Republican Violence, Old Regime Victims: Balzac’s *L’Auberge rouge* as Cultural Anthropology

Early anthropology (e.g., Rousseau, Herder) developed in response to France’s universalist pretensions and its perceived victimization of minor cultures. Balzac wagers a similar critique, but from the perspective of Ancien Regime/Catholic victims — i.e., “others” within France for whom modern French readers would probably lack sympathy. In *L’Auberge Rouge*, Balzac obscures his victims’ Ancien Regime identifications behind a modern veneer: as soldiers in Napoleon’s army, Prosper Magnan and Frédéric Taillefer are presented as enlightened carriers of Republican values to “archaic” Germany (still the Holy Roman Empire). Paradoxically, the two Frenchmen rediscover in Germany a sacred dimension of their existence that had been displaced by the Revolution. The psychological trauma produced by the reawakening of repressed attachments leads to a number of strange effects, including one character’s self-sacrifice and a seemingly endless cycle of violence.

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Paris et la province, cette antithèse a fourni ses immenses ressources. […] J’ai taché de donner une idée des différentes contrées de notre beau pays. Mon ouvrage a sa géographie [19] comme il a sa généalogie et ses familles, ses lieux et ses choses. Mais cette géographie n’est qu’accessoirement un manuel de tourisme; elle est avant tout la trace d’une réalité spirituelle. (my emphasis)

Balzac, “Avant-Propos” (18-19)
Anthropology came into existence in various prototypical forms in the eighteenth-century Europe as a response to cultural and political modernization, the declining influence of religion, and the rise to predominance of Enlightenment “civilization.” At its origins, anthropology sought to define the limits of “human nature” in order to found a secular ethics (Kant, Feuerbach), to protect traditional cultures from Europe’s — and in particular France’s — increasingly universalist political and cultural pretensions (Rousseau, Herder), but also to understand rationally how each individual culture produces legitimate social codes, logic and forms of existence (Montesquieu to Lévi-Strauss). This last approach, which best describes contemporary “scientific” anthropology, is nonetheless intimately related to the Rousseauian idea of “culture as victim” — victim, for example, of imperialism, expansionist wars, institutional and economic rationalization, global markets, and so on. By emphasizing each culture’s uniqueness, by rendering the “savage mind” of subaltern societies intelligible and sympathetic to “civilized” readers, anthropologists have sought, wittingly or unwittingly, to defend minority identities (even if only for the sake of future memory) from the ravages of modern civilization.

Yet one of the paradoxes of anthropology is that it is inextricably bound up with the violent and victimizing forces of modernization. This is true in the trivial sense: there are no victims to study without modernity’s destructive forces. In *Tristes tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, speaks of Amazonian people as a “[p]auvre gibier pris aux pièges de la civilisation mécanique” and “tendres et impuissantes victimes” (40-41). His vocation as anthropologist, he claims, is motivated by a wish to “atone” for the global “monoculture” to which traditional societies are rapidly succumbing (466). But it is also true in a more profound way: anthropologists often perceive themselves as victims of modernity within their own social order. Their identification with non-western victims of western civilization thus stems from a personal sense of alienation, just as their power to deconstruct cultural myths and illusions comes as a by-product of the detachment gained from social exclusion. Again, Lévi-Strauss is instructive: he associates his anthropological outlook with his chronic feeling of “déracinement” (57), a feeling which he ties to his experience as a Jew in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Likewise, the anthro-