

# The Ambiguous Lily Motif in Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée*

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Critics of Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée* have tended to overlook the inherent ambiguity of this novel's eponymous lily motif and, by extension, the ambiguity of nature description in the novel generally.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, the meaning of the novel's title is clear and univocal: at numerous places in the text the lily is treated as a symbol of purity and equated with the novel's pristine, virtuous heroine, Mme de Mortsauf. On a deeper level, however, another meaning can be discerned, although it is never openly proclaimed in the text like the other and may well have not been consciously "intended" as a symbol by Balzac. That second meaning—the second sense in which the lily motif can be understood and thus part of the basis of its ambiguity—is that of the *fleur-de-lis*, symbol of monarchy. The fact that Mme de Mortsauf serves throughout the novel as both the metaphorical tenor of the lily as purity and as the novel's chief spokesman and emblem for Monarchism in itself constitutes prima-facie evidence of the ambiguity. But there is other evidence to be found as well, notably, in one lengthy nature description where natural phenomena like the "lys" consistently appear as having veiled political significance. That scene occurs near the beginning of the novel where it serves almost single-handedly to establish the overall descriptive tone and thematics of the novel. The task of this paper will be to examine the ambiguity of the lily motif and nature generally in that key descriptive scene and then to draw conclusions from the ambiguity regarding the personal and political outlook expressed in the novel.

It is necessary at the outset to identify the narrative source of the ambiguity—to answer the question, for whom is nature ambiguous? That source can be identified as the first-person narrator of the novel, Félix de Vandenesse. He is the character who describes nature in *Le Lys* and who endows it with the peculiar coloration, even deformation, which we shall be concerned here to discover and describe. The fact of Félix's being the source of the ambiguity is not tantamount, I hasten to add, to his fully comprehending it. Indeed dramatic irony is very much a feature of Balzac's novel: that is to say that the reader, seeing Félix see nature, comprehends certain facets of the visual act to which the character, himself, remains blind. The process is not unlike the ironic one utilized by Constant in *Adolphe* or Gide in his *récits*. The first-person narrator looks back and seeks to understand or excuse a presumably reprehensible past conduct. But the retrospective vision, like the past conduct—and indeed the very act of narration itself—emerges as suspect. The result of the first-person narrative, then, is less clarity than increased obscurity, and I might add that this obscurity is crucial to the ambiguity we shall be discovering in nature description in *Le Lys*. For what is at issue is not merely symbolism—a

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<sup>1</sup>Noteworthy critical works on *Le Lys dans la vallée* include the following: Leo Bersani, *Balzac to Beckett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 24-90; Jacques Borel, *Le Lys dans la vallée et les sources profondes de la création balzacienne* (Paris: Corti, 1961); Victor Brombert, *Mouvements premiers* (Paris: Corti, 1972), pp. 177-90; Peter Brooks, "Virtue-Tripping: Notes on *Le Lys dans la vallée*," *Yale French Studies*, 50 (1974), 150-62; Howard Davies, "The Relationship of Language and Desire in *Le Lys dans la vallée*," *Nottingham French Studies*, 16, No. 2 (1977), 50-59; Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, "Le Régime de l'aveu dans *Le Lys dans la vallée*," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 47, No. 175 (1979), 7-16; O. N. Heathcote, "Time and Félix de Vandenesse: Notes on the Opening of *Le Lys dans la vallée*," *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 8 (1979-80), 47-52; Claude Lachet, *Thématique et Technique du Lys dans la vallée de Balzac* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Debrasse, 1978).

multiplicity of connotative meanings that reader, author, or characters may or may not perceive in nature. Rather, *Le Lys* displays a process whereby nature is willfully given two meanings, whereby nature is misread and its meaning rendered obscure.

If one begins by focusing on the treatment of the lily and plant images generally in the lengthy opening description of nature in *Le Lys*, one immediately notes that it is as a distant "point blanc" surrounded by the green valley and the green plants in her garden that Henriette first appears to Félix and assumes in his eyes the resemblance with the lily of the valley: "Sa robe de percale produisait le point blanc que je remarquai dans ses vignes sous un hallebergier. Elle était, comme vous le savez déjà, sans rien savoir encore, LE LYS DE CETTE VALLEE où elle croissait pour le ciel, en la remplissant du parfum de ses vertus."<sup>2</sup> One also notes the spiritual, transcendent qualities that simultaneously make the lily a symbol of Henriette's purity and virtue. Elsewhere in the novel she is continually compared to stars, sun, and other celestial bodies; and in the opening description we are considering, her capacity to capture and reflect light is repeatedly stressed: at one point one reads that "le soleil de midi faisait pétiller les ardoises de son toit et les vitres de ses fenêtres" (p. 29); later in the passage she is referred to as "la femme qui brillait dans ce vaste jardin comme au milieu des buissons verts éclatait la clochette d'un convolvulus" (p. 30).

One might be tempted to go no further and accept the lily of the valley symbol at face value, univocally, were there not odd indications in the text that another, different level of meaning is at issue. For one thing, the indication that Henriette is like the "clochette d'un convolvulus" is followed by the comment that she is "flétrie si l'on y touche." This phrase can be read as evoking not only her own vulnerability and fragility, but that of the declining, slowly degenerating aristocracy in general and of a certain blind, backward-thinking provincial aristocracy in particular. For another thing, there is the following very curious instance of flower imagery: "Les amaryllis, le nénuphar, le lys d'eau, les joncs, les flox décorent les rives de leurs magnifiques tapisseries. Un pont tremblant composé de poutrelles pourries, dont les piles sont couvertes de fleurs, dont les garde-fous plantés d'herbe vivaces et de mousses veloutées se penchent sur la rivière et ne tombent pas . . ." (pp. 30-31). An emphasis once again is placed on the "lys," in this case both through mention of the related species of the "lys d'eau" and its synonym, "le nénuphar," as well as through the naming of the homophonic "amaryllis." What is most striking here, however, is not just the recurrence and modulation of the lily motif but its peculiar function, that of acting together with the other flowers to cover up "un pont tremblant composé de poutrelles pourries." Once again, vulnerability, fragility, even degeneracy and ultimate destruction are the key notions which nature imagery serves here to evoke.

It is important in this regard to emphasize the special role played in the novel by M. de Mortsauf, a character designated by Balzac in a letter to Mme Hanska as "la statue de l'Emigration"<sup>3</sup> and portrayed in the text as having all the physical, mental, moral, and intellectual infirmities of an old, genuine aristocracy which has suffered through the deprivation of exile and which is tragically lacking in the regenerative powers necessary for a true Restoration to occur. Not surprisingly then, in the description we are examining, the notions of vulnerability, fragility, and degeneracy of the aristocracy seem to focus on M. de Mortsauf. It is he whose seemingly inevitable destruction has for whatever reason still not come to pass at

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<sup>2</sup>Honoré de Balzac, *Le Lys dans la vallée* (Paris: Garnier, 1966), p. 29. Subsequent references to the novel are to this edition and will appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Moïse Le Yaouanc in the Introduction to the Garnier edition of the novel, p. lxxxii.

the end of the novel, whose debilitated physical and mental structures, one could say, "se penchent sur la rivière et ne tombent point." It is he whose decadent, even demented state is covered from public view by his wife—"dont les piles sont couvertes de fleurs, dont les garde-fous plantés d'herbe vivaces et de mousses veloutées." Later in the novel, significantly, the same image of flowers masking a crumbling wooden object—a bridge in one case, a door in another—reappears. In both cases, the connection with M. de Mortsauf is made explicit. Referring to Henriette, Félix says, "Aussi, personne ne soupçonnait-il l'incapacité réelle de monsieur de Mortsauf, elle avait paré ses ruines d'un épais manteau de lierre" (p. 64). Elsewhere he recalls, "Nous étions en vue d'une porte de bois par laquelle on entrait dans le parc de Frapesle, et dont il me semble encore voir les deux pilastres ruinés, couverts de plantes grimpantes et de mousses, d'herbes et de ronces. Tout à coup une idée, celle de la mort du comte, passa comme une flèche dans ma cervelle" (p. 102).

It remains to take note regarding plant imagery of the aristocratic overtones that appear in the text in connection with trees; for these overtones extend beyond the trees and affect the reader's interpretation of other botanical phenomena, the lily not least among them. What is at issue is the personification of the trees, as if they were the elegant inhabitants of the world of nobility Félix is entering, along with the metaphorical designation of the trees as crowns, tapestries, laces, and other typical accouterments of the aristocratic appearance. Early in the description, Félix notices "ces lignes de peupliers qui parent de leurs dentelles mobiles ce val d'amour" (p. 29). Later he notes in a similar vein the islands "couronnées de quelques bouquets d'arbres," the trees "qui tapissent la rivière," and the flowers which "décorent les rives de leurs magnifiques tapisseries" (pp. 30-31). Aristocratic overtones also are produced through the emphasis placed further on in the description on the age of the trees—the "noyers antiques" and the "parc orné d'arbres centenaires" (p. 31)—as if they were as old and venerable as the aristocratic families Félix will soon meet or as the chateau which, significantly, is the very first object he perceives in the valley at the beginning of the description. It is not surprising that later in the novel, when Henriette argues the case for Monarchism to Félix, she has recourse to a symbolism of trees and plants. Monarchism, she says, "est comme une sève qui doit s'infiltrer dans les moindres tuyaux capillaires pour vivifier l'arbre, lui conserver sa verdure, développer ses fleurs, et bonifier ses fruits" (p. 157).

Turning away from botanical images, one can now focus on the two separable but related images of the river and the road which the opening description of nature in *Le Lys* displays, taking both of these images, as it is traditional to do, as analogues for progressive historical time. Regarding both the flow of the river and Félix's movements on the road which goes alongside it, one will note that throughout the description Félix describes nature and himself through a strange, even paradoxical combination of movement and stasis, as if wanting at one and the same time to affirm and to deny temporal movement and change. At the beginning, all movement seems arrested: Félix presents himself "assis sous mon noyer"; the noon-day sun seems to be immobilized, as does the river "qui ruisselle au soleil entre deux rives vertes" (p. 29). Yet at the same time, he seems to attribute to nature a will if not perhaps a compulsion to interrupt the descriptive stasis which he himself has imposed. The trees are active decorating the valley ("ces lignes de peupliers qui parent de leurs dentelles mobiles ce val d'amour"), the woods move forward toward the river and the river establishes the contours of the hills ("les bois de chênes qui s'avancent entre les vignobles sur des coteaux que la rivière arrondit toujours différemment"), the horizons actually take flight ("ces horizons estompés qui fuient en se contrariant"); (pp. 29-30). Through Félix's use of active verbs and personified natural objects, movement seems to inhere not only in the river itself, but in all of the natural phenomena which surround it.

Later in the description, there is a repetition of the pattern whereby Félix establishes a descriptive stasis and yet seeks to interrupt it by attributing movement to the natural phenomena he describes. Félix's movements in this case are limited to his entry into the valley ("je descendis") and the perceptual activities that he performs ("mes yeux revenaient," "je vis") or invites the reader to perform ("Figurez-vous"). With nature generally and the river especially, however, there is no such diminution of movement. Especially important in this regard is the emphasis placed in the following passage on the tumultuous flow of the river and the trees growing on its islets and banks: "Figurez-vous trois moulins posés parmi des îles gracieusement découpées, couronnées de quelques bouquets d'arbres au milieu d'une prairie d'eau; quel autre nom donner à ces végétations aquatiques, si vivaces, si bien colorées, qui tapissent la rivière, surgissent au-dessus, ondulent avec elle, se laissent aller à ses caprices et se plient aux tempêtes de la rivière fouettée par la roue des moulins! Ça et là, s'élèvent des masses de gravier sur lesquelles l'eau se brise en y formant des franges où reluit le soleil" (p. 30). Now, if one takes the trees as symbols of the aristocracy—as the text invites us to do and as does the example of other descriptive novelists, Chateaubriand for example—then it is not without significance to note how the trees passively submit to the river's flow: they "surgissent au-dessus, ondulent avec elle, se laissent aller à ses caprices et se plient aux tempêtes." One might say that the trees submit to the tempestuous flow of the river as the aristocracy was forced to do to the tumultuous process of historical change.

Immobility and movement are also contrasted on another occasion in the opening description, although in this case they are not attributed to nature but to Félix alone. Consider the following passage: "Encadrez le tout de noyers antiques, de jeunes peupliers aux feuilles d'or pâle, mettez de gracieuses fabriques au milieu des longues prairies où l'oeil se perd sous un ciel chaud et vapoureux, vous aurez une idée d'un des mille points de vue de ce beau pays. Je suivis le chemin de Saché sur la gauche de la rivière, en observant les détails des collines qui meublent la rive opposée. Puis enfin j'atteignis un parc orné d'arbres centenaires qui m'indiqua le château de Frapesle. J'arrivai précisément à l'heure où la cloche annonçait le déjeuner" (p. 31). At the beginning of this passage, movement seems to be arrested. Directly addressing the reader of his narration, Félix proposes framing the scene ("Encadrez le tout"), thereby fixing it outside of progressive historical time like an aristocratic family portrait hung on the wall of a château. One will also note with regard to the cessation of movement that between "midi" evoked earlier and "l'heure du déjeuner" here, time has barely seemed to progress. Near the end of this passage, however, movement seems to be emphasized. Félix now actually progresses along the road leading to the château: "Je suivis le chemin de Saché sur la gauche de la rivière, en observant les détails des collines qui meublent la rive opposée." Moreover, his movements occur on the left side of the river inhabited by the Chessel family, representative of the new, changing, bourgeois way of life as opposed to the old, unchanging, aristocratic way of the Mortsauf family on the right side. (One is reminded of the similar opposition in Proust's novel between "le côté de chez Swann" and "le côté de Guermantes.") Félix's movements on the left side of the river here prefigure the denouement of the novel. Eventually he will join the changing modern world and will leave behind that world of the Mortsauf family where "l'oeil se perd sous un ciel chaud et vapoureux," that is, in a world of irrevocable, unchanging pastness.

What conclusions can one draw from the existence of the ambiguous nature imagery that has been seen to be at work in Balzac's *Le Lys*? The first and most obvious one is that Félix, the viewer and describer of nature in this novel, evinces a peculiar, persistent urge to impose his subjective vision on nature. The existence of this urge is even emphasized within the description itself. At one point Félix

says that he took the river to be a symbol of infinite love, "sans autre aliment qu'un objet à peine entrevu dont mon âme était rempli" (p. 29). Later he states that he viewed the village as special and unique because of "la poésie qui surabondait en moi" (p. 30). Such an emphasis on the subjective quality of landscape alerts the reader to the possibility of an ironic interpretation of Félix's vision of nature in particular and himself as a character in general. If Félix's visual perceptions are not accurate and objective, then his account of his actions, motives, feelings, and the like—indeed all of the explanation he gives to Natalie during the course of the narration—are perhaps not accurate or objective either.

Other conclusions about the ambiguity of nature in *Le Lys* follow from the first which concerns Félix's subjective vision. One of these conclusions is that Félix's perception of nature mirrors and explains his perception, or rather misperception, of Henriette herself. It is not only as a lily of the valley, but also as a "fleur de lys" that he sees both her and nature, that is, as epiphenomena of the nobility: the aesthetic accouterments and values of aristocracy are the grid for filtering nature and Henriette into his and our consciousness from the first pages of the narrative to the last. In addition to Félix's claiming to see as a lily of the valley what he often sees as a "fleur de lys," there is of course the further misperception of his seeing Henriette as a lily of the valley in the first place: her deathbed letter reveals that she was tormented by sensual desires and was not the embodiment of virtue he conjured up in his imagination. There is a fundamental sense then in which Félix really never succeeded in seeing her as a person in her own right, beyond her social class, at all, just as by blithely proceeding to recount to Natalie his enduring love for Henriette he reveals that he has never succeeded in seeing her as a person, or being aware of her needs or desires, either.

It is not only love but also success and political stature that Félix seeks, although to the end he remains blind to his own materialistic motives—motives which in the final analysis are perfectly concordant with those of the Restoration as it is depicted in the novel. It is significant to note in this context that the first real event of the narration, after the exposition of Félix's unhappy childhood, is the ball given by the duc d'Angoulême to celebrate the Bourbon Restoration where Félix first meets Henriette, a meeting that he subsequently recounts as follows: "Puis tout à coup je rencontraï la femme qui devait aiguillonner sans cesse mes ambitieux désirs, et les combler en me jetant au coeur de la Royauté" (p. 24). The failure at issue in the novel, one might say, is less Henriette's in satisfying Félix's desires than his own in knowing what those desires really were, and acknowledging that they were perhaps more social and political than personal and romantic. There plainly is an ironic ring to Félix's frequent protestations to have had absolutely no interest in politics: for example, "J'ignorais ce qu'était le conseil privé; je ne connaissais rien à la politique ni aux choses du monde; je n'avais d'autre ambition que celle d'aimer Henriette" (p. 106). In fact it is Henriette, as Natalie points out at the end, "qui vous a donné la pairie" (p. 332), just as it is the Monarchist cause to which he is so totally devoted—"il me vit attaché de coeur, de tête et de pied aux Bourbons" (p. 171)—which enables him to achieve the lofty political position to which he aspired. There also is an ironic ring, I might add, to Félix's name, Vandenesse, an anagram of his family motto—"ne se vend pas"—as well as of Vendée, the reactionary rebellion in which Félix is seen to play a role within the pages of the novel. Félix is a reactionary in the opportunistic, vaguely unprincipled sense that characterized the period of the Restoration for Balzac, a period where selling oneself and success were largely synonymous.

Félix's misperception of time, like his misperception of Henriette and Natalie, is also deducible from his ambiguous perception of nature. With respect specifically to the lily motif, O. N. Heathcote notes that there is a dislocation of the sense of

time in Félix's very invention of the metaphor of the lily of the valley.<sup>4</sup> One will perhaps have noted the enigmatic, even incoherent phrase quoted earlier—"elle était, comme vous le savez déjà, sans rien savoir encore, le lys de cette vallée"—in which the reader of Félix's account is presumed by him to know what he is saying before he says it. Heathcote concludes from a phrase such as this that "the novel takes place in a kind of eternal present" and that Félix's misperception of time is such as "to destroy any sense of past which may otherwise be created"; he further concludes that "Natalie's reply shows the reader that Félix does indeed . . . remain for ever trapped in his own a-temporal, verbal creation."<sup>5</sup> Again there is a connection between Félix's way of seeing the world and his aristocratic outlook, that connection being an unconscious need and desire to deny time and change. Such a denial enables the aristocrat to believe that there exist eternal, God-given structures of Monarchy and social class, and that these structures are the ballast on which edifices of the future can be built. Such a denial similarly enables Félix, as describer of nature, to believe that landscape exists as some static aesthetic phenomenon in the eternal present of his own subjective vision. Only reluctantly, would it seem, does he resume his normal movements on the left, progressive side of the river as the description comes to a close. His heart, his mind, his eye remain riveted to the other side—the unchanging, eternal, atemporal world "du côté de Mortsauf."

Another conclusion which can be drawn from the ambiguous treatment of nature in *Le Lys* concerns the aristocracy itself. One will recall that a symbolic reference is made to Henriette in the flower which is "flétrie si l'on y touche" and to her husband in the "pont tremblant composé de poutrelles pourries," and that moreover both of these references can be taken as suggesting the vulnerability, the fragility, even the degeneracy of the aristocracy. Such an interpretation is supported by the presentation in the novel at large of the members of the Mortsauf family (other than Henriette, who paradoxically is the one who dies) as debilitated, feeble, and sickly. Nor is the presentation of other members of the nobility more edifying. The aristocratic mothers of both Félix and Henriette are, like M. de Mortsauf, tyrants; and the king and members of his court emerge as essentially weak and indifferent to any serious human problems or values. Externally and aesthetically the aristocratic way of life may be pleasing and may seem to be an appealing model for the future. But plainly it lacks the substance to sustain serious Monarchistic convictions. How then can one explain the adherence of Félix—and for that matter of Balzac himself—to the Monarchist cause?

One can perhaps best attempt to answer this question in terms of the ambiguity that it has been our concern to discover and discuss above. The ambiguity of Félix's perception of nature, one might say, derives from another, more profound ambiguity, that which he and Balzac entertain with respect to the aristocracy. The latter ambiguity involves a nostalgic, aesthetic attraction on the one hand and a lucid, critical rejection on the other. In this vein, Leo Bersani observes that "*Le Lys dans la vallée* is an extraordinary pessimistic critique of Balzac's conservative principles; it dramatizes both the need for those principles and the bankruptcy of the institutions which embody them."<sup>6</sup> The nostalgic, aesthetic attraction to Monarchism which Félix experiences is apparent in the dwelling on images of flowers, trees, châteaux, and the like in the landscape we have examined. It is also apparent more generally in the poignant portrayal in the novel of the Mortsauf family, even the demented count. Enfeebled, remote from contemporary reality, and doomed to extinction, this family nonetheless embodies a genuine, ancient aristocracy which

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<sup>4</sup>Heathcote, pp. 50-51.

<sup>5</sup>Heathcote, pp. 51, 52.

<sup>6</sup>Bersani, p. 54.

contrasts sharply with the degraded, materialistic counterpart which arose and prospered during the Restoration. It is that genuine aristocracy which the lily symbolizes, and which inspires Félix and Balzac's respect and allegiance.

There is a crucial difference, however, between Balzac and Félix, as there probably was more generally between Balzac and most other men of his time who rallied to the Monarchist cause, who echoed the then popular phrase, "Où sont les fleurs de lys, là est la patrie."<sup>7</sup> That difference is a function of Balzac's lucidity. Félix—and there were undoubtedly many others like him—does not clearly distinguish between politics and love, between nostalgia for the aristocratic way of life and Monarchism as a viable political alternative. Félix's lack of lucidity does not escape Balzac: indeed it is perhaps the true subject and focus of his novel. To promote this focus, Balzac has recourse to ambiguity. Balzac uses ambiguity to dramatize this character's misperception of his own feelings and those of the "lily of the valley" he claimed to love. By surrounding the central metaphor of the novel, the lily, with obscurity, Balzac brings into the penetrating light of novelistic inquiry the similar obscurity which for him and others of his time undoubtedly seemed to enshroud a rapidly changing, profoundly problematic society.

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<sup>7</sup>Fernand Baldensperger, *Le Mouvement des idées dans l'Emigration française* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), p. 305.