Oscar Wilde, in one of those epigrams that cut to the heart of the matter, states our subject in broadest outline: "Balzac invented the nineteenth century." The remark is profoundly true, in that the identification of an era-its shape, salient characteristics, its meaning-depends on its having been self-consciously conceptualized and articulated. The sense of an era comes to consciousness when it becomes a text. And Balzac's *Comedie Humaine* is pre-eminently the text in which the nineteenth century takes cognizance of itself, recognizes itself as modernity, a new epoch governed by new sets of laws, criss-crossed by new codes of significance.

Balzac is in fact one of the first writers to be aware of the radically changed situation of literature in the new age: an age that for the first time made of literature itself a commodity, a commercial product which depended on the play of market forces, including advertising, journalism, and the attraction of investment capital, rather than on the old system of royal or aristocratic patronage. This transformation is the theme of Illusions *perdues*, possibly Balzac's greatest novel, which has been described by Georg Lukics as the epic of "the capitalization of spirit." Along with the commercialization of the very medium in which he was working, the other inescapable phenomenon facing the writer of Balzac's era was, not yet so much industrialization-this was only beginning to make its impact in continental Europe in the 1830's-but urbanization. From the time of the French Revolution through the 1830's, the population of Paris had nearly doubled, largely because of immigration from the provinces-an example of which was Balzac himself. The growth of the city was apparent to the observer principally, in two ways: in the building of new residential areas in what had previously been suburb (to the accompaniment of considerable land speculation) and, much more strikingly, in a greatly increased density of inhabitation in the old quarters of the city, especially in the working-class districts. The urban *crowd* became a recognizable phenomenon and a felt presence. There was a new sense of the city as a total dynamic entity and way of life, a total horizon bounding one's perception and one's life, beyond which was simply the unthinkable darkness of the provinces. As the fates of so many Balzacian characters show, while life in Paris may be a struggle, there are no viable alternative worlds elsewhere.

Balzac made the choice of Paris-resisting all his family's urgings to return to the provinces-and immersed himself in its commercial, journalistic, and literary lives. Yet his reaction to the modern urban milieu is curiously one of nostalgia and loss. The sentiment of loss has to do with the density, anonymity, and uncenteredness of modern urban life, or, in a term I find more specifically appropriate to his problems as an artist, its *indifferentiation*. Again and again, we find Balzac complaining about the "platitude" of modern existence: its flatness, the way-it has been leveled and has lost what he believes to have been an earlier system of traditional distinguishing characteristics and marks. The refrain comes back repeatedly: it is perhaps most succinctly stated in the preface to one of his novels, *Une Fille d'Eve* (1839), where he argues that in the hierarchical society of the Old Regime one could tell who people were from their outward appearance and demeanour, even from their clothes. Bourgeois, merchant or artisan, noble, enslaved peasantry: all had their distinctive and defining marks. Now, however, equality has produced a world of "infinite nuances." Previously, he writes, "the caste system gave each person a physiognomy which was more important than the individual; today, the individual gets his physiognomy from himself." This is a lucid statement of a historical passage from what a sociologist would call a system of "assigned identity" to one of "achieved identity." Curiously, this new individual self-definition makes it more, not less, difficult to tell who anyone is, makes the process of differentiation infinitely more subtle and problematic. With the eclipse of the political and spiritual center of social authority-monarch and church-there has been a loss of a clear and accepted system of signs with unambiguous, hierarchized referents.

Balzac, a self-proclaimed political reactionary, finds what he calls the "disorder" of modern existence to be both deplorable and exciting. The profusion of life styles and self-definitions which it offers creates a challenge and a problem for the novelist. The writer who turns his attention to the portrayal of modern life, particularly life in the urban landscape, must encounter and overcome the fact of indifferenti-
entiation. He must find the system of nuanced distinctions, contrasts, hierarchies which will allow him to create meaning in a social world that appears threatened by a loss of meaning. He must discover—or invent—those codes that will allow him to make sense of the grayish phenomena (blackish, in fact, since that has become the predominant color of male dress) before his eyes. Indeed, since meaning has in some sense been occulted, he may have to reach beyond the surface appearances of reality, to uncover those latent systems of signification which the surfaces mask.

We can witness Balzac attempting to recover meaning in the urban landscape in such an early and apparently trivial text as his Petit Dictionnaire critique et anecdotique des Enseignes de Paris (1826)—dictionary of the tradesmen's signs hung above shop doors along the streets of Paris. Signed "Par un batteur du pave" ("By a stroller of the streets") the Dictionary suggests already the Baudelairian figure of the urbanj7dneur: the curious stroller or prowler of the urban landscape. But here the stroller is concerned to organize a systematic interpretation of legible meanings in the urban landscape. Recording and commenting upon the shop signs in fact becomes a "semiotic" enterprise, a consideration of how shops' names and pictorial emblems relate to the interior aspects of the shops, their merchandise, the character of the establishment and its proprietor. The Dictionary becomes an inquiry into one of the sign-systems which the city has created to organize and convey certain of its meanings.

The Dictionary is an early and relatively crude version of what was to become an almost obsessive concern with finding the bases of an urban semiotic: a way of discovering, elaborating, the codes which would allow the indifferentiated surfaces of modern urban existence to reveal their systematic meaning. In the manner that modern linguistics has discovered that language is fundamentally a system of differences—that a system of differences, beginning with phonological oppositions, subordinates the process of selection and combination which creates the code and makes possible the message—Balzac, we find, is concerned to locate differences, distinctions which will allow him to discern basic units of meaning, and their articulation in networks of significance. In a series of occasional texts, such as the "New Theory of the Luncheon," "The Study of Manners by Way of Gloves," the "Physiology of the Toilette," he returns again and again to the problem of distinctive marks or signs? For instance, in the first part of "Physiologie de la Toilette," entitled "On the Cravat, Considered in Itself and in its Relations with Society and the Individual," he begins: "The French Revolution was for the toilette, as for the civil and political order, a time of crisis and anarchy... During the Old Regime, each class of society had its costume; one recognized by his dress the lord, the bourgeois, the artisan." The cravat held no personal importance. Then Frenchmen gained a theoretical equality, and differences in the cut and material of clothing were no longer a sure measure of social distinction. Threatened with this uniformity, how could one distinguish the rank of an individual? From this moment on, the cravat took on a new destiny: "for it was called upon to reestablish the lost nuances of the toilette." The cravat, tied by its owner, becomes the sign by which man "reveals and makes himself manifest." After Balzac has categorized the different manners of cravat-tying, the various possible messages made available by its codes, the cravat has come, at the end of the article, to approximate the literary text: an "expression of thought, as is style." The cravat has thus been established as a key signifier in the social text, a sign that traces differences and distinctions.

Balzac apparently intended to group such articles as those I have mentioned, plus a number of others projected but never written, in a volume which would bear the title, Pathologie de la vie sociale, a complete "codification" of the "laws of exterior existence" and what it expresses. The title, "The Pathology of Social Life," cannot but recall Freud's Psychopathology of Everyday Life, which is also about the ways in which people reveal themselves in what may at first appear to be the innocent and insignificant gestures of quotidian reality. The most important fragment of Balzac's projected pathology is no doubt the "Theorie de la demarche," a curious text which registers his discovery that everything in a person's bearing or gait, each posture and gesture, is somehow revelatory. The whole of human movement is meaningful; it bears the imprint of will and
thought. Thus "a simple gesture, an involuntary tremor of the lips can become the terrible denouement of a drama long hidden within two hearts." This essay emanates a sense of Balzac's excitement at his discovery that a whole realm of human existence can become semiotic, a realm of messages made available to the writer. These messages are in fact latent within the demeanour and comportment of man in society; the "Theorie" is a demonstration of how to read the latent text in and through the manifest text, how to recover the significations of the one through the indicators of the other. As in Freud's Psychopathology, in Balzac's fragmentary Pathology we have a sense of a new field of meaning recuperated for human discourse.

The discovery of a new way to read meanings in human behavior-in the presentation of selves in everyday life-is peculiarly tied to modern urban existence in that it permits the decipherment of those occulted signs of character and meaning in the urban crowd. It allows the "observer"-as the Balzacian narrator will so often label himself-to make distinctions in the seta of bodies, faces, attitudes, gestures before his eyes, and to penetrate to the latent signifieds which these signifiers both conceal and reveal. Rehearsed many times in Balzac's fiction is the moment where the observer's insistent gaze directed at reality begins to organize its signs, then in a moment of penetration passes through surface forms to the messages they represent, strikes through to a vision of the networks of social and psychological meaning which constitute the latent texts of individuals or social groups, and which allow them to become legible.

This kind of observation can be applied to the city as a whole, as in the "Histoire et Physiologie des Boulevards de Paris," where Balzac begins by recording his preference for Paris over London, Vienna, St. Petersburg, because, despite the encroaching indifferenation of modern existence, Paris displays a greater capacity for self-representation, for spectacle: it puts itself on show more than other cities. Paris to the observer who has trained himself in the distinction of social nuance can be highly dramatic, the place where repressed conflict and hidden symbolic action are ever on the verge of becoming manifest. The boulevards of Paris constitute a free performance. And in fact, as Balzac proceeds with his sociological cartography of Paris in this article, the spiritual center of Paris, the place of its essential drama, comes to be, not the Tuileries or the Assemblee Nationale, nor even the Banque, but rather the Boulevard du Temple, place of the principal popular theaters of the city. Eight theaters, fifty open-air vendors, and a dense crowd-the world recreated in Les Enfants du paradis: here we have a kind of concentrated theater within the generalized theater of Paris, the place where a culture puts itself self-consciously on the stage, recognizes the need for acting out its central concerns, legitimizes its informal drama. That the productions of the Boulevard du Temple's theaters at this time were principally melodramas is not unrelated to Balzac's quest for meaning. For melodrama is a form that calls for heightened meanings, meanings made explicit through their overt manifestation and acting out. Balzac sometimes complains that social comedy as it was known in the Old Regime-based as it was on a system of clear social norms and distinctions-no longer is possible in the modern era. Melodrama has in fact come to take its place, to enact with obviousness and force essential truths about people and their relations, about ethical and psychological forces that risk remaining latent in everyday reality. Melodrama thus presents another version of Balzac's concern with making manifest the systems of meaning that can be uncovered within and behind the indifferenation of surfaces.'

Were there space here for more extended discussion, one might consider further some of the moments in Balzac's novels that show the narrator-observer at work, interrogating the surfaces of urban life, searching for the systematic orders that will allow him to detect the presence of meaning, exercising on facade, contour, posture, gesture a pressure of insistence that makes them yield their significance in legible texts. For instance, in Ferragus (the first of the "Scenes de la Vie Parisienne"), the narrator begins by an effort to organize the web of Paris streets into a morally significant network: "There are in Paris certain streets as dishonored as a man accused of infamy; then there are noble streets, then simply honest streets, then young streets on whose morality the public hasn't yet formed an opinion;
then homicidal streets, streets older than old dowagers are old, estimable streets. . . ." But this is not enough; the narrator goes on to lay out the interrelations of different quarters of the city and their characteristics, then finally articulates the whole as the anatomical parts of a monstrous body. The monster provides an organic metaphor of the city, whose every detail is a "lobe of cellular tissue" in the whole; but the image of the monster's articulations also suggests how a significant message is put together from the elements of the code. In another instance, at the start of La Fille aux yeux d'or, Paris becomes a set of circles in imitation of Dante's Inferno, through which we spiral up or down, moved by the universal principle: gold and pleasure. In Illusions perdues, the ambitious young provincial, Lucien de Rubempre, goes for his first stroll in the Tuileries garden and discovers he is at a performance, where the littlest things—the "world of necessary superfluities"—are used to create messages concerning vital social discriminations.

Central to the different metaphors and schemes, grids of perception and rhetorical devices, used to organize, categorize, and explain the physiognomy of Paris, is the sense of city as theater: not spectacle merely, but the potentially revelatory enactment of meanings, of the sort theoretically formulated in the "Theorie de la demarche." The observer is thus never a passive spectator: he must work on what is before his eyes, bring to it a pressure of insistence that will make the latent text show through the manifest text. Balzac's best-known novel enacts for us in its final scene the ambition of the narrator-observer: at the end of Le Pere Goriot, Eugene de Rastignac stands at the top of the slope of the Pere Lachaise cemetery, and looks down on Paris, stretched along the snakelike Seine, as dusk gathers and the first lights begin to shine. Paris is spread before Rastignac like a n-iap to be read, and the quarter inhabited by high society—the world where Rastignac desires to succeed—is marked out as by two grandiose drawing pins: the Column of the Place Vendome and the Dome of the Invalides, both of which incidentally evoke the conqueror Napoleon, and which organize the map into symbolic legibility. Rastignac, who began the novel in the sordid quarters which the narrator called a "valley of plaster," has now attained an altitude from which he can read Paris, seize it in one possessive glance, interpret its messages, and utter his famous line of challenge: "A nous deux maintenant!" ("Now it's between the two of us!") which presages what we know, from the sequels, to be a successful campaign of conquest. The conquest of Paris ultimately depends on the reading of Paris: being able to seize the city as a legible and meaningful text.

This condition of legibility is one that all the ambitious young Balzacian heroes aspire to, and one that their narrator must attain. All that we have said about Balzac's efforts to work on and work through the apparent indifferentiation of surfaces, to systems of meaning which make of the cityscape and the urban crowd legible texts, could be summarized in the statement that Balzac is everywhere seeking to find, to postulate, to invent the semiotic conditions that make the modern novel possible. The very existence of what we think of as "the Balzacian novel" and indeed as "the nineteenth-century novel" depends on this effort to make meaning in modern urban life. Starting from the anxiety that this new world, deprived of its former clear codes of meaning, might be threatened by loss of meaning—as, socially and politically it is threatened by chaos—Balzac's response is the insistence on meaning. By claiming, as he most explicitly does in the "Theorie de la demarche," that nothing is meaningless, that the world cannot not mean, he makes possible the text of modernity. He invents the nineteenth century by bringing to consciousness the very shape of modernity as a set of texts subject to our reading and interpretation.

By way of conclusion, I want briefly to reach beyond Balzac to the poet who was his great admirer and who best understood the importance of the city to the artist of modern life: Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's celebrated essay on Constantin Guys, "The Painter of Modern Life," comes closer than any text I know of to defining the aesthetic of modern urban art, "tyrannized by the circumstance," concerned with the transitory and the fugitive, dedicated to wrestling beauty from the restless crowdedness of the city streets. There is a poem set as epilogue to Le Spleen de Paris (Baudelaire's collection of prose poems) in which the
speaker, imitating Rastignac’s position at the end of Le Père Goriot, climbs to the heights of Montmartre to look down on and possess through his gaze Paris stretched below him. But I want to say a word instead about one of the poems from the section of Les Fleurs du mal called "Tableaux parisiens," the sonnet entitled "A une passante" ("To a passer-by").

La rue assourdissante autour de moi, hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balangant le feston et l’ourlet;
Agile et noble, aver sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crisi)e comme un extravagant,
Dans son oeil, ciel livide on
germe l’ouragan,
La douleur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un eclair ... puis la nuit!-Fugitive beaut&t
Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaitre,
Ne to verrai-je plus que dans l’éternite?

Ailleurs, bien loin d’ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être!
Car (ignore ou to fuis, to ne sais ou je vain,
0 toi que j'eusse aimee, o toi qui le savais!

(The deafening street roared around me. Tall, slender, in heavy mourning, majestic grief, a woman passed, with a sumptuous hand raising, swinging the flounces and hem of her skirt, agile and noble, with legs like a statue. I drank, tense as a madman, from her eye, livid sky where tempests germinate, the sweetness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills. A lightning flash ... then night! Fleeing beauty by whose glance I was suddenly reborn, shall I see you no more except in eternity? Elsewhere, far, far from here! too late! never perhaps! For I know not where you fled, you know not where I go, 0 you whom I would have loved, 0 you who knew it!)

The poem describes an urban encounter, which is not quite a meeting. The anonymous woman suddenly emerges from the crowd, from the deafening street, while the speaker of the poem watches, fascinated, reading from her costume and attitude, precisely from her demarche indeed, the possibility of a new sweet and dangerous pleasure. When we move from the quatrains to the tercets of the sonnet, the encounter is already over; she is gone, she has passed by like a lightning flash in the movement of the city street. This urban beauty is unstable, fleeting, fugitive. What we have had is a promise of meeting in love, and hence of a new meaning—a lightning-like knowledge of reciprocity, message of revelation from the instantaneous reading of an encounter—which is then obliterated, effaced. We have here the dynamics of urban sentiment, always interruptus, always menaced with effacement by that very crowd which confers on this sentiment its excitement, its perverse tension. The excitement depends on the dynamics of urban reading and interpretation, where the text may offer the flash of revelation, the fugitive transparency of latent meanings, but is then immediately subject to the pathos of loss, effacement. Meaning is indeed fugitive in the urban landscape. The act of reading is consubstantial with the act of erasure, significance incorporate with loss. This is why to those nineteenth-century writers who had chosen the city as context and text, the city called for an ever-renewed semiotic enterprise. Have we in our own time seen this enterprise lose its potency: has the city ceased to be legible? Has it been surrendered to loss of meaning?

Notes
2. These, and other essays, mentioned here (including the Dictionnaire), can most conveniently be consulted in Balzac, Oeuvres diverses, 3 vols. (Paris: Conard, 1935-40). Translations from Balzac are my own.
5. I take this prose translation, which has the advantage of liter- alness, from the very useful anthology edited by Elaine Marks, French Poetry from Baudelaire to the Present (New York: Dell, 1962).