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1

The Melodramatic Imagination

Qu'on n'aille pas s'y tromper, ce n'était pas peu de chose que le mélodrame; c'était la moralité de la Révolution!

—Charles Nodier

OVERTURE

There is at the start of Balzac's first major novel, *La Peau de chagrin*, a passage that indicates how we should read Balzac, how he locates and creates his drama, and, more generally, how the melodramatic imagination conceives its representations. When Raphaël de Valentin enters a gambling house to play roulette with his last franc, a shadowy figure crouched behind a counter rises up to ask for the young man's hat. The gesture of surrendering one's hat forthwith elicits a series of questions from the narrator:

Is this some scriptural and providential parable? Isn't it rather a way of concluding a diabolical contract by exacting from you a sort of security? Or may it be to oblige you to maintain a respectful demeanour toward those who are about to win your money? Is it the police, lurking in the sewers of society, trying to find out your hatter's name, or your own, if you've inscribed it on the headband? Or is it, finally, to measure your skull in order to compile an instructive statistic on the cranial capacity of gamblers?¹

The gestures of life call forth a series of interrogations aimed at discovering the meanings implicit in them. The narrative voice is not content to describe and record gesture, to see it simply as a figure in the interplay of persons one with another. Rather, the narrator applies pressure to the gesture, pressure through interrogation, through the evocation of more and more fantastic possibilities, to make it yield meaning, to make it give up to consciousness its full potential as "parable."

Throughout these opening pages of *La Peau de chagrin*, we can observe the narrator pressuring the surface of reality (the surface of his

text) in order to make it yield the full, true terms of his story. In the face of the old man who takes the hat, we are told we can read "the wretchedness of hospital wards, aimless wanderings of ruined men, inquests on countless suicides, life sentences at hard labor, exiles to penal colonies." The gambling house itself elicits a contrast between the "vulgar poetry" of its evening denizens and the "quivering passion" of daytime gamblers. The crowd of spectators is like the populace awaiting an execution at the Place de Grève. Finally we reach this judgment: "Each of the spectators looked for a *drama* in the fate of this single gold piece, perhaps the final scene of a noble life" (9:17).

Use of the word *drama* is authorized here precisely by the kind of pressure which the narrator has exerted upon the surface of things. We have in fact been witnesses to the creation of drama—an exciting, excessive, parabolic story—from the banal stuff of reality. States of being beyond the immediate context of the narrative, and in excess of it, have been brought to bear on it, to charge it with intenser significances. The narrative voice, with its grandiose questions and hypotheses, leads us in a movement through and beyond the surface of things to what lies behind, to the spiritual reality which is the true scene of the highly colored drama to be played out in the novel. We have entered into the drama of Raphaël's last gold piece; that coin has become the token of a superdrama involving life and death, perdition and redemption, heaven and hell, the force of desire caught in a death struggle with the life force. The novel is constantly tensed to catch this essential drama, to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality, to open up the world of spirit.

One could adduce a multitude of other examples. There is always a moment in Balzac's descriptions of the world where the eye's photographic registration of objects yields to the mind's effort to pierce surface, to interrogate appearances. In *Le Père Goriot*, after a few initial lines of description of Mlle Michonneau, the narrator shifts into the interrogatory: "What acid had stripped this creature of her female forms? She must once have been pretty and well-built: was it vice, sorrow, greed? Had she loved too much, been a go-between, or simply a courtesan? Was she expiating the triumphs of an insolent youth?" (2:855). Reality is for Balzac both the scene of drama and mask of the true drama that lies behind, is mysterious, and can only be alluded to, questioned, then gradually elucidated. His drama is of the true, wrested from the real; the streets and walls of Paris, under pressure of

the narrator's insistence, become the elements of a Dantesque vision, leading the reader into infernal circles: "as, step by step, daylight fades, and the song of the guide goes hollow when the visitor descends into the catacombs." (2:848).

The same process may be observed in Balzac's dramatizations of human encounters. They tend toward intense, excessive representations of life which strip the facade of manners to reveal the essential conflicts at work—moments of symbolic confrontation which fully articulate the terms of the drama. In *Gobseck*, for instance, the sinning Comtesse de Restaud, struggling to preserve an inheritance for her two illegitimate children, is caught in the act of trying to extort her husband's secrets from the oldest son (the legitimate child) when the comte rises from his deathbed:

"Ah!" cried the comte, who had opened the door and appeared suddenly, almost naked, already as dried and shriveled as a skeleton. . . . "You watered my life with sorrows, and now you would trouble my death, pervert the mind of my own son, turn him into a vicious person," he cried in a rasping voice.

The comtesse threw herself at the feet of this dying man, whom the last emotions of life made almost hideous, and poured out her tears. "Pardon, pardon!" she cried.

"Had you any pity for me?" he asked. "I let you devour your fortune, now you want to devour mine and ruin my son."

"All right, yes, no pity for me, be inflexible," she said. "But the children! Condemn your wife to live in a convent, I will obey; to expiate my faults toward you I will do all you command; but let the children live happily! Oh, the children, the children!"

"I have only one child," answered the comte, stretching his shriveled arm toward his son in a gesture of despair. [2:665]

I have deliberately chosen an extreme example here, and in quoting it out of its context, I run the risk of simply confirming the view, popularized by Martin Turnell and others, that Balzac is a vulgar melodramatist whose versions of life are cheap, overwrought, and hollow. Balzac's use of hyperbolic figures, lurid and grandiose events, masked relationships and disguised identities, abductions, slow-acting poisons, secret societies, mysterious parentage, and other elements from the melodramatic repertory has repeatedly been the object of critical attack, as have, still more, his forcing of narrative voice to the breathless pitch of melodrama, his insistence that life be seen always

through highly colored lenses. "His melodrama," Turnell comments, "reminds us not so much of Simenon or even Mrs. Christie as of the daily serial in the BBC's Light Programme." In his most waspish *Scrutiny* manner, Turnell adds, "It must be confessed that our experience in reading Balzac is not always very elevated and that his interests are by no means those of the adult."²

To the extent that the "interests of the adult" imply repression, sacrifice of the pleasure principle, and a refusal to live beyond the ordinary, Turnell is right, but his terms of judgment blind him to Balzac's characteristic drive to push *through* manners to deeper sources of being. Such representations as the scene I quoted from *Gobseck* are necessary culminations to the kind of drama Balzac is trying to evoke. The progress of the narrative elicits and authorizes such terminal articulations. The scene represents a victory over repression, a climactic moment at which the characters are able to confront one another with full expressivity, to fix in large gestures the meaning of their relations and existence. As in the interrogations of *La Peau de chagrin* we saw a desire to push through surface to a "drama" in the realm of emotional and spiritual reality, so in the scene from *Gobseck* we find a desire to make starkly articulate all that this family conflict has come to be about.

The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship. They assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions. Life tends, in this fiction, toward ever more concentrated and totally expressive gestures and statements. Raphaël de Valentin is given a lesson by the old antiques dealer: "*Desire* sets us afire, and *power* destroys us"—terms which reveal the true locus and the stakes of his drama. Eugène de Rastignac, in *Le Père Goriot*, is summoned to choose between Obedience, represented by the family, and Revolt, represented by the outlaw Vautrin. The metaphoric texture of the prose itself suggests polarization into moral absolutes: Rastignac's "last tear of youth," shed over Goriot's grave, from the earth where it falls "rebounds into heaven." The world is subsumed by an underlying manichaeism, and the narrative creates the excitement of its drama by putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things—just as description of the

surfaces of the modern metropolis pierces through to a mythological realm where the imagination can find a habitat for its play with large moral entities. If we consider the prevalence of hidden relationships and masked personages and occult powers in Balzac, we find that they derive from a sense that the novelist's true subject is hidden and masked. The site of his drama, the ontology of his true subject, is not easily established: the narrative must push toward it, the pressure of the prose must uncover it. We might say that the center of interest and the scene of the underlying drama reside within what we could call the "moral occult," the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality. The moral occult is not a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth. It bears comparison to unconscious mind, for it is a sphere of being where our most basic desires and interdictions lie, a realm which in quotidian existence may appear closed off from us, but which we must accede to since it is the realm of meaning and value. The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult.

We shall return to these summary formulations. It is important first to extend our understanding of the kind of representation of social life offered by melodrama of manners, and to extend the demonstration beyond Balzac by calling upon his greatest admirer among subsequent novelists, Henry James. The melodramatic tenor of James's imagination was beautifully caught by his secretary, Theodora Bosanquet:

When he walked out of the refuge of his study into the world and looked about him, he saw a place of torment, where creatures of prey perpetually thrust their claws into the quivering flesh of the doomed, defenseless children of light.³

James's moral manichaeism is the basis of a vision of the social world as the scene of dramatic choice between heightened moral alternatives, where every gesture, however frivolous or insignificant it may seem, is charged with the conflict between light and darkness, salvation and damnation, and where people's destinies and choices of life seem finally to have little to do with the surface realities of a situation, and much more to do with an intense inner drama in which consciousness must purge itself and assume the burden of moral sainthood. The theme of renunciation which sounds through James's novels—Isabel Archer's return to Gilbert Osmond, Strether's return to Woollett, Densher's rejection of Kate Croy—is incomprehensible and

unjustifiable except as a victory within the realm of a moral occult which may be so inward and personal that it appears restricted to the individual's consciousness, predicated on the individual's "sacrifice to the ideal."

As Jacques Barzun has emphasized, James always creates a high degree of excitement from his dramatized moral dilemmas, partly because of his preoccupation with evil as a positive force ever menacing violent conflict and outburst.⁴ Balzac did an apprenticeship in the *roman noir*, nourished himself with Gothic novel, melodrama, and frenetic adventure story, and invented cops-and-robbers fiction. These are modes which insist that reality can be exciting, can be equal to the demands of the imagination, which in Balzac's case means primarily the moral imagination, at play with large and basic ethical conflicts. With James, the same insistence has been further transposed into the drama of moral consciousness, so that excitement derives from the characters' own dramatized apprehension of clashing moral forces. A famous sentence from the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* suggests James's intent. He is describing Isabel's vigil of discovery, the night she sits up and makes her mind move from discovery to discovery about Gilbert Osmond. "It is," says James, "a representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as 'interesting' as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate."⁵ The terms of reference in the adventure story are mocked; yet they remain the terms of reference: moral consciousness must be an adventure, its recognition must be the stuff of a heightened drama.

The excitement and violence of the melodrama of consciousness are obviously and derivatively Balzacian in such an early novel as *The American*. Christopher Newman's initiation into the epistemology of good and evil is represented through a dark ancestral crime hidden beneath, and suggested by, the gilded surface of Faubourg Saint-Germain society: depths open beneath the well-guarded social image of the Bellegarde family; crisis is revelation of sin, and Newman's consciousness must open to receive the lurid, flashing lights of melodrama. But even in James's latest and most subtle fiction—probably most of all in this fiction—the excitement of plot is generated almost exclusively from melodramatic conflict within the realm of the moral occult. There is a pressure similar to Balzac's on the textual surface, to make reality yield the terms of the drama of this moral occult. To take this time deliberately a low-keyed example—standing

in apparent opposition to the quotation from *Gobseck* and thereby suggesting the range of the mode—from *The Ambassadors*: following the revelation of Mme de Vionnet's relationship with Chad, Strether goes to pay her a final visit. He stands for the last time in her noble apartment:

From beyond this, and as from a great distance—beyond the court, beyond the *corps de logis* forming the front—came, as if excited and exciting, the vague voice of Paris. Strether had all along been subject to sudden gusts of fancy in connexion with such matters as these—odd starts of the historic sense, suppositions and divinations with no warrant but their intensity. Thus and so, on the eve of the great recorded dates, the days and nights of revolution, the sounds had come in, the omens, the beginnings broken out. They were the smell of revolution, the smell of the public temper—or perhaps simply the smell of blood.⁶

That this vision is ascribed to Strether's "gusts of fancy" does not really hedge the bet. James makes the "unwarranted" vision exist, wrests forth from "beyond" the facades of Paris sinister implications of impending disaster and chaos, and pervades the final encounter of Strether and Mme de Vionnet with "the smell of blood." Their relation has all along been based on Strether's "exorbitant" commitment to "save her" if he could. Here, the evocation of bloody sacrifice, eliciting a state of moral exorbitance, authorizes the intensity of the encounter, where Strether sees Mme de Vionnet as resembling Mme Roland on the scaffold, and where he moves to his most penetrating vision of the realm of moral forces in which she struggles. "With this sharpest perception yet, it was like a chill in the air to him, it was almost appalling, that a creature so fine could be, by mysterious forces, a creature so exploited" (2:284). Strether, and James, have pierced through to a medium in which Mme de Vionnet can be seen as a child of light caught in the claws of the mysterious birds of prey. After this perception, when Strether speaks it is to say, "You're afraid for your life!"—an articulation that strikes home, makes Mme de Vionnet give up "all attempt at a manner," and break down in tears. This stark articulation, which clarifies and simplifies Mme de Vionnet's position and passion, which puts her in touch with elemental humanity ("as a maidservant crying for her young man," thinks Strether) and with the ravages of time, finally differs little from the exchanges of the Comte and Comtesse de Restaud in *Gobseck*. The Jamesian mode is subtler,

more refined, but it aims at the same thing: a total articulation of the grandiose moral terms of the drama, an assertion that what is being played out on the plane of manners is charged from the realm of the moral occult, that gestures within the world constantly refer us to another, hyperbolic set of gestures where life and death are at stake.

There is a passage from James's 1902 essay on Balzac (he wrote five in all) that touches closely on the problem of melodramatic representation. A notable point about the passage is that it constitutes a reparation, for in his 1875 essay, in *French Poets and Novelists*, James had singled out, as an example of Balzac's ineptitude in portrayal of the aristocracy, the episode in *Illusions perdues* where Mme de Bargeton, under the influence of her Parisian relation the Marquise d'Espard, drops her young provincial attachment, Lucien de Rubempré. The two women desert Lucien, whose dress is ridiculous and whose plebeian parentage has become public knowledge, in the middle of the opera and sneak out of the loge. Aristocratic ladies would not so violate manners, James argues in the earlier essay, would not behave in so flustered and overly dramatic a fashion. His view in 1902 is more nuanced and marks an effort to come to terms with those features of Balzacian representation that he had previously criticized:

The whole episode, in "Les Illusions perdues," of Madame de Bargeton's "chucking" Lucien de Rubempré, on reaching Paris with him, under pressure of Madame d'Espard's shockability as to his coat and trousers and other such matters, is either a magnificent lurid document or the baseless fabric of a vision. The great wonder is that, as I rejoice to put it, we can never really discover which, and that we feel as we read that we can't, and that we suffer at the hands of no other author this particular helplessness of immersion. It is *done*—we are always thrown back on that; we can't get out of it; all we can do is to say that the true itself can't be more than done and that if the false in this way equals it we must give up looking for the difference. Alone among novelists Balzac has the secret of an insistence that somehow makes the difference nought. He warms his facts into life—as witness the certainty that the episode I just cited has absolutely as much of that property as if perfect matching had been achieved. If the great ladies in question *didn't* behave, wouldn't, couldn't have behaved, like a pair of nervous snobs, why so much the worse, we say to ourselves, for the great ladies in question. We

know them so—they owe their being to our so seeing them; whereas we never can tell ourselves how we should otherwise have known them or what quantity of being they would on a different footing have been able to put forth.⁷

James's somewhat baffled admiration here seems to arise from a perception of "surreality" in Balzac's representation of the episode: the fact that its hyperbolic mode and intensity make it figure more perfectly than would an accurate portrayal of manners what is really at stake for the characters and in their relationships. If reality does not permit of such self-representations, he seems to say, then so much the worse for reality. By the manner in which the thing is "done"—by the quality of the narrative performance—we know the characters essentially; we are, if not in the domain of reality, in that of truth.

James poses the alternative of judging Balzac's episode to be "either a magnificent lurid document or the baseless fabric of a vision," only to conclude that we cannot tell which it is. This alternative, and the admission of defeat in the attempt to choose, strikes close to the center of the problem of melodrama. The melodramatic imagination needs both document and vision, and it is centrally concerned with the extrapolation from one to another. When the Balzacian narrator pressures the details of reality to make them yield the terms of his drama, when he insists that Raphaël's gestures refer to a parabolic story, or when he creates a hyperbolic scene of Lucien de Rubempré's social defeat, he is using the things and gestures of the real world, of social life, as kinds of metaphors that refer us to the realm of spiritual reality and latent moral meanings. Things cease to be merely themselves, gestures cease to be merely tokens of social intercourse whose meaning is assigned by a social code; they become the vehicles of metaphors whose tenor suggests another kind of reality. In *The Ambassadors*, Strether's discovery of Mme de Vionnet's affair with Chad is essentially a vehicle for discovery of her entrapment and exploitation by "mysterious forces."

I. A. Richards has given an encompassing definition of metaphor as a "transaction between contexts," and in all these cases there is such a transaction: pressure on the primary context is such that things and gestures are made to release occult meanings, to transfer significance into another context.⁸ Both Balzac and James weave a rich texture of metaphor in their prose, and the metaphors most often create an expanded moral context for the narrative. But it is not a question of

metaphoric texture alone; it is rather that, to the melodramatic imagination, significant things and gestures are necessarily metaphorical in nature because they must refer to and speak of something else. Everything appears to bear the stamp of meaning, which can be expressed, pressed out, from it. The dandy de Marsay, refusing to recognize Lucien de Rubempré in *Illusions perdues*, lets his lorgnon fall "so singularly it seemed the blade of the guillotine" (4:624). In *Le Lys dans la vallée*, the narrator reads in the "forced smile" of the dying Mme de Mortsauf "the irony of vengeance, the anticipation of pleasure, the intoxication of the soul and the rage of disappointment" (8:1003). If with James we are tempted to believe that gestures receive their charge from social manners—this is after all the classic view of James—we find that, on the contrary, social signification is only the merest starting point for an immense construction of connotation. One could adduce this moment in *The Wings of the Dove* when Merton Densher learns from Milly Theale's servant that Milly can't receive him—his, and our, first indication that crisis is at hand:

[Eugenio] now, as usual, slightly smiled at him in the process—but ever so slightly, this time, his manner also being attuned, our young man made out, to the thing, whatever it was, that constituted the rupture of peace.

This manner, while they stood for a long minute facing each other over all they didn't say, played a part as well in the sudden jar to Densher's protected state. It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for them alike, so that they were together in their anxiety, if they really could have met on it; a Venice of cold, lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges.⁹

The Jamesian prestidigitation is in full evidence here. Eugenio's slight, too slight smile is the detailed token which indicates a larger manner which in turn indicates a "rupture of peace"—already the vocabulary is taking on strong coloration—and this rupture then becomes the passageway for a flood of evil, conjuring into existence a new Venice of storm, darkness, and suppressed violence.

We will later pursue in more detail the questions posed by this metaphoricity of gesture that evokes meanings beyond its literal configuration. We may already be struck by the seeming paradox that

the total expressivity assigned to gesture is related to the ineffability of what is to be expressed. Gesture is read as containing such meanings because it is postulated as the metaphorical approach to what cannot be said. If we often come perilously close, in reading these novelists, to a feeling that the represented world won't bear the weight of the significances placed on it, this is because the represented world is so often being used metaphorically, as sign of something else. If we consider in this light the implications of works like *The Beast in the Jungle* and *The Sacred Fount*, we find that the more elusive the tenor of the metaphor becomes—the more difficult it becomes to put one's finger on the nature of the spiritual reality alluded to—the more highly charged is the vehicle, the more strained with pressure to suggest a meaning beyond. The violence and extremism of emotional reaction and moral implication that we find in the prose of both James and Balzac may in part derive from their lack of clear foundation, their location in an ethical consciousness that cannot be shown to correspond evidently and necessarily to the way life is lived by most people. To the uncertainty of the tenor corresponds the exaggeration, the heightening of the vehicle. The heightening and hyperbole, the polarized conflict, the menace and suspense of the representations may be made necessary by the effort to perceive and image the spiritual in a world voided of its traditional Sacred, where the body of the ethical has become a sort of *deus absconditus* which must be sought for, postulated, brought into man's existence through the play of the spiritualist imagination. We cannot, however, go farther without saying more about melodrama, our understanding of the concept and use of the word, its historical and ideological situation, and its nature.

THE USES OF MELODRAMA

I have tried, in the opening pages, to suggest the pervasive melodramatism of two such important novelists as Balzac and James—the very consubstantiality of melodrama with the mode and vision of their fiction. But I have not yet said anything in explication or justification of the word melodrama, its appropriateness as a critical term, the reasons for choosing a label that has a bad reputation and has usually been used pejoratively. The connotations of the word are probably similar for us all. They include: the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good,

and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety. The few critics who have given serious attention to melodrama have noted its psychological function in allowing us the pleasures of self-pity and the experience of wholeness brought by the identification with "monopathic" emotion, in Robert Heilman's phrase.¹⁰ Eric Bentley in particular has argued the importance of melodrama as a concept opposed to naturalism, its expression of emotion in the pure histrionic form of dreams, its representation of the quintessentially dramatic.¹¹ In his discussion of four dramatic types (melodrama, farce, tragedy, comedy), Bentley sets melodrama first, because it embodies the root impulse of drama—the need for dramatization, we might say, for acting out. The term seems useful, even necessary, because it points, as no other word quite does, to a mode of high emotionalism and stark ethical conflict that is neither comic nor tragic in persons, structure, intent, effect. That the term covers and, in common usage, most often refers to a cheap and banal melodrama—to soap opera—need not decrease its usefulness: there is a range from high to low examples in any literary field, and the most successful melodrama belongs to a coherent mode that rewards attention, in its literal as well as in its "extrapolated" forms. What I will say about melodrama in general will, I think, be relevant to the low examples as well as the high, with the difference that, as in all art, the low is attempting less, risking less, is more conventional and less self-conscious. At its most ambitious, the melodramatic mode of conception and representation may appear to be the very process of reaching a fundamental drama of the moral life and finding the terms to express it.

It might be idle to use the term melodrama were not the literal reference of the word also relevant to our critical perspective. Working back from the adjective *melodramatic*, used to describe such novelists as Balzac and James, one finds that melodrama proper, stage melodrama, constitutes a viable and important context. Considering mainly the "classical" melodrama as it was first established in France at the dawn of the nineteenth century, we find a fully realized, coherent theatrical mode whose structures and characteristics, in their very purity and even crudity, can teach us to read a whole body of modern literature with a finer perception of its project. Without now entering into the characteristics of stage melodrama (the subject of the next chapter) we can note that we find there an intense emotional and ethical drama based on the manichaeistic struggle of good and evil, a

world where what one lives for and by is seen in terms of, and as determined by, the most fundamental psychic relations and cosmic ethical forces. The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world. Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order. Man is seen to be, and must recognize himself to be, playing on a theatre that is the point of juncture, and of clash, of imperatives beyond himself that are non-mediated and irreducible. This is what is most real in the universe. The spectacular enactments of melodrama seek constantly to express these forces and imperatives, to bring them to striking revelation, to impose their evidence.

In considering melodrama, we are in a sense talking about a form of theatricality which will underlie novelistic efforts at representation—which will provide a model for the making of meaning in fictional dramatizations of existence. The nineteenth-century novel needs such a theatricality, as we shall see, to get its meaning across, to invest in its renderings of life a sense of memorability and significance. With the rise of the novel and of melodrama, we find the entry into literature of a new moral and aesthetic category, that of the "interesting." Its first theoretician may be Diderot, in his effort to establish the new genre of *drame*, which owes much to the novels of Richardson and in some ways prefigures melodrama. Diderot's definition of *le genre sérieux*, intermediate between tragedy and comedy—but explicitly not a mixture of the two—addresses itself to the "interesting" in life. What he proposes is a serious attention to the *drama* of the *ordinary*: the "picture of the misfortunes that surround us," the representation of "dangers concerning which you must have trembled for your parents, your friends, yourselves."¹² This should not be read as a recommendation of naturalistic "realism." On the contrary, Diderot wants to exploit the dramatics and excitement discoverable within the real, to heighten in dramatic gesture the moral crises and peripeties of life. The *drame* is characterized by its specific form of the sublime, which Diderot defines through examples of hypothetical speeches: the father who has been nursed by his son in old age pronounces, "My son, we are even. I gave you life, and you have restored it to me"; or again, "Always tell the truth. . . . I so beg you by these feet that I warmed in my hands when you were in the cradle."¹³ These enunciations, like the situations that frame them, possess the precise "sublimity" of melodramatic rhetoric: the emphatic articulation of simple truths and relationships, the

clarification of the cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures. We are near the beginnings of a modern aesthetic in which Balzac and James will fully participate: the effort to make the "real" and the "ordinary" and the "private life" interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lay bare the true stakes.

The word melodrama means, originally, a drama accompanied by music. It appears to have first been used in this sense by Rousseau, to describe a play in which he sought a new emotional expressivity through the mixture of spoken soliloquy, pantomime, and orchestral accompaniment.¹⁴ The word then came to characterize a popular drama derived from pantomime (itself accompanied by music) that did not fit within any of the accepted genres. Music was an important element in Diderot's aesthetics; it was given a durable role in nineteenth-century theatre and then became a staple in the contemporary form that most relayed and supplanted melodrama, the cinema. Jean-Paul Sartre has well described the effect of musical accompaniment in the silent film, the kind of clear identity it provided for character and incident, the rigorous necessity it conferred on plot;¹⁵ and we are aware of how in the speaking film it still determines mode and meaning. Even though the novel has no literal music, this connotation of the term melodrama remains relevant. The emotional drama needs the desemanticized language of music, its evocation of the "ineffable," its tones and registers. Style, thematic structuring, modulations of tone and rhythm and voice—musical patterning in a metaphorical sense—are called upon to invest plot with some of the inexorability and necessity that in pre-modern literature derived from the substratum of myth.

One might be tempted to consider melodrama as a constant of the imagination and a constant among literary modes: it could be (as some critics have proposed for the terms *baroque* and *romanticism*) one typological pole, detectable at all epochs, as Heilman suggests in his discussions of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. Such a conception of the term is no doubt valid; one could reasonably, for instance, talk of the melodramatic in Euripides in distinction to the tragic in Sophocles.¹⁶ But melodrama as we need the term—as it demonstrates its usefulness—appears to be a peculiarly modern form, and there is a specific relevance in the genre labeled melodrama as it comes into being in an historical context. The origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. This is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and

to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms—tragedy, comedy of manners—that depended on such a society. Melodrama does not simply represent a "fall" from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern. When the revolutionary Saint-Just exclaims, "Republican government has as its principle virtue; or if not, terror,"¹⁷ he is using the manichaeistic terms of melodrama, arguing its logic of the excluded middle, and imaging a situation—the moment of revolutionary suspension—where the word is called upon to make present and to impose a new society, to legislate the regime of virtue. A new world, a new chronology, a new religion, a new morality lay within the grasp of the revolutionary legislator and, particularly, in the power of his verbal representations. The Revolution attempts to sacralize law itself, the Republic as the institution of morality. Yet it necessarily produces melodrama instead, incessant struggle against enemies, without and within, branded as villains, suborners of morality, who must be confronted and expunged, over and over, to assure the triumph of virtue. Like the oratory of the Revolution, melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and *raison d'être* the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths. It says them over and over in clear language, it rehearses their conflicts and combats, it reenacts the menace of evil and the eventual triumph of morality made operative and evident. While its social implications may be variously revolutionary or conservative, it is in all cases radically democratic, striving to make its representations clear and legible to everyone. We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era.

This claim needs further attention. The Revolution can be seen as the convulsive last act in a process of desacralization that was set in motion at the Renaissance, passed through the momentary compromise of Christian humanism, and gathered momentum during the Enlightenment—a process in which the explanatory and cohesive

force of sacred myth lost its power, and its political and social representations lost their legitimacy. In the course of this process, tragedy, which depends on the communal partaking of the sacred body—as in the mass—became impossible.¹⁸ The crucial moment of passage could no doubt be located somewhere in the seventeenth century. Racine stands emblematically as the last tragic playwright (Milton as the last epic poet) and his career has much to tell us about the increasing difficulties encountered in the apprehension and representation of communal sacred imperatives. The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, at the close of the seventeenth century, was the symbolic annunciation of literature's divorce from the mythic substratum that had sustained it, its incipient privatization and desacralization.

Yet by the end of the Enlightenment, there was clearly a renewed thirst for the Sacred, a reaction to desacralization expressed in the vast movement we think of as Romanticism. The reaction both reasserted the need for some version of the Sacred and offered further proof of the irremediable loss of the Sacred in its traditional, categorical, unifying form. Mythmaking could now only be individual, personal; and the promulgation of ethical imperatives had to depend on an individual act of self-understanding that would then—by an imaginative or even a terroristic leap—be offered as the foundation of a general ethics. In fact, the entity making the strongest claim to sacred status tends more and more to be personality itself. From amid the collapse of other principles and criteria, the individual ego declares its central and overriding value, its demand to be the measure of all things. The *incipit* of modernity is the first page of Rousseau's *Confessions*, with its insistence on the uniqueness of his individual inner being, his difference from all other men, and on the necessity of expressing that being in its totality. The importance attached by Rousseau to his decision to "say all," *tout dire*, is a measure of the personalization and inwardness of post-sacred ethics, the difficulty of their location and expression.¹⁹ A manic analogue can be found in Sade's effort to "say all" the possible crimes that are permitted in nature, in order to prove that the only principle to be observed is that of the individual's totalistic pleasure. Melodrama represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms. Melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized: they are assigned to, they inhabit persons who indeed have no psychological complexity but who are strongly characterized.

Most notably, evil is villainy; it is a swarthy, cape-enveloped man with a deep voice. Good and evil can be named as persons are named—and melodramas tend in fact to move toward a clear nomination of the moral universe. The ritual of melodrama involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them. It can offer no terminal reconciliation, for there is no longer a clear transcendent value to be reconciled to. There is, rather, a social order to be purged, a set of ethical imperatives to be made clear.

Of particular pertinence in any discussion of desacralization and the response to it are two early Romantic ("pre-Romantic") forms that in fact nourish one another, melodrama and the Gothic novel. The Gothic novel stands most clearly in reaction to desacralization and the pretensions of rationalism; it represents, in D. P. Varma's phrase, a "quest for the numinous."²⁰ It reasserts the presence, in the world, of forces that cannot be accounted for by the daylight self and the self-sufficient mind. Yet the Gothicists typically discover that this reassertion of spiritual forces and occult issues hidden in the phenomenal world cannot lead to the resacralization of experience. The status of the Sacred as "wholly other"—in Rudolf Otto's phrase—as a realm of being and value recognized to be apart from and superior to man, is gone and is irrecoverable. Of the *mysterium tremendum*, which Otto defines as the essence of the Holy, only the *tremendum* can be convincingly revived.²¹ This issue, in fact, is given a dramatization in M. G. Lewis' *The Monk* (along with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the most interesting and intelligent of the Gothic novels) in relation to the problem of guilt and its definition. The monk's temptress, Matilda, proposes to call upon diabolical aid in the seduction of the virginal Antonia; and Ambrosio, who still retains vestigial belief in the Christian paradox of salvation, resists: "No, no, Matilda, I will not ally myself with God's enemy." In reply, Matilda is fiercely logical in her description of the changed ontology of the supernatural and Ambrosio's altered relationship to it:

Are you then God's friend at present? . . . Are you not planning the destruction of innocence, the ruin of a creature whom he formed in the mould of angels? If not of daemons, whose aid would you invoke to forward this laudable design? Will the seraphims protect it, conduct Antonia to your arms, and sanction with their ministry your illicit pleasures? Absurd! But I am not deceived, Ambrosio! It is not virtue which makes you reject my

offer; you *would* accept it, but you *dare* not. 'Tis not the crime which holds your hand, but the punishment; 'tis not respect for God which restrains you, but the terror of his vengeance!²²

In her logic of the excluded middle (the very logic of melodrama), Matilda demonstrates that Ambrosio has moved out from under the mantle of the Sacred, and that ethics are now determined, not by virtue, but by terror. Her argument images a world in which God exists still, but no longer as holy mystery and as moral principle eliciting love, worship, and respect. No longer the source and guarantor of ethics, "God" has become an interdiction, a primitive force within nature that strikes fear in men's hearts but does not move them to allegiance and worship. Guilt, in the largest sense, may itself derive from an anxiety produced by man's failure to have maintained a relation to the Sacred; it must now be redefined in terms of self-punishment, which requires terror, interdiction of transgression, retribution. As with the revolutionary legislator Saint-Just, we have a new alternative basis for the ethical community: a sentimental virtue (of the type often urged in Diderot's aesthetics) or else a retributive, purgative terror.

The nature of the traditional idea of the Sacred is clarified in Clifford Geertz' definition of the status it maintains in "primitive" cultures: "The holy bears within it everywhere a sense of intrinsic obligation: it not only encourages devotion, it demands it; it not only induces intellectual assent, it enforces emotional commitment."²³ A true Sacred is evident, persuasive, and compelling, a system both of mythic explanation and implicit ethics. The traditional conception of the *mysterium tremendum* requires man's sense of dependence in relation to a "wholly other," and his feeling of being covered by it. The origin of religious feeling, according to Otto, lies in the "primal numinous awe," in a religious dread that may have at its root "demonic dread." The radical emotion is a feeling of the "eerie" and "uncanny," then elaborated into a concept in which the idea of awfulness and majesty exists in relation to the numen. Matilda's theology starts from the same point, but then evolves toward what a Christian theologian would see as a perversion, the belief in spooks and spirits, where "God" is merely one figure in a manichaeistic demonology. It is as if, coming out of the Enlightenment, man had to reinvent the sense of the Sacred from its source—but discovered it now skewed and narcissistically fascinated by its point of origin. There is a reassertion of magic

and taboo, a recognition of the diabolical forces which inhabit our world and our inner being. Since these forces achieve no sacred status as wholly other, they appear, rather, to abide within nature and, particularly, within nature's creature, man. If the *tremendum* has reasserted its presence and force against the reductions of rationalism, the *mysterium* that it should modify has been displaced from without to within. We are led back to the sources of the "uncanny" in the processes of desire and repression analyzed by Freud.²⁴ The desacralization and sentimentalization of ethics leads us—as Diderot discovered in reading Richardson—into "the recesses of the cavern," there to discover "the hideous Moor" hidden in our motives and desires.²⁵

The Gothic castle, with its pinnacles and dungeons, crenellations, moats, drawbridges, spiraling staircases and concealed doors, realizes an architectural approximation of the Freudian model of the mind, particularly the traps laid for the conscious by the unconscious and the repressed. The Gothic novel seeks an epistemology of the depths; it is fascinated by what lies hidden in the dungeon and the sepulcher. It sounds the depths, bringing to violent light and enactment the forces hidden and entrapped there. *The Monk*—in which all the major characters are finally compelled to descend into the sepulcher of St. Clare, there to perform their most extreme acts—belongs to a moment of "claustal" literature, fascinated by the constrained and hidden, determined to release its energies.²⁶ The content of the depths is one version of the "moral occult," the realm of inner imperatives and demons, and the Gothic novel dramatizes again and again the importance of bringing this occult into man's waking, social existence, of saying its meaning and acting out its force. The frenzy of the Gothic, the thunder of its rhetoric, and the excess of its situations image both the difficulty and the importance of the breaking through of repression, where victory is achieved, as in melodrama, by finding the true stakes of the drama.

The Monk, this exemplary Gothic novel written at the dead end of the Age of Reason, at the intersection of revolution and reaction, offers a particularly forceful dramatization of passage into an anxious new world where the Sacred is no longer viable, yet rediscovery of the ethical imperatives that traditionally depended on it is vital. Rediscovery would then be the task of the individual ethical consciousness in struggle with an occult domain. Melodrama shares many characteristics with the Gothic novel, and not simply in the subjects that were traded back and forth between the two genres. It is equally

preoccupied with nightmare states, with clausturation and thwarted escape, with innocence buried alive and unable to voice its claim to recognition. Particularly, it shares the preoccupation with evil as a real, irreducible force in the world, constantly menacing outburst. Melodrama is less directly interested in the reassertion of the numinous for its own sake than in its ethical corollaries. Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible. It tends to diverge from the Gothic novel in its optimism, its claim that the moral imagination can open up the angelic spheres as well as the demonic depths and can allay the threat of moral chaos. Melodrama is indeed, typically, not only a moralistic drama but the drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to "prove" the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men.

I am not making an argument for the direct influence of melodrama proper on novelists like Balzac and James (though this influence is in fact discernible), I am rather suggesting that perception of the melodramatic in their work can usefully be grounded and extended through reference to melodrama. Melodrama is the reductive, literalistic version of the mode to which they belong. The world of melodrama constitutes a temptation for such as Balzac and James because it offers a complete set of attitudes, phrases, gestures coherently conceived toward dramatization of essential spiritual conflict. It provides the expressive premises and the clear set of metaphors that they will exploit in extrapolated form, with a more problematical sense of the relation between vehicle and tenor.

Such writers as Balzac and James need melodrama because their deep subject, the locus of their true drama, has come to be what we have called the "moral occult": the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives that is not clearly visible within reality, but which they believe to be operative there, and which demands to be uncovered,

registered, articulated. In the absence of a true Sacred (and in the absence indeed of any specific religious belief of their own) they continue to believe that what is most important in a man's life is his ethical drama and the ethical implications of his psychic drama. Yet here they are dealing in quantities and entities that have only an uncertain ontology and, especially, an uncertain visibility: they are not necessarily seen in the same manner, if perceived at all, by an audience, since the social cohesion of an earlier society with a greater community of belief no longer obtains. In the manner of the melodramatist, such writers must locate, express, demonstrate, prove the very terms in which they are dealing. They must wrest them forth from behind the facades of life, show their meaning and their operation. Precisely to the extent that they feel themselves dealing in concepts and issues that have no certain status or justification, they have recourse to the demonstrative, heightened representations of melodrama.

We might, finally, do well to recognize the melodramatic mode as a central fact of the modern sensibility (I take Romanticism to be the genesis of the modern, of the sensibility within which we are still living), in that modern art has typically felt itself to be constructed on, and over, the void, postulating meanings and symbolic systems which have no certain justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted social code. The mad quest of Mallarmé for a Book that would be "the Orphic explication of the earth," of Yeats for a synthetic mythology which would enable him to hold "in a single thought reality and justice," of Norman Mailer for dreams adequate to the moon—these are all versions of a reaction to the vertiginous feeling of standing over the abyss created when the necessary center of things has been evacuated and dispersed. Starting perhaps from Rousseau's decision that he must "say all" in his "enterprise without example," there is a desperate effort to renew contact with the scattered ethical and psychic fragments of the Sacred through the representation of fallen reality, insisting that behind reality, hidden by it yet indicated within it, there is a realm where large moral forces are operative, where large choices of ways of being must be made. The Promethean search to illuminate man's quotidian existence by the reflected flame of the higher cosmic drama constitutes one of the principal quests of the modern imagination. The melodramatic mode can be seen as an intensified, primary, and exemplary

version of what the most ambitious art, since the beginnings of Romanticism, has been about.

What seems particularly important in the enterprise of the social melodramatists—and here one should include, beyond Balzac and James, Dickens, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Proust, Lawrence, to name only the most important—is their dual engagement with the representation of man's social existence, the way he lives in the ordinary, and with the moral drama implicated by and in his existence. They write a melodrama *of* manners. On the one hand, they refuse any metaphysical reduction of experience and refuse to reduce their metaphorical enterprise to the cold symbolism of allegory. They recognize, with Isabel Archer during her intense vigil, that "this base, ignoble world, it appeared, was after all what one was to live for" (2:197). On the other hand, they insist that life does make reference to a moral occult that is the realm of eventual value, and this insistence makes them more interesting and ambitious than more "behavioristic" novelists who, from Flaubert onwards, have suggested that there are not more things on earth than can be represented exclusively in terms of the material world. The melodramatists refuse to allow that the world has been completely drained of transcendence; and they locate that transcendence in the struggle of the children of light with the children of darkness, in the play of ethical mind.

It comes back, once again, to that alternative posed by James in reading Balzac, between the "magnificent lurid document" and the "baseless fabric of a vision." To make the fabric of vision into a document, to make the document lurid enough so that it releases the vision, to make vision document and document vision, and to persuade us that they cannot be distinguished, that they are necessarily interconnected through the chain of spiritual metaphor, that resonances are set up, electrical connections established whenever we touch any link of the chain, is to make the world we inhabit one charged with meaning, one in which interpersonal relations are not merely contacts of the flesh but encounters that must be carefully nurtured, judged, handled as if they mattered. It is a question, finally, of that attention to the significant in life that James captured in a famous line of advice to young novelists: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost."²⁷ To be so sensitized an instrument, one upon whom everything leaves a mark, with whom everything sets up a correspondence, is not simply to be an observer of life's surface, but someone who must bring into evidence, even into being, life's moral

substance. So that the task of the writer is like that assigned by Balzac to the exiled Dante, in his tale *Les Proscrits*: "He closed himself in his room, lit his lamp of inspiration, and surrendered himself to the terrible demon of work, calling forth words from silence, and ideas from the night." (10:344).