“Tristes Triangles”:
*Le Lys dans la vallée* and Its Intertext

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Apocrypha has it that Balzac, having been panned by Sainte-Beuve in the *Revue des deux mondes*, exclaimed to Jules Sandeau: “Il me le payera; je lui passerai ma plume au travers du corps. . . . Je referai Volupté.” Whether or not Balzac articulated exactly those “machistic” desires, evidence exists that he was stimulated enough by Sainte-Beuve’s “livre puritain” for us to include it as an important page—at least on the level of (rivalrous) intentionality—in the intertext of *Le Lys dans la vallée*. Balzac’s primary conscious objective in redoing *Volupté* appears to stem from his objection to the character of its heroine; more specifically, to the dosage of her femininity: “Mme de Couaèn n’est pas assez femme et le danger n’existe pas.” The challenge, as it can be read here, was to rewrite what has been rather elegantly described as “l’aventure blanche de cet amour sans espoir,” intensifying the excitement implicit in such a drama without, however, changing the outcome of the script; to rewrite, then, making his heroine more of a woman, but without changing the color of her destiny.

The creation of Mme de Mortsauf, the (white) flower announced in the novel’s title, proves to have challenged the critics as much as it apparently challenged Balzac; the question for them was, curiously, despite (or perhaps because of) the ostensible intertext, posing itself in terms of origins, Was there a model (other than Mme de Couaèn), and if so, who was she? Although source hunting is a commonplace pursuit in traditional Balzacian scholarship, in the case of Mme de Mortsauf, the mystery to be solved (*cherchez la femme*) is complicated by a peculiarly persistent enigma: “de qui Mme de Mortsauf pouvait tenir le goût du plaisir, innocent ou non, que Balzac prête à son héroïne?” The earliest textual model of feminization pointed to is Marguerite de Navarre’s lady of Pamplona, for whom, like Mme de Mortsauf, the double bind created by the conflicting demands of virtue and illicit desire is resolved by and in death. The intratextual commentary on that resolution in *L’Heptameron* provides the following analysis: “Pensez . . . que voylà une saige femme, qui, pour se montrer plus vertueuse par dehors qu’elle n’estoit au cuer, et pour dissimuler ung amour que la raison de nature vouloit qu’elle portast à ung
The verdict is clear enough: having repressed her natural desire, the lady falls victim to nature’s revenge. Her death, however, is only half the story; as she exits from this world, our “saige femme” tells all. The trajectory of the nouvelle, therefore, links death with an end to denegation; telos emerges as topos: the revelation of truth in articulo mortis. Thus, “L’heure est venue qu’il faut que toute dissimulation cesse, et que je confesse la vérité que j’ay tant mis de peine à vous celer: c’est que, si vous m’avez porté grande affection, croyez que la myenne n’a été moindre . . . car, entendez . . . que Dieu et mon honneur ne m’ont jamais permis de la vous declarer . . . mais sachez que le non que si souvent je vous ay dict m’a faict tant de mal au prononcer, qu’il est cause de ma mort” (H, p. 218). Her denial, her “non,” is italicized in the text and designates (by hypotyposis) the specifically linguistic forum of repression.

The lady of Pamplona, however, dies happy: “puis que Dieu m’a faict la grace de morir, premier que la violance de mon amour ayt mis tache à ma conscience et renommée” (H, p. 218). The conviction of her victory is such—and this is the topical twist that interests us here—that it permits her to ask her lover (as secular confessor) to share the good news with her husband, “affin qu’il congoisse combien j’ay aymé Dieu et luy” (H, p. 218). This gesture of sublime confidence is Julie de Wolmar’s too; with the latter, however, it is the husband who delivers the message to the lover, and in writing. In both cases, by putting a term to all future intercourse, death brings freedom of sexual expression, permits the enunciation of desire, for which—on balance—death seems a small enough price to pay: “Trop heureuse,” Julie concludes, “d’acheter au prix de ma vie le droit de t’aimer toujours sans crime, et de te le dire encore une fois!”55 Death reactivates a silenced discourse, giving the lie to a politics of neutrality, to what Mme de Mortsauf will call “ce bonheur négatif.”

But if Mme de Mortsauf’s last words in the linearity of the novel, that is, in her farewell letter (also communicated to the beloved with the sanction of the husband) reflect (as do those of her predecessors) a measure of optimism about God’s mercy and her own righteousness—“Dieu saura mieux que moi si j’ai pratiqué ses saintes lois selon leur esprit. J’ai sans doute chancelé souvent, mais je ne suis point tombée” (LV, p. 322)—those last words must be read in counterpoint to her own earlier vocal confession. Unlike Julie—who can write peacefully from her deathbed, “Je me suis longtemps fait illusion. Cette illusion me fut salutaire; elle se détruit au moment que je n’en ai plus besoin. Vous m’avez crue guérie, et j’ai cru l’être. Rendons grâces à celui qui fit durer cette erreur autant qu’elle était utile: qui sait si, me voyant si près de l’abîme, la tête ne m’eût pas tournée” (NH, p. 728), thus embracing death as the garde-fou that will prevent her from acting out, from acting on what she now knows to be true—Mme de Mortsauf, disillusioned and enlightened, yearns at death’s door.
for a reprieve: "Tout a été mensonge dans ma vie, je les ai comptées depuis quelques jours, ces impostures. Est-il possible que je meure, moi qui n’ai pas vécu? moi qui ne suis jamais allée chercher quelqu’un dans une lande" (LV, p. 301). Whereas Julie feels that heaven can deprive her of nothing, since life has nothing left to offer—"Que me restait-il d’utile à tirer de la vie? En me l’étant, le ciel ne m’ôte plus rien de regrettable" (NH, p. 729)—Mme de Mortsauf wants her heaven on earth: "Une heure de lady Dudley vaut l’éternité" (LV, p. 513).

That last equation, however, does not appear in the final version of the novel. It was excised, we are told, to placate Balzac’s superegoistic reader Mme de Berny. As Wurmser describes the operation in his Comédie inhumaine: “C’est plus que le modèle n’en pourra supporter et, docile, Balzac coupera la parole à Mme de Mortsauf, falsifiera le récit de son agonie.”11 Mme de Mortsauf is not completely silenced, but her bitterness at dying without having known sexual pleasure is attenuated by the deletions; the violence of her desire muted by a periphrastic retreat from the explicit; her feminization euphemized. For what is eliminated in the final version—one hundred or so lines available to the reader in the choix de variantes reprinted in the Garnier edition—is nothing less than the heroine’s rejection of the underlying assumptions that support and justify the sublimation of female desire. A refutation of the doxa is accomplished (not so paradoxically) by the simple assertion of female sexuality (drive) as an operative reality. (I should mention here that even without the actual suppression of the “offensive” material, its potentially subversive content is undercut by the context of enunciation: namely, the act of enunciation itself is placed under the sign of madness. Thus, the abbot in attendance, horrified at Mme de Mortsauf’s passionate outburst, exclaims: “Si toutefois elle est complice de ces mouvements de folie!” Félix reassures him: “Non, . . . ce n’est plus elle” [LV, p. 302], and she is given opium.)

To return to eu-feminization, following the periphrasis cited earlier—“chercher quelqu’un dans une lande”—Mme de Mortsauf in the unexpurgated edition asks, rhetorically: “A qui mon bonheur aurait-il nui?” (LV, p. 513). And she answers, reversing the nineteenth-century novelistic cliché that sexual mothers kill their children, or at least are bad for their health:12 “Si vous aviez été moins soumis, Félix, je vivrais, je pourrais veiller au bonheur de mes enfants” (LV, p. 513). The reversal is radical (even if subsequently repressed) in terms of her own, which is to say Félix’s, previous discourse and narrative. Thus before Félix set out for Paris, he had exclaimed: “je donnerais l’éternité pour un seul jour de bonheur, et vous!” “Et moi?” Mme de Mortsauf had then replied to such a sacrilegious trade-off, “Moï! . . . de quel moi parlez-vous? Je sens bien des moi en moi! Ces deux enfants . . . sont des moi” (LV, p. 219). In that (domestic) economy, to give herself over to love for “un seul jour de bonheur” would be to kill her children: “leur mort serait certaine” (LV,

In the “dedoxatized” variants, however, where another economy is at work, Mme de Mortsauf refutes this notion that a mother and a sexual woman cannot coexist in the same body; she refutes too the notion that spiritual love is superior to, and more complete than, sensual fulfillment: “Le ciel ne descend pas vers nous, ce sont nos sens qui nous conduisent au ciel. Nous ne nous sommes aimés qu’à demi. L’union des âmes ne précède pas l’amour heureux, elle en est la conséquence” (LV, p. 513). The potential for scandal in such a transvaluation is easily measured by contrasting this passage with Julie’s “feminine” invitation to Saint-Preux: “Viens avouer, même au sein des plaisirs, que c’est de l’union des cœurs qu’ils tirent leur plus grand charme” (NH, p. 121); or with Julie’s nostalgia for heavenly bliss: “Un feu pur et sacré brûlait nos cœurs; livrés aux erreurs des sens, nous ne sommes plus que des amants vulgaires” (NH, p. 76). Mme de Mortsauf’s disinvestment of the platonic and the vertical, moreover, though a significant departure from the canon, is not presented as idiopathic dissent. In her “défère sensuel” she diagnoses all women: “Toute femme est voilée et tout voile veut être levé; vous avez manqué de hardiesse, une hardiesse m’aurait fait vivre!” (LV, p. 513). These assertions, however, have a curious ring to them; they sound both false and familiar. Indeed, Mme de Mortsauf would seem to be mouthing standard, fictional masculine discourse, adopting the language of the “vil séducteur.” It is in this sense (and in this sense only) that one might agree with M. Le Yaouanc when he claims: “Et l’on a peine à tenir pour vraisemblables les regrets, les cris sensuels,—contre lesquels Mme de Berny a protesté, mais surtout pour des raisons morales et esthétiques,—proférés par une femme à l’agonie, épuisée par la faim, torturée par la souffrance.” What is not “vraisemblable” is neither the content nor the context of her regret but its language, its intertext. For in making Mme de Mortsauf “more of a woman,” Balzac attributes to his heroine the phallocratic discourse of an eighteenth-century roué. It is as though in tampering with the perfect model—Mme de Couaën, for example, who says nothing but whose silence is eloquent—Balzac, at a loss for a countermodel, puts a man in her place. Feminization spirals into virilization.

Mme de Mortsauf’s revelation of desire and of the claims of the body is not entirely buried in the variants; it survives in the final edition, primarily in the tempered, less subversive written testament that is her deathbed letter. (This letter is less subversive because of its intertextual resonance: Mme de Mortsauf’s final words, like Julie’s, are to be read through the reassuring grid of an older [Ovidian] rhetoric—the art of persuasion a posteriori. Mme de Mortsauf, “cette Didon chrétienne” [LV, p. 237], whose husband’s name cannot save her, writes with consummate control, the pyre in sight.) The thematic parallels linking Henriette de Mortsauf’s letter to Julie de Wolmar’s have not been
ignored by the critics. And we shall not rehearse them here except to signal an important dyssymmetry. Julie touches but briefly upon the past; she has already rewritten history, that is, the etiology of their passion, for Saint-Preux, in other letters. Her farewell, therefore, is bearer of revelation only in its account of continuing desire. Thus, to the extent that Rousseau’s fiction functions as intertext to Balzac’s, the letter itself will serve us as an emblematic counterpoint.

Mme de Mortsauf frames her final analysis within the parental strategy that had characterized her relationship with Félix. As she describes her status at the time of writing: “Heureusement la femme est morte, la mère seule a survécu” (LV, p. 316). This assertion, though confirmed in part by the preceptorial program set forth in the letter, remains open to scrutiny; for the reader will remember that when the letter literally is transmitted to Félix, Mme de Mortsauf says to her husband: “Il est maintenant mon fils d’adoption, voilà tout”; but having thus justified the establishment of a last will and testament for this honorary member of the family, she adds: “Je suis toujours femme” (LV, p. 310). The structure of the letter reflects the strain of the screen scenario, the family romance in which she and Félix negotiate their subtextual desires. How do you love me, she had asked in an earlier catechism: “Comme une mère?” To which Félix had replied: “Comme une mère secrètement désirée” (LV, p. 189). The letter, then, articulates the split in Mme de Mortsauf’s self-concept—mother and woman—and the history of that split as it played itself out between Henriette and her “adopted” son: Félix, addressed in the beginning of the letter as “ami trop aimé” (LV, p. 315), and at the end, “cher enfant de mon cœur” (LV, p. 321)—problematic object of desire, illicit and legitimized.

Saint-Preux’s status as addressee is less ambiguous: he remains “l’ami” throughout; a shift in intensity is marked, however, by the passage from the initial “vous” over whom Julie exercises control to the final “tu,” the dangerous relation from whom death alone protects her. By their allocutionary strategies, then, the two letters stand in chiasmatic relation to each other: Julie’s is metaphoric and overdetermined by the jubilation of desire sublimated (at last) in death: “Quand tu verras cette lettre, les vers rongeront le visage de ton amante” (NH, p. 731); Mme de Mortsauf’s is metonymic and structured by the resignation of substitution: “N’ayant pu être à vous, je vous légue mes pensées et mes devoirs!” (LV, p. 321).

Mme de Mortsauf writes as a mother in order to persuade Félix to replace her in that function: “Je mets . . . à profit les dernières heures de mon intelligence pour vous supplier . . . de remplacer auprès de mes enfants le cœur dont vous les avez privés” (LV, p. 316). For this politics of guilt to work, Mme de Mortsauf must demonstrate Félix’s responsibility: “Vous allez voir, cher, comment vous avez été la cause première de mes maux” (LV, p. 316). There follows her “novel,” which as readers we receive as the deconstruction of the
text we have just assimilated: Félix’s fiction. In this sense we might go so far as to suggest that Félix’s story is Mme de Mortsauf’s intertext; or, as Peter Brooks comments in his elegant and illuminating Freudian reading of Le Lys, “Mme de Mortsauf’s ultimate letter which, read only after her death, in fact presents another perspective on the whole story from its beginning, thus creating a true effect of palimpsest.”

CHAPTER 1: THE AWAKENING

Jusqu’à cette fête donnée au duc d’Angoulême, la seule à laquelle j’aie assisté [and during which Félix, having been mistaken for a child, responds with equal misprision, embracing Mme de Mortsauf, as he puts it, “comme un enfant qui se jette dans le sein de sa mère” (LV, p. 25)] le mariage m’avait laissée dans l’ignorance qui donne à l’âme des jeunes filles la beauté des anges. J’étais mère, il est vrai; mais l’amour ne m’avait point environnée de ses plaisirs permis. Comment suis-je restée ainsi? je n’en sais rien; Je ne sais pas davantage par quelles lois tout en moi fut changé dans un instant . . . vos baisers . . . ont dominé ma vie . . . j’éprouvai une sensation pour laquelle je ne sais le mot dans aucun langage . . . . Je compris qu’il existait je ne sais quoi d’inconnu pour moi dans le monde . . . . Je ne me sentis plus mère qu’à demi . . . . Si vous avez oublié ces terribles baisers, moi, je n’ai jamais pu les effacer de mon souvenir: j’en meurs! . . . . Ni le temps, ni ma ferme volonté n’ont pu dompter cette impérieuse volupté. [LV, pp. 316–18]

This description of passion at first kiss is not without echoes, since it is a conventional concretization of love at first sight. Julie, for example, remembering her first kiss in the grove, underlines the same instantaneity and indelibility: “un instant, un seul instant embrasa [mes sens] d’un feu que rien ne put éteindre; et si ma volonté résistait encore, dès lors mon cœur fut corrompu” (NH, p. 321). And in her farewell letter, where the sensual is spiritualized after the fact: “Oui, j’eus beau vouloir étouffer le premier sentiment qui m’a fait vivre, il s’est concentré dans mon cœur” (NH, p. 728). For both heroines, passion is an irreversible narrative.

CHAPTER 2: COMBATTING PASSION

For Julie giving in to passion is to be a “bad” daughter; for Mme de Mortsauf, a “bad” mother. And for both, the encounter with the imperatives of sexuality threatens the fundamental equilibrium of the female self, setting in motion a life-and-death struggle. Thus, Julie, reviewing the past, recollects: “Je souhaitai d’être délivrée de la vie . . . mais la cruelle mort m’épargna pour me perdre. Je vous vis, je fus guérie, et je péris” (NH, p. 322). She succumbs where Mme de Mortsauf cannot. Although Julie survives this moment of weakness to make a voluntaristic sacrifice of her “bad” self in her marriage to M. de Wolmar, and as Mme de Wolmar—wife and mother—(re)lives at Clarens a struggle roughly parallel to Mme de Mortsauf’s martyrdom at Clochegourde, the fact that she has experienced those feelings that are not permitted—to use Mme de Mortsauf’s code—constitutes a fundamental discrim-
inant of difference between the two texts. For although in tribute to Félix's "grandeur d'âme" (LV, p. 320) during her husband's nearly fatal illness, Henriette contemplates the total gift—"je souhaitais me donner à vous comme une récompense due à tant d'héroïsme" (LV, p. 320) (a notion to be paired with Julie's famous "pity" for Saint-Preux)—she dismisses, in retrospect, this courtly notion as madness—"cette folie a été courte" (LV, p. 320)—and gives herself over to God instead. Félix is to enjoy her sexuality by synecdoche only; he is made a gift of her hair, the price of her resistance: "Il y eut un moment où la lutte fut si terrible que je pleurais pendant toutes les nuits: mes cheveux tombaient. Ceux-la vous les avez eus!" (LV, p. 320).

CHAPTER 3: VIRTUE REWARDED?

The trial of Julie's virtue as Mme de Wolmar differs from that of Mme de Mortsauf in several important ways: as we have seen, Julie knows what she is resisting for having experienced it; moreover, Julie and Saint-Preux are partners in innocence, or rather, in sublimation; then too, Julie's second awakening (to "corrupt" desire for Saint-Preux), if we are to believe her account, is à retardement and short-lived. Finally, she is spared jealousy, for Saint-Preux is committed to total chastity: "Je n'ai plus rien d'un homme ordinaire" (NH, p. 666). Unlike Saint-Preux (and unlike Amaury), Félix believes in an invincible masculine condition: "Nous possédons une puissance qui ne saurait être abdiquée, sous peine de ne plus être hommes. . . . La nature ne peut donc pas être longtemps trompée" (LV, p. 249). And he gives in to that nature.

Mme de Mortsauf, for her part, not only does not know what she is missing, so to speak, but she only discovers the depth and violence of her own erotic desire when she learns that Félix has made love to another woman: "Votre amour si naturel pour cette Anglaise m'a révélée des secrets que j'ignorais moi-même" (LV, p. 320). In a strangely hysterical process, Mme de Mortsauf becomes sexualized vicariously through the pleasures experienced by Félix with Arabelle. The variants make clear the ideological implications of such an illumination: "Mon don de seconde vue m'a révélé ces plaisirs pour lesquels vous m'avez trahie, vous aviez raison de m'abandonner pour les goûter, c'est toute la vie, et je me suis trompée moi-même, car mes sacrifices ont été faits au monde et non à Dieu! Et l'on me console en me parlant de l'autre vie, mais y a-t-il une autre vie?" (LV, p. 513). But this wordly epiphany, this newly found understanding of her own erotic potential, has no place for expression; it takes her on a death trip. Instead of going to Paris and killing the other woman—"Je voulais aller à Paris, j'avais soif de meurtre, je souhaitais la mort de cette femme" (LV, p. 320)—she allows herself to die of hunger and thirst; instead of acting on her fantasmatic impulses, she passively acts out; as a self-inflicted punishment for not having given in, she gives up. And like the lady of Pamplona, that renunciation is written in the body.

In both cases the symptoms mime the aporia that generated them: the heroine
of *L'Heptameron*, we are told, suffers from an unabated fever and melancholia, "tellement que les extremitez du corps luy vindrent toutes froides, et au dedans brusloit incessamment" (*H*, p. 217); the heroine of *Le Lys*, as Brooks writes, "the representative of humidity and tenderness, is burning hot, and the water of the Indre . . . only increases her thirst."¹⁹ Feverish and apathetic, hot and cold, the (body) language of the two patients is characterized by the oxymoron of their double bind. Thus, Mme de Mortsauf’s physician explains: "Cette affection est produite par l’inertie d’un organe dont le jeu est aussi nécessaire à la vie que celui du cœur. Le chagrin a fait l’office du poignard" (*LV*, p. 288). Medicine cannot cure so fundamental a dysfunction. Upon Félix’s reappearance, however, Mme de Mortsauf’s appetite miraculously returns: "Ils croient que ma plus vive douleur est la soif," she explains to him, "j’avais soif de toi" (*LV*, p. 301). Her illness, then, which dates from the day she learned of Félix’s affair with Lady Dudley, might be diagnosed more interestingly as a form of conversion hysteria,²⁰ specifically as anorexia nervosa, than as generally interpreted: cancer of the pylorus.²¹ Mme de Mortsauf’s autopunishment is a violence of privation, a refusal of sustenance engendered by the undeniable proof of her own sexuality.

But if what Henriette learns about herself "kills" her, ultimately it makes her want to live because it revises the scenario, abolishing the distinctions, the dichotomies upon which the logic of the novel (her text) is founded. On the one hand, as Mme de Mortsauf explains in her letter: "Je n’étais pas insensible," and as a result, "nos souffrances d’amour étaient bien cruellement égales" (*LV*, p. 320)—which is to say that desire’s challenge to the body existed on both sides, female as well as male. (And here the counterpoint to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is particularly pertinent: "Sans doute," Julie writes to Saint-Preux, "je sentais pour moi les craintes que je croyais sentir pour vous" [*NH*, p. 729].) In her [hysterically] "feminine" innocence, she had been blind by virtue of what we might call denegation by projection.) On the other hand, Mme de Mortsauf abolishes the difference, removes the *cordon sanitaire* separating Henriette, "l’épouse de l’âme," and Arabelle, "la maîtresse du corps" (*LV*, p. 232). At the end of her life Mme de Mortsauf asserts the identity of contraries: "Arabelle n’avait aucune supériorité sur moi. J’étais aussi une de ces filles de la race déchue que les hommes aiment tant" (*LV*, p. 320). To measure the reversal at work here, one has only to look back to the "official" narrative: "La marquise Dudley m’a sauvée. A elle les souillures, je ne les lui envie point. A moi le glorieux amour des anges!" (*LV*, p. 259).²² In the end, then, Mme de Mortsauf asserts not only equality in infelicity between her and Félix, but equipollence between the pure and the impure. She would be a fallen angel. Indeed, in her "delirium," in the stage of her acting out that was not corrected for the final edition, Mme de Mortsauf made it quite clear that what she wanted was to be just like Arabelle: "Je veux être aimée, je ferai des folies comme Lady Dudley.
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j’apprendrai l’anglais pour bien dire: *my dee* (LV, p. 302). Those are the last words of her outburst: she would learn another language, the other woman’s maternal language, the better to name the object of desire; to name, and hence make hers, that feeling for which, as she says in her letter, “je ne sais de mot dans aucun langage” (LV, p. 317). Having at last given voice to her desire, she adds calmly: “Nous dînerons ensemble” (LV, p. 302).

**EPILOGUE**

Félix refuses this collapsing of polarities and imagines for himself castration, death, and the monastery—in that order. If Henriette were no different from Arabelle, then he was “comme tous les hommes” (LV, p. 303) and barred from the sublime. So at the end of his narrative, his love letter to yet another woman, he attempts to reinscribe ideal femininity and define its function: “Auprès des âmes souffrantes et malades, les femmes d’élite ont un rôle sublime à jouer, celui de la sœur de charité qui panse les blessures, celui de la mère qui pardonne à l’enfant” (LV, p. 329). His addressee rejects the (de)nomination: “Votre programme est inexécutable. . . . Vous ne connaissez donc pas les femmes?” (LV, p. 332). She thus condemns the necrophilic impulse of Félix’s fantasy.

The epigraph to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* consists of two lines from Petrarch, translated by Rousseau himself: “Le monde la possédà sans la connaître, / Et moi, je l’ai connue, je reste ici-bas à la pleurer.” Félix, who before Henriette’s death had wished she had been more like Dante’s Francesca than Petrarch’s Laura, concludes in mourning: “Seul je devais savoir en son entier la vie de cette grande femme inconnue, seul j’étais dans le secret de ses sentiments, seul j’avais parcouru son âme dans toute son étendue; ni sa mère, ni son père, ni son mari, ni ses enfants ne l’avaient connue” (LV, pp. 325-26). Both novels, then, are presented to the reader as acts of revelation, of the lifting of the veil: “Ceci est la vie humaine dans toute sa vérité” (LV, p. 326), Félix exclaims upon reading Mme de Mortsauf’s parting words. And both novelists choose, as vehicles of that truth, deathbed confessions; specifically, articulations of female desire simultaneously hyperbolized and euphemized. The mourner’s consolation is to have unlocked that private door; the artist’s, to have created fictions of what was hidden.

But if the ending of *Le Lys* (in exposing as truth the “secret” that merely the fine line of denegation makes “la différence d’une folle et saine dame”) not only rewrites the Renaissance tale and the Rousseauian fiction, but by evoking, to use Girard’s terms, “la transcendance verticale,” conforms in a wider perspective to the rules of closure proper to “vérité romanesque” (the inevitability, as he describes it, of “la banalité absolue de ce qui est essentiel dans la civilisation occidentale”), then what transposition has Balzac wrought upon his intertext? And has he in fact redone (outdone) *Volupté*? I would suggest that Balzac’s
repenning can be deciphered in an intensity, in an ambivalent impulse (as attested to genetically by the variants) to deconstruct, as Peter Brooks reads it, "the intoxication of virtue" and "much of the Romantic structure of self," but perhaps more insistently to interrogate the geometry of desire, the ideology of representation that reposes upon the assumption that positive femininity (since Rousseau inseparable from the maternal function) and female sexual desire are incompatible in one and the same body. In this sense, both of the novel's triangles, the courtly love triangle (married woman, older husband, young lover) and its double (chaste woman, fallen woman, divided-heart lover), prove to be "cover" triangles: obviously fragile but no less persistent constructs dependent upon a cultural aporia, and a logic of contraries that might be transcended or superseded. This might be, were it not for the power of the matrix in which they are inscribed: a "doctored" theology in the service of the teleology of fiction; a ritualization of (male) textual desire.

Not surprisingly, Mme de Lafayette came up with another angle on the triangle. Her heroine does not have to die in order to reveal the truth of her desire; she survives her aveu to go on at a healthy distance from the court, far from what Girard diagnosed as "la contagion métaphysique."26

3. Ibid.
5. M. Le Yaouanc has the longest list of possible suspects (p. xxxv), but he is not alone in his speculations. See, for example, Jacques Borel's chapter (chap. 4) on Mme de Mortsauf in Le Lys dans la vallée et les sources profondes de la création balzacienne (Paris: Corti, 1961).
8. Marguerite de Navarre, L'Heptaméron (Paris: Garnier, 1967), p. 218; all future references to this work will appear, as H followed by the page number, in the text.
9. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, La Nouvelle Héloïse (Paris: Garnier, 1960), p. 731; italics mine. All future references to this work will appear, as NH followed by the page number, in the text.
10. Honoré de Balzac, Le Lys dans la vallée, p. 199. References to Le Lys are drawn from the Garnier edition (see note 1); all future references will appear as LV followed by the page number in the text itself.
13. M. Le Yaouanc in his commentary on variants, p. 446.
15. In particular, the famous letter 18 of part 3, Julie's first letter as Mme de Wolmar.
17. Of two sorts: Le Yaouanc footnotes the obvious reference to Mme de Rénal p. 317; and Brooks describes the kisses as "a memory trace that she was never able to exorcise," an event that has "determined the rest of her life, all the counter-cathexes she has been obliged to form," pp. 157–58.
18. Perhaps the only use of hair that rivals this unromantic, unheimlich one is George Sand's in Indiana (where the hair fetishized belongs to a dead woman).
20. Ibid., pp. 155–56: "Mme de Mortsauf's final illness is patterned as a conversion hysteria, that is, as a flight into illness in which the somatic symptoms are symbolic of the repressed."
21. Le Yaouanc, for example, concludes from the symptoms described (p. 251 n. 2, p. 288 n. 1, and elsewhere) that such is her illness. But his diagnosis is an interpretation and not a textual fact.
22. Brooks, p. 156, commenting on these lines in the context of his analysis of Mme de Mortsauf's conversion hysteria, points out: "But the terms of the denial make it textually inevitable that the repressed will take its revenge"—which it does.