORC 2, 92).

This short compendium, though unable to cover the breathtaking scope of what is more often than not barely disguised vitriol, does however point out the starkly demonstrative character of Barbey's prose: all of the foregoing thoughts are from his fiction. It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that the presence of an author's opinions in a text is necessarily negative and harmful to literary meaning: Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is redolent with aphorisms and epigrams, Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a veritable treasure trove of literary theory. The question is one of *tone*. Whereas Wilde's text is acceptable in so far as it is frivolous and light-hearted, Proust's inasmuch as it is reasoned and modest, Barbey's texts, on the other hand, suffer precisely because they are so singularly devoid of both irony and reason. His opinions only have face value which, from any angle, are crushingly bombastic, as his law-making for female psychology irredeemably proves. Yet, within the Fantastic, all is not lost; this genre, ever struggling to 'un-say' what it says, happily accommodates sententious rhetoric, which, in alienating the reader and in confusing the boundaries between *literal* and *literary* truth, makes mischief of the norms that ordinarily sustain fiction.[49]

[49] Sententiousness is far from limited to Barbey's fiction. It forms the bedrock of his *Pensées détachées* (ORC 2, 1229-67) just as it equally informs his *Disjecta membra*, the *Mémoranda* (ORC 2, 737-1125) and, of course, his monument to self-opinion, *Les œuvres et les hommes*. A full-scale examination of this subject, beyond the fictional corpus, is awaited with interest.

* * *

In a wish to synthesise this study of Barbey's rhetoric, some degree of apology is called for. To be sure, Barbey's style is a subject worthy of an entire thesis, given not only the uniqueness of his way of writing but furthermore the breadth of the subject, rhetoric, itself. Nonetheless, within the parameters of lexis--taxis--meta-taxis, it is hoped that the examples chosen have indicated clearly what I consider to be the most remarkable features of his discourse. Secondly, it is worth underlining the point that it is in no way the aim of this work to mock or belittle Barbey's prose; the foregoing comments, if on occasion inevitably dry, hopefully avoid gratuitous lampoon. Rather than do that, the earlier remarks aim to make clear that Barbey's penmanship, superficially disparate and by turns difficult to digest, does in fact respond to the greater demands of an organic unity which underpins his writing, a unity that Berthier hints at in the following metaphor:

> [...] le langage aurevillien naît du corps, il en garde le modelé, le muscle et la chaleur; c'est un corps lui-même.[50]

Of course, complimenting Barbey's style may, to some, smack of the most untenable critical casuistry. Northrop Frye, for one, is unequivocal in his belief that verbal opacity cannot make for good literature:

> [...] prose by itself is a transparent medium: it is at its purest [...] when it is least obtrusive and presents its subject-matter like plate glass in a shop window.[51]

---

[50] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 239.
[51] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 265.

Yet this contention ignores the fact that words, like windows, are a two-way process, looking out *and* reflecting back:

> Le signe est une fracture qui ne s'ouvre jamais que sur le visage d'un autre signe.[52]

In this context-- appreciably more tenable than Frye's 'classical' view--, prose which takes itself as its own subject, examining its strengths and weaknesses, is no more opaque than fiction which-- impossibly-- takes itself as *read*. It is to such a modern context that Barbey d'Aurevilly must be returned, ironically enough for a writer so possessed of a nostalgic vision.

Moreover, these remarks have a pertinence all of their own for rhetoric itself which, we remember, in Classical and common usage, opposes seemingly antithetical meanings. Barbey's apparent lexical opacity is irreducible meaning in itself, negative and difficult perhaps, but meaning nonetheless, for it voices the unresolvable problem language faces in the articulation of the Fantastic. In this way, Barbey's prose-- the *use* of *mis-use*-- closes the circle of antinomy in rhetoric on which this discussion began, just as this dialectic harmony unites the conflicting poles of the Fantastic.

It is, then, appropriate to turn in the following chapter to the question of the dialectical structure of the Aurevillian text, suggested in this discussion by the figure of the oxymoron. As Michel Crouzet underlines, this one lexical unit embraces the entire textual framework:

---

[52] Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes* (Geneva: Skira, 1970), p. 66.

[l'oxymore], loin de rester figure de rhétorique devient figure narrative, elle soutient et organise les grandes masses de la narration, elle en contient dans sa ténébreuse clarté les principes et le sens, ou l'absence de sens définissable.[53]

[53] Crouzet, *Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'oxymore*, p.83.

5

Dialectics

[...] les informations béent sur des zones d'ombre brûlante [...] si bien qu'au delà des leçons d'une analyse thématique, seule une dialectique des contraires peut aider à comprendre le monde passionnel de [Barbey d'Aurevilly]. (B 3, 8).

Le mot diabolique ou divin, appliqué à l'intensité des jouissances, exprime la même chose, c'est-à-dire des sensations qui vont jusqu'au surnaturel. (ORC 2, 155).

In the foregoing chapter, we saw how Barbey *wrote* the Dandy into his text and what significance this aestheticisation holds for the Fantastic. Beyond the dimension of extravagance-- be it verbal or vestimentary-- the Dandy also poses the notion of contrast, conflict and counterpoint, as Albert Camus observes:

> Le dandy est par fonction un oppositionnel. Il ne se maintient que dans le défi [...]. [il] ne peut se poser qu'en s'opposant.[1]

In so saying, Camus reminds us of the innumerable hostilities that characterised Barbey's career as a journalist. His antipathy for Zola and the Naturalist school, 'C'est un spéculateur en cochonneries' (CG IX, 198), and his memorable altercations with Hugo, 'cette colossale Saloperie des *Misérables*' (CG VI, 203) dramatically point out the adversarial position adopted by Barbey the *man* throughout his life: anti-Orleanist, anti-feminist, anti-materialist, anti-modernist, anti-

[1] Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 72.

Socialist and so on. Rarely indeed has a literary figure so exclusively appropriated for himself the reputation of negation and confrontation: 'Je n'écris jamais qu'*inflammatoirement*' (CG IV, 196).

Remembering, as we saw in Chapter Four, that the Dandy is *text* as well as historical figure, Camus' remarks equally remind us of Barbey's *literary* production. Indeed, at the risk of worrying Proust's sacred cow, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, the greater part of Barbey's fictional work, as with his life, demonstrates a palpable love of contradiction and antithesis. Consider, by way of exemplary motif, the supposedly noble Duchesse d'Arcos de Sierra-Leone in *Vengeance*, aristocrat and yet whore to the Parisian masses. Similar patterns of discord in discourse, theme and structure pervade Barbey's texts from first to last:

> [...] le monde de Barbey se nourrit de contrastes violents. (B 3, 65).

Taking Berthier's remark as the cue for this discussion, this chapter will examine how the Aurevillian text develops an aesthetic of *confrontation* and to what extent such a framework is germane to and generative of Fantastic discourse. To begin, however, confrontation itself must first be defined.

* * *

Barbey's debt to Balzac is well charted (B 5, 81-119), his familiarity with *La Comédie humaine* far from superficial.[2] While many of the latter's texts offer interesting parallels with Barbey's œuvre, it is perhaps *Sarrasine* which proves most illuminating in terms of the writing of antithesis. Commenting on the unsettling juxtaposition of the sombre gardens with the dazzling gaiety of the ball, Balzac's narrator observes,

> Ma folle imagination, autant que mes yeux, contemplait tour à tour et la fête, arrivée à son plus haut degré de splendeur, et le sombre tableau des jardins. Je ne sais combien de temps je méditai sur ces deux côtés de la médaille humaine[...].[3]

Beyond the superficial echo of the medallion which prompts the narrative in *Prêtre*, in so far as they set in motion the principle of dichotomy, these lines remind us, albeit loosely, of the 'contrastes violents' at the heart of Barbey's fiction: good/evil, innocence/guilt, divine/diabolic etc. Their relevance is however fully seized when we consider what Balzac does with this medallion structure. Having posited a world sharply delineated by contrasting differences, here suggested in the motif of the 'médaille' with its two sides, Balzac confounds his initial premise in the story of Sarrasine, revealed to be neither man nor woman but somewhere in between, that is, a *third* side to the coin:

> La médaille est emblème de l'incommunicabilité des côtés: comme la barre paradigmatique de l'Antithèse, le métal ne peut en être traversé: il le sera pourtant, l'Antithèse sera transgressée.[4]

---

[2] As mentioned earlier, in addition to previous readings, at the time of composing *Les pensées de Balzac* (1850-51) Barbey seems to have re-read *La Comédie humaine* in its entirety.

[3] Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine*, VI, 1050.

[4] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 55.

Balzac's transgression of antitheses calls immediately to mind Barbey's own ambiguous handling of the principle of opposites; aside from numerous instances of a third sex, which of course constitute a direct link with *Sarrasine*, Barbey's texts are equally replete with thematic in-betweens: good and *yet* evil (Sombreval), innocent and *yet* guilty (Lasthénie), divine and *yet* diabolic (Alberte). As such he, like Balzac, works on the interrogation of antitheses: confrontation is subsumed into a more significant, more challenging dialectical enquiry.

How then is a dialectical structure of relevance to the Fantastic? As philosophical discourse dialectics proceeds from an opening proposition or question through the interrogation of antitheses towards a coherent, concluding synthesis:

> «Dialectique» signifie, dès l'origine grecque et jusqu'à nos jours, l'opposition à l'intérieur du discours. Opposition en forme de contradiction mouvementée quand s'affrontent les thèses adverses, dans le va-et-vient dialogal de toute pensée qui se cherche.[5]

This procedure of human understanding, as Hegel formulates it, implies, beyond the process of unceasing questioning, the rejection of fixed, unimpeachable notions, as his canonical definition makes plain:

> Le moment dialectique est la propre auto-suppression des déterminations finies [...].[6]

These concepts, wherein Barthes' transgression of the antithesis finds a pertinent echo, must, at first sight, appear somewhat esoteric. Yet,

---

[5] Claude Bruaire, *La Dialectique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), p. 123.

[6] Georg Hegel, *Encyclopédie des sciences philosophiques*, trans by B. Bourgeois, 2 vols (Paris: Vrin, 1979), I, § 81.

within the terms of Barbey's handling of the Fantastic, they are of a precise and unmistakable purport, for it is exactly in the rejection of fixed notions that Barbey's aesthetic of confrontation finds its true, *literary* meaning.

The notion that Barbey confronts-- and denies-- is the very notion of *difference* itself. We remember from Chapter Two that language is founded on the principle of difference: 'bat', for example, only means 'bat' by virtue of the distinction it establishes linguistically with the rest of language, 'cat', 'coat', 'curry', 'crooner' and so on. Discourse, then, which questions accepted distinctions inevitably saps its power to signify: words become indistinct, literally *indifferent*, as do the meanings they carry. What indeed are we to make of human sexuality on reading Balzac's *Sarrasine*? Similarly, in Barbey's case, the dismantling of difference tends to express a void or absence, a dimension which is ineffable and in which the Fantastic, as ineffability itself, resides: 'l'absence de différence égale l'inexistence'.[7] As Barbey points out in the second title quotation, once difference is denied in language, logical, Cartesian thought falters; in this crisis, fissures in empirical understanding are suggested through which the Supernatural may be perceived.

To synthesise this preamble let us turn once again to Camus, writing here on Chamfort although his comments equally fit Barbey:

> Pour qui [...] s'est placé tout entier dans le refus, ni le langage ni l'art n'ont plus leur expression.[8]

---

[7] Tzvetan Todorov, *La notion de littérature* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 107.
[8] Chamfort, *Maximes et pensées. Caractères et anecdotes*, ed. by Albert Camus (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1965), p. 13.

While Camus' motives for so saying are understandable-- humanist positivism-- his grasp of the workings of art and language is perhaps rather over-simplified: Barbey's fiction is undeniably the writing of denial, rejecting even the very idea of difference itself. Yet it is this very refusal which, in abolishing the conventions upon which words and meaning depend, voices that which would otherwise remain voiceless-- the Fantastic. In this way, Camus' belief, 'L'art est le contraire du silence'[9], shows itself to be flawed: art, whatever else it may be, is, as the Fantastic proves, in one sense the very voice of silence itself.

With this in mind, following Bornecque's cue in the opening title quotation, it is the intention of this chapter to pursue a dialectical enquiry of *difference* in Barbey's œuvre. Far from seeing his love of contradiction in a negative light, it is hoped to demonstrate how he puts negation to positive use, deconstructing the conventions of language and understanding in order to offer a vision of a world normally beyond our grasp:

> Dans l'ordre des créations de l'esprit comme dans les créations de la Nature, il y a des créations intermédiaires entre les créations contrastantes. Le monde ne se rompt pas en *deux*, mais se relie toujours en *trois*. (CG III, 196).

This discussion will, in the first instance, foreground the dialectical feud on the level of discourse, analysing how the *oxymoron*, as supreme linguistic scandal, denies and reformulates accepted antitheses in language. Then the text will be looked at from a thematic perspective, giving consideration to Barbey's refusal to subscribe to conventional moral and philosophical dichotomies--

---

[9] Chamfort, *Maximes*, p. 13.

good/evil, innocence/guilt, love/death and so on. Finally, in terms of structure, attention will be paid to the numerous ways in which the Aurevillian text questions and then redefines the counterpoint of *revelation* and *dissimulation*.

* * *

We remember from the preceding chapter how the oxymoron, semantic 'impostor', contributes to the artificiality of Barbey's discourse and in what ways such tropes sustain the Fantastic. In the present discussion, this subject is pursued from a different perspective, namely, how the oxymoron abolishes traditional concepts of antithesis, provoking a crisis of difference. It does this by invoking difference-based understanding precisely in order to revoke conventional differences, bringing together elements from otherwise mutually exclusive semantic fields.

According to Bernard Dupriez, the function of the oxymoron can be defined as follows:

> Rapprocher deux termes dont les significations *paraissent* se contredire.[10]

To justify his claim that the contradiction in this figure is only *apparent* he cites Nerval's 'soleil noir de la Mélancolie' (*El Desdichado*), pointing out, legitimately, that the poet's 'sun' is purely figurative. In such circumstances the contradiction is undeniably

10 Bernard Dupriez, *Gradus: Les procédés littéraires* (Paris: Union générale d'Editions, 1984), p. 31.

simply a question of appearances. This much cannot be said for *all* oxymorons however. Where a figurative context is not supplied, the contradiction becomes incontrovertible, in which circumstances the following definition is entirely justified:

> L'oxymore [...] est le plus hardi des tropes; elle consiste à associer des termes incompatibles [...].[11]

It is possible, then, for the oxymoron to unite, paradoxically, elements which are otherwise mutually exclusive. And, which is why Reboul dubs it 'le plus hardi des tropes', the re-alignment it achieves is particularly testing of interpretation. Consider this assessment of Calixte's charms from *Prêtre*: 'ce visage d'une *beauté effrayante*' (My italics). What exactly are we to make of this? At the simplest possible level, we know that this observation has *something* to do with beauty. Beyond such vagaries, it is however very dificult to read the remark with precision. All that can be said, in fact, is that the charm of Calixte's face falls somewhere *in between* beauty and horror, a quality for which there is no single word. Far from a game of appearances then, the true oxymoron is indeed an apparently uncrackable linguistic nut:

> [...] l'oxymore est irréductible [...] il est l'irréductibilité même.[12]

Uncrackable, that is, save for one vital 'flaw'. The one thing that can be said with certainty in relation to the oxymoron is that its constitutive elements, opposed in isolation, are, in context, worked into some form of harmony. Given that language relies on difference to make itself understood and remembering how the Fantastic preys

---

[11] Reboul, *La Rhétorique*, p. 50.
[12] Crouzet, *Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'oxymore*, p. 91.

on semantic failure, the oxymoron is patently central to this discussion.

With which differences do Barbey's oxymorons wage war? At the heart of his aesthetic lies a profoundly ambiguous treatment of the conventional polarity by which *le Bien* and *le Mal* are normally defined. Barbey uses the oxymoron to challenge these concepts and reformulate them in terms of sympathy rather than antipathy. A very familiar pattern with students of his work is the congress between happiness and hell:

> 'le bonheur de tout un enfer!' (ORC 1, 6).
>
> 'le paradis terrestre dans un sentiment infernal'. (ORC 2, 372).

Corollary to this is the re-writing of feelings and their conventional associations:

> 'l'orageux bonheur'. (ORC 2, 170).
>
> 'si délicieusement et si horriblement heureux'. (ORC 2, 372).

By extension, moral codes are also scrambled:

> 'la pure assassine de son père'. (ORC 1, 880).
>
> 'innocemment vengeresse'. (ORC 1, 894).

This tendency, in so far as it questions the world of *values*, also sets loose from their moorings traditional suppositions as to what is aesthetically pleasing. Beauty is neither sweet nor tender, 'la beauté âpre [...] cette beauté sévère' (ORC 1, 877), just as ugliness refuses to repel, seen here in Jugan's terrible disfigurement, 'C'était magnifique et c'était affreux!' (ORC 1, 645). Barbey's figures are in fact frequently set in an impasse between attraction and repulsion, 'Elle était atroce

et charmante' (ORC 1, 877), a literary confirmation of the appeal of the unappealing that he makes plain in correspondence with Trebutien:

> *La Bague* ici a du succès. On trouve que c'est une horreur, mais l'horreur d'abord est toujours une jolie chose en soi [...].(CG I, 139).

In such circumstances, it is no surprise that the writing of love and death, the ultimate expressions of attraction and repulsion, should demonstrate a comparable abolition of boundaries and dividing lines. Commenting on Marmor de Karkoël's fascination for poisons, the narrator of *Dessous* remarks:

> Les uns disent: Si je voulais détruire! comme les autres: Si je voulais jouir! (ORC 2, 162).

To explain the antinomy he adds, 'C'est le même idéalisme enfantin!' (ORC 2, 162). Indeed, Marmor's 'palpitation de joie du meurtrier' (ORC 2, 163), announces a structure of sadism apparent throughout Barbey's work wherein passion is married to crime, 'voluptés criminelles' (ORC 2, 369), making love fatal, 'amour funeste' (ORC 2, 371), its true consummation to be found only in death: 'Ce qui donne la vie me cause la mort' (ORC 2, 374). As an ultimate expression of this disregard for normative polarities, Barbey even refuses to let men be men and women be women: 'ces femmes qu'on appelle les hommes' (ORC 1, 889).

Sustained by all of the above is the antinomy between revelation and dissimulation. In this context, lies, so often hidden and negative, are positive and manifest, 'Qu'elle me dictait un beau mensonge!' (ORC 1, 874). Deception, accordingly, becomes a delight:

> [...] les délices qu'il y a dans la trahison et dans l'adultère. (ORC 1, 16).

Falsehood fails to be fraudulent:

> Aussi pratiquait-elle le mensonge au point d'en faire une vérité. (ORC 2, 166).

Furthermore, that which is revealed in Barbey's texts rarely if ever conforms to expectations, producing a literary form of hide and seek where the idea of truth is set free from its sense-giving counterweight, falsehood:

> Il y a une effroyable mais enivrante félicité dans l'idée qu'on ment et qu'on trompe [...]. (ORC 2, 155).

In such terms both revelation and dissimulation lose their sharp contours and are subsumed into a much more problematic half-world of blurred perceptions.

Barbey's oxymorons are manifestly central to his creative energy, a fact to which critics pay tribute by imitating his own inimitable style: 'un écrivain diaboliquement religieux et religieusement diabolique'.[13], 'les femmes qu'il a peintes sont exécrables et sublimes'.[14] Rightly, they sense that Barbey's fictional universe is very much a no-man's-land of bewildered *signifiants* where taste, values, appetites and even human form cross over from their respective camps to meet and mingle in an indefinite and confusing arena of cross-attributions. This much being true, the oxymoron questions the very production of meaning, challenging

[13] Edouard Moriac, *Le Gaulois*, 7 November 1874.
[14] Bloy, *Un brelan d'excommuniés*, p. 259.

the differential foundation of language and offering up its own semantic sacrifice as principal meaning:

> Étrange discours que celui qui connote sa propre négation! (B 8, 52).

The oxymorons covered in this discussion point towards the broad thematic and structural categories wherein Barbey's dialectical combat is pursued. They suggest first Barbey's most arresting antithetical enquiry-- male/female polarity. Given that this raises the question of Desire, they also direct us not only to the problematics of attraction/repulsion but also to the supposed antithesis that traditionally separates Eros from Thanatos. As this in turn points to moral and aesthetic codes, the oxymoronic framework equally suggests the final thematic pairing to be commented upon: Bien/Mal. In terms of structure, given its irresistible centrality, this enquiry concludes with an analysis of the revelation/dissimulation pattern.

Before proceeding however, one final clarification is necessary. Although this trope is especially pertinent to the Fantastic, it would no doubt be incorrect to claim that *every* oxymoron is *a fortiori* 'Fantastic'. Nevertheless it does represent an exceptionally suitable device for all discourse which challenges realist-- that is, empirical and difference-based-- interpretations of experience. Beyond its popularity in the Fantastic,[15] it also finds favour with the Surrealists[16] and of course with poetry.

---

[15] The following is a sample of oxymorons to be found in Guy de Maupassant's *Le Horla*: 'présence invisible', 'des êtres invisibles bien que tangibles', 'une sorte de transparence opaque', 'un bûcher horrible et magnifique', 'ce corps d'esprit'.

[16] Cf. Éluard's 'La terre est bleue comme une orange'. Paul Éluard, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols (Paris: La Pléiade, 1968), I, p. 232.

* * *

To begin the thematic discussion, let us turn, then, to the interstitial world where Barbey re-writes traditional sexual polarity. As suggested above, Balzac's *Sarrasine* in many ways provides the model for Barbey's handling of the concept of antithesis, particularly so here in terms of his opposition to the principle of sexual difference.[17] This feature of his work has unsurprisingly attracted the attention of much critical enquiry. For Philippe Berthier, Barbey's sexual cross-currents are representative of the equivocal nature of human desire, 'les échanges variés entre deux visages d'Eros'[18], in which the attractiveness of a masculine woman or a feminine man suggests 'la part homosexuelle qui est au fond de tout amour'.[19] This reading (which is of course sustained by the fact of auto-eroticism) enables Berthier to propose by way of conclusion that 'Le sexe est insurrection contre toute possibilité de norme'.[20] A similar homosexual interpretation is also offered by Pierre Tranouez.[21]

From a somewhat less disinterested perspective, Pierre Schneider sees in Barbey's sexual cocktails the stamp of aristocratic decadence and the perversion inherent in a social order which the

---

[17] According to Emile Verhaeren, Barbey's aesthetic owes more to *Séraphita*: 'Barbey d'Aurevilly garde le *Lys dans la vallée, la Femme de trente ans, Béatrice, Madame de la Chanterie* et surtout *Séraphita-Séraphitus*'. Emile Verhaeren, *Impressions* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1927), pp. 186-87. Such distinctions are, of course, somewhat facile as both *Sarrasine* and *Séraphita* deal with the same question: the fluidity of sexual identity.

[18] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 173.

[19] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 181.

[20] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 186.

[21] 'Barbey, ôtant son sexe au Sphinx pour lui conserver sa fascination, ne faisait [...] que poser l'homme comme objet de désir et d'interdit pour l'homme'. Pierre Tranouez, (B 10, 110).

forces of History are soon to sweep away.[22] More recently, Barbey's rejection of sexual definition has provided the material for enquiry into the wider question of *ambivalence* within his work,[23] while, in Nichola Haxell's study, the hermaphrodite aesthetic is linked to Barbey's prose-poetry innovations.[24]

All of the above approaches offer pertinent readings of the subject, although it must be said that the Marxist view is a little narrow: Tiresias does not comprehensively, if at all, 'explain' the demise of the Classical world. While Berthier's interest in the abolition of norms obviously suggests the scope of this study, none of the preceding strategies places the transgression of sexual definition explicitly within the context of the Fantastic, which is precisely the aim of this discussion.

In divesting sexual identity of its traditional male/female polarity, Barbey abolishes one of the principal differences on which verbal discourse is based-- consider the centrality of gender in language. Abolishing also a fairly fundamental benchmark of human experience, Barbey opens up fissures in both conceptual and practical understanding, bringing forward a dimension beyond the remit of accepted definitions, a dimension 'sans nom'. It is true to say that Barbey's *non-literary* thoughts on sexual identity are often, confusingly, rather clear-cut:

> Pour notre compte, nous ne croyons nullement à l'égalité spirituelle de l'homme et de la femme, telle que le bas-bleuisme la suppose et la pose. Pour nous, il y a identiquement les mêmes différences de l'homme à la femme, dans son esprit que dans son corps. Or, s'ils sont différents, c'est évidemment pour faire des

22 Schneider, *Barbey d'Aurevilly l'extrême*, p. 1546.
23 Malcolm Scott, 'Sexual ambivalence and Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le Chevalier des Touches*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 1 (1983), 31-42.
24 Haxell, *Winged monsters*.

> choses différentes et différence implique hiérarchie. (OH V, XXI).

Private animosity (here directed principally towards George Sand) should not however de-rail literary analysis. For it is nonetheless also true, and more importantly so, that his fiction confounds this idea of sexual difference, as Marcelle Marini observes:

> Il n'y a point de véritable classification des personnages selon le sexe, ni même selon l'alternance phallique/châtré. [...] les indices de castration ou de puissance phallique, les signes que le texte donne pour marques de féminité ou de virilité, circulent de personnage en personnage.[25]

Turning therefore to his fiction, the rejection of traditional or normative gender demarcation is most strikingly felt when Barbey's men and women are considered in terms of pairs, that is, in the context of a sexual relationship. Alberte and Brassard in *Rideau* offer an arresting illustration of this point. Her hand, which instigates their union, possesses weighty, masculine virility:

> [...] la chair tassée de cette main, un peu grande, et forte comme celle d'un jeune garçon. (ORC 2, 33).

In addition to such explicit de-feminisation, it is also to be noted that it is Alberte who dictates the course of events-- she who seizes Brassard's hand, refusing to let go (ORC 2, 33) and she who enters his bedroom (ORC 2, 43-4). Not only, then, does Alberte assume the role of initiator, traditionally the male preserve, more importantly she robs her mate of the act of *penetration*: note the hysterical and, stereotypically speaking, female fear expressed by Brassard on the two occasions when Alberte enters his space:

---

[25] Marini, *Ricochets de lecture*, p. 16.

> Je vis bleu... mes oreilles tintèrent. Je dus devenir d'une pâleur affreuse. Je crus que j'allais m'évanouir... que j'allais me dissoudre dans l'indicible volupté causée par la chair tassée de cette main [...]. (ORC 2, 33).
>
> [...] l'espèce de coup au cœur que je ressentis et qui se répéta en palpitations insensées [...]. (ORC 2, 44).

This is not to say however that Alberte is fully re-defined in male terms; she remains sphinx-like throughout (ORC 2, 47), neither male nor female, her femininity truncated ('Albertine'-- 'Alberte') but not expunged.

A similar pattern is shared by her lover Brassard. Here, de-masculinisation is first suggested in the figure of the Dandy (ORC 2, 12), that is, in a manifestation of cosmetic beauty, which again connotes, perhaps somewhat stereotypically, female attributes. Brassard is only seventeen at the time of his acquaintance with Alberte (ORC 2, 44), an age where sexual identity is often fluid. Consequently it is of no surprise that he be described in the following terms:

> [...] un front bombé, sans aucune ride, blanc comme le bras d'une femme [...]. (ORC 2, 17).
>
> [...] Brassard *poitrinait* au feu, comme une belle femme, au bal, qui veut mettre sa gorge en valeur [...]. (ORC 2, 15).

This last observation, insisting on the femininity of his physique, set against the predominance of Alberte's man-like hand and the phallic hint conveyed in its penetration of *hidden* spaces (under the table), demonstrably scrambles accepted gender norms, bringing together opposite sexual characteristics in an undefinable androgynous half-world.

This much can equally be said for Ryno and Vellini in *Vieille*. It is certainly true that the sexual cross-currents in this work have not been overlooked[26]; obviously little is to be gained in reiterating information covered extensively elsewhere. As such, Ryno's dandyesque femininity (ORC 1, 253; 261-62) and Vellini's cigars (ORC 1, 277), moustaches (ORC 1, 473) and sailors' caps (ORC 1, 418) can be taken as read. What remains to be developed however and which is also more directly pertinent to the question of androgyny is the *negation* of sexuality we read in the figure of Vellini. Pre-pubertal boyishness is largely responsible for this:

> [...] la poitrine extrêmement plate de la señora, lui donnait fort un air de jeune garçon [...]. (ORC 1, 236).

Indeed, the possibility of crossing any sexually defining rubicon, social or physiological, is repeatedly stifled, whether in the pose of a 'jeune Dieu antique' (ORC 1, 318) or in the figure of an 'Icoglan' (ORC 1, 318), that is, a Turkish page-boy. Throughout, Vellini's sexuality is refused the definition of maturity, 'On eût dit les épaules bronzées d'une enfant qui n'est pas formée encore' (ORC 1, 272), and is reabsorbed into pre-pubertal *neutrality*: 'le buste svelte et sans sexe' (ORC 1, 278).

The writing of an inert sexual dimension suggests numerous readings. The fact that Vellini remains desirable in spite (or because) of this neutrality obviously points to penumbrous corners of sexual desire; equally, the paradox echoes Freud's belief in the latency of sexuality throughout childhood. What is important here, however, is the aesthetic value of this sexual inversion. By removing sexual

---

26 Berthier, *Imagination*, pp. 181-84.

polarity from the female sex, Barbey renders it *indifferent*, suppressing the categories which conventionally define it. This, allied to the de-masculinisation of Ryno, transforms the very idea of their sexual union into an androgynous impasse, incapable of procreation-- which is why Vellini's child fails to survive (ORC 1, 309). For the Fantastic, this impasse expresses the linguistic impossibility language confronts once it denies difference-based understanding: from this verbal invisibility the Supernatural draws strength.

The foregoing remarks do not aim to offer an all-inclusive reading of the place of the androgyne in Barbey's works; nor do they seek to refer his handling of the theme to what is an undeniably vast context.[27] Admittedly selective, this discussion nonetheless hopes to point towards a dimension of his work which is pre-eminently central, namely the re-writing of difference that the Fantastic demands. Indeed, if it is true that Barbey re-casts sexual polarity in terms of androgynous *a-sexuality*,[28] it is also the case that the abolition of gender boundaries extends to his writing as a whole, embracing and challenging difference in the broadest of senses. Note the loss of sharp focus in the evocation of colour, 'une nuance un peu hermaphrodite, entre le gris et le lilas' (ORC 1, 179), the marriage of poetry and prose, 'production *Hermaphrodite*' (CG III, 196) and even the rejection of topographical delineation seen in the island of

---

[27] For a discussion of the wider setting of this subject, see A. Busst, 'The Image of the androgyne in the nineteenth century', in *Romantic mythologies*, ed. by I. Fletcher (London: Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 1-95.

[28] Wanda Bannour's contention that Barbey 'ne franchit pas le seuil de l'ultime mystère qui abolirait l'inepte dualité du féminin et du masculin', referring, that is, to the androgyne, beggars belief; as we see above, Barbey *does* cross this threshold. Wanda Bannour, 'Ce gouffre de feu, la femme', *L'École des Lettres*, 7 (1991), 59-67 (p. 67).

Jersey, neither French nor English but 'cette île hermaphrodite' (ORC 1, 369). In this sense, as Berthier proposes, the androgyne informs Barbey's creative aesthetic in the widest of terms confronting difference *per se*:

> [l'androgyne] se glisse partout, jusqu'à devenir comme un tic de pensée et de langage. Tout ce qui reste indécis, entre deux affirmations, se trouve ainsi connoté [...].[29]

Barbey's interest in the androgyne and his re-casting of sexual definition ineluctably throws a somewhat confused light on the world of Desire. Vellini, we remember, pre-pubertal and tending towards the masculine but no less desirable for all that, proposes a *tropisme* beyond conventional ground rules of attraction: a counterpoint between positive and negative poles. This pattern recurs throughout Barbey's private and public writings:

> Car la beauté de la passion, c'est, en Art, souvent son horreur et sa frénésie. (OH XIII, 176).

As such, Barbey's fiction suggests the re-ordering of difference between attraction and repulsion, proposing a Janus-like coalition of the two:

> [...] l'œuvre passionnelle de Barbey [est] un Janus aussi attirant qu'angoissant. (B 3, 25).

How then does Barbey absorb these nominally antithetical tendencies into a unitary force? First, in the moral sphere, the concept of transgression is noticeably detached from negative polarity and re-written in terms of the sublime. Sombreval's feigned

---

[29] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 172.

penitence, a serious crime in the eyes of the Church, is seen by Néel as 'ce sublime horrible' (ORC 1, 1108), terms repeated word for word in *Vengeance* with reference to the Duchesse's 'sin' of prostitution (ORC 2, 254). If Jacques-Henry Bornecque sees such oxymoronic associations as something of a tired cliché[30], and Philippe Berthier, a rather heavy-handed borrowing from Balzac,[31] it is only perhaps because they answer a state of affairs so central to Barbey's creative imagination, namely a sense of the Infinite. We remember the fusion of diabolique/divin from the second title quotation, a marriage of negative and positive poles suggesting the Supernatural and expressed elsewhere by Barbey with remarkable clarity:

> C'étaient des yeux infernaux ou célestes, car l'homme n'a guères que ces mots-là qui cachent l'Infini. (ORC 1, 236).

The debate over originality is of scant importance; what matters is the meaning contained within the *transgression* of transgression. In Barbey's terms, the idea of wrongdoing is overtly expressed as a form of *jouissance*:

> [...] son bonheur furtif devenait plus ébranlant encore du double mouvement du crime et du mystère. (ORC 1, 42).

In this evidently Sadian context, incest, as the contravention of the most homely of precepts, offers the most tangible physical thrill:

> [...] cette histoire fut celle d'un amour et d'un bonheur tellement coupables que l'idée en épouvante...et charme... de ce charme troublant et dangereux qui fait presque coupable l'âme qui l'éprouve et semble la rendre complice d'un crime peut-être, qui sait? envieusement partagé... (ORC 2, 368).

---

30 *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Berthier and Bornecque, p. CVII.
31 Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 244.

In such terms, Barbey frees what is conventionally reprehensible (incest, murder, prostitution etc) from the moorings of negativity, scrambling the binary oppositions by which we normally make sense of such concepts. If certain dark truisms about human nature are to be detected in this uncoupled moral helix, the world they suggest and which conventional oppositions repress is a decidedly ill-defined one. Barbey knows this and is able to hint at a sense of the absolute in the *indifference* he cleverly defines.

What can be observed in the moral sphere is, logically, equally expressed in human terms. Again, notions of wrongdoing are redirected towards a positive pole; Hauteclaire, notwithstanding her crime, evokes a celestial purity:

> En descendant les marches de son escalier, ses jupes flottant en arrière sous les souffles d'un mouvement rapide, elle semblait descendre du ciel. (ORC 2, 124).

In this, the narrator underlines, the dialectic of right/wrong and hence attraction/repulsion loses all sense of clarity:

> Eh bien! vous me croirez si vous voulez, mon cher, la pureté de ce bonheur, souillé par un crime dont j'étais sûr, je ne l'ai pas vue, je ne dirai pas ternie, mais assombrie une seule minute dans un seul jour. Cette boue d'un crime lâche qui n'avait pas eu le courage d'être sanglant, je n'en ai pas une seule fois aperçu la tache sur l'azur de leur bonheur! C'est à terrasser, n'est-il pas vrai? tous les moralistes de la terre, qui ont inventé le bel axiome du vice puni et de la vertu récompensée! (ORC 2, 125).

An identical pattern is also at work in *Dîner*, in the figure of La Pudica, adulteress and yet angelic, 'la figure d'une des plus célestes madones de Raphaël' (ORC 2, 213), whore and yet virgin, 'cette Messaline-Vierge' (ORC 2, 214). Once again, human understanding

strains under the pressure of the paradoxical attributions this figure attracts:

> Elle fût sortie d'une orgie de bacchantes, comme l'Innocence de son premier péché. Jusque dans la femme vaincue, pâmée à demi morte, on retrouvait la vierge confuse, avec la grâce toujours fraîche de ses troubles et le charme auroral de ses rougeurs... Jamais je ne pourrai vous faire comprendre les raffinements que ces contrastes vous mettaient au coeur; le langage périrait à exprimer cela. (ORC 2, 211-12).

The reason why language is unfit for such a task is because La Pudica denies the basis of difference on which it relies; in marrying attraction and repulsion she displaces orthodox understanding in favour of an unnamed, unorthodox and verbally invisible dimension.

The foregoing remarks do, of course, beg a central question: if the re-ordering of moral wrongdoing can be accepted who, in the first instance, defines adultery, for example, as wrong? Consider the following judgement of Sombreval: 'le héros satanique par excellence' (B 8, 109). Sombreval does indeed attract typically ambivalent associations, 'sataniquement magnanime' (ORC 1, 1149), fusing positive and negative notions in the way discussed above. Yet, for the crisis of difference this entails to be valid, we clearly need to be precise about the nature of the misdeed in question: there is nothing *necessarily* repellent in the rejection of the Catholic Church.

Barbey resolves this potential difficulty by writing the dispolarity of attraction and repulsion explicitly into the narrative. Witness first the *fascination* exerted on the fictionalised audience by Rollon Langrune's narrative in *Prêtre*:

> J'emportais chaque matin l'histoire de Rollon sur ma pensée, ou plutôt j'emportais ma pensée, toute plongée en l'histoire de

> Rollon, comme le plongeur qui marcherait sous sa cloche de verre et qui la déplacerait avec lui. (ORC 1, 881).

Nevertheless, engaging though the narrative may be, it equally designates itself as a negative, almost destructive force, as seen here in the description of 'Mme de ...' whose reaction on hearing Rollon's account speaks for itself: 'son teint meurtri, ses cheveux alourdis, ses yeux battus' (ORC 1, 881). If the repulsion suggested here is *latent*, in other texts it is made perfectly plain. In *Dessous*, in counterpoint to the fascination noted in the circle of auditors, 'elles ne perdaient pas une syllabe de la voix qu'on entendait dans le salon' (ORC 2, 131), we also read the opposed polarity of repulsion: 'Empêche-le, maman [...] de nous dire ces atroces histoires qui font frémir' (ORC 2 , 133). Again, this time in *Histoire*, that which attracts,

> [...] tous curieux et épris de cette émeraude qui avait une histoire, ils la demandèrent pour la voir de plus près [...]. (ORC 2, 357).

--also repels:

> Mais Mme de Ferjol [...] ne la prit pas. Seulement ses yeux [...] tombèrent sur l'émeraude, et, comme frappée d'une balle, elle poussa un cri et tomba raide sans connaissance. (ORC 2, 357).

In this manner Barbey locates the structure of re-thought polarities within the discourse itself, obviating potential difficulties implied in moral judgements made by a reader outside the text.

Of course, when Barbey dramatises the act of narration, he simultaneously posits the reader-text relationship in which we participate; in other words, he extends the attraction/repulsion paradox beyond the fiction. While we may not necessarily respond to adultery (*Dîner*), apostasy (*Prêtre*) and prostitution (*Vengeance*) in

the same way as our fictional counterparts, it is difficult to be diffident about incest (*Léa*) and murder (*Bonheur*). Set against such unsavouriness, the very act of reading is, however, a form of fascination, where *lecteur* becomes *voyeur*:

> Narrateur et narrataire tirent leur jouissance l'un de l'autre [...]. Ce «ricochet» de la jouissance, c'est la transmission du fantasme par la représentation; c'est par là qu'elle nous captive.[32]

Barbey's reader then, like it or no, is equally prey to 'la suavité du mal' (OH III, 58) circulating within the text, a point reminding us of Baudelaire's celebrated 'hypocrite lecteur'. In this context, forces which appeal or appal can no longer be sustained in opposed isolation: paradoxically, it is as if they become one.

The re-casting of these terms in a way which refutes their accepted, antithetical grounding saps the notion of difference upon which language rests, producing a linguistic stalemate; we remember from above the verbally impenetrable nature of La Pudica. Yet, in proposing that which is beyond the reach of human locution, Barbey admirably defines the scope of the Fantastic.

In so far as Barbey plays on the appeal of transgression, he inevitably focuses attention on the very nature of attraction itself; in short, he speaks of Desire. Nowhere is this question dealt with more ambiguously than in his treatment of the erotic. Coventionally speaking, Eros, the sexual impulse for procreation, can be defined as a life-giving desire. In Barbey's works however, Eros is systematically

---

[32] Françoise Gaillard, 'La représentation comme mise en scène du voyeurisme', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 154 (1974), 267-82 (p. 280).

underwritten by the pathological, that is, its polarity is reversed towards a negative, destructive goal where creation is consumed in destruction. The debate which follows seeks to examine exactly how Barbey achieves this marriage of Eros and Thanatos, what Jacques Petit describes as:

> [...] la contradiction entre ce désir et le vertige de la destruction, entre la crainte et la fascination de la catastrophe.[33]

Let us begin with the question of sadism. Although Barbey himself roundly condemned the Marquis de Sade, 'l'immonde romancier de *Justine*' (OH XXI, 65), it is difficult to interpret his catalogue of sexual cruelty *outside* the Sadian context. Zola, for one, viewed the connection as irresistible: '[Barbey] est le seul qui puisse être comparé au marquis, logiquement'.[34] It is to Léon Bloy however that we must turn if the link with Sade is to be fully understood:

> Ce qu'on entend par sadisme est-il autre chose qu'*une famine enragée d'absolu*, transférée dans l'ordre passionnel et demandant aux pratiques de la cruauté le condiment des pratiques de la débauche?[35] (My italics).

According to Bloy, sadism represents an aspiration towards the Infinite mediated through the excess of passion. This belief is similarly shared by Flaubert:

> Je suis convaincu que les appétits matériels les plus furieux se formulent *insciemment* par des élans d'idéalisme, de même que les extravagances charnelles les plus immondes sont engendrées par le désir pur de l'impossible, l'aspiration éthérée de la souveraine joie.[36]

---

[33] Petit, *Essais de lectures*, p. 85.
[34] Emile Zola, *Documents littéraires* (Paris: Charpentier, 1917), pp. 396-97.
[35] Bloy, *Un brelan d'excommuniés*, p. 259.
[36] Flaubert, *Correspondance*, IV, 313-14.

These rather abstract comments beg the question: How? In Barbey's œuvre, sadism constitutes an unmistakable union of the erotic and the morbid, in other words, a marriage of creative and destructive forces. As such it strives to transcend the founding dialectic of existence (life/death), nullifying the most fundamental difference of all. In this striving, it therefore proposes the indivisibly infinite, that which is beyond all difference-based knowledge and which we conventionally call the Supernatural. It is consequently in this context that Barbey's fascination for sadism is best understood.

Of the numerous scenes of sadism in Barbey's œuvre certain episodes unerringly stand out. Presented as an attempt to revive the dead Calixte, Néel's branding of her feet is pregnant with sundry, conflicting associations:

> Néel, qui y cherchait la vie avec rage et qui voulait la faire jaillir, par la douleur, des profondeurs d'un engourdissement qui pouvait la recéler encore, brûlant avec un acharnement égaré les beaux pieds insensibles que le feu rongeait [...]. Bourreau par tendresse, il s'enivrait de son action mêlée d'horreur et de volonté. (ORC 1, 1205).

While Néel's 'acharnement' may be read innocently as a straightforward attempt to save Calixte, other, less superficial readings are also possible, especially so given the nature of the implement employed, 'cette barre' (ORC 1, 1205), and the phallic connotations it suggests. Moreover, the accent on 'volonté', that is to say, *desire*, reinforces the impression that Néel's act is somehow erotic, from which he derives an ambivalent ('horreur'/'volonté') but no less manifest pleasure. The suggestion that love seeks its consummation in death, making Néel an assassin, is furthermore explicitly avowed by the author, 'comme s'il avait commis un

meurtre' (ORC 1, 1205). This transgression is however immediately reabsorbed in the *sublimated* reprimand of castration:

> [...] il regardait ses mains avec haine: elles lui paraissaient dignes de la hache. (ORC 1, 1205-6).

This episode, which dramatically questions the relationship between Eros and Thanatos, is repeated in almost identical terms in *Rideau*. Here again, the dead body is *penetrated*, this time with a knife (ORC 2, 52). On this occasion, however, the erotic impulse is made still more tangible in the form of oral contact, 'Ni baisers, ni succions, ni morsures ne purent galvaniser ce cadavre raidi' (ORC 2, 52), and the sublimated suggestion of post-coital loss of arousal: 'Ma colonne vertébrale se fondit en une fange glacée' (ORC 2, 52).

Perhaps the most arresting episode of sexual sadism-- where Barbey's debt to the Marquis is unmistakable-- is to be found in the focal scene of *Cachet*, repeated and embellished in the later *Dîner*.[37] The act in question is presented as follows:

> Il prit sur la table à écrire la cire argent et azur et un cachet. [...]
> Il présenta à la flamme de la bougie la cire odorante, qui se fondit toute bouillonnante, et dont il fit tomber les gouttes étincelantes là où l'amour avait épuisé tout ce qu'il y avait de nectar et de parfums.
> La victime poussa un cri d'agonie et se souleva pour retomber. Dorsay, intrépide et la main assurée, imprima sur la cire bleue et pailletée qui s'enfonçait dans les chairs brûlées le charmant cachet à la devise d'amour! (ORC 1, 19-20).

Dorsay's 'cachetage' is patently an act of possession, a point he himself makes plain: 'pour que tu ne sois jamais à d'autres' (ORC 1, 19). If we accept that possession unavoidably returns us to the

---

[37] According to Robert-Louis Doyon, Barbey's infamous 'cachetage' borrows from Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* where Dolmancé perpetrates the same act. Robert-Louis Doyon, *Exégèse: Les Diaboliques* (Paris: La Connaissance, 1959), p. 14.

question of Desire, then Dorsay's act (and that of Ydow in *Dîner*, ORC 2, 226) unfalteringly designates itself as pathologically erotic, at which point creative and destructive impulses coalesce.[38]

Sadistic acts of possession often assume the guise of vampirism in Barbey's fiction. It is no doubt true, as Berthier indicates, that this particular distillation of love and death is principally a matter of *suggestion*: '[le vampirisme] s'impose-- en filigrane, bien sûr, mais sigulièrement présent'.[39] Consequently, the following may be read as metaphor: 'cet homme-fléau qui avait passé dans sa vie et celle de sa fille comme un vampire' (ORC 2, 361). Nevertheless, on occasion, the vampire's kiss is palpably real. The culmination of Réginald's desire for his 'sister', Léa, augmented by the appeal of transgression (incest), is a single kiss which precipitates her death: 'il avait les lèvres sanglantes' (ORC 1, 24). More dramatic still is the vampirism at work in *Vieille*. When Ryno wakes from his fever following the duel, he sees Vellini watching him and comments on her gaze, 'ces yeux vampires qui vous suçaient le cœur en vous regardant' (ORC 1, 296). Admittedly, at first glance, the reference is metaphoric; when, on the other hand, we learn that Vellini drank Ryno's blood during his sleep (ORC 1, 299), the context changes. In the light of such knowledge, Vellini's kiss is truly that of the vampire, with an important added twist; the kiss is one of resurrection and not death, making Berthier's reading somewhat misjudged:

---

[38] The 'cachetage' in *Dîner* is in fact given an extra erotic twist when Mesnilgrand stabs Ydow in the back at the very moment he is 'sealing' La Pudica (ORC 2, 226). The homosexual associations suggested here in this act of penetration complicate the erotic impulses still further, proposing an image of bewilderingly dense sexual confusion.

[39] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 141.

> Vellini a sucé la blessure de Ryno, et elle boira lentement sa vie jusqu'à la dernière goutte.[40]

Vellini's act offers a rather dense collocation of the supposed antithetical forces, Eros and Thanatos: at once erotic and destructive, the kiss is also life-giving-- a vampire version of Sleeping Beauty--, a creative force leaving the dialectics of life and death in disarray.

These remarks are equally pertinent with regard to the presence of necrophilia in Barbey's works, to which of course vampirism is intimately linked. Once again, this extreme act of sexual possession is often expressed metaphorically:

> On eût dit une blanche morte dans un suaire de pourpre. Réginald la couvait de son regard; c'était posséder une femme que de la regarder ainsi? (ORC 1, 40-41).

In other texts this impulse is insistently physical, as is the case when Néel projects his desire on to the corpse of Calixte:

> Sombreval labourait convulsivement de son front, de ses lèvres, de son visage tout entier, le cadavre qu'il tenait et levait dans ses bras. [...]
> Et Néel, qui souffrait aussi de la mort de Calixte, était comme jaloux de cette douleur qui se repaissait de ce cadavre, dont il ne pouvait pas demander la moitié. Il n'osait troubler ce père en ces caresses suprêmes, en ces impartageables baisers que seul au monde il avait le droit de donner au corps virginal de Calixte!
> Lui aussi, Néel, un désir le mordait au cœur: c'était d'aller soulever la tête de Calixte morte [...] mais il restait avec la morsure de son désir [...]. (ORC 1, 1217).

Néel is demonstrably jealous of Sombreval's physical contact, all the more so as it suggests a violation of Calixte's virginity. This fact unerringly lends an erotic dimension to the scene, where the suggestion of necrophilia is given further resonance in the hint of incest: Sombreval's kisses are 'impartageables' not because Néel is

---

[40] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 142.

excluded but because they represent an almost inconceivable transgression.

This rather dense admixture of erotic and morbid forces is given still further twists in the exhumation scene at the close of *Histoire*. In the first instance, Mme de Ferjol's desire to penetrate the worm-eaten corpse, 'Elle enviait le sort de ces vers... Elle aurait voulu être un de ces vers' (ORC 2, 363), expresses an erotic fascination with death immediately reminiscent of Sade's *Juliette*:

> Ah! comme j'étais doucement remuée en me disant; dans trois jours ce beau corps sera la proie des vers, et je serai la cause de cette destruction! Élan divin de la luxure![41]

In the second instance, if only metaphorically, Mme de Ferjol 'absorbs' Riculf's body, reversing the act of penetration: 'Elle l'avait dans le dos, ce soleil, et sa grande ombre à elle tombait dans la fosse' (ORC 2, 363). Written in such terms, she clearly seeks an all-consuming congress with Riculf's corpse, a union of erotic annihilation:

> Elle s'en approcha jusqu'au bord et regarda dedans avec ces yeux que la haine a comme l'amour, --ces yeux qui dévorent tout [...]. (ORC 2, 363).

The question of necrophilia brings us finally to the broader theme of what Berthier describes as 'des proies morbides'.[42] The erotic appeal of illness and physical decline, where Thanatos is felt in fermentation, appears as a characteristic trait in all Barbey's writings. What Huysmans observes in the fictional output,

---

[41] Sade, *Œuvres complètes*, 11 vols (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966), IX, p. 452.
[42] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 134.

> [...] ces faisandages, ces taches morbides, ces épidermes talés et ce goût blet [...].[43]

--is also to be seen in the journals: 'languissante, pâle, en vêtements blancs, très souhaitable, ma foi!' (ORC 2, 740). Nonetheless, certain critics seek to deny the erotic import of Barbey's sallow, moribund females. Jean de la Varende is categoric:

> Quand Barbey s'émerveille d'anémies féminines, c'est qu'il pense à l'âme, dont il distingue alors mieux les formes, sous une chair diminuée et comme translucide.
> Ni vice ni platonisme![44]

While there is of course some truth in the spirit/flesh dialectic, it is no doubt rather prim to deny the erotic dimension; moreover, in censuring what he calls 'vice', he ironically admits its presence. In a somewhat more sophisticated argument, Pierre Tranouez nonetheless also refutes the sexual appeal of the figure he defines as 'l'Asthénique':

> [...] archétype féminin épisodique; défini par sa non-mixité, sa non-sensualité et sa dépendance. (B 10, 101).

If we consider Léa, Calixte and Lasthénie in the light of this judgement Tranouez' legislation is difficult to defend. First, it is hard to see how these central figures can be described as 'episodic'; more importantly, it is even less tenable to deny them their sexual appeal. As Berthier underlines, Léa,

> [...] impose irrémédiablement le visage et le corps de la femme malade, progressivement détruite, et d'autant plus appétissante qu'elle se décompose.[45]

---

[43] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *A rebours* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 193.
[44] Jean de la Varende, *Grands normands* (Rouen: Defontaine, 1939), p. 67.
[45] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 134.

Indeed, Réginald is irresistibly attracted *because* and not in spite of her physical decline:

> Jamais la beauté d'une femme, quelque resplendissante qu'elle fût, n'avait parlé un plus inspirant langage à son imagination que cette forme altérée et qui bientôt serait détruite. (ORC 1, 28).

Similarly, Néel is drawn to Calixte's 'beauté effrayante' precisely because of her 'pâleur sépulcrale' (ORC 1,897). Her charms increase in direct proportion to her sufferings, 'la beauté de Calixte se redoublait de tout ce qui la faisait souffrir' (ORC 1, 948), making Néel's desire all the more morbid:

> [...] elle avait ôté le long châle blanc dont elle enveloppait sa gracieuse et pudique langueur, et l'amoureux Néel put étreindre du regard cette taille longue et brisée de jeune fille malade, qui mêle aux désirs tous les frissons de la terreur. (ORC 1, 951).

Finally, Lasthénie, as her name suggests, commands the destructive fascination of Riculf by virtue of her languid physical infirmity, proposed first in the lifelessness of her features, 'tout en elle était de la lenteur de ces cils' (ORC 2, 278), and extended to the suggestion of a limp: 'elle avait l'air de boiter' (ORC 2, 278). Undeniably, Lasthénie's charm is that of the increasingly frail *victim*, 'Elle respirait, enfin, dans tout son être, cette faiblesse divine' (ORC 2, 278), making Riculf's erotic predations pathological in motivation.[46]

Drawing these remarks together, it is all too clear that sexual impulses in Barbey's texts, whatever their nature, define themselves systematically as negative and literally counter-productive, making

---

[46] In drawing attention to the sexual desirability of Barbey's pale, sickly females we should not overlook the robust, Amazon types, such as Vellini, erotic forces in their own right. The attraction they exert is of course a question of submission, which in turn suggests masochism, itself a form of erotic destruction. For a fuller discussion, see Pierre Tranouez, *L'Asthénique, l'Amazone et l'Androgyne* (B 10) and Jacques Petit, *La femme dominatrice* (B 8).

love a question of death. Uniting such antithetical concepts doubtlessly appears, in human terms, somewhat bleak; in the context of the Fantastic, however, which does not in any sense aim to console the reader, such loss of difference is crucial to the evocation of an indivisible, transcendent order.

The larger part of the foregoing discussion, inasmuch as it reveals a fascination for *transgression*, inevitably raises the question of Good and Evil. Barbey's interest in *le Mal* is without doubt central to his work and has prompted much critical investigation.[47] A commonplace of Aurevillian criticism (and which aims to explain Barbey's Catholicism) proposes that Evil constitutes a necessary dialectic proof of Good, in the same way that Satan only makes sense as a derivation of God and vice versa:

> On ne peut séparer Dieu et le Christ de leur mortel ennemi Satan. D'où il suit qu'un romancier catholique est tout naturellement amené à peindre la passion en révolte contre la divinité, sous les traits de la possession démoniaque.[48]

Oddly, however, given the unbreakable dialectical helix, critics rarely interest themselves in Barbey's handling of *le Bien*. The discussion which follows aims to redress this imbalance, underlining the bilateral focus of Barbey's attentions and demonstrating that far from promoting Evil-- for whatever reasons-- the texts in fact seek to

---

[47] Cf. Alain Toumayan, *La littérature et la hantise du Mal* and Peter Yarrow, *La pensée politique et religieuse de Barbey d'Aurevilly*.

[48] Eugène Grelé, *Barbey d'Aurevilly, sa vie et son œuvre*, 2 vols (Caen: Jouan, 1904), I, p. 119. The reciprocity of Good and Evil is also examined by Sartre in his essay on Baudelaire: 'La création délibérée du Mal, c'est-à-dire la faute, est acceptation et reconnaissance du Bien; elle lui rend hommage et, en se baptisant elle-même mauvaise, elle avoue qu'elle est relative et dérivée, que, sans le Bien, elle n'existerait pas'. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 83.

question the very validity of moral dichotomies, to go *beyond* a sense of Good and Bad :

> Pascal nous dit qu'au point de vue des faits, le Bien et le Mal sont une question de «latitude». En effet, tel acte humain s'appelle crime, ici, bonne action, là-bas, et réciproquement. Ainsi, en Europe, l'on chérit, généralement, ses vieux parents; en certaines tribus de l'Amérique, on leur persuade de monter sur un arbre; puis on secoue cet arbre. S'ils tombent, le devoir sacré de tout bon fils est, comme autrefois chez les Messéniens, de les assommer sur-le-champ à grands coups de tomahawk, pour leur épargner les soucis de la décrépitude. S'ils trouvent la force de se cramponner à quelque branche, c'est qu'alors ils sont encore bons à la chasse ou à la pêche, et alors on sursoit à leur immolation. Autre exemple: chez les peuples du Nord, on aime à boire le vin, flot rayonnant où dort le cher soleil. Notre religion nationale nous avertit même que «le bon vin réjouit le cœur». Chez le mahométan voisin, au sud, le fait est regardé comme un grave délit. [...] Les actes sont donc indifférents en tant que physiques; la conscience de chacun les fait, seule, bons ou mauvais. Le point mystérieux qui gît au fond de cet immense malentendu est cette nécessité native où se trouve l'Homme de se créer des distinctions et des scrupules, de s'interdire telle action plutôt que telle autre, selon que le vent de son pays lui aura soufflé celle-ci ou celle-là: l'on dirait, enfin, que l'Humanité tout entière a oublié et cherche à se rappeler, à tâtons, on ne sait quelle Loi perdue.[49]

The above remarks, made by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, propose that there is no empirical fixity to moral legislation, reminding us that the conventional antithesis Bien/Mal is in fact illusory precisely because these elements are *fluid* in status. In this sense, Villiers recalls Barbey's own ambiguous treatment of supposed moral polarity-- *Le Bonheur dans le crime*--, where notions of Good and Evil are consciously scrambled: 'Le mal, le bien, ne sont-ils donc que des notions interchangeables?' (B 3, 64).

What, then, is the purpose of Barbey's moral disorder? Simply put, bearing in mind the dialectical antagonism found throughout the texts, when Barbey denies morality its antipodean antipathies, he invalidates one of the principal differences on which human

[49] Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Contes cruels* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 45-46.

understanding is based. This in turn proposes a dimension beyond empirical knowledge, an indivisible, transcendent order in which the Supernatural may flourish. This, undoubtedly, is the 'Loi perdue' to which Villiers' moral latitude aspires and in which Barbey's own treatment of the question finds its most complete meaning:

> Tout se passe, de fait, comme s'il s'agissait de dire l'indicible, de trouver une issue pour une dimension ignorée, effacée, désormais «sans nom». (B 8, 51).

How then does Barbey re-position moral poles? Let us first examine the denial of absolute innocence (le Bien). Calixte, 'cette créature de lumière' (ORC 1, 936), Carmelite nun and devoted daughter, superficially appears to be the purest of Barbey's fictional creations: 'le personnage Aurevillien le plus éthéré'.[50] And yet she stimulates in Néel-- and perhaps in her father too-- the most unconventional of erotic impulses. Furthermore, the mortification she seeks and her appetite for suffering (ORC 1, 937) recall the symptoms of masochism, suggesting again depraved physical desire. For Barbey, of course, all human love is a negative, destructive force, a form of satanic *possession*:

> [...] le Démon [a] à son service des incarnations terribles, [...] l'amour est, de toutes, la plus redoutable! (ORC 2, 304).

It is for this reason that Barbey is unable to resist the temptation of suggesting that Calixte's love for Sombreval is somehow unwholesome (ORC 1, 1073) and why, as a consequence, the daughter is as guilty as the father (ORC 1, 937). Seen in this way, Calixte is not so pure as she first appears.

---

[50] Berthier, *Imagination*, p. 138.

Lasthénie, apparently more sinned against than sinning, nevertheless demonstrates similar characteristics. She too is the source and inspiration of dark erotic impulses. She too, with appalling resolve, craves the mortification of her own body (ORC 2, 347-48), inserting needles in her heart-- offering yet another sublimated image of devastating *penetration*. Although Lasthénie's feelings for Riculf are defined in terms of horror (ORC 2, 304), we know that in the Aurevillian lexis repulsion is often, paradoxically, a matter of attraction, a point Barbey makes explicit in his depiction of Lasthénie's emotions:

> Et l'horreur,-- l'espèce d'horreur que Lasthénie avait toujours montrée pour cet effrayant Sphinx en froc qui, pendant quarante jours, avait vécu impénétrable à côté d'elle, n'était pas une raison pour qu'elle ne l'aimât pas follement! C'était une raison, au contraire, pour qu'elle l'aimât avec frénésie! (ORC 2, 304-5).

In this way, then, Lasthénie, just like Calixte, is guilty of desire, however confused its manifestation, in which sense Barbey's vision of humanity is resolutely post-Eden, denying the very concept of innocence.

If, however, in Barbey's fiction there is no room for an absolute sense of Good it is also true that there is no such thing as an absolute sense of Evil. When we consider Hauteclaire and Serlon, *Bonheur*, it becomes clear just how far Barbey seeks to resist the conventional sovereign negativity of le Mal. Despite their crime the two lovers enjoy unbridled happiness:

> [...] immuablement heureux malgré leur crime, puissants, passionnés, absorbés en eux, passant aussi superbement dans la vie que dans ce jardin, semblables à deux de ces Anges d'autel qui s'enlèvent, unis dans l'ombre d'or de leurs quatre ailes! (ORC 2, 120).

The suggestion here, later made plain by Torty, is that the transgression of a criminal act (murder) provides some form of *jouissance* in which the lovers indulge:

> «Sans son crime, je comprendrais l'amour de Serlon.
> -- Et peut-être même avec son crime!-- dit le docteur. (ORC 2, 128).

Such indeed is the pattern which pervades Barbey's *Diaboliques* from first to last. Whether we consider the prostitution in *Vengeance*, Karkoël's mysterious part in the deaths of Mme de Stasseville and her daughter or Ravila's morbid *Plus Bel Amour*, transgression is a source of fascination throughout as the public acclaim which greets the gory conclusion to *Dîner* confirms:

> «Servez donc le café!-- dit, de sa voix de tête, le vieux M. de Mesnilgrand.-- S'il est, Mesnil, aussi fort que ton histoire, il sera bon.» (ORC 2, 228).

This being so, the traditionally negative and repellent characteristics of le Mal become increasingly unreliable and are, in fact, overtaken by a sense of attraction which, in turn, problematises the very validity of a fixed concept of Evil, as Berthier rightly suggested earlier.

If the movements away from positive and negative polarity scramble notions of right and wrong, it is furthermore worth remembering, as discussed in Chapter Three, that the diluted structure of Barbey's narrative style enhances still further the absence of fixed meanings. So it is that Sombreval's damnation at the conclusion to *Prêtre* (ORC 1, 1223) is in fact mitigated thanks to the mediation of peasant folklore, in which sense not even his crime can claim the sovereign status of irredeemable Evil. Barbey's interest in conventional moral dichotomies is not so much, as Bornecque

defines it, 'la lutte fulgurante du Mal apparent contre le Bien caché' (B 3, 30), but more a concerted investigation into the very credibility of these notions as *opposed* forces. Whether or not this sense of *doubt* is compatible with Barbey's avowed religious convictions--which it probably is not[51]-- is a question that should not delay us unduly. What is important is Barbey's tangible antagonism towards over-simplified moral distinctions. Refusing Good and Evil their supposed enmity enables Barbey to challenge difference-based human knowledge, and to re-order the visible, linguistically verifiable world in favour of an invisible, ineffable Supernatural order. In this, perhaps somewhat paradoxically and certainly a good deal circuitously, he rejoins the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church.

* * *

We have seen in discourse and thematics how Barbey confronts the validity of polarised thought and understanding, how in fact his fiction assails the notion of difference. To conclude this examination I propose to look at the *structure* of Barbey's texts and in particular the ambiguous interplay of revelation and dissimulation. By virtue of its verbal presence, a literary text is above all a form of communication, a message, a revelation.[52] However, as we saw in

---

[51] Barbey's moral relativity reminds us of Satan's heresy in *Paradise Lost* : 'The mind is its own place, and in it self/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n'. John Milton, *The Poetical Works*, ed. by Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 12.

[52] 'Le langage est un processus de communication d'un message'. Julia Kristeva, *Le langage, cet inconnu* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 13.

Chapter Three, this truism holds little appeal for the Aurevillian text which, as Pierre Gille defines it, wilfully clouds what it has to say:

> [...] qu'il s'agisse des circonstances de l'histoire ou des modalités de la narration, il n'est rien dans le récit aurevillien qui n'apparaisse commandé par une loi d'occultation. (B 8, 47).

It would of course be naïve to suggest that the literary message is, in normal circumstances, direct and free from all form of obfuscation. We remember, from the preceding chapter, the illusory nature of Frye's 'plate-glass' literary communication; Todorov's suggestion that literary language is above all a matter of 'obliquité' is undeniably more convincing.[53] For Barbey, however, the will to dissimulate is taken to such an exceptional degree that it constitutes one of the centres of gravity in his work, as Gille again reminds us, here borrowing the metaphor of the veil:

> Des personnages aux événements, de l'histoire proprement dite à la technique du récit, tous ces éléments d'un unique «discours» ont une caractéristique commune: ils sont fondés sur une dialectique du «voile». (B 8, 45).

As will become clear, in Barbey's fiction, telling (revelation) is more a matter of un-telling (dissimulation), making Jacques Petit's contention somewhat problematic:

> [...] le secret n'existe que pour être révélé et l'accumulation de mystères et de mensonges enchevêtrés a pour fonction de rendre, par contraste, le scandale plus violent. (B 8, 20).

As he is forced in part to concede,[54] the concealed dimension of Barbey's writing remains to the last word unrelieved. In this way,

---

[53] Todorov, *La notion de littérature*, p. 186.

[54] 'Certaines images «scandaleuses» ne révèlent rien d'ailleurs, elles manifestent un mystère'. (B 8, 22).

Barbey reverses the relative *openness* of literary texts, rendering the notion of telling problematic and clouding the difference it conventionally enjoys in opposition to un-telling. In this context, what we know about the fiction is displaced by a wider and infinitely less tangible investigation into what we do not know.

In what forms then does dissimulation manifest itself? Let us consider first the question of *lies*. The following remark made by the narrator of *Dessous* draws attention to the structure of deception on which Barbey's work greatly depends:

> Il y a une effroyable, mais enivrante félicité dans l'idée qu'on ment et qu'on trompe; dans la pensée qu'on *se* sait *seul soi-même*, et qu'on joue à la société une comédie dont elle est la dupe [...]. (ORC 2, 155).

More often than not, the literary intrigue itself stems from the tensions of duplicity. Alberte, by day the respectable 'bourgeoise', by night discards her marmoreal impenetrability (ORC 2, 48) in favour of the dissipations of passion. Hauteclaire, notwithstanding the murderous plot she instigates to usurp Mme de Savigny, remains to the last unmoved by her crime (ORC 2, 124). Jeanne le Hardouey, in the eyes of the world, wife to a Jacobin farmer, in secret conspires in the Royalist cause (ORC 1, 658). Throughout, in fact, from Réginald's occult desires in *Léa* to Riculf's unavowable violation of Lasthénie in *Histoire*, Barbey's texts are built upon a structure of deception, systematically questioning the value of appearances and exploiting the intrigue this suggests. Moreover, Barbey rigorously abstains from all attempts to resolve the flux of meaning set in motion by deception. Writing here on *Dessous*, Bornecque's judgement equally extends to Barbey's output as a whole:

> *Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist* [...] évoque une succession ou un engrenage de mystères [...] sans que nous puissions jamais connaître les rapports exacts des trois personnages dans l'amour, la lutte, l'attaque, la vengeance. De qui est l'enfant? Qui aimait surtout Marmor: la mère, ou la jeune fille? A-t-il empoisonné les deux? A-t-il empoisonné la mère pour la punir d'avoir lentement tué sa fille? S'est-elle empoisonnée de désespoir, à défaut de remords, après le départ de Marmor? Autant de questions sans réponses absolument sûres.[55]

In these circumstances, the text itself is something of a cheat since it only reveals that which it jealously hides, making the narrator himself an emblematic dissimulator:

> Je reprends donc,-- reprit le conteur, avec la simplicité de l'art suprême qui consiste surtout à se bien cacher... (ORC 2, 157).

The movement towards opacity suggested by cloak and dagger narrative-- a movement which can but blur the contours of communication and incommunication-- is furthermore enhanced, on a symbolic level, by the insistence on restriction and confinement we read in the texts.

In spatial terms, Barbey's fictional universe is composed of increasingly restrictive, cloistered units. Towns, if they are not cloaked in the cover of night (ORC 2, 173), are explicitly immured by the surrounding topography: 'des montagnes qui entourent et même étreignent cette singulière bourgade' (ORC 2, 267). If, as is the case with the Lande de Lessay in *Ensorcelée*, the text proposes the possibility of an expansion outwards, this potential is denied in the sense of enclosure suggested by the walls and partitions dividing the heath:

---

[55] *Les Diaboliques*, ed. by Berthier and Bornecque, p. XXXVII.

> Tout un lexique se compose pour marquer la barrière ontologique, par une cloison, une paroi hermétique renvoyant tragiquement l'intériorité à elle-même. Tel est le rôle des murs, des haies et de leurs «bouchons» de fagots [...]. (B 8, 49).

Within these restricted spaces reside still more restricted social units: redundant aristocrats (*Dessous*), childless dowagers (*Maîtresse*), ageing atheists (*Dîner*). In combination, they produce a stifling sense of confinement, 'Son salon asphyxiait comme une serre' (ORC 2, 168), which, in addition to the typically sedentary lifestyle of Barbey's characters, encloses all in introspective stagnation:

> [...] les petites villes dormantes sous la végétation presque immobile des intérêts journaliers et dans la moisissure de la vie sédentaire.[56]

Furthermore, in human terms, Barbey reinforces the sense of enclosure by systematically masking or veiling his characters, both physically and psychologically. A common motif here is the impenetrable brow, 'la pensée mystérieuse enfermée dans ce front' (ORC 2, 388) or the unbroken silence:

> Hélas! ce silence n'avait, toute leur vie, que trop existé entre ces deux femmes; mais alors il devint absolu. (ORC 2, 333).

Frequent also is the impeded narrative lens, distorting rather than disclosing the subject under study: 'Cette belle tête [...] aperçue à travers la vapeur qui s'élevait de la théière' (ORC 1, 206). In addition, Barbey's figures often wear a mask of scars: that of Jugan, 'ce masque rouge de sang extravasé' (ORC 1, 658), or that of Sélune, 'comme un large ruban rouge qui lui traversait sa face bronzée' (ORC 2, 205), both

---

[56] A. Bellesort, *La Revue hebdomadaire*, 16 May 1931.

establishing an aesthetic of concealment which Karkoël's real mask enshrines (ORC 2, 161).

There is undoubtedly in Barbey's efforts to *cover* human identity a literary pointer to ontological considerations of the Self and its problematic rapport with the Other: this is no doubt the point in Gille's 'barrière ontologique' mentioned above. In this discussion, however, the restriction of identity, in tandem with the scanty psychological analysis so maligned by some,[57] performs the same textual function as the aesthetic of deception; namely, a movement towards the scrambling of information.

Considering lies and confinement together, Barbey's will to communicate the *suppression* of communication is remarkable. There is indeed a suggestion that, as a logical conclusion, the text would disavow its claims outright; moreover, the degree zero that the restriction of space seems to covet would hint at the annihilation of the narrative altogether, beyond Space, beyond Time. Of course such esoteric hypotheses are literally and *literarily* impossible: what *is* achieved is a paradoxical reversal of the shown and the un-shown, a point which in turn calls into question the validity of established antitheses. This verbal prestidigitation is of direct consequence for the Fantastic whose very make-up is a play on ways of revealing that

[57] The flimsiness of Barbey's psychological portraits is indeed a much vexed question and is seen by many as a flaw: 'Le plus fâcheux, c'est que le surnaturel des histoires de M. d'Aurevilly est la suppression de toute psychologie'. Jules Lemaître, *Les Contemporains* (Paris: Lacère et Oudin, 1889), p. 54. Remarks such as this fail to consider that the Supernatural is the *negation* of empirically verifiable experience-- of which psychological analysis is the mainstay-- and as a consequence inevitably covets the suppression of such inquiry. Nonetheless, to do so and still remain within the realm of the *possible* is clearly a question of not a little skill, as Berthier proposes: 'L'absence de psychologie [...] n'est pas du tout une solution de facilité pour Barbey'. (B 9, 79).

which is not shown to empirical, deductive and above all difference-based human science.

* * *

> Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.
> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil.[58]

William Blake's belief that human existence is shaped by patterns of opposing forces and experiences defines Man's estate as it *is*. For Blake, logocentric understanding unerringly divides the world into a series of relations, where meaning is grasped, in a sense, by default: as mentioned earlier, 'cat' only means 'cat' by dint of the innumerable differences it establishes with the rest of language. While Man may depend on such differences, language is nevertheless a source of 'decline' as it breaks up the Infinite into finite parts, each knocking against the other. It is, moreover, a threat to a God-centred universe thanks to its ability to define existence in terms of relativity and not absolutes. This is why the Old Testament God attempts to thwart Man's ability to communicate:

> And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Genesis 12. 5-7).

---

[58] *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. by Mary Johnson and John Grant (New York, NY: Norton, 1979), p. 86.

The significance of these observations is far from abstract in the case of Barbey d'Aurevilly and the Fantastic. Barbey responds to post-lapsarian verbal 'chaos', as we have seen, by rounding on the accepted differences of human knowledge: Good/Evil, Attraction/Repulsion and so on. Although such a quest fails in ultimate terms, as Barbey must retain some sense of difference if he chooses to express himself in words, he nonetheless manages to attain a degree of *indifference*. In so doing, he actively re-positions our understanding of existence in terms of an obscure and undivided domain in which unnamed *correspondances* displace conventional experience; in this, the reader tentatively senses vistas of the Infinite--the home of the Supernatural.

Conclusion

The concept of *indifference* brings this study to an appropriate close, for it is in Barbey's re-ordering of binary patterns that the notion of the Fantastic reaches its clearest illustration. Bringing real and unreal together as one, this enigmatic branch of narrative fiction questions the most deep-seated of distinctions by which human understanding works, challenging the relationship between Man, language and the world. This thesis reflects that tension by examining how the Fantastic investigates the boundaries of verbal meaning.

In the first instance, we have seen how it tests fiction's capacity to create an illusion of reality. The arguments I provide *against* an orthodox form of realism, in the nineteenth-century sense of the word, is no doubt a subtle *critique*; given Prendergast's view that realism is a sort of 'collective *carte d'identité*',[1] I find it impossible to bracket Barbey as one of my fellows or as belonging to the mainstream identity of his own age. He is a case apart. For this reason, in Chapter Two, I argue in favour of a broader *vraisemblance*, in which the illusion of reality is sustained by more neutral means.

The second illusion which the Fantastic tests, that of the unreal, confronts the conventions of verbal meaning head on. If language maps out experience as a set of interconnected relationships, making the

[1] Prendergast, *Mimesis*, p. 217.

world, and Man's place in it, intelligible as a series of correlations, how does it voice the unreal, that which corresponds to nothing and which we all reject as non-existent? The solution offered by the Fantastic is an attempt to assassinate language itself, celebrating in its demise the destruction of empirical knowledge. We saw, in Chapter Three, how Barbey's narrative structure points in this direction, in its reluctance to define or confirm what it reports. This process is furthered in Barbey's rhetoric, discussed in Chapter Four, where the crucial balance between *signifier* and *signified* is upset, demoting the importance of meaning in favour of decorative self-indulgence. This vain self-interest I have shown to be detrimental to language's ability to correspond with real experience. Finally, I have pointed out, in Chapter Five, how Barbey's texts substitute the very foundation of meaning-- difference-- with an ambiguous and challenging world of *indifference*.

The evolution of my argument draws on several subjects that others have discussed *outside* the Fantastic context. Realism, narrative technique, prose-style and all-consuming ambiguity have all attracted the critic's attention in varying degrees; with a little less variety, perhaps, they have all been submitted to individual judgements. What has remained unstudied, however, is the relevance of these questions to the Fantastic. This thesis analyses that relationship and indicates its new significance.

Given the abstract nature implied in a discussion of the boundaries of meaning in literary discourse, I end this study by testing the efficiency of my arguments within a given text. To this end, Barbey's early *nouvelle, Léa* (1832), is in many ways a fitting paradigm of the genre. This is not to say, however, that each and every one of the patterns discussed above are to be found in even distribution in this short story; some elements of technique are, unsurprisingly, in

embryonic form, while still others have yet to be fully discovered. Such is the case for the ambiguities offered by the Norman patois, which are admittedly absent from *Léa*. Without doubt, the fullest appreciation of Barbey's Fantastic discourse is only to be enjoyed in the reading of all his Fantastic works. Even so, the pivotal point of the Fantastic, where real and unreal challenge and confront one another, is remarkably manifest in *Léa*, all the more so given the concentrated brevity of the text. Furthermore, in selecting this early work, I hope to redress a certain imbalance in Barbey studies where attention tends to concentrate on *Diaboliques*; no less indicative of his Fantastic aesthetic, *Léa* is often overlooked.

As defined in the opening chapter, *Léa* offers, first, an arresting example of the Fantastic moment. The event in question focuses on the kiss that Réginald gives to his 'adopted' sister, Léa, and which tragically provokes her death (ORC 1, 42). On one hand, there exists an obvious rational and physiological explanation for this occurrence. Léa suffers from a tumour, 'un commencement d'anévrisme' (ORC 1, 23) and is increasingly frail: 'Un cercle plus large et plus noir autour de ses yeux, une taille plus abandonnée, une démarche plus traînante' (ORC 1, 31). At the point before the kiss, Léa is ready to succumb to her inexorable physical decline: 'On eût dit une blanche morte' (ORC 1, 40). It is, therefore, not entirely surprising that the shock of Réginald's incestuous kiss should precipitate the rupture and haemorrhaging so graphically depicted by Barbey in the closing lines:

> Le sang du cœur avait inondé les poumons et monté dans la bouche de Léa, qui, yeux clos et tête pendante, le vomissait encore, quoiqu'elle ne fût plus qu'un cadavre. (ORC 1, 42).

The possibility of a rational opt-out is always tendered in Barbey's fiction: the 'ensorcelée' of *Ensorcelée*, we remember, refers just as much to the lame horse as it does to the bewitched Jeanne.

On the other hand, the scientifically verifiable explanation in *Léa* must compete with other, less rigid readings. Réginald's 'lèvres sanglantes' (ORC 1, 42) suggest that he has drunk Léa's blood, making the erotic attraction he harbours for his sister one of sadistic predation. His desire is thereby consummated in the destruction of the Other, with blood offering the supreme *jouissance*. In the lexicon of the Fantastic, this is defined as vampirism.

This supernatural reading conforms to the theme that Barbey's later fiction enthusiastically adopts. *Maîtresse* examines the question of vampirism through the figure of Vellini, and, in broader form, the subject of destructive erotic visitation (playing on the incubus/succubus myth) represents the central theme of at least *Ensorcelée*, *Diaboliques* and *Histoire*. In *Léa*, as in these texts, the matter remains, however, a question of possibility: at no stage does the fiction vote in favour of either reading, real or otherwise. The fact that Barbey's narrator moves 'sideways' at the conclusion to this *nouvelle*, positioning the narrative focus within the perceptions of Mme de Saint-Séverin and offering a sort of opt-out codicil, as discussed in Chapter Three, underlines this principle of declined authority: 'Elle s'était aperçue qu'il avait les lèvres sanglantes' (ORC 1, 42). In this sense, *Léa* represents an admirable illustration of the moment of doubt that the Fantastic requires.

It is possible to terminate our considerations here on the flux of the Fantastic moment. To limit ourselves to narrow moments of uncertainty is, however, a very arid and restrictive approach to adopt, turning the reading of a text into a pin-prick perception of isolated detail. As proposed in the central premise to this study, the Fantastic

may be read on a much broader basis, examining real and unreal in terms of the fiction as a whole. Indeed, given that doubt is itself an open-ended, undefined phenomenon, the Fantastic *should* be read as more than a matter of a moment. From the sporadic occurrence we therefore move to the text as a whole.

I have argued above that the Fantastic *text*, in the first instance, must convince us of its realist credentials. Certainly, the introductory perspective offered in *Léa*, 'Une voiture roulait sur la route de Neuilly' (ORC 1, 23), is a traditional realist exposition. The moving carriage perceived on the road to Neuilly provides an objective focus in which both Space and Time (implied in the movement) are clearly marked. These yardsticks are repeatedly indicated, first in the outward and return journeys between Italy and Paris (ORC 1, 25), and second in the reference to the time at which these journeys began and ended (ORC 1, 26). Within this verifiable framework, Barbey recounts the events leading to the death of Léa.

However, the chronotope presented in *Léa* is not made problematic by the exhausting and alienating promotion of aristocratic values that we see elsewhere. Although the fiction concerns itself exclusively with the aristocracy (Mme de Saint-Séverin and her family), the ideological baggage that obstructs the otherwise realist pretensions of Barbey's later works is not to be found in this text. Having said this, the ability to win our assent to the fiction is more comprehensively felt in the rather subtle play on *vraisemblance* that Barbey manages to engineer in *Léa*.

This is achieved first in the manipulation of spoken communication. The conversations which dominate the narrative,

between Réginald, Léa and Mme de Saint-Séverin, lend to the 'falsehoods' of penmanship the authenticity of the spoken word. While such a device in *Léa* has yet to discover the extra resonance of patois and its self-professing verities, the organic integrity of conversation, with all its pauses and variations in rhythm, does much to suggest that the text declines the mediations of the pen: 'Leur conversation était insignifiante; entrecoupée de silences fréquents et longs' (ORC 1, 40).

In many ways, *Léa* points to the potential offered by conversation as narrative form. Certainly, in later works, the *ricochet* aesthetic and its importance for *vraisemblance* are more fully developed. Here, the fascination with refracted forms of communication remains in fledgling form. Nevertheless, the perhaps somewhat oratorical apostrophising of the reader, 'O vous, femme qui lirez ceci' (ORC 1, 38), posing questions or soliciting understanding, offers an echo of the concern for the reception of his text that will later characterise Barbey's fiction. At almost every turn, in fact, Barbey attempts to 'share' the text with the reader, employing the first-person plural narrative perspective (ORC 1, 30), or offering modest 'Don't knows' as regards certain obscurities in the narrative:

> Était-ce un instinct de mourant ou une admiration secrète qui lui faisait demander à sa mère de venir là chaque soir? On l'ignore. (ORC 1, 38).

Such preciosity can, of course, be read in different ways, as we shall later see. Nonetheless, the inadequacies of the narrator, allied to the patterns of text-reader dialogue, prefigure the salon récit in which the narrative detaches itself from the sovereignty of one, single narrator to assume the guise of autonomy. Indeed, the switch in focus on which the *nouvelle* concludes, 'Elle s'était aperçue', gestures in precisely this direction. As

yet, however, Barbey's narrative arabesques remain very much in gestation.

Such subtle hints towards the illusion of a sort of textual independence are, in *Léa*, greatly served by the physiological explanation of Léa's death. In tandem, they assure the reader that the sequence of events depicted is one which conforms to the norms of reality and which can be defended as a set of objective facts. This much said, in another sense, which is perhaps the strength of *Léa*, the text is also remarkably careless about its own credibility.

Moving across the dynamic flux of the Fantastic to ways in which the fiction problematises the validity of what it recounts, Barbey's early short story is unarguably coloured by the excesses of rhetorical discourse. The credibility of the narrator himself is repeatedly threatened by the mannered, self-conscious position he assumes. 'Que dis-je!' (ORC 1, 36), expostulates Barbey's narrator, drawing attention to himself and reminding us of the self-indulgent oratorical interjections with which he is particularly free: 'Dites, n'est-ce pas là de la douleur' (ORC 1, 36). Although such discourse is innately associated with Barbey's aesthetic of conversation, in a positive sense, in other ways it is difficult to ascribe much credibility to these rhetorical inflations which pepper the text: 'Oh! c'était un jeu cruel' (ORC 1, 31), 'Grâce! grâce!' (ORC 1, 36), 'Ah! ne dites point que la nature n'est pas cruelle' (ORC 1, 39).

Characteristic of such rhetorical self-indulgence is the rather feigned modesty implied in the recurring interrogative structures:

> Qui ne sait pas que tous nos amours sont de la démence? que tous nous laissent à la bouche la cuisante absinthe de la duperie? et l'expérience ne l'avait-elle pas appris à Réginald? (ORC 1, 31).

Questions such as these, while again pointing to the reassurances of conversation, also combine to belittle the viability of the narrative. Questions unavoidably interrogate meaning; the fact that *Léa* is freely indulgent in such forms (the narrator poses approximately twenty-five questions to his reader) confuses the sense of affirmation that we might normally expect from a text. Given, moreover, that these appeals to exterior knowledge are in fact much more a rhetorical posturing on the part of the narrator, musing on his finesse, it is even less likely that his enquiry should be taken seriously:

> D'ailleurs y avait-t-il en elle des facultés aimantes? Saurait-elle jamais ce que c'est que l'amour? Ce que ce mot-là signifie, alors que tant de femmes restent hébétées devant ce sentiment qu'elles font naître? (ORC 1, 32).

In a sense, therefore, Barbey's narrative voice in *Léa* is dispersed, lost in a crisis of credibility as we saw in Chapter Three. Although the dilution of perspective offered in the multiple récit is not present in *Léa*, a hint in this direction is provided in the 'opt-out' clause on which the story concludes (ORC 1, 42). Displacing the closing utterance by making it the property of Mme de Saint-Séverin, Barbey injects a note of ambiguity into his text. We have seen how this defocalisation is, in one sense, an artful ruse serving the interests of *vraisemblance*; removed from the perceptions of the narrator, the bloody lips acquire a certain objectivity. At the same time, however, the narrator appears to disown his creation, casting it loose from the authority his authorship implies. In a very real sense, the dynamics of the last line in *Léa* voice the dynamics of the Fantastic as a whole, leaving the certain, physiological interpretation of Léa's death in some doubt.

The ostentatiousness of narrative technique also draws our attention to the rhetorical nature of the *nouvelle*. As discussed earlier, the semantic reliability of rhetoric is often unsure, given the obsession with self-decoration exhibited by this supremely vain form of discourse. In terms of the patterns set down in Chapter Four, Barbey's lexis provides much in the way of over-gorged signifiers. We have already noted his passion for archaisms such as 'nonchaloir' (ORC 1, 23) and 'adurent' (ORC 1, 26), or neologisms calqued on English: 'sensitif' (ORC 1, 27). To these it is fitting to add his decidedly mannered interest in what we must take to be learned jargon: 'ses *aperceptions* les plus lumineuses' (ORC 1, 24) (My italics). In the same way, we note the attempt to borrow from a painterly lexicon in his rendering of the landscape, 'La courbe effacée des lointains' (ORC 1, 26) or, indeed, his flair for obscure exoticism, 'ce simoun qui ravage nos vies' (ORC 1, 31).

The oxymoron, leitmotif of Barbey's style, is firmly in place as early as *Léa*: 'innocemment cruelle' (ORC 1, 34). Throughout, in fact, an oxymoronic structure works to confound recognised antitheses. For Léa, the idea of happiness is coextensive with the idea of death: 'Il me faut craindre de donner du bonheur à ma fille sous peine de la tuer' (ORC 1, 26). Similarly, any notion of beauty is underwritten by the presence of dark foreboding: 'délicieuse coiffure qui jette je ne sais quel reflet de mélancolie autour d'une rieuse tête d'enfant' (ORC 1, 28). In what is an insistent pattern of irreconcilable opposites, Léa is unmistakably the seat of emotionally and physically antagonistic forces: 'les lèvres redevenaient blanches quoiqu'elles brûlassent encore' (ORC 1, 32). Turning confrontation into correlation, Barbey substitutes the principle of difference in language with a profoundly challenging thesis of undefined and unverifiable *correspondances*. The jolt that our

understanding thereby receives (and which is sustained by other forces to be commented on later) unerringly questions the scope of objective truths, such as Léa's haemorrhage, which the text appears to put forward. Of course, on a lexical level, the anarchy of the oxymoron is relatively confined: expressed conceptually, as we shall later see, its disorder is unrestrained.

From lexis to taxis, the difficulties inherent in Barbey's style go unchecked. Repeatedly, recalcitrant syntax is shamelessly tortured by poetic conceits: 'Eux, attendris, *mais* heureux, *mais* confiants, *mais* fous de mille espoirs [...]' (ORC 1, 25) (My italics). Equally difficult to take at face value are the elongated, multi-clause constructions, punctuated with the 'incidentes' that Champfleury found so exasperating:

> Et il la pleurait comme morte, et non pas de la mort de tout à l'heure que, dans l'égoïsme féroce de son amour, il désirait parfois avec rage, mais de celle dont elle mourrait sans doute... un jour... bientôt... ignorant que l'on pût mourir autrement que d'un anévrisme, et que l'on pût souffrir davantage pour mourir, ne regrettant rien des biens inconnus de la terre, et n'envoyant pas la plus belle boucle de ses cheveux blonds à quelque amie d'enfance, mariée bien loin... car elle n'en avait pas. (ORC 1, 32).

Still less easy to digest are the impossibly melodramatic perorations on love (ORC 1, 37), where distressed syntax must also make room for the most shameless of sentimental similes: 'comme une flamme et comme une rosée'. At no stage, in fact, does Barbey give quarter to measure or modesty. Throughout, his metaphors indulge in rhetorical commonplace, either in the laboured *pastorale* of the setting, 'la maison blanche, ceinte de la vigne aux bras d'amoureuse' (ORC 1, 25), or in the youths' heroic *adieux*, leaving tearful maidens in their train:

> [...] les deux amis montant, avec cette frémissante rapidité du départ quand on a le cœur plein, dans l'aérien tilbury qui les attendait, volèrent vers Paris, laissant derrière eux un nuage de

poussière qui s'évanouit, déchiré par le vent avec plus d'un adieu! (ORC 1, 25).

Of the final division offered in discussion of Barbey's rhetoric, that is, meta-taxis, *Léa* is particularly abundant. The flair for apostrophising the Great and the Good seems to be an Aurevillian constant and here, in this text, we immediately find reference to Keats and, not surprisingly, Barbey's beloved Byron (ORC 1, 24). In addition to what is rather clumsily handled literary cross-referencing, *Léa* is also accutely self-conscious as regards sententious declamation or law-making. This thread in Barbey's work reveals both an impatience with the confines of mere fiction and a will to impose a certain *literalness* on the perceived frailties of *literariness*. Little, in fact, appears to escape the pretensions of edict. Art, says Barbey (rather ironically), is a slow, evolving process: 'On ne commence pas par être artiste: l'homme finit par là' (ORC 1, 24). Pain is crueller than Time: 'La douleur est plus impitoyable que le temps' (ORC 1, 26). With something that looks like modesty, Barbey is also sure of his reading of female psychology: 'Il paraît que les mères ont de ces courages' (ORC 1, 27). Friendship, alas, is fickle, 'l'amitié est aussi une trompeuse' (ORC 1, 27), but not, apparently, as unreliable as women who are 'perfides' (ORC 1, 29). Passion, pity and love-- the gamut of the sentimental lexicon-- are all treated to the Aurevillian encyclical: 'Toujours l'amour grandit et s'enflamme en raison de son absurdité' (ORC 1, 32).

As we saw in earlier discussions, the forcefulness of Barbey's texts, seen emphatically in their tireless legislation, is less than helpful in maintaining the subtle illusions by which fiction works its charm. Indeed, on the contrary, the self-satisfied bombast tends to estrange us from the text. On a superficial reading, this, and other exaggerations in Barbey's style, may be done away with in accordance with the dictates of

good taste: this is certainly the line adopted by Flaubert, seen in the introduction to this thesis. Nevertheless, as put forward in Chapter Four, it is also possible to re-read these imperfections as a form of opacity in which the very essence of literary communication is challenged: Barbey the post-modern forerunner? While it might appear somewhat tendentious to make such an association, the facts of the text, as *Léa* displays them, are incontrovertible: there is no comfortable relationship with Barbey's fiction. This state of affairs is not in itself meaningful. In the context of the Fantastic, however, problematic meaning is central to the writing of doubt and it is this, paradoxically, that resurrects Barbey's rhetoric, and, in the case of *Léa*, makes certain, scientific judgement somewhat out of place.

The final stratum of Fantastic discourse displayed in *Léa* focuses on the ambivalences to be detected in the treatment of *difference*. As suggested in the figure of the oxymoron, Barbey's text appears to scorn recognizable distinctions by proposing a quirky sort of harmony between elements that are normally contradictory or antithetical. The supreme voicing of such obscure *correspondances* is seen in *Léa* in the uneasy marriage that Barbey brokers between Eros and Thanatos.

The uncertain ground that the text works towards is, in fact, already prepared by the dispolarity of Réginald's relationship with his 'sister'. The incestuous longings that he is unable to overcome disrupt the definition of the family unit, replacing defined roles with a catastrophic union. Furthermore, the murky sexuality that he embodies also appears to question other relationships within the family. The manifestation of Réginald's desire for Léa occurs when their mother is sitting directly next to the two siblings (ORC 1, 42). Is the son making a

perverse offering to the mother? Is it a jealous taunt? Why does Mme de Saint-Séverin tacitly permit the incestuous kiss? And why, most telling of all, does Léa not resist? Of the bewildering permutations set in chain by the act, little of any clarity is to be discerned; the only certainty, in fact, is that Barbey's text scrambles sexual definition in much the same way that later works will probe other interstices in human psychology.

Réginald's erotic drive is, therefore, already the source of obscure, competing forces. The fact that it is destructive renders it even more so. As we saw in Chapter Five, Eros is consummated in Thanatos: Life, paradoxically, realises its aspirations in Death. Barbey leaves the point in little doubt, drawing our attention to the morbid appeal of Léa's physical decline:

> Involontairement, il se demandait s'il y a donc plus de poésie dans l'horrible travail de la mort que dans le déploiement riche et varié de l'existence? (ORC 1, 28).

Turning the interrogative outwards, Barbey also solicits the reader's thoughts on the matter, positing the Sadian perspective as a universal dilemma. Certainly, in terms of the fiction, Réginald's urge is to destroy, growing increasingly irresistible as Léa's symptoms get worse: 'Cette mourante, dont il touchait le vêtement, le brûlait comme la plus ardente des femmes' (ORC 1, 41). In its realisation, therefore, his erotic will proclaims the vampire's *jouissance*: 'Il avait les lèvres sanglantes' (ORC 1, 42).

In what is an undeniably dramatic fashion, *Léa* represents an anarchic re-writing of conventional assumptions about sexuality, inverting our understanding of what is and is not taboo. Indeed, the moral high-ground the narrator claims to defend, 'scène odieuse' (ORC 1, 42), rings a little hollow given the voyeuristic fascination that Léa,

both character and text, exerts over the spectator. Barbey's morality is, then, somewhat confused, dissimulating the Good/Bad dichotomy that we might otherwise expect in the depiction of incest. At no stage, in fact, does the text make clear its stake. The mute passion which drives the narrative is itself re-stated in Réginald's characteristically impenetrable brow (ORC 1, 25), suggesting a pattern of confinement and repression which the spatial enclosure in the claustrophobic household and the seemingly fated return of Réginald can but reinforce.

To answer the structures of enclosure, we might expect *Léa* to resolve itself in a clearly defined concluding *expression*. We remember, however, that the text sidesteps such revelations by offering a frustratingly dual closing meaning: Lea the victim of biological breakdown or Léa the victim of vampires? The increasingly ambiguous frame of reference on which the text depends, where fixed notions of moral and psychological verities are rudely challenged, means that questions such as this, within the economy of the fiction, go unanswered. Cast free from the reassuring differences of an empirically verifiable universe, the *illusion* of vampirism remains a possibility.

Léa, then, as paradigm of Barbey's Fantastic, plays on our perceptions of the real as mediated through the voice of fiction. Of course, vampires do not exist, at least not in the way that rocks or trees exist; no Fantastic text can challenge that distinction. The illusion by which fiction mimics reality is, however, substantially more supple than reality itself and is capable of surprising feats of manipulation that no-one would describe as 'real' but which nonetheless act on the imagination with as much force as rocks or trees. The cinema-goer's scream or the child's fear of big bad wolves are concrete proof of this.

The suggestion of the vampire's kiss in *Léa* is the illusion of an illusion. To make this work, Barbey must both convince us that the text is real and, at the same time, dislodge the sense of reality which scoffs at ghosts and hobgoblins. The moment of doubt on which I began this study achieves just that by positing the 'real' scientific explanation simultaneously with the 'unreal' visitation of the vampire. If it were left to a matter of moments, the Fantastic might be hard pressed to sustain its charm; after all, if the text resumed its tree-like reality the memory of the Fantastic would quickly fade. This explains why *Léa* assumes the dynamic of real/unreal as an unbroken textual constant, now assuring us of the illusion of reality, now breaking off that illusion in unexpected and challenging ways. It is in this sense that *Léa* defines the discourse of the Fantastic.

* * *

Aristotle said that the word 'dog' does not bite and we, as readers, know that the phantoms of the Fantastic are toothless illusions. Being aware of this, however, has done little to dampen the popularity of the genre, even into the modern age where writers such as Kafka have continued to test the boundaries of illusion in fiction. The reasons why the Fantastic persists are no doubt difficult to penetrate; even more so in our century where no-one need look to fiction in search of destructive phantoms. Perhaps one explanation might be seen in the need for catharsis, a collective demonstration and expurgation of evil. No less primordial, the Fantastic also surely offers a penetrating look at how humans slant their vision, substituting and sublimating that which they

are unable to voice. Although, in this study, I have put to one side the psychoanalytical approach, its validity for understanding what the Fantastic *means* cannot be underestimated.

In a sense, however, demystifying the Fantastic is counterproductive as it inevitably shatters the illusion that is, in the first place, interesting, leaving the reader with a toothless 'dog'. Those critics who treat the Fantastic as moments of illusion appearing intermittently against the backdrop of the fiction do precisely this, for they extract the Fantastic from the only context which makes it Fantastic-- the text itself. To redress that error, this thesis shows us how Aristotle's 'dog' *might* have bitten us, by describing, *in medias res*, how the illusion works: *reading the Fantastic.*

Select Bibliography

In order to be of precise use, this bibliography is strictly limited to those works directly relevant to Barbey d'Aurevilly and the Fantastic. The place of publication, unless shown, is Paris for French books and London for books in English. Details of other books and articles consulted in the preparation of this thesis are given in the footnotes.

Primary texts

Barbey d'Aurevilly, Jules-Amédée, *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, ed. by Jacques Petit, 2 vols (La Pléiade, 1964, 1966).

-----*Correspondance générale*, 9 vols (Les Belles Lettres, 1980-89).

-----*Les œuvres et les hommes*, 26 vols (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1968).

Critical works on Barbey

Books

Berthier, Philippe, *Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'imagination* (Geneva: Droz, 1978).

----*L'Ensorcelée, Les Diaboliques: Une écriture du désir* (Champion, 1987).

----ed., *Barbey d'Aurevilly: Cent ans après (1889-1989)* (Geneva: Droz, 1990).

----ed., *Barbey d'Aurevilly: L'Ensorcelée, Les Diaboliques. La chose sans nom* (Société des Études Romantiques, 1988).

Berthier, Philippe, and Bornecque, Jacques-Henry, eds, *Les Diaboliques* (Garnier, 1991).

Bésus, Roger, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Éditions Universitaires, 1957).

Bornecque, Jacques-Henry, *Paysages extérieurs et monde intérieur dans l'œuvre de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Caen:Publications de l'Université de Caen, 1968).

Canu, Jean, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Laffont, 1965).

Colla, Pierre, *L'Univers tragique de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Brussels: La Renaissance du livre, 1965).

Crouzet, Michel, ed., *Les Diaboliques* (Imprimerie nationale, 1989).

Dodille, Norbert, *Le texte autobiographique de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Geneva: Droz, 1987).

Doyon, Robert-Louis, *Exégèse: Les Diaboliques* (La Connaissance, 1959).

Gramont, Élisabeth de, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Grasset, 1946).

Grelé, Eugène, *Barbey d'Aurevilly, sa vie et son œuvre*, 2 vols (Caen: Jouan, 1904).

Hofer, Hermann, *Barbey d'Aurevilly Romancier* (Berne: Franke, 1974).

Juin, Hubert, *Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Seghers, 1975).

Leberruyer, Pierre, *Au pays de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Coutances: Éditions Bellée, 1960).

Marie, Aristide, *Le Connétable des Lettres* (Mercure de France, 1939).

Mourier-Casile, Pascaline, ed., *Les Diaboliques* (Pocket, 1993).

Petit, Jacques, *Barbey d'Aurevilly critique* (Les Belles Lettres, 1963).

----*Essais de lectures des Diaboliques* (Les Lettres Modernes, 1974).

----ed., *La Revue des Lettres Modernes-- Série Barbey d'Aurevilly*, 15 vols (Minard, 1966-).

Rogers, Brian, *The Novels and Stories of Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Geneva: Droz, 1967).

Saint-Gérand, Jacques-Philippe, *Morales du Style* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1994).

Tranouez, Pierre, *Fascination et narration dans l'œuvre romanesque de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Minard, 1987).

Yarrow, Peter, *La pensée politique et religieuse de Barbey d'Aurevilly* (Geneva: Droz, 1961).

Articles

Bloy, Léon, 'Un brelan d'excommuniés', in *Œuvres complètes*, 15 vols (Mercure de France, 1964-75), II, pp. 250-85.

----'*Un prêtre marié*', *La Revue du Monde catholique*, 10 September 1876.

Cardonne-Arlyck, Élisabeth, 'Nom, corps, métaphor dans les *Diaboliques* de Barbey d'Aurevilly', *Littérature*, 54 (1984), 3-19.

Champfleury, '*Une vieille maîtresse*-- Lettre à M. Louis Veuillot', in *Le Réalisme* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1967), pp. 286-320.

Duvignaud, Jean, 'Barbey d'Aurevilly', in *Tableau de la littérature française de Madame de Staël à Rimbaud* (Gallimard, 1974), pp. 184-190.

Gaillard, Françoise, 'La représentation comme mise en scène du voyeurisme', *La Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 154 (1974), 267-82.

Marini, Marcelle, 'Ricochets de lecture. La fantasmatique des *Diaboliques*', *Littérature*, 10 (1973), 3-19.

Rigault, Henri, 'De la politesse dans la critique: le roman d'un moraliste catholique', *Le Journal des Débats*, 5 February 1858.

Ropars-Wuilleumier, Marie-Claire, '*Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan*. Narration et signification', *Littérature*, 9 (1973), 118-25.

Schneider, Pierre, 'Barbey d'Aurevilly l'extrême', *Les Temps Modernes*, 65 (1951), 1542-560.

Scott, Malcolm, 'Sexual ambivalence and Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Le Chevalier des Touches*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 1 (1983), 31-42.

Teissier, Philippe, 'Réalisme et fantastique dans *Les Diaboliques*', *L'École des Lettres*, 7 (1991), 21-33.

Toumayan, Alain, 'Barbey d'Aurevilly et l'amour', in *La littérature et la hantise du Mal* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1987), pp. 13-38.

Tranouez, Pierre, 'La narration neutralisante. Étude de quatre *Diaboliques*', *Poétique*, 17 (1974), 39-49.

----'Un récit révocatoire: *A un dîner d'athées*', *Littérature*, 38 (1980), 45-63.

Critical works on the Fantastic

Books

Bessière, Irène, *Le récit fantastique: la poétique de l'incertain* (Larousse, 1974).

Brooke-Rose, Christine, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal-- studies in narrative and structure, especially the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Caillois, Roger, *Cohérences aventureuses* (Gallimard, 1965).

Castex, Pierre-Georges, *Le conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant* (Corti, 1951).

Chanady, Amaryll, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: resolved versus unresolved antinomy* (Garland, 1985).

Cornwell, Neil, *The Literary Fantastic* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

Finné, Jacques, *La littérature fantastique. Essai sur l'organisation surnaturelle* (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1981).

Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (Methuen, 1981).

Killen, Alice, *Le roman terrifiant ou roman noir de Walpole à Anne Radcliffe et son influence sur la littérature française jusqu'en 1840* (Champion, 1924).

Lovecraft, Howard, *Supernatural horror in literature* (New York, NY: Abramson, 1945).

Milner, Max, *La fantasmagorie: essai sur l'optique fantastique* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1982).

Penzoldt, Peter, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1952).

Rabkin, Eric, *The Fantastic In Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

Retinger, Joseph, *Le conte fantastique dans le romantisme français* (Grasset, 1909).

Steinmetz, Jean-Luc, *La littérature fantastique* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1990).

Todorov, Tzvetan, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Seuil, 1970).

Vax, Louis, *L'Art et la littérature fantastiques* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1960).

Articles

Bellemin-Noël, Jean, 'Notes sur le fantastique (Textes de Théophile Gautier)', *Littérature*, 8 (1972), 3-23.

----'Des formes fantastiques aux thèmes fantasmatiques', *Littérature*, 2 (1971), 103-18.

Culler, Jonathan, 'Literary Fantasy', *Cambridge Review*, 95 (1973), 30-33.

Freud, Sigmund, 'The "Uncanny" ', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (Hogarth Press, 1955), XVII, pp. 217-56.

Germain, Gabriel, 'Du sacré au fantastique', *Bulletin de l'association Guillaume Budé*, 4 (1968), 461-71.

Juin, Hubert, 'Les chemins du fantastique français', *Magazine littéraire*, 5 (1972), 9-16.

Maupassant, Guy de, 'Le fantastique', *Le Gaulois*, 7 October 1883.

Nodier, Charles, 'Du fantastique en littérature', *La Revue de Paris*, 28 November 1830.

Ostrowski, Witold, 'The Fantastic and the Realistic in Literature: suggestions on how to define and analyse Fantastic fiction', *Zagadnienia Rodzajow Literakich*, 9 (1966), 54-71.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, '*Aminadab* ou du fantastique considéré comme un langage', in *Situations*, 10 vols (Gallimard, 1947-76), I, pp. 122-42.

Scott, Sir Walter, 'Du merveilleux dans le roman', *La Revue de Paris*, 12 April 1829.

Viatte, Auguste, 'Le fantastique dans la littérature française', *La Revue de l'Université de Laval*, 19 (1965), 715-21.