

BALLET*See Dance.***BALZAC, HONORÉ DE
(1799–1850)**

French novelist. Balzac is best known as the creator of the *Comédie humaine*, a vast collection of interlocking novels and stories of which about ninety were written in less than twenty years. The *Comédie humaine* displays both unity and diversity: if a number of narratives are set in Paris in the 1820s, the bold strategy of letting characters from one book know characters from another fosters the reader's growing conviction of the reality of the world evoked by the novelist. The literary complex also carries conviction because of the interplay of critical attitudes that express Balzac's intuitive analysis of modern society: even the more obscure private dramas are linked with the life of France at a particular moment in its history—the Restoration and the July Monarchy. The stresses and conflicts between thought and instinct, between Paris and the provinces, between those who cling to the past and those who move with the times—all these mirror Balzac's need to compensate for what life had failed to give him and the truth of his own experience. Balzac transformed the novel into a vehicle for reflective commentary on modern society and so to an incalculable degree influenced succeeding generations of writers in many tongues.

While there is no evidence that Balzac was overtly homosexual, he has been suspected of a latent and sublimated bisexuality in the paternal "friendships" which he cultivated with the handsome young men with whom he surrounded himself. At the same time, the homosexual theme flourishes in his work, in either an open or a veiled fashion, even if Balzac was always considered the author who specialized in woman and marriage.

In *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1844–46) Balzac describes the world of the *tantes* ("queens") in prison,

where the prisoners, of the same sex but of different ages, are crowded together under conditions that favor homosexuality. Vautrin is the symbol of imprisoned sexuality, incarcerated because he took the blame for the crime of another, "a very handsome young man whom he greatly loved." The novelist's depiction of prison homosexuality goes beyond any mere documentary treatment; it does not hide the sexual dimension of prison friendships, but shows them as a form of love with values all their own. The homosexual element is present everywhere in the prison, yet unutterable and unmentionable. Vautrin's secret is that he does not love women, but when and how does he love men? He does so only in the rents of the fabric of the narrative, because the technique of the novelist lies exactly in not speaking openly, but letting the reader know indirectly the erotic background of the events of his story. The physical union of Vautrin with Lucien he presents with stylistic subtlety as a predestined coupling of two halves of one being, as submission to a law of nature. The homosexual aspect of the discourse must always be masked, must hide behind a euphemism, a taunting ambiguity that nevertheless tells all to the knowing reader.

The pact struck between Vautrin and Lucien is a Faustian one. Vautrin dreams of owning a plantation in the American South where on a hundred thousand acres he can have absolute power over his slaves—including their bodies. Balzac refers explicitly to examples of the pederasty of antiquity as a creative, civilization-building force by analogy with the Promethean influence of Vautrin upon his beloved Lucien. Vautrin is almost diabolical as a figure of exuberant masculinity, while Lucien embodies the gentleness and meekness of the feminine. The unconscious dimension of their relationship Balzac underlines with magnificent symbolism. He characterizes Vautrin as a monster, "but attached by love to humanity." Homosexual love is not relegated to

the margin of society, as in the dark underworld of the prison, but expresses the fullness of affection with all its physical demands and its spiritual powers. Homosexuality is not the whole of Vautrin's existence, but he is incomprehensible without it, it stylizes his will to power and invests it with its driving force.

There is also a political aspect to homosexuality in Balzac: in it he saw a defiance of the society that proscribed and marginalized it and a challenge to prevailing moral values. By virtue of living outside the French bourgeois society of his day, Vautrin gains insight into its hypocrisy and expresses his contempt for its sham values. He declares that in reality honesty is useless, money is everything, the sole moral principle is to maintain a façade of propriety, justice is corrupt. The poor are no better than the rich, and it has always been this way. In such an ethical context homosexuality is the practice of those who have gauged society and perceived its hollowness, liberating themselves from the social contract, while the world of heterosexuality is a world of false anti-values maintained by shameful and covert means. The affirmation of the erotic is the negation of the legitimacy of the respectable and so-called honorable.

In 1835 Balzac published his extravagantly plotted *La fille aux yeux d'or*, which concerns a beautiful young woman kept in seclusion by a lesbian who, after an absence, discovers her ward's infidelity with a man and kills her. Again, the writer sought to use the theme to illustrate the corruption of contemporary society, but was less successful in empathizing with his characters.

Elsewhere in his work, in *Séraphita* (1834), Balzac took up the theme of the androgyne under the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg. He asserted that he had begun to write the story at the age of nineteen and that he had long "dreamed of the being with two natures." The underlying myth is that all the angels were once human beings who earned their elevation

to this celestial dignity. The personage after whom the story is named appears to the main characters, Wilfrid and Minna, as Séraphita and Séraphitus respectively. But while Minna is an insignificant and dreamy romantic heroine, Wilfrid is a mature hero with a stormy past and aspirations for a glorious future, who nevertheless is ready to sacrifice all his ambitions to obtain Séraphita "who should be a divine woman to possess." Balzac represents both as in love with one and the same person, a chosen being endowed with a mysterious power. The androgyne does not symbolize bisexuality, but nature in its wholeness, in its original purity, "the diverse parts of the Infinite forming a living melody." Having revealed to the hero and heroine an ideal love, Séraphitus-Séraphita departs for a heaven free of the earthly misery that human beings must endure.

Recently, the story "Sarrasine" (1830) has attracted scholarly attention, notably from the homosexual critic Roland Barthes. This short, but resonant narrative concerns the ambiguities of a family whose fortunes are founded on the achievements of a castrato.

Balzac confronted the mysteries of homosexuality and intersexuality in their forms both real and ideal, not just as a chronicler of the France of his time, but also as a visionary whose imagination relived myths of pagan antiquity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Philippe Berthier, "Balzac du côté de Sodome," *L'Année balzacienne* (1979), 147-77; Marie Delcourt, "Deux interprétations romanesques du mythe de l'androgyne: Mignon et Séraphita," *Revue des langues vivantes*, 38 (1972), 228-40, 340-47.

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BANG, HERMAN (1857-1912)

Danish novelist and short story writer. Associated with the theatre for much of his life, Bang was also active as a journalist and critic in opposition to Georg