Love as Prime Mover in the Balzacian world would not be Balzacian if it did not include physical love. The word *amour* is ambiguous; *le plaisir* also. But among the different meanings of these *words*, there is one *action* that can be defined fairly unambiguously: sexual intercourse. The set of actions that we call sexual love, whatever its many and diverse forms, can be designated by technical terms (those, for example, that the vicomte de Valmont boasts of having taught Cécile Volanges in *Les liaisons dangereuses*). Yet, in spite of the clarity and distinctness of sex, or perhaps because of these qualities, writers who are not primarily writers of sex speak of sex without recounting it. In a fine article, “Tabou or not Tabou,” on Maupassant’s “self-censure,” Floriane Place-Verghnes cites the many ways that the language of sex engages the reader. As she notes, “Le corpus regorge de *personnages* qui font mais ne disent pas” [The corpus is packed full of *characters* who do but don’t say] (372). She inventories the “diverses figures de style allant de la périphrase à la métaphore, de l’euphémisme au jeu de mots, avec une typographie qui se fait à l’occasion l’alliée de la dérision” [various figures of speech ranging from periphrasis to metaphor, from euphemism to play on words, with a typography that occasionally becomes the ally of derision] by which Maupassant accomplishes this self-censure (375). As she notes, “l’euphémisme, la métaphore, le blanc typographique permettent d’écrire le tabou tout en ne l’écrivant pas. Au récepteur de comprendre le non-dit”
[the euphemism, the metaphor, and the unprinted blank allow the taboo to be written while not writing it. It’s up to the receiver to understand what’s unsaid] (382). In similar fashion, Balzac goes to considerable lengths to create particular expressions that one would nevertheless hesitate to call “clean” or “proper.” Avoiding the most technical language for the most technical definition of l’amour, Balzac invents a language of sex.

“Comment dire le sexe?” asked Éric Bordas (“Ne touchez pas le H” 23). “Quelle pratique énonciative pour quelle pratique désirante?” [How can one speak about sex? What enunciative practice for what desiring practice?]. The analysis that follows does not record the various “desiring practices” in Balzac but shows rather how the complete sexual event translates into words; it is the writing of sex, so to speak: the way to write what people do not narrate. Bordas’s purpose instead is to show how metaphors and euphemisms work in the semiotic system and in the narrative programs configuring meaning, as in his article, “Ne touchez pas le H de Natalie.” Others are concerned to develop the range of desires and sexual activities in La Comédie humaine. But my purpose is simpler. I am not seeking to enumerate the diversity of forms of pleasure or physical love among Balzacian characters, nor to inventory the social types within sexual relations—these are forms of content—but rather to examine the forms of expression that take the place of the act.

Many critical studies have addressed the question of Balzacian eroticism, elucidating Balzac’s vision of the diversity of sexual relations and following the traces of the more or less hidden forms of physical love, in their practice and in their social insertion. These studies, constituting a veritable industry around Balzacian eroticism, are indispensable for both our sociological and narratological knowledge of the world of La Comédie humaine. Nicole Mozet’s analysis of La fille aux yeux d’or, a story in which sex is a prime mover, has the merit of precision in its examination of details, illuminating the eroticism of the novella especially by reestablishing the lines of feminine power that were previously unappreciated. To this type of approach I am adding a more strictly linguistic view, focusing on the language that takes the place of the act. As Mozet incidentally observes in her analysis of La fille aux yeux d’or, “il était évidemment impossible à Balzac de parler de l’homosexualité autrement que par sous-entendu” [it was naturally impossible for Balzac to speak of homosexuality other than by innuendo] (Balzac au pluriel 128). It is precisely this impossibility that provokes the reader’s interest, and this innuendo that calls for analysis. Mozet elsewhere comments that the novel has constantly “adopté un discours détourné sur la chair, le plaisir, et la luxure” [adopted a roundabout discourse on matters of the flesh, pleasure,
and erotic love] (“Par le biais” 203). My purpose is to examine the precise nature of this diverted discourse.

Moïse Le Yaouanc’s indispensable study on “Le plaisir” will serve as a background for this examination. Le Yaouanc writes:

[l’entrée des personnages dans les draps marque la fin des hardiesses de langage chez l’auteur. Soucieux de respecter les bienséances quand il s’agit d’un genre sérieux qui s’adresse à la communauté des lecteurs, l’auteur de La Comédie humaine devient alors discret, tout au moins dans ses mots, et aussi prudent que s’il parlait dans un salon d’autrefois . . . : sans choquer, il adresse des signes aux gens avertis. (“Le plaisir” [1973] 211)

[the moment when the characters slip between the sheets marks the end of the author’s boldness of language. Anxious to respect decency in a serious genre addressed to the community of all readers, the author of La Comédie humaine becomes discreet at that moment, at least in his words, and as prudent as if he were speaking in an old-time drawing room . . . : he avoids shocking anyone while sending signals in the direction of well informed people.]

The “salon d’autrefois” represents a place of well-chosen metaphorical expressions, spoken most likely in the rhetorical forms of preterition as practiced by ancien régime nobility, where good form allowed one to “parler de choses basses avec élégance et de distractions grossières avec distinction” [speak of base things with elegance and of coarse distractions with distinction], according to Robert Ellrich (218). By sending “des signes aux gens avertis,” Balzac sets up a language of sex that is both coded and clear.

But, says Le Yaouanc, “Il serait illusoire de prétendre découvrir toujours des sous-entendus. Balzac se place assez souvent sur le plan de l’affirmation générale sans avoir en vue aucune pratique particulière. . . . Mais souvent aussi il donne à entendre, et la meilleure lecture est celle qui se montre la plus attentive à ses signes, même les plus discrets” [It would be illusory to claim to always discover hidden meanings. Balzac places himself rather frequently on the level of general affirmations without having any particular procedure in mind. . . . But also he often gives things to be understood, and the best reading is one that pays the most attention to these signals, including the most discreet ones] (“Le plaisir” [1973] 211). Balzacian eroticism works by innuendos, to be sure. Yet the discreet signals on which Le Yaouanc insists are sometimes the clearest ones. Clarity refers to a very specific quality of this language, which employs neither the proper or technical term nor an
insignificant, vague, or general one, but something specific and agreed upon whose meaning the alert reader immediately understands and which serves to hide the referent.

If Adrian, Genestas’s son in Le médecin de campagne, suffers from the “disease” of onanism, according to Le Yaouanc’s diagnosis in Nosographie de l’humanité balzacienne (208–10), it is only through coded words that the reader penetrates the mystery of his behavior, which is explained by his “mauvaises habitudes de collège” [bad habits of high school boys] (9: 585). The expression is a coded sign immediately understood, but coded all the same. Comprehension and knowledge come from the relationship of the words with each other, rather than the relation of the words with the actions (which are characterized rather by understatement [“Le plaisir” [1972] 284]). Similarly, it is one thing to say that a man is “aimé, très aimé” [loved, much loved] by Valérie Marneffe, but it is another thing to say “souvent aimé” [often loved] (La cousine Bette 7: 395). Like the word amour, amant or lover can be plurisemantic, ambiguous as to sexual relations, but the context can give it the clear meaning of sexual partner. For Mme de Beauséant in La femme abandonnée, where all society knows that Ajuda-Pinto is her lover, this word will always have a sexual meaning, to the extent that when Gaston de Nueil visits her, as an enamored lover, it is enough to make people believe that there are sexual relations going on. In La Rabouilleuse, Balzac does not tell us in technical terms how Flore Brazier “cessa d’être une honnête fille” [ceased being an honest girl] (4: 400); it is by metonymy that he designates the sexual act thus given to be understood, by giving the date on which the servant Fanchette leaves the household, offended in the name of morality. Finally, one of the correspondents in Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées employs the laconic “quand on a été heureuse” [when a woman has known joy] (1: 274) to discreetly mean: after we have slept with a man. All these expressions yield their significance instantaneously.

This clear if not proper language is widespread and not unusual. Yet Balzac also knows how to vary his tone to multiply and “thicken” meanings. The language of sex involves witty inventions such as “la femme comme il faut” vs. “la femme comme il en faut” [the well behaved woman of the world vs. the type of woman men need] (Autre étude de femme 3: 694; La vieille fille 4: 936); conventional language such as a woman’s very neutral “fautes” [erring ways]; the delicate “vœux de la nature trompée” [yearnings of cheated nature] (La vieille fille 4: 860) and the brutal “viol” [rape] feared by the duchesse de Langeais; the mostly “horrible” “scènes conjugales” [conjugal disputes] (L’enfant maudit 10: 877; La femme de trente ans); and the romantic “poèmes de leur double vie secrète” [poems of their secret
life together] also of *La femme de trente ans* (2: 1115). In this last novel, a poetic language translates the woman’s orgasm in terms of “notre nature, dont la mélodieuse harmonie ne s’émeut jamais que sous la pression des sentiments” [our nature, whose melodious harmony is roused only by the urgings of our emotions] (2: 1118–19). The language of sex is often composed of figures of speech that eliminate or remove proper terms, obtaining clarity on the topic as a result: ordinary ellipses, even extremely ordinary (in *Béatrix*, after having dined with the seductive Béatrix, the unfaithful Calyste “rentra vers deux heures du matin” [went home around two in the morning] [2: 871] without anything mentioned that could have filled up his time since dinner); ellipses as suspension points: Foedora the hard-hearted woman spied upon in her boudoir by Raphaël de Valentin says: “Quel est l’homme auquel je pourrais me . . .” [Where is the man to whom I could bring myself . . . ] (*La peau de chagrin* 10: 183), or else this comment by the very innocent mother of *L’enfant maudit*: “La sainte Vierge n’a-t-elle pas conçu sans . . .” [Didn’t the holy Virgin conceive without . . . ] (10: 877); narrative compression that allows one to skip over the “coquetteries charmantes” [charming coyness] (*La femme abandonnée* 2: 491) or those “petits protocoles du boudoir” [little protocols of the boudoir] (2: 492); and finally total silence, as in *La muse du département*, where Dinah de La Baudraye becomes pregnant without the slightest word about sexual intercourse.

Not all proper terms are absent, however. Thus, Mme de Beauséant in *La femme abandonnée* exclaims: “il m’a possédée ne m’aimant plus” [he took me even when he no longer loved me] (2: 499). “Posséder,” whose meaning is unambiguous in context, is as direct and targeted as the angry viscountess’s thoughts—she is about to send Gaston de Nueil to his death. More interesting is the mundane euphemism, as when Mme de Beauséant laments: “parce que j’ai été faible, le monde veut donc que je le sois toujours?” [because I was weak once, does the world expect me therefore to always be that way?] (*La femme abandonnée* 2: 479). The worldly metaphor can be elegant; the pious metaphor is perhaps less so, like the example in *La Maison du Chat-qui-pelote* (1: 73): “l’amour saint et permis du mariage” [the saintly and permitted love of marriage], in which the adjective “permis” also permits the expression. But the pretense of decency of the Balzacian text produces twists in the language that are often more enticing than they are modest. Thus M. Marneffe has become hideous, destroyed “par ces débauches particulières aux grandes capitales, décrites par les poètes romains, et pour lesquelles notre pudeur moderne n’a point de nom” [by debaucheries of the kind that happen in the great capital cities, as described by the Roman poets, and for which our modern-day modesty has no name] (*La cousine Bette* 7: 194).
feigned inability to give a name to the debaucheries creates an enigma and obliges one to search among poets: does Balzac mean to suggest something like the sadistic practices of a scene from *Venise sauvée*, mentioned in *La Rabouilleuse*? In that novel, Flore Brazier makes her master play “ces scènes ensevelies dans les mystères de la vie privée” [scenes buried in the mysteries of private life], that “réalise[nt] le magnifique de l’horrible!” [make what is magnificently horrifying real!] (4: 403). To understand that this language of sex refers to sadism, one has to be familiar with the work by Otway; the language is indirect and comes to us through an embedded intertextual allusion.

To speak of the prince de Cadignan’s impotence, the language of sex alludes to the king Charles X, “puni . . . pour avoir . . . trop plu dans sa jeunesse” [punished . . . for having . . . been too admired in his youth] (*Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan* 6: 982). The completion of the sexual act in spite of this impotence is expressed by periphrasis: “le bonheur inespéré de se donner un héritier” [the unexpected good fortune of giving oneself an heir] (6: 983). Rouget in *La Rabouilleuse* has become “caduque” [decrepit] (4: 519); after his marriage with the young Flore, the danger of sexuality in old age is expressed by an allusion to the death of Louis XII.

It is clear that the most attractive expressions are distorted, indirect, or detoured. Neither the proper term nor the general term, the language of sex is something else that is more suggestive, a third term that reveals while it plays at hiding. The examples that follow are grouped according to several categories.

**Outside of Marriage**

A negotiation about sex occupies the entire second chapter of *La duchesse de Langeais*. Beyond the banalities about the “senses,” “possession,” “voluptuousness,” and the “pleasures” that perpetuate love, Balzac skillfully varies the language. This language is moreover deeply appropriate, in that the ambiguity that characterizes the boundaries of the act is reproduced in the ambiguity of the words. Thus, the line between permitted caresses and shameful acts is described as the “nec plus ultra de passion; et quand [Montriveau] en arrivait là, elle se fâchait toujours [s’il] faisait mine d’en franchir les barrières” [ne plus ultra of passion; and when [Montriveau] got to that point, she always became angry if he made as if to cross those barriers] (5: 966). When he naively lets out the expression “conserver les apparences” [keeping up appearances], Mme de Langeais cries out with the shocked morality she knows how to feign: “Vous ai-je donné le moindre droit de penser que
je puisse être à vous?” [Have I in the least given you the right to think that I could be yours?] (5: 962). Later the marquis makes “la demande farouche de ses droits illégalement légitimes” [the brutal request of his illegally legitimate rights] (5: 974)—rights that are made legitimate in his mind by the compromising actions already performed by the duchess, but illegal because they are outside of marriage. But upon the duchess’s refusal, he indulges in amusing phraseology: “Madame la duchesse, je suis au désespoir que Dieu n’ait pas inventé pour la femme une autre façon de confirmer le don de son cœur que d’y ajouter celui de sa personne” [my dear madame duchess, I am in despair that God has not invented another way for women to confirm the gift of their heart than by adding to it the gift of their person] (5: 977)—which by contention the duchess calls “désirs prodigieusement vulgaires” [prodigiously vulgar desires]. For a rather long time, she limits Montriveau to the preliminaries, the “péchés véniels” [venial sins] (5: 981), a feminine jurisprudence that Balzac veils with the following sentence: “pour l’honneur du faubourg Saint-Germain, il est nécessaire de ne pas révéler les mystères de ses boudoirs, où l’on voulait tout de l’amour, moins ce qui pouvait attester l’amour” [for the honor of the faubourg Saint-Germain, we cannot reveal the mysteries of its boudoirs, where everything was expected of love except what could bear witness to love] (5: 978)—let us say, for example, a pregnancy, possible result of the “péché positif” [positive sin], of the “grand péché mortel” [great mortal sin] (5: 981). Montriveau’s attempt to “donner le mat en trois coups, à volonté” [checkmate in three moves, at will] (5: 983), will fail, and, as everyone knows, in spite of so many words spent on the subject, there is no sex in this novel. Is it because Antoinette had touched Montriveau’s castrating axe (see the analysis by Bordas, “Ne touchez pas le H” 30–31)?

In *La muse du département* Dinah de La Baudraye, who is considering a very sexual transgression, commits one against originality when she speaks of the “dénouement” of “ce beau roman” [this fine novel] (4: 671) to indicate the act of love. Normally Balzac does not fall into such platitudes except to make fun of them. In this novel there is an unrealized fiacre scene (love in a carriage) (4: 726). But only Mme de La Baudraye’s organdy dress is mussed, for Étienne Lousteau returns from Sancerre and from the provincial muse “sans y plus toucher” [without having touched her any more] (4: 735) than one touches a fancy dessert before someone cuts it. By a curious displacement effect, nevertheless, this nonhappening is made to take the place of the act that puts an end to Dinah’s virtue, for we will find her pregnant nine pages later without the slightest elucidation on the event. Here is a case where no words let the act that produces a pregnancy find a place in our reading. At
the most, we have the word *fiacre*, about which *La physiologie du mariage* merely comments that taxicabs are a place where a husband can be made into a cuckold (11: 989).

From the trivial to the sublime: in *Le père Goriot*, the language of sex becomes lyrical and noble when Eugène de Rastignac and Delphine de Nucingen sleep together after a long, chaste love affair:

Rastignac et Delphine s’étaient rencontrés dans les conditions voulues pour éprouver l’un par l’autre les plus vives jouissances. Leur passion bien préparée avait grandi par ce qui tue les passions, par la jouissance. En possédant cette femme, Eugène s’aperçut que jusqu’alors il ne l’avait que désirée, il ne l’aime qu’au lendemain du bonheur: l’amour n’est peut-être que la reconnaissance du plaisir. (3: 262–63)

[Véronique Bui, in commenting on Mme de Mortsauf’s death in *Le lys dans la vallée*, mentions this passage to support her interpretation of the sexual nature of Henriette’s behavior during her agony, and adds: “La synonymie entre bonheur et jouissance est ici explicite” [There is an explicit synonymy between “happiness” and “orgasm” here] (79). She also cites Pierre Barbéris, who affirms with no uncertainty that this meaning is “normal depuis le classicisme. Bonheur égale satisfaction sexuelle” [normal from classicism on. Happiness equals sexual satisfaction] (Bui 80).]  

1. Raphaël and Pauline achieve a similar bliss in *La peau de chagrin* through their sexuality: “Leur mariage, retardé . . . et le bonheur leur ayant révélé toute la puissance de leur affection . . . de part et d’autre même délicatesse, même pudeur, même volupté . . .” [their marriage having been delayed . . . and their sexual happiness having revealed to them all the power of their affection . . . on both sides the same delicacy, the same modesty, the same voluptuousness . . . ] (10: 234). Delicacy and modesty are terms that, in Balzac, augment voluptuous pleasure without repressing it.

1. As part of his argument, Barbéris cites the language that tells us that Lucien de Rubempré sleeps with Coralie every day: “heureux tous les jours avec Coralie” [made happy every day with Coralie] (notes to *La femme de trente ans* 357).
Le curé de village is interesting because it involves an illicit love affair that is not recounted, contrary to the explanatory manner that widely characterizes La Comédie humaine. The mystery and secret are kept until the end. Véronique Graslin’s “nature” balks in the face of marriage, “ce dur métier” [this difficult job] (9: 667), and she is happy when her husband sleeps elsewhere in the house (9: 681). But when she becomes pregnant, ambiguity resurfaces, because her husband has only just returned to the conjugal bedroom (9: 681). No more is told us; the sexual act is simply absent.

It is literally veiled in Les Marana. Here, once again, a bastard child will be created, after a two-week seduction. Montefiore knows how to “contenir ses désirs pour en mieux assurer le contentement” [contain his desires the better to assure their contentment] (10: 1058); for, “sûr du succès, l’Italien se donna les plaisirs ineffables d’une séduction allant à petits pas” [sure of his success, the Italian allowed himself the pleasure of a slow-paced seduction] (10: 1059). During these approaches, Juana remains, if not chaste, at least virgin.² Montefiore chooses the eve of his departure to consume his prey entirely, like a tiger, but this sexual act takes place behind the following words: “La porte en tapisserie retomba sur eux, sur leurs folies, sur leur bonheur, comme un voile, qu’il est inutile de soulever” [The tapestry door fell shut on them, on their folly, on their happiness, like a veil we do not need to lift] (10: 1060). And that is all.

Specialties and Specialists

The “specialties” are first and foremost those of the specialists, particularly in La cousine Bette: “Valérie possédait des spécialités de tendresse qui la rendaient indispensable à Crevel aussi bien qu’au baron” [Valérie possessed specialties of tenderness that made her indispensable to Crevel as well as to the baron] (7: 192). Balzac does not further elucidate these practices that perpetuate desire; the language of sex remains perfectly euphemistic. Sleeping with Valérie is expressed by this metaphor of the sexual act: “Crevel . . . avait payé le droit de prendre, aussi souvent qu’il le pourrait, sa revanche de l’enlèvement de Josépha” [Crevel . . . had paid for the right to take his revenge as often as he could for the abduction of Josépha] (7: 191). As for Baron Hulot, never in the last twenty-five years, he protests to Valérie, has his wife “gêné [s]es plaisirs” [gotten in the way of his pleasures] (7: 303)—and this is once

². This opposition between chasteness and virginity is often found in Balzac’s works, especially in La fille aux yeux d’or (5: 1092); La physiologie du mariage (11: 1156): “tout à la fois vierge et savante!” [virgin and knowing at the same time!]}; and Modeste Mignon.
again an expression of the language of sex, signifying that the Hulot couple have not been sleeping together for twenty-five years.

In *La vieille fille*, the smart milliner Suzanne needs to have a language that expresses the sexual act so she can pretend to be pregnant, as she does. But while she speaks only of a “bonheur” [good fortune] for which du Bousquier should be glad to pay dearly (4: 833), he wonders if he ever has “chiffonné autre chose que sa collerette! . . .” [wrinkled anything more than her ruff! . . . ] (4: 836). The difference between these two expressions highlights what could be called female innocence and male competence (quite ironically, as it will turn out): Suzanne borrows a conventional term of the least precise sort, while du Bousquier’s rhetoric describes an act of foreplay, however limited.

*Les secrets de la princesse de Cadignan* supplies an entire vocabulary of the language of sex. The banal “adventures,” the flat “liaisons,” the worn-out “frivolities,” and the perfectly insignificant “inconsequences” (6: 966) compose the fabric on which the Parisian princess will embroider the secrets that make her worthy of her own novella. No well-informed reader has any trouble translating these terms, in the same way that society interprets the beautiful Diane’s actions, but it is difficult to imagine how she could have conceived a child, when we hear her say to d’Arthez, on the subject of her son: “Eh bien, sa naissance est un hasard ou le fait d’une convention de ma mère et de mon mari. Je suis restée longtemps jeune fille après mon mariage” [Well, his birth is a stroke of luck or the result of an agreement between my mother and my husband. I remained a virgin long after my wedding] (6: 991). The object of her secrets being her innocence, she must make others believe in her virginity—but there is no possible “agreement” that makes one pregnant, nor a stroke of luck that lets a mother remain a maid. It is true that five pages later she admits to “une mauvaise nuit de mariage” [one wretched wedding night] (6: 995). When the princess wants d’Arthez to understand that he may sleep with her—that in fact he will definitely sleep with her—she simply tells him: “vous ferez croire au monde que nous sommes purement et simplement frère et sœur” [you will make everyone believe that we are purely and simply brother and sister] (6: 1000), in which the idea of sex is transmitted by language that would proclaim the opposite of sex. In fact, d’Arthez has had a liaison with a lower-class woman, but he has not yet known love with a noble woman, and this contrast between the sexual act and the sentiment of love is expressed thus: “peut-être aimait-il mieux faire la part à la Nature et garder ses illusions en cultivant son Idéal?” [perhaps he preferred to satisfy the needs of Nature and preserve his illusions by cultivating his Ideal?] (6: 964).
In *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, Esther has hidden her past as a courtesan from Lucien de Rubempré, but has she or hasn’t she slept with him? Here is how we learn that she has: when Esther wants to kill herself because “le voile d’innocence qu’elle avait est tombé” [the veil of innocence that she had has fallen aside], Carlos Herrera speaks with her thus: “Votre voile d’innocence? . . . dit le prêtre, vous avez donc traité Lucien avec la dernière rigueur?—Oh! mon père, comment vous, qui le connaissez, me faites-vous une semblable question! . . . On ne résiste pas à un Dieu” [Your veil of innocence? . . . said the priest, have you then refused Lucien your most intimate favors?—Oh father, you who know him, how can you ask me such a question? . . . One does not resist a God] (6: 453). Notable is the language that makes a religion out of this love, while the relationship between Esther and Nucingen, later on, is expressed through an entirely financial language, when Esther says for example: “Vous avez payé, je me dois. . . . Je veux payer dans une seule nuit toutes les sommes qui sont hypothéquées sur ce fatal moment et j’ai la certitude qu’une heure de moi vaut des millions” [You have paid, I owe myself to you. . . . I want to pay up in a single night all the sums that are mortgaged on this fatal moment, and I am certain that an hour with me is worth millions] (6: 603). Her specialty is rich with interest.

**What Love Brings to Girls**

In *Béatrix*, Sabine du Génic describes her honeymoon in her letters to her mother (see chapter 13). A girl becomes a woman (a word full of meaning in Balzac’s works) as a result of the act of love in marriage, or outside of it. In spite of the desire to reconcile passion with marriage, the women suffer in the gulf that separates them—as does Honorine, for whom the sexual act with a husband is diametrically opposed to the love of a lover. To speak of the pleasure Honorine knew with her unworthy lover, the language of sex resorts to oxymorons: “cruelles délices” [cruel delights], “délire mortel” [mortal delirium] (2: 581), and “des voluptés gravées en traits de feu” [sensual pleasures etched with strokes of fire] (2: 581). For the sexual love that she finally agrees to grant her husband Octave, the language of sex says only: “quand vous le voudrez, je serai votre femme” [when you wish it, I will be your wife] (2: 592). To be a wife says everything without recounting much.

*Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* proposes a particularly developed case of the language of sex in the context of a young woman’s love and marriage. The serious Renée will have the fruits of the sexual act (children) without knowing its flowers, while the passionate Louise will have the flowers with-
out the fruit (1: 316). Renée in her marriage of reason negotiates her sexual initiation and speaks of “consentement entier” [complete consent] (1: 252), in contrast to passive obedience “comme ma très honorée mère vient de me le recommander” [as my most honored mother has just recommended] and to duty (1: 253). Keeping her “libre arbitre” [free will], Renée does not have sex as long as she does not want to (1: 255). When the initiation takes place, she calls it a “fête” and, to keep it secret, even from her intimate friend, this is how she writes of it to Louise:

Sache cependant que rien n’a manqué de ce que veut l’amour le plus délicat, ni de cet imprévu qui est, en quelque sorte, l’honneur de ce moment-là: les grâces mystérieuses que nos imaginations lui demandent, l’ entraînement qui excuse, le consentement arraché, les voluptés idéales longtemps entrevues et qui nous subjuguent l’âme avant que nous nous laissions aller à la réalité, toutes les séductions y étaient avec leurs formes enchanteresses. (1: 255)

[Know, however, that nothing was lacking of what the most delicate love seeks, nor of that unanticipatedness that is in some ways the honor of that moment: the mysterious graces that our imagination demands of it, the allurement that excuses it, the consent that is won, the ideal sensual pleasures long foreseen that subjugate our souls before we let ourselves suffer the reality, all the seductions were there in their enchanting forms.]

These words, although not particularly metaphorical, weave a veil through which one must discern Renée’s sexual happiness, in particular by means of the connotations of the word “réalité”—the positive, concrete reality of the sex act. Nevertheless, she feels unhappy because she is experiencing a conflict between conjugal duty and passion (1: 278). Renée thus has the role of symbolizing the failure of marriages that require the wife to give herself to her husband as a duty, and that, because of this, exclude sexual passion.

With more elaborate flowers of rhetoric, Louise de Macumer later describes the “terrible passage” (1: 303) from maidenhood to womanhood and from love to happiness:

Comment! on a nommé un devoir les gracieuses folies du cœur et l’irrésistible entraînement du désir. Et pourquoi? Quelle horrible puissance a donc imaginé de nous obliger à fouler les délicatesses du goût, les mille pudeurs de la femme, en convertissant ces voluptés en devoirs? Comment peut-on devoir ces fleurs de l’âme, ces roses de la vie, ces poèmes de la sensibilité exaltée, à un être qu’on n’aimerait pas? Des droits dans de telles sensations! (1: 306)
[What! People have called the graceful follies of the heart and the irresistible surrender to desire a duty! But why? What horrible force has thought to oblige us to trample upon delicate tastes, the thousand modesties of women, by converting these sensual pleasures into duties? How can one owe these flowers of the soul, these roses of life, these poems of exalted sensibility, to a being whom we may not like? Rights, among such sensations!]

Here, reunited once again, are scruples and modesty with sensual pleasure. On the bed called an altar there takes place “le terrible fait qui change la fille en femme et l’amant en mari” [the terrible act that changes the girl into a woman and the lover into a husband] (1: 299). Through this language, we can see that a husband is not a lover, as the following remark also states: “Faire de son mari son amant est une œuvre aussi délicate que celle de faire de son amant son mari” [To make a lover out of one’s husband is as delicate a task as is making a husband out of one’s lover] (1: 302).

Julie d’Aiglemont, in La femme de trente ans, suffers in her new sexuality as a married woman because her “lansquenet” [warrior] (2: 1066) of a husband “[l]a cherche trop souvent” [seeks her out too often] (2: 1065); the euphemism “chercher” returns several times to designate “ce qui [l]a tue” [what is killing her] (2: 1066), the act that renders her Victor happy. “Toujours jeune fille en dépit du mariage” [still a virgin in spite of marriage], says the narrator (2: 1075)—we have to interpret this to mean that she does not know the blossoming that love brings to a woman—she will nonetheless have a daughter, which will allow her a cessation in her sexual relations, and that is called a “bonheur négatif” [negative happiness] (2: 1075). What is going badly in this conjugal love is expressed by the verb “succomber encore une fois” [to succumb once again] (2: 1084) and by the terrible logic of the sentence: “elle se donnait, contre son cœur et contre le vœu de la nature, à un mari qu’elle n’aimait plus” [she gave herself, against her heart and against the wishes of nature, to a husband she no longer loved] (2: 1085). The refusal of sex will be translated by the qualifier “widow” (2: 1091), and when the narrator says that “elle ne pouvait plus être une créature complète” [she could no longer be a complete being] (2: 1108), this means that she no longer has a sex life.

Driftings

Paquita Valdès, in La fille aux yeux d’or, is introduced as an enigma, a mystery, and a charade because she knows physical love even though she has
never slept with a man: “si la Fille aux yeux d’or était vierge, elle n’était certes pas innocente” [if the Girl with the Golden Eyes was a virgin, she was certainly not innocent] (5: 1091). She knows the refinements of sensual pleasure, “toute ce que pouvait connaître Henri de cette poésie des sens que l’on nomme amour” [all that Henri could know about that poetry of the senses that one calls love] (5: 1091). In this paragraph, which recounts the first act of love between Henri de Marsay and Paquita, there is no direct expression of sex. The language of sex is borrowed here from the domain of oriental poetry, of which, however, no rhyme could translate “l’extase pleine de confusion et la stupeur dont cette délicieuse fille fut saisie quand cessa l’erreur dans laquelle une main de fer la faisait vivre” [the ecstasy full of confusion and the stupor that seized this delicious girl when the error in which an iron hand was forcing her to live came to an end] (5: 1092). The expression is distorted and twisted, especially because the reader does not yet know that a woman was responsible for Paquita’s loss of innocence, and that the error is homosexuality (of which, according to Mozet, it is impossible to speak [Balzac au pluriel 128]). But the ecstasy, the confusion, the stupor are words that indicate her first sexual pleasure with a man.

When the marquise de San-Réal finds Paquita again, she examines her and discovers that she is no longer a virgin; Paquita herself says: “il est bien facile de voir que je ne suis plus la même” [it is very easy to see that I am no longer the same] (5: 1099). This quasi-medical examination is expressed by the following language: “Tous les flambeaux allumés, un parfum délicat qui se faisait sentir, certain désordre où l’œil d’un homme à bonnes fortunes devait reconnaître des folies communes à toutes les passions, annonçaient que la marquise avait savamment questionnée la coupable” [All the lit torches, a delicate scent that one could smell, a certain disorder in which a man of experience would readily recognize the follies that all passions have in common, told that the marquise had skillfully questioned the guilty girl] (5: 1106). In this “parfum” that no doubt exudes from a human body, and especially in these “folies” that two impassioned beings can commit together, men or women, and even in the irony of the adverb “savamment,” we should be able to read, if we exercise mental gymnastics, a sexual act.3 Mozet attracts our attention to the fact that “Margarita n’intervient donc qu’au dénouement, pour l’acte décisif” [Margarita thus does not intervene until the dénouement, to accomplish the decisive act] (Balzac au pluriel 128).4

3. I am not at all convinced by the examination of this passage by Drevon and Guichardet, nor by their conclusion: “ce n’est pas Gomorrhe” [it is not Gomorrah] (273).
4. Mozet in her astute analysis concludes that Balzac “a choisi de parler à la fois et en même temps des lesbiennes et des ouvriers” [chose to speak at the same time and simultane-
Everything that has needed to be said about *Une passion dans le désert* is said by Janet Beizer in her book *Family Plots*—while Balzac says almost nothing about sex between the soldier and the panther. In this case of a bestial sexual partnership, where the subject matter is the least proper, the language is the most chastised, the most inhibited. Such is not the case for at least one reader of the story, Philippe Berthier, who has certainly dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s: “C’est en faisant l’amour avec sa geôlière, en plein orgasme, qu’un faux mouvement, un geste mal interprété amène la tragédie. Elle se croit menacée, il la poignarde” [It is while making love with his jailor, at the moment of orgasm, that a false movement, a misinterpreted gesture brings about the tragedy. She thinks she is threatened, he stabs her] (“Le désir” 83; emphasis added). For an opposite tendency, there is the intelligent reading by Anne-Marie Baron arguing that the real occulted passion is the mystical, disincarnated one of Christ:

Cette nouvelle fascinante cache bien son jeu. Car ce n’est pas une perversion sexuelle que Balzac a voulu dissimuler, c’est un sens mystique qu’il a cherché à occulter par une apparente perversion, jetée comme leurre au lecteur. Texte plus édifiant que provocant, moins érotique qu’arétologique, *Une passion dans le désert*, comme toutes les vies d’ermite, répète symboliquement la vie du Christ, jusque dans sa crucifixion. (*Les hiéroglyphes* 147)

[This fascinating story plays its cards close to the chest. For it is not a sexual perversion that Balzac wanted to hide, it is a mystical meaning that he sought to occult by an apparent perversion, flung to the reader like a decoy. More an edifying than a provocative text, less erotic than aretological, *Une passion dans le désert*, like all the hermits’ lives, symbolically repeats the life of Christ, right up to his crucifixion.]

As Beizer recognizes, the story about sex is the one of our second reading—the one that is not naive and that sees the erotic relation between man and panther (52); and it is a reading that Balzac has arranged for us to uncover, “a rather simplistic secret core of this text” (57) while pretending not to.

In the famous passage of sexual pleasure in *Sarrasine*, this “histoire du contresens sexuel du sculpteur Sarrasine” [story of sexual misinterpretation by the sculptor Sarrasine] (Bordas, Introduction to *Sarrasine* 12), I will only...
note that the ecstasy of the sculptor that takes place while Zambinella is
singing is not solely “toute nerveuse” [completely nervous], as Le Yaouanc
would have it (“Le plaisir” [1973] 230). One would have to be as naive as
Suzanne Simonin, Diderot’s nun, not to accept seeing sexual pleasure written
here, or more clinically speaking, an orgasm, to be exact. In my opinion, this
is how it is written. Balzac is no less crafty at inventing a language for homo-
sexual sex than he is for sex between a man and a woman.

Why a Language of Sex?

Balzac “s’intéresse extrêmement à la vie charnelle de ses personnages” [is
extremely interested in the carnal life of his characters], says Le Yaouanc
(“Le plaisir” [1973] 211–12)—and also in the language he uses to speak it, I
would add. This is why we should try to “percevoir, à travers ce que Balzac
a dit, ce qu’il a tu” [perceive, through what Balzac has said, what he has
not said] (Drevon and Guichardet 257). Mental gymnastics, a suspicious
reader’s attitude, bold intellection, sincerity or insincerity—this is what we
need as we read the language of sex in Balzac’s works. Often a child must be
conceived before we are able to say with certainty that the couple has had
sexual relations. And yet this language is not “flat”: neither proper nor dull,
as I have said, but evocative, provocative, ultimately clear. For it is under-
stood that one cannot recount sex, in proper terms. Not only is this simply
not done (a question of social norms), but also, is it not true that indirect
language speaks more than direct language? The mental effort that translates
this language not into acts but into another language is rewarded by the price
that is attached to it: the greater pleasure of the text. The language of Bal-
zacian sex takes place in the domain of the obvious hidden meanings (I am
reformulating one of Michel Butor’s notions about the second pavilion scene
in La princesse de Clèves [Répertoire 1: 76]).

But Balzac is perfectly conscious of the stakes involved in such a lan-
guage with respect to his global project. What he called the obscenity of
Massimilla Doni elucidates his personal and particular reasons for the
choice of such language, a language that represents an image of literary
creation. Massimilla Doni represents for Balzac creation as execution, the
execution being the realization, at the price of arduous work on language,
of the conception that is born in the spirit, fertile in inventing subjects for
novels. Sexual love represents literary creation and gives “une belle expli-
cation des plus intimes procédés de l’art” [a fine explanation of the most
intimate processes of art]; but to arrive at “l’enfantement des œuvres d’art” [the birthing of works of art], one must go past the barriers that separate the bodies. Love, of the kind that may conceive a child, brings to fruition an imagined creation. Balzac thus tells us about sexual unions, and to do this, he conceives a language of sex.