Realizing the Past: History and Spectacle in Balzac’s *Adieu*

In late January 1831, Parisians flocked to see the *Panorama de Navarin* by Charles Langlois, Napoleonic officer turned history painter, in the new rotunda built specifically for this canvas on the rue des Marais du Temple. A popular spectacle at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the panorama staged a comeback in the 1830s thanks largely to Langlois’s flair for special effects: in the *Panorama de Navarin*, spectators viewed the enormous, 120-foot-in-diameter circular canvas representing a recent victory over Turkish forces from the deck of a real French battleship, the *Scipion*, purchased by Langlois after the battle, and refitted by him to make visitors believe they were actually at sea. His gambit worked: “You are truly in the middle of the combat,” enthused the reviewer for *Le cabinet de lecture*.1 “It’s the first time that I witnessed a naval combat,” declared another reviewer for the same journal, “And, good God, what a spectacle!”2 Critics of all stripes hastened to praise the seamless mixture of reality and representation offered by the new attraction, delighting in what the reviewer for *Le corsaire* called “the terrible truth of the picture.”3 As an article in *L’artiste* put it: “The combat was a poem, so too is its painted representation, a poem without fiction in which historical truth is religiously maintained, in which all is true, the action, the local color, down to the look of each individual boat.”4 To the French public in 1831, the past had never seemed more alive, more real.

The panorama represents but one of a host of new spectacles made popular in France around the time of the Revolution that turned history into a form of public entertainment. These new “shows”—including the wax display, the diorama, and the Boulevard theater—drew crowds of spectators eager to pay to see the past, and particularly the recent past of the Revolution and Empire, represented with an unprecedented visual “realism.” Exploiting the latest optical technologies, the historical spectacles of the early nineteenth century aimed at surpassing the illusionistic effects of conventional painting to startle and seduce viewers with images of famous men and great battles. The press accounts of the time, along with the spectacles’ receipts, bear witness to their remarkable success.
Most studies of nineteenth-century France’s historical renaissance, however, tend to ignore popular entertainments like the panorama, and give the impression that Romantic historians such as Prosper de Barante, François Guizot, Jules Michelet, Adolphe Thiers, and Augustin Thierry emerged in a vacuum during the 1820s, influenced only by the descriptive style of Walter Scott’s historical fiction.\(^5\)

In fact, the Romantic historical writing of Scott and Michelet can be seen as participating, along with the spectacles of popular culture, in a widespread movement to envision history in a new way in the period following the Revolution. Indeed, the highly visual style of these Romantic authors, their emphasis on local color, has more in common with popular spectacles like the panorama than with the late nineteenth-century “scientific” histories that are commonly seen as their legacy.

The historical spectacles thus provide a key to understanding the modern historical imagination at this early, formative moment. They also provide a key to understanding how the French Realist novel, which critics such as Georg Lukács have seen as an extension of Romanticism’s historical project, actually developed in opposition to the early nineteenth century’s visual mode of representing the past.\(^6\)

In what follows, I show how a foundational Realist text, Honoré de Balzac’s 1830 novella *Adieu*, theorizes this opposition through the inscription and critique of a spectacular act of Romantic historiography.

*Adieu* opens in the French countryside during the summer of 1819, four years into the Restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, which followed Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. Philippe de Sucy, a Napoleonic officer recently returned from captivity in Siberia following the disastrous defeat of the French in Russia, goes hunting with his friend, the marquis d’Albon, a minister in the Restoration government. They come upon the ruins of an old monastery and notice what seems like a ghost frolicking in the park. Upon closer inspection they see that it is not a ghost at all, but a beautiful woman, and that she appears to be insane; she repeats endlessly, but without seeming to understand what she says, a single word—“adieu.” Philippe takes a closer look, realizes that she is his former lover, and faints.

After carrying his friend home, d’Albon returns to the monastery and meets the madwoman’s uncle, a doctor who explains that his niece, the countess Stéphanie de Vandières, lost her mind while accompanying her husband on the ill-fated Russian campaign of 1812. In the second part of the text, entitled “The Crossing of the Beresina,” the doctor describes the notorious military disaster in which the French, during their retreat from Moscow, were forced to burn the only bridge across the Beresina river to prevent the Russians from giving chase, leaving a large portion of their freezing, starving, and exhausted army on the far bank to face certain slaughter or capture. Just as the bridge goes up in flames, Philippe arrives at the icy river bank, dragging his lover Stéphanie and her husband, a general, both more dead than alive. Two places remain in a raft, and Philippe magnanimously surrenders them to the countess and her husband. Stéphanie calls out a miserable “adieu” to
her lover, who remains on the far bank, just as the general falls overboard and is decapitated by a block of ice.

Back in the present time of the story’s narration, the doctor tells how his niece lost her mind at that fatal moment, becoming the “plaything” of the retreating army, and how he found her, by chance, after her escape from a mental hospital in Strasbourg in 1816. The third and final part of the story, entitled “The Cure,” recounts how Philippe attempts to restore his former lover to sanity. Reduced to an animal-like state, and only able to utter the single word “adieu,” the countess ignores all reminders of her former life. Unable to make her recognize him during his frequent visits to the monastery over the next few months, Philippe resorts to drastic measures. Returning to his own estate, he orders the construction of an exact replica of the Beresina at the moment of their separation, hoping that the sight of the scene will shock Stéphanie back to reality. In January of 1820, as snow covers the scene just as it did that tragic day in Russia, he returns to the monastery, and with the help of the doctor, drugs the countess, blindfolds her, and brings her to his estate. Her blindfold removed, the madwoman contemplates the scene with horror and is momentarily restored to sanity. She recognizes Philippe, says a final but lucid “adieu,” and falls dead in his arms. Ten years, but only one page, later, Philippe commits suicide.

First published in the journal La mode in May and June of 1830, Adieu is one of the earliest texts to form part of La comédie humaine. It was nevertheless generally overlooked by critics until the 1970s, when its reprinting provoked a debate that turned the text itself into a battlefield of sorts. The debate centered around the nature of Realism. For Pierre Gascar, who wrote the introduction to the new 1974 edition, the detailed description of the horrors of the Russian campaign in Adieu marks a vital step in Balzac’s development as a Realist. Gascar and Patrick Berthier, who wrote the notes for the volume, single out for praise the middle section of the text, which describes the horror and suffering of the Beresina episode with a “realism without precedent in literary history.”

According to Gascar, the originality of the war scenes in Adieu lies in their departure from previous accounts of the Napoleonic epic, which had tended to mythologize or idealize the conflict. With his graphic images of the soldiers of the grande armée, haggard, half-dead from the cold, struggling toward the frozen river, Balzac “strikes at the myth of military grandeur, involuntarily no doubt, a blow the repercussions of which went far beyond the post-Napoleonic era.” For Gascar, Balzac’s “Realism” involves a rejection of the romanticized accounts of the war that preceded it, and sets the tone for a new mode of writing about history, grounded not in myth, but in “reality.”

In a landmark work of feminist-deconstructionist criticism published a year later in Diacritics, Shoshana Felman took Gascar and Berthier to task. By focusing exclusively on the historical flashback in the middle section of the story, she argues, the two French male critics overlook the female character and her concerns, thus reproducing the narcissistic blindness of the male protagonist. By doing so, they
miss how the ending of the story undermines the model of Realism that the middle seems to embody. For Felman, Stéphanie’s meaningless “adieu” signals a refusal to attach the sign to its referent, the linguistic process, she argues, on which Realist historical narrative depends. Philippe’s reconstruction of the Beresina succeeds in restoring the identity of the sign, in putting an end to Stéphanie’s madness, but only by dealing a fatal blow to both the woman and the text: Philippe’s effort to restore Stéphanie to a “realistic” conception of the world brings about her death and the end of the story. “Through this paradoxical and disconcerting ending,” Felman writes, “the text subverts and dislocates the logic of representation which it has dramatized through Philippe’s endeavor and his failure.” 10 The text thus signifies its “impuissance” to control what Felman calls “its own linguistic difference,” or to represent the reality of history with “identity or truth.” 11 Adieu thus shows not the triumph of Realism, as the male critics would have it, but its undoing by the female character and her madness.

The debate over Adieu produced a great deal of acrimony, with Felman accusing the French critics of an “allegorical act of murder” 12 and Gascar and Berthier denouncing her spirit of “intolerance.” 13 The clash certainly reflects the spirit of its time, testifying to the high stakes of the feminist and deconstructionist challenge to the critical establishment in the 1970s. It also reflects, however, the way certain outmoded critical concepts survive even the most bitter academic feuds. For while Felman and the Frenchmen disagree over the text’s position vis-à-vis the poetics of Realism, they share a similar notion of what this term connotes.

Both sides see Realism as a process of assigning signs to referents. For Gascar and Berthier, Balzac’s triumph lies in describing the war as it really was. Felman points to the way Adieu deconstructs this process, allowing us to see the ideological aggression underlying both Realist representation and its conventional critical reception, but leaves the notion of Realism as mimesis fundamentally unchallenged. More recent scholars, however, have problematized this traditional definition of Realism, with Marxists and feminists laying stress on the ideological work Realist texts perform, and cultural historians tending to ground their definitions in the material practices that governed representational possibilities at the time Realist texts were written. 14 This latter perspective allows us to see how both the traditional and deconstructionist readings of Adieu overlook a crucial way in which the text intersects with its historical context. For by situating Balzac’s text historically, we see how it offers a critique of the way new visually realistic forms of history were changing the face of the past in the postrevolutionary period.

As I described earlier, the climax of the story occurs when, after visiting his now-insane former lover, Philippe decides to undertake a radical “cure.” Sparing no expense, he transforms his estate into an exact copy of the Beresina river, where he and Stéphanie were parted. To achieve his re-creation of the Beresina that he hopes will shock Stéphanie back to reason, Philippe assembles a veritable army of craftsmen and laborers, aiming to create a perfect copy of the historical scene.
river is dug, peasants are costumed as soldiers, bridges are built and burned. The description of Philippe’s representation, as Felman notes, mirrors the terms that traditional critics, like Gascar, use to praise Balzac’s descriptions of the war earlier on in the text. Philippe is clearly a master of historical “realism”:

The Colonel [Philippe] assembled workers to dig a canal which represented that devouring river where France’s treasures, Napoleon and his army, were lost. Aided by his memories, Philippe succeeded in copying on his estate the riverbank where General Eblé had constructed his bridges. . . . He ravaged his grounds in order to perfect the illusion on which his last hope lay. He ordered uniforms and tattered costumes to clothe several hundred peasants. He erected sheds, bivouacs, batteries that he burned. In the end, he overlooked nothing that could reproduce that most horrible of all scenes, and he attained his goal. Sometime early in December, when snow had covered the ground with a thick white blanket, he recognized the Beresina. So dreadfully true was that false Russia that several of his comrades in arms recognized the scene of their former miseries.15

Like Balzac, Philippe seeks to produce the most accurate possible representation of the historical referent: so “dreadfully true” is his depiction that it fools even historical witnesses of the event. Yet, if one can, along with Felman, read the description of Philippe’s historical reconstruction as a mise-en-abyme for the novella in which it figures, one can also read it as a comment on the way French spectacle entrepreneurs and theatrical producers were staging just such realistic historical representations at the time.

The panorama, one of the most important forms of spectacular historical entertainment in early nineteenth-century France, was invented by Robert Barker, a Scotsman, who received a patent on 19 June 1787. Robert Fulton, the American inventor of the steamboat, brought the panorama to Paris, displaying a Vue de Paris in 1799. While the first panorama to be shown in Paris depicted the city itself, this initial success was followed up by a historical canvas, which opened in Paris in 1800, a depiction of the port of Toulon being evacuated by the English in 1793.16 Other historical scenes rapidly followed, including a view of Paris celebrating the storming of the Bastille (1803), of the port of Boulogne with the French fleet waiting to attack England (1806), of the meeting between Napoleon and the Russian emperor at Tilsitt (1808), and of Napoleon’s great victory at Wagram (1810), all painted by the legendary panoramiste, Pierre Prévost. Viewed from a central platform in a dark room, lit only from above so as to erase all points of comparison with the horizon, the panorama’s giant circular canvas took on the appearance of a “real” historical landscape. “The illusion is complete,” wrote one visitor to the Panorama de Wagram; “You would think you had been transported to the scene.”17

Early nineteenth-century theaters, particularly the houses on the notorious Boulevard du Temple, which catered to a diverse public, sought similar illusionistic effects in their historical representations. A river was constructed for the staging of Guilbert de Pixérécourt’s Tekéli in 1814, while a production of the historical melodrama Christophe Colomb in 1815 featured a reconstruction of the explorer’s two-
story ship. Jacques Mandé Daguerre, who would go on to create dioramas in the 1820s and later invent one of the early photographic processes, worked early on as a theatrical set designer, creating many spectacular backdrops for the Ambigu-Comique theater beginning in 1818. His main rival, Eugène Cicéri, caused a sensation by designing an erupting volcano, “Vésuve en fureur,” for Eugène Scribe’s *La muette de Portici* in 1828. These productions amazed audiences with their material re-creation of the past.\(^18\)

In the late 1820s, the Romantic historical drama brought this desire for material specificity in historical representation to Paris’ major theaters. Stendhal’s *Racine et Shakespeare* of 1823 launched this Romantic historical quest by calling for a new kind of theater that would reproduce the past with a “perfect illusion.”\(^19\) Victor Hugo likewise advocated in the preface to *Cromwell* a new drama that would be “radically impregnated with the color of past ages,” that would seek the re-creation of the “reality” of history through visual representation.\(^20\) The Romantic dramatist Alexandre Dumas père responded to these manifestoes by hiring Cicéri to create six gigantic sets for his historical play *Christine*, based on the life of the queen of Sweden. This lavish production, which also featured costumes by Louis Boulanger, reportedly cost upwards of 30,000 francs, an enormous sum at the time. Not to be outdone, Baron Taylor, the director of the prestigious Comédie française, hired Cicéri to create even more lavish sets for Victor Hugo’s *Hernani*, based on sketches by Hugo himself. Both plays opened during the early months of 1830, shortly before the publication of *Adieu*.

The July Revolution of 1830 added an impetus to the spectacular staging of the past by removing theatrical censorship constraints. Twenty-nine new plays about Napoleon and the Empire opened during the 1830–31 season, once it was no longer forbidden to mention Napoleon’s name on stage. Featuring actors who looked like the emperor (one theater even hired a woman, the celebrated Virginie Déjazet, to quite literally travesty Napoleon as a schoolboy) and who copied his characteristic gestures and tics, these productions carried Romanticism’s interest in historical realism to an extreme. François-Antoine Harel, the director of the Odéon theater, reportedly spent 80,000 francs on the production of Dumas’s *Napoléon Bonaparte ou trente ans de l’histoire de France*, which featured twenty-three separate sets—including a reconstruction of the Beresina—as well as live horses and real cannons to increase the authenticity of the battle scenes. “No expense will be spared for the costumes, the decorations, and for the truth of the staging,” boasted an advertisement in *La revue de Paris* several months before the play opened.\(^21\)

These historical entertainments turned the past into a spectacle: history became a kind of visual commodity, something one paid to see, in these elaborately staged representations.\(^22\) This mode of viewing the past, of course, is still very much with us today, as the success of such recent films as Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*, Michael Bay’s *Pearl Harbor*, and Ridley Scott’s *Black Hawk Down*, with their use of special effects to simulate the visual appearance of the past, attests. It is im-
important to realize, however, that this quintessentially modern form of historical representation first took shape in a specific historical period and in response to a specific set of historical circumstances. Indeed, historical spectacles like the panorama and the Romantic historical drama served an ideological function for the postrevolutionary public, providing perspectives through which a sense of historical agency could be assumed by viewers disoriented after decades of revolution and civil war.

Of course this view of the past was aimed primarily at those who could afford to pay for it: during the first half of the nineteenth century, the middle and upper bourgeoisie made up the majority of the panorama’s clientele, although the audiences of some of the Boulevard theaters may have been more varied. Significantly, these spectacles attracted not only male viewers, but female ones as well, who thus witnessed representations of a history from which they were increasingly excluded. After a brief period in the spotlight during the early days of the Revolution, women became marginalized during the Revolution’s later phases, and especially under the Empire. The exclusion of women from the center of political and national life, intensified by the mobilization of the imperial nation around a seemingly endless series of wars, became formalized in the Napoleonic Code of 1804, which officially deprived them of some of their civil rights. The new popular entertainments that came into existence at just this time allowed women to “see” what they were missing, and to do so from the same perspective as male spectators.

Providing spectators with a view of the historical events and figures that had affected their lives powerfully but indirectly, historical entertainments like the panorama and the Boulevard theater gave the illusion of control over a mysterious past. The public’s delight in the “realism” of these spectacles, its fetishization of the material specificity they offered, testifies to the entertainments’ capacity to substitute for a perceived lack of historical reality in everyday life. “Masts, ropes, cannons, megaphones, compasses, telescopes, the captain’s cabin, the meeting room, nothing is lacking on this vessel,” reported the critic for the right-wing journal La gazette de France in his review of the Panorama de Navarin, which opened in January of 1831, at the same time as Dumas’s Napoléon. The left-wing journal Le national likewise praised the “remarkable exactitude” of the panorama, which it described as “so strikingly true” that a member of the Scipion’s crew would have no problem recognizing the ship on which he served.

Amid all this enthusiasm, Balzac refused to be carried away. In a series of articles on Parisian political and cultural life that he wrote for Le voleur in the months following the July Revolution, the young author consistently registered his dislike of the historical spectacles. “I went to see Virginie Déjazet playing Napoleon. What a joke!” he wrote on 18 October 1830, accusing the plays about Napoleon, “these napoleonized representations” (ces représentations napoléonisées), of “prostituting” the emperor’s memory “in order to give one and all a piece of the great man in small
In later months, other critical voices would be heard, but Balzac was one of the first to see through the realistic stagecraft of these productions to denounce their more sinister effects: “In a week, we have had our fill of Napoleon, and in another week, even the July Revolution will be seen on screens, on prints, and you’ll blow your nose with the storming of the Hôtel de Ville.” For Balzac, the proliferation of historical images ends by cheapening the past itself, and by alienating the viewer from crucial moments in modern history. In another article, Balzac criticized the Panorama de Navarin for its “mechanical charlatanism,” deflating the historical illusion that had so captivated other critics by exposing its special effects as mere gimmicks. That Balzac should find fault with these spectacles should come as no surprise, however, for less than a year previously he had provided a startling critique of the spectacularization of history in Adieu.

Let us now return to the end of Balzac’s novella, when Philippe reveals his “horrifyingly realistic” reconstruction of the Beresina to the mad countess, to see how the text offers a critique of how, to cite Guy Debord’s analysis of the spectacle, “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.” After completing his reconstruction of the Beresina, Philippe blindfolds Stéphanie and carries her to the scene, much as viewers of the panorama were forced to pass through a darkened staircase to disrupt their point of reference with the outside world. Her blindfold removed, Stéphanie stares dumbstruck at what the text calls “that strange picture [tableau]” (206). By referring to Philippe’s three-dimensional scene as a “tableau,” the text establishes a link with the two-dimensional panorama. Stéphanie’s horrified response, moreover, mimics the stupefaction of the critics in front of the canvases of Prévost and Langlois.

Like the postrevolutionary French public, Stéphanie suffers from an identity crisis brought on by recent historical events. The horrors of the Russian campaign, including the death of her husband and the separation from her lover, have caused a trauma equivalent to what the nation as a whole experienced following the revolutionary crisis and the imperial military disaster. Dislodged from the moorings of her past persona by these horrible events, Stéphanie has ceased to resemble the person she used to be. As Philippe laments, after she gobbles up some sugar, “When she was a woman . . . she didn’t like sweet things” (196). The historical trauma has severed her identity with her prior self. And just as the historical spectacles proposed to restore lost identities through historical representation, so too does Philippe’s representation of the Beresina revive Stéphanie’s memory of her past life. As her gaze passes from the historical scene to Philippe, who hovers nervously nearby, she recognizes him for the first time, transforming, in an instant, back into a woman:

For an instant as fast as a flash of lightning, her eyes had the lucidity lacking intelligence that we admire in the bright eye of birds; then she passed her hand over her face with the
the lively expression [l’expression vive] of a thinking person, she contemplated this living memory [ce souvenir vivant], this past life [cette vie passée] translated before her, turned her head quickly [vivement] toward Philippe and saw him [le vit]. (206, Balzac’s emphasis)

The text plays on the homonymic equivalency between the simple past tense of voir, vit, and vie, life, variations of which it repeats four times in a single sentence, to emphasize the extent to which Stéphanie’s resuscitation is linked to her vision of the spectacular historical representation.

But while bringing her back to life, Stéphanie’s gaze turns Philippe into a tableau. Here we begin to see the dangers that the spectacle poses, for what is shown is its contaminating effect: in a remarkable metonymy, the frozen artificiality of the representation passes to its creator, to Philippe, who becomes part of the scene, part of what Stéphanie sees. This vision reawakens her memory, restores her powers of recognition and hence her prior identity—“Stéphanie, cried the colonel / Oh! It’s Philippe, said the poor countess” (207)—but simultaneously turns her into a spectacle: “She collapsed into the trembling arms that the colonel held out to her, and the embrace of the two lovers terrified the spectators” (207). The spectacle is spreading: now Stéphanie, the privileged viewer, is viewed by the peasant-actors who form part of the scene. The spectacle becomes the spectator, as Stéphanie freezes into nonexistence, nonlife, before the eyes of the onlookers.

A moment later, she dies in Philippe’s arms: “All of a sudden her tears dried, she cadaverized [elle se cadaverisa] as if lightning had touched her” (207). The text leaves the cause of her death vague. Sandy Petrey has suggested that she dies of shame when she remembers the sexual degradation she suffered at the hands of the retreating French army after becoming insane. But I would like to suggest that she becomes a martyr to the spectacle: like Lot’s wife, she dies in the blink of an eye and from the act of looking. Indeed, the text invents the verb form se cadaveriser to convey the rapidity and reflexivity of the event. Blaming the historical spectacle, moreover, allows us to see how Philippe also dies as its victim. At first, he makes an attempt to break free from the fatal vision of the false Beresina and his dead lover: “Monsieur de Sucy took several steps to tear himself away from this spectacle” (208). Ultimately, however, he remains under its spell, unable to move forward, frozen. His own story stops there, as suicide beckons.

The danger of the historical spectacle, Adieu seems to say, lies in the tricks it plays on the identity of the viewer. On the one hand, it posits history as the ground for the formation of subjectivity: the sight of the spectacle restores the identity Stéphanie lost on the banks of the Beresina. But at the same time the spectacle undermines that identity by forcing the viewer into a position of paralyzing passivity. By encouraging the public to consume the past and by making that past more “real” than life, the new visual forms of history rob postrevolutionary French culture of the identity they hoped to foster. The remarkable image of Philippe and Stéphanie being looked at by the figures of their past reflects the way new forms of historical representation, under the guise of reawakening public memory, of cementing a col-
lective social identity based around a narrative of a shared past, undermined that society’s possibility for continuing the narrative into the future. For what hope for continuing forward, politically or socially, the text asks, exists for a society fixated on the spectacle of its past?

Marx would make a similar diagnosis in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), where he analyzed the failure of the Revolution of 1848. For Marx, the disappointment of 1848 stemmed from the revolutionaries’ troping of the first Revolution. Rather than “draw its poetry from the past,” rather than mold its discourse on the bourgeois Revolution, the social revolution of the nineteenth century, according to Marx, needed to look to the future, tailoring its discourse to the problems facing the proletariat class. But the forms of the past held them in sway: “Men make their own history,” Marx famously wrote,

but they do not make it just as they please . . . The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language . . . the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795.

Although Marx does not mention the role of actual spectacular representations in fostering this sense of historical repetition, his references to costumes and borrowed language provide an apt characterization of the way historical representations of the Revolution and Empire exerted a nefarious hold over nineteenth-century revolutionaries. Marx begins *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by noting, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” Marx’s theatrical metaphor signals how history was increasingly perceived as a spectacle by astute midcentury observers, and the extent to which the spectacular view of the past was identified as the major obstacle blocking historical progress.

As Richard Terdiman has remarked, Alexis de Tocqueville, who participated in the early stages of the Revolution of 1848, expressed his frustration with the Revolution’s outcome in similarly theatrical terms in his *Souvenirs* of 1850, complaining of the way his fellow revolutionaries “performed the French Revolution rather than continuing it . . . We sought without success to warm ourselves at our fathers’ passions; we imitated their gestures and their poses as we had seen them in the theater. . . . It all seemed a vile tragedy staged by a provincial troupe.” According to Terdiman, this failure of authenticity in 1848, coming as it did in the middle of a century that had begun to deify originality, had a profoundly alienating effect on the generation of 1848, revealing the extent to which all action was always already an imitation, a representation. *Adieu* shows how not even this sense of alien-
ation was original to the generation of 1848, however, for the perception of history’s spectacular nature had already been registered by the generation of 1830.

Returning now to the middle section of the story, to the historical narrative of the Beresina episode praised by Gascar and Berthier for its “realism,” we see how even the original experience of witnessing historical events is likened to the act of looking at popular entertainments. The general in charge of the evacuation of the French troops across the river, we learn, “began to contemplate the spectacle presented by the camp situated between the bank of the Beresina and the Borisov road to Studzianka” (166). Here, as later when Stéphanie encounters Philippe’s representation of the scene, the reader encounters the historical event at a distance, mediated through the gaze of the characters and through the terms of spectacle. When a group of freezing soldiers attacks the carriage carrying the half-dead Stéphanie and her husband, they don the countess’ clothes to keep warm, thus assuming a theatrical appearance. “The young countess looked at this spectacle twice and remained silent” (174). As Philippe oversees the construction of the raft that will carry Stéphanie and her husband across the fatal river, she once again watches as if attending a theatrical event, cut off from the action and passive in the face of danger: “The young countess, seated next to her husband, contemplated this spectacle with the regret of being able to contribute nothing to the work” (185–86). After the raft’s completion, Philippe watches in horror as the soldiers fail to leave a place for him and his charges: “he shuddered when he saw the crowded embarcation and the men pressing together like spectators in the stalls of a theater” (186).

Distanced from events as they unfold, the characters in Balzac’s text watch rather than act. This section of the story thus eerily foreshadows the passivity and alienation generated by Philippe’s historical representation at the story’s end. It also reveals the spectacle’s deeper danger: by transforming historical events into objects of vision even as they take place, the spectacle undermines the impetus to action. From a Marxist perspective, the spectacle can be seen to serve the interests of the ruling class: by turning the people into viewers of revolutionary history, it effectively eliminates the danger of future revolution. Adieu exposes the mechanism of this process.

In my reading of Adieu, then, Philippe incarnates the nineteenth-century impulse to bring the past to life through spectacularly realistic representations. His heroic but misguided attempt to recreate the scene of his “past miseries” as a means of curing his lover of the trauma inflicted by history focuses our attention on the dangers inherent in the kinds of historical spectacles that proliferated in the post-revolutionary period. The drive toward a spectacular vision of the past did not confine itself to popular entertainments, however, but formed an essential part of the Romantic movement more generally.

Philippe’s obsession with the recent past, and his drive to represent it with a visual accuracy, have much in common with the Romantic historians who would likewise see in the representation of the visual details of the past, and particularly
of the recent past of the Revolution and Empire, the key to overcoming the traumas that these periods provoked. Born in 1789, Philippe is not only a literal child of the Revolution, but also part of this cohort of writers who, like Philippe, would begin their historical careers around 1820: Barante was born in 1782, Guizot in 1787, and Thierry in 1795. It is tempting to see the disastrous effects of Philippe’s historical vision as a prescient allegory for the way the Revolution of 1830 was about to propel Romantic historians such as Thiers, Guizot, and Barante to positions of authority in the new government of Louis-Philippe, the citizen-king, and for the way their ministry would prove a disappointment to the cause of liberty and progress that their histories had seemed to advocate.

If Philippe is the historian, then Stéphanie represents the French people, duped and done in by new forms of history that promised a cure for the traumas of the Revolution, as well as a foundation on which to construct a solid identity. Not wanting to overlook her specificity as a woman, I would also point out that women fared particularly badly at the hands of this new history. Not only did Romantic historians such as Michelet at times demonize women, blaming them paradoxically for both the Terror and the Counter-Revolution, they also excluded women from their rapidly professionalizing ranks. Their voices silenced and their characters maligned, nineteenth-century French women had much in common with Stéphanie de Vandières. Balzac’s female spectator thus epitomizes the particular oppression experienced by women in relation to the historical practices of the day: forced to become spectators of historical events, rather than creators of either the events themselves or their representation, women were all the more susceptible to the spectacle’s dangers. The only character in Adieu to escape unscathed is the marquis d’Albon, who from the beginning casts an ironic glance upon Philippe’s Romantic obsession with the past, and who takes no part in the fatal reconstruction of the Beresina. D’Albon might therefore be seen to figure the Realist novelist, who lives to tell the tale.

Adieu, however, would not have the last word on the spectacle. On 3 August 1835, a theatrical adaptation of Balzac’s novella by Marie-Emmanuel Théaulon de Lambert, entitled La folle de la Bérésina, opened at the théâtre du Palais-Royale—yet another production pandering to the July Monarchy’s insatiable desire to see the Empire on stage. Difficult as it may be to imagine, given the dark nature of the subject, the new version was a musical, a “drame mêlé de chants,” with songs by the chef d’orchestre at the Palais-Royale theater. This was not the only change between the two versions. While the second act of La folle de la Bérésina, like the original novella, depicts the attempt of the colonel Falbert (the new name for Philippe de Sucy) to restore his lover Julie (Stéphanie) de Vandières to reason by reconstructing the battlefield on which she lost her sanity, the theatrical version, after literally staging the spectacle, does away with the tragic ending. Julie faints when she sees the scene, but then wakes up with her reason and health intact. After a moment’s hesitation in which she remembers her dead husband, she vows to live
happily ever after: “Ah! Poor Vandières,” she intones sadly as she remembers her husband, “dead... over there... before my eyes... in the torrent... (with dignity) Colonel Falbert... one more year for the memory of the general... and the rest of my life... for you!” The representation thus succeeds in the mission it set out to accomplish: the spectacle restores the madwoman to reason and to her lover. Memory is kept under control—allowed for, but confined within limits set by the characters themselves.

In the theatrical version, the critique of the visually realistic historical entertainments that we find in *Adieu* gives way to an affirmation of their redemptive power, both for the characters on stage and for the members of the audience who confront the spectacle along with Julie. As Patrick Berthier points out, for reviewers in the popular press at the time, the lavish Beresina set, created by none other than Ciceri, the famous designer of sets for the Paris Opera and for the Romantic historical dramas of Hugo and Dumas, literally dominated the play: one critic remarked that the “second act is by M. Eugène Ciceri alone. It’s for the décor of M. Eugène Ciceri that the second act was constructed.” By turning a story about a spectacle into an actual spectacle, by literalizing its dominant metaphor, the production transforms condemnation into celebration. This recuperation of Balzac’s critique by its very object testifies to the threat that *Adieu* posed as well as to the spectacle’s crafty resilience.

Reconsidering the representation of military history in *Adieu* allows a new perspective on a vital moment in literary history. Written shortly after *Les Chouans* of 1829, a Romantic historical novel in the style of Walter Scott, and shortly before the Realist fiction that would form the bulk of *La comédie humaine*, *Adieu* represents an important turning point for both its author and the nineteenth-century French novel. While Romantic historical novels would continue to be published after the July Revolution of 1830, most critics agree that Realism replaced Romanticism as the style of fiction most capable of reflecting the historical exigencies of the bourgeoisie’s triumphant return to power under the aegis of Louis-Philippe. In his monumental study of the historical novel, the Marxist critic Georg Lukács argues that Balzac’s transition from writing about the past to writing about the present comes as a direct response to the shifting historical landscape:

The change from his plan to present French history in the manner of Scott to portraying the history of the present coincides roughly and not accidentally with the July Revolution of 1830... Louis-Philippe’s “bourgeois monarchy” was such an unstable equilibrium that the contradictory and vacillating character of the entire social structure inevitably became the focus of Balzac’s conception of history.

For Lukács, Balzac’s Realist fiction produced after 1830 reflects an awareness that the tensions inherent in postrevolutionary society articulate the historical dilemmas of the modern era. To understand the meaning of the Revolution, it was no longer necessary to set novels in that era, as he had done in *Les Chouans*, but rather to probe the surface of the present to discover the fault lines that the Revolutionary upheaval...
had produced. According to Lukács, Balzac’s shift from Romanticism to Realism, from novels about the past to novels about the present, signals a new understanding of the historicity of contemporary life: “This continuation of the historical novel, in the sense of a consciously historical conception of the present, is the great achievement of . . . Balzac. Balzac is the writer who carries forward in the most conscious fashion the tremendous impetus which the novel received from Scott, and in this way he creates a higher and hitherto unknown type of realistic novel.”

According to Lukács, then, Balzacian Realism can be defined as the continuation of Scottian Romanticism, as the application of both the techniques and the worldview of the historical novel to a study of the present as history.

Lukács is certainly correct in his perception that Balzac’s fiction everywhere reveals an understanding of how historical events contributed to the manners and morals of contemporary life. Père Goriot would never have become a martyr to paternal generosity if he had not made a fortune selling grain during the Revolution. Yet Lukács’s neat formulation of the filiation between Romanticism and what he calls the “hitherto unknown type of the realistic novel” overlooks a crucial way in which nineteenth-century French Realism differs from Romanticism precisely over the question of history and its relation to the present. Indeed, I would advance the hypothesis that Realism in the French context defines itself in opposition to Romantic ways of looking at the past.

Along with Adieu, numerous other works in La comédie humaine, set in postrevolutionary France, show characters whose obsession with historical representation leads to disastrous ends. Lucien de Rubempré, the hero of Balzac’s Illusions perdues and the author of an unsuccessful historical novel in the style of Walter Scott, is but one example. The same can be said of those other key Realist protagonists, Julien Sorel of Stendhal’s Le rouge et le noir, whose effort to follow his idol Napoleon leads him to ruin, and Frédéric Moreau of Flaubert’s L’éducation sentimentale, who like Lucien de Rubempré dreams of becoming the Walter Scott of France, and whose fixation on the past prevents him from living in the present. In Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert, images of history undo the subjectivity of the protagonists, undermining identity and evacuating the self of the originality that could lead to positive engagement in the present. Philippe de Sucy and Stéphanie de Vandyères die as a result of the spectacle, as does Julien Sorel. Frédéric Moreau survives, but in a reduced state, his life a record of emptiness and missed opportunity. The anticlimactic ending of L’éducation sentimentale, in which Frédéric and his friend Deslauriers recall an aborted visit to a brothel as “the best time we ever had” testifies to a life lived as absence and to a continued fixation on a meaningless past.

Realism shows us the dangers of the historical spectacle, all the horrible fates that befall its victims, but fails to suggest an alternative way of relating to the past. These novels denounce the historical spectacle, but seem to point, depressingly, to its inevitability. In all of these works, and this is ultimately an alternative definition of Realism in the nineteenth-century French novel, the Romantic obsession with
history is at once incorporated and banished, allowing Realism, if not to propose an alternative to history for the formation of subjectivity, at least to stake out an oppositional space, the space of critique, in which modernity’s relation to the past is continually called into question.

Notes

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1. *Le cabinet de lecture*, 4 February 1832. All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise stated. Vanessa Schwartz discusses the technological innovations of this panorama in *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley, 1998), 154.

2. *Le cabinet de lecture*, 4 February 1831.


7. After its initial publication in *La mode* as *Souvenirs soldatesques / Adieu*, the text figured in tome III of the second edition of the *Scènes de la vie privée* in 1832, now titled *Le devoir d’une femme*. In 1834, Honoré de Balzac reedited the story and published it as *Adieu* in tome IV of the *Études philosophiques*, and it entered tome XV of *La comédie humaine* in 1846; see Moïse Le Yaouanc, “Histoire du texte,” in Balzac, *La comédie humaine* (Paris, 1979), X:1764–65.


9. Ibid., 10–11.


11. Ibid., 10. 12. Ibid.


14. In *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction* (New York, 1985), Naomi Schor defines Realism from a feminist perspective as “that paradoxical moment in Western literature when representation can neither accommodate the Otherness of Woman nor exist without it” (xi). An example of a definition of Realism informed by...
a cultural history model can be found in Jann Matlock’s “Censoring the Realist Gaze,” where she relates critical anxieties about reading Realist fiction to the phantasmatic discourse surrounding such institutions as the pathological anatomy museum, and argues that “the ‘realism’ imagined both by . . . critics and by the state censors of 1847 and 1857 can be associated with certain theories of looking . . . forged out of anxieties about looking”; in Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast, eds., Spectacles of Realism (Minneapolis, 1995), 32.

15. Balzac, “Adieu,” in Le Colonel Chabert suivi de trois nouvelles, 203–4, my emphasis. All subsequent references to the novella will be to this edition, the same as the one used by Gascar and Felman, and will appear parenthetically in the text of the essay.


17. Le journal des arts, 5 August 1810.


21. La revue de Paris, 7 November 1830, 63.

22. While Guy Debord used the concept of the “spectacle” to analyze the increasing domination of the image, and its substitution for lived experience, in late twentieth-century capitalist culture, my aim is not merely to backdate this theory to the nineteenth century, but rather to use testimony from the time to show how the nineteenth century generated its own theory of the spectacle; see Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, 1995).

23. The entrance price of the panoramas painted by Pierre Prévost, between 1800 and 1820, ranged from 1.5 francs to 3 francs. Since the average wages for a skilled male worker rose between 1800 and 1850 only from 3 to between 4 and 5 francs a day, the panorama clearly remained beyond the means of the working classes. According to Robichon, the “middle bourgeoisie” constituted the majority of the panorama’s clientele during the first half of the century. Beginning with the panorama of the Moskowa in 1835, however, Charles Langlois began to reach downward, offering tickets to families and soldiers for 1.25 francs. On panorama ticket prices, see Robichon, Les panoramas, 160. On wages, see Jacques Rougerie, “Remarques sur l’histoire des salaires à Paris au XIXe siècle,” Le mouvement social 63 (1969): 71–78. In 1830, theater tickets ranged from about 1 to 6 francs, although a seat at the Porte-Saint-Martin theater could be had for as little as .60 francs, suggesting that workers were among the audience at these spectacles. On theatrical ticket prices, see Maurice Descotes, Le drame romantique et ses grands créateurs (1827–1839) (Paris, 1955), 9.


25. Whereas feminist historians have argued that women were in theory excluded from the public sphere in the postrevolutionary period, Matlock uses female attendance at the

26. La gazette de France, 1 May 1831.
27. Le national, 21 January 1831.
28. The articles from Le voleur are collected as the Lettres sur Paris in volume two of the Pléiade edition of Balzac’s Oeuvres diverses (Paris, 1996), 867–981.
29. Balzac, Oeuvres diverses, 881.
30. From Lettre XIV, published in Le voleur on 8 February 1831, in Balzac, Oeuvres diverses, 954. This was the only negative review of the Panorama de Navarin that I found.
31. Debord, 12.
32. In his article on Adieu, Petrey calls Philippe a “Griffith or von Stroheim avant la lettre” (27), thereby overlooking the way he was very much a man of his time. In his introduction to the Pléiade edition of Adieu, Le Yaouanc suggests several possible sources for Philippe’s therapeutic reconstruction of the Beresina, including the efforts of Esquirol, a pioneer of early French psychiatry, to cure “melancholia” through “l’effet de la frayeur, de la crainte, par l’effet d’un stratagème concerté,” cited in Le Yaouanc, 968. To Le Yaouanc’s list of sources, we might add the efforts of the alienist Philippe Pinel to cure mental patients, including those suffering from emotional trauma associated with the Napoleonic Wars, through theatrical stagings. For more on Pinel, see Jan Goldstein, Console and Classify (Cambridge, 1987). A more literary source might be found in Uncle Toby’s efforts to reconstruct the Battle of Namur on his lawn in Laurence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, one of Balzac’s favorite novels. I thank Marshall Brown for this reference.
33. The beheading of Stéphanie’s husband, the Count de Vandières, by a block of ice might stand for the Revolution’s most traumatic period, the Terror. I thank Jonathan Strauss for this insight.
34. Felman likewise places Stéphanie’s identity crisis at the center of the story, but sees it less as an allegory for the historical situation than for the mystery of “woman.” The repeated questions “Elle? Qui?” which the two hunters pose in the opening scene, according to Felman, “situate from the start the textual problematic within a systematic search for the nature of feminine identity”; see Felman, “Women and Madness,” 7.
36. Ibid., 38.
38. Ibid., 15.
39. Ibid.
42. On women and the writing of history in nineteenth-century France, see Bonnie G. Smith, The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice (Cambridge, 1998).
43. Certainly not all women became passive victims of the spectacle. As discussions of popular entertainments in the contemporary press indicate, some women avoided the fate that befalls Stéphanie by turning the spectacle to their advantage. One of the leading women’s magazines of the Empire, the Journal des dames et des modes, advertised the panorama as offering “toute la charme de la vérité, et toute le seduisant de l’optique.” Female readers were clearly meant to realize that the spectacle provided something more than
mere historical knowledge. A later article on the panorama in the same journal would follow its enthusiastic review of the first panorama of Paris with a spicy vaudeville song in which a hapless husband is so taken in by the canvas that he loses his balance and falls off the balustrade, thus offering his wife a chance to be alone with her lover, see Journal des dames et des modes, 20 Thermidor (an 7): 349–50; and 20 Vendémiaire (an 8): 28–29.

44. During the July Monarchy, 120 new plays about Napoleon and the Empire opened in France.

45. Marie-Emmanuel Théaulon de Lambert, La folle de la Bérésina (Paris, 1835), 37.


47. Hugo’s Notre Dame de Paris appeared in 1831. Claude Duchet estimates that in 1832, out of one hundred new novels published, thirty were historical. While this is roughly the same percentage of historical novels as under the Restoration, Duchet argues that the “banalisation des thèmes,” “dévaluation des formules,” and “épuisement des sujets” signals the end of the genre’s viability. See Claude Duchet, “L’illusion historique: l’enseignement des préfaces (1815–1832),” Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France nos. 2–3 (Mars–Juin, 1975): 245–67.

48. Lukács, Historical Novel, 84.

49. Ibid., 81.

50. Lukács’s theory, it should be noted, develops insights made by the French critic Louis Maigron, who wrote that “le roman de Balzac n’est, en effet, que le roman de Walter Scott vidé de sa substance archaïque et rempli de matière moderne”; see Maigron, Le roman historique à l’époque romantique: essai sur l’influence de Walter Scott (Paris, 1912), 232.

51. My claim that Realism represents and critiques Romantic forms of historical representation is meant to apply only to the nineteenth-century French model, although certain English novels from the period, including George Eliot’s Middlemarch, reveal a similar suspicion of history. Tolstoy’s War and Peace, published the same year as Flaubert’s L’éducation sentimentale (1869), certainly offers a different approach to the past. While Tolstoy relies on the metaphoricities of nineteenth-century spectacular culture to represent Napoleonic history (“The sun shone to the left and behind him and brightly lit up the enormous panorama which, rising like an amphitheater, extended before him in the clear rarefied atmosphere”), the force of his critique is aimed at particular theories of history rather than the Romantic obsession with the past as such; see Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace: The Maude Translation, ed. George Gibian (New York, 1996), 678.


53. Hayden White describes the hostility to history as a phenomenon of the twentieth century, and as characteristic of literary modernism. “The modern writer’s hostility towards history is evidenced most clearly in the practice of using the historian to represent the extreme example of repressed sensibility in the novel and theatre”; “The Burden of History,” in Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore, 1978), 31. The list of antihistorical writers he cites includes Gide, Ibsen, Malraux, Mann, Sartre, Camus, Woolf, Proust, Musil, Valéry, Yeats, Kafka, and Joyce. I have aimed to trace the genealogy of modernity’s difficult relation to history in the nineteenth century.