OCTAVE MIRBEAU'S MADAME HANSKA IN "LA MORT DE BALZAC"

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The bizarre title of *La 628-E-8* suggests a mystery novel for which the work itself was once mistaken.' Actually it is probably the first book ever written on the automobile, and it describes Mirbeau's tour through France, the Rhineland and, as he puts it in Montaigne-like fashion, "à travers un peu de moi-même."[2]

The various episodes of *La 628-E-8* are a blend of fiction, reality and literary criticism, and seem to have nothing else to bind them together other than the author and his car. An occasional cameo-appearance by Mirbeau's friends and acquaintances may be intended to give the impression that the stories are true. What is more, the testimonies of such artists as Jean Gigoux and Auguste Rodin make it more difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. The situation becomes particularly sensitive when Mme Hanska, who is a historical figure, also becomes a protagonist in "La Mort de Balzac." In this episode of *La 628-E-8,* Mirbeau attributes to Rodin certain statements concerning Mme Hanska, which may receive today great attention because of his glory. They may not have seemed as impressive during Rodin's own life when he was less appreciated. The opposite may be true of Gigoux.[3] He was deemed "un des plus célèbres portraitistes de l'époque," and had once enjoyed a great popularity, yet is today forgotten by many.[4] Gigoux has left two portraits of Mme Hanska: first, a handsome painting exhibited at the Salon of 1852, and much later, he orally entrusted to Mirbeau his recollections about her.[5] Even though he had once known Mme Hanska intimately, some critics consider Gigoux's testimony unreliable, owing to the artist's advanced age at the time he confided in Mirbeau. The latter, himself, calls the testimony "véridique" rather than "vrai," and this helps make it ambiguous.

On the surface, Mirbeau's travel in *La 628-E-8* unfolds in a chronological order, from day to day, from country to country. The trip affords Mirbeau an opportunity to observe the changing scenery and to record new sensations, for instance seeing a landscape in motion from a moving car. At times, when the auto stops, the passenger is under the deceptive impression that the land-

scape continues to flow. This illusion is a common distortion of reality which many drivers experience today as part of their daily life, but in Mirbeau's time, the car was a novelty and these were new sensations which gave rise to many questions on illusion and reality. What is more, within a relatively short time, the traveler of *La 628-E-8* sees his surroundings change, and this contributes to a strange feeling of being "depaysé," or disoriented. The excitement of traveling and the movement of the car result in mental and physical fatigue, which adds another dimension to the travel experience and helps explain Mirbeau's moodiness, for instance his need to read a rare edition of Balzac, alone, in a hotel room.

The speed of the car, the changing scenery and the passenger's feelings are not the only factors which inspire the writer to reflect on new perceptions of reality. In fact, the emotional and intellectual meandering through space and time, now in the present, now in the past, does not prevent the traveler from clearly recording his observations from within and without. He no doubt introduces complexities of his own as he recalls his impressions of the journey, embellishing, exaggerating, and attenuating as he puts them in writing. Mirbeau believed that a writer should not copy reality, but rather he should deform it. According to him, deformation allows the artist to endow reality with new life. It helps him, perhaps, avoid creating a lifeless copy.[6] These considerations lead us to re-examine Mirbeau's portrayal of Mme Hanska, and to study the metamorphosis she undergoes as a historical character when Mirbeau endows her with new life.

Our objective is, first of all, to clarify any ambiguities by studying in *La 628-E-8* the circumstances which led Mirbeau to become interested in Mme Hanska, and second, to explore "recurrent characteristics" in his portrayal of her. In transposing his vision of the world into one of art, Mirbeau reinforces certain images and patterns which suggest to us the dominant traits of his poetic landscape, and they prove helpful in identifying and isolating elements of fiction in his story.[7] Our ultimate goal is to appraise the portrait in "La Mort de Balzac," without determining what is historically true or false in the author's portrayal of Mme Hanska. This has already been attempted by others, i.e., Marcel Bouteron.

Mirbeau's obsession to shed light on Balzac's marriage revived an old controversy of which the public first became aware when the posthumous volume of *Choses vues* appeared in 1887. Here, Victor Hugo describes his last visit to the dying Balzac, and, in passing, refers to Balzac's wife, emphasizing Mme Hanska's absence from her husband's side at that crucial moment when a loving wife should be there. Hugo's contemporaries noticed this indifference,

and following in Hugo's footsteps, other critics searched for evidence of a possible misunderstanding between Balzac and his wife. In *1907,* some twenty years later, Mirbeau proposed his own version of the subject.[8]

Having acquired a rare edition of Balzac's correspondence in Belgium, Mirbeau was inspired to study certain obsessions of Balzac, e.g., his infatuation with titles of nobility and with money. These infatuations helped Mirbeau clarify Balzac's marriage to a wealthy aristocrat, and he suggested that: "C'est par ses péchés qu'un grand homme nous passionne le plus" (393).

Mirbeau's admiration for and interest in Balzac do not alone explain why he chose to speak of Balzac's wife.[9] The presence in *La 628-E-8* of Paul Bourget helps shed some new light on the matter. Paul Bourget was a friend and a contemporary of Mirbeau, as well as a critic whose essay on Balzac Mirbeau had once admired. Later in his career, however, Mirbeau became very critical of Bourget. The criticism is felt in works like *Le Jardin des supplices* (1898), where Bourget appears satirized as "l'illustre ecrivain," and again in *Le Journai d'une femme de chambre* (1900), where he plays the role of a writer who prefers women of high society and scorns chambermaids. Bourget explains to Celestine his lack of interest in her because chambermaids have no depth, no "âme."

Mirbeau, on the other hand, did not share this view. In a pointed reference to Paul Bourget he wrote: "[Balzac], cet esprit si averti, si aigű, si profondement humain, croyait, avec une ferveur théologale, aux grandes dames. Comme M. Paul Bourget ..." (406). Mirbeau approaches Mme Hanska from a different point of view. In his portrayal of Eveline Hanska de Balzac, he focuses on the moral character of this "grande dame," who enjoys a unique social position, thanks to her title, her wealth as well as her marriage to a renowned novelist. Yet, in spite of these advantages, she does not fit into the mold of "grandes dames"; for that matter few, if any, Mirbelian heroines do.

"La Mort de Balzac" represents the last episode in a three-part essay. We owe the account to Jean Gigoux's testimony who tells what happened on the eve of Balzac's death, thus providing Mirbeau with the most shocking and controversial passage of *La 628-E-8.* Mirbeau eventually withdrew the story and never allowed it to be published during his lifetime. In this episode, Gigoux claims to have been with Mme Hanska when her husband died, and he speaks of the event with a freshness of precision as if it had taken place only yesterday, and not on August 18, 1850. Gigoux vividly recalls hearing a knock at Mme Hanska's door "on the dot" of ten-thirty in the evening. To be able to recall with such an unusual sharpness a moment of forty years previous, the event must have either left a lasting impression on Gigoux, or Mirbeau is

embellishing his story. The latter hastens to reassure us of his complete impartiality, denying in four categorical statements (why so many?) any intention to slant the testimony: "Je n'y change rien ... Je ne le brode, ni ne le charge, ni ne I'attenue" (442). Although he claims to be an impartial listener, we know that Mirbeau thought of deformation as a desirable literary technique. He further refers to Gigoux's account as "un fait ... de la plus grande horreur tragique . . ." (404), "un fait" transformed by subjective elements, imagination and feelings, as is suggested by the use of the superlative. Moreover, as if he were using a microscope, Mirbeau singles out and magnifies the event, inevitably distorting it.[10]

"La Mort de Balzac" brings to mind the many variations on the eternal triangle of the betrayed husband (Balzac), the unfaithful wife (Mme Hanska) and her lover (Jean Gigoux). The great Balzac plays a minor role and dies "off stage," so to speak, attended by an old woman, not even a member of the family, who watches over the dying man: "La vérité vraie est que Balzac est mort abandonné de tous et de tout, comme un chien!" (422). Gigoux's exclamation and his use of the redundant epithet "vraie" (true) betray his emotions. On the other hand, the very common and trite comparison, "left to die like a dog," takes a new meaning because, in his works, Balzac constantly drew comparisons between the animal and human worlds.

Mirbeau proceeds to investigate the "dessous," or secrets, unknown to the public. He no doubt intends to expose them, in order to shed new light on the characters.**"** While Balzac lies dying alone, his wife remains in the same house and spends the evening with Gigoux, "dans cette maison, en plein Paris, où, plus délaissé qu'une bête malade au fond d'un trou, dans les bois, mourait le plus grand génie du siècle . . ." (430). To abandon so completely Balzac no doubt illustrates, in Mirbeau's mind, the depth of indifference to which a woman can stoop in her scorn toward a great writer. By adroitly punctuating each of Jean Gigoux's utterances, Mirbeau makes certain that the reader fully understands the incongruity of the situation: "J 'oubliais réellement que j'étais, à l'instant même où il mourait ... dans la maison, dans le lit, avec la femme de Balzac! ... Comprenez-vous ça?" (433). While the rhetorical question needs no answer, we can almost visualize Mirbeau's disbelief and indignation.

According to a critic, Balzac, who was not inclined to tenderness, could not have imagined a scene more melodramatically cruel: "Balzac lui-même n'eût osé concevoir un semblable dénouement pour le plus tragiquement humain de ses romans."[12] His own death becomes more poignant when we compare it to similar situations in his novels. Indeed, the characters of the *Comédie humaine* almost always receive some consolation which is denied

to Balzac. The miser Grandet dies dreaming of the gold he so loved, while his tender daughter Eugénie watches over him. Although Goriot is abandoned by his daughters, he is attended by a young medical intern, the future Horace Bianchon, whom Balzac charitably places at the bedside of many characters. Legend has it that Balzac himself called for Bianchon during his last days of illness. Even the terrifying "cousine Bette," who repeatedly attempted to destroy the Hulot family, even she dies surrounded and mourned by the members of this family. As for the great seductress, Valérie Crevel, whose list of victims includes Baron Hulot, she receives the consolation of the last rites. Like his notorious protagonist, Balzac suffers from unpleasant odors and pus which emanate from his decaying body, and yet Mirbeau does not even grant him the comfort of religion and love. [13]

In his portrait of Mme Hanska, Mirbeau only gradually introduces distortions. She who is blamed for cruelly abandoning Balzac first appears as the ideal woman: beautiful, exquisitely sensitive, compassionate, enticing and sensuous. She is the ideal woman of *Les Lettres à l'étrangère*, distant, mysterious and inaccessible, "une femme extraordinaire" (405), "supérieure par I'intelligence et par le coeur ..." (406). Mirbeau's ultimate goal, however, is to dispel the mystery surrounding "I'étrangère." He accomplishes this by enlisting the cooperation of two friends, Barbey d'Aurevilly and Jean Gigoux. According to the former, "[Mme Hanska] valait la peine de toutes les folies" (407). But the latter's "confidences parlées" strike a fatal blow, destroying the traditional image of Mme Hanska, great lady and loving wife. By resorting to a variety of sources, i.e., Spoelberch de Lovenjoul and Mme Surville (Balzac's sister), and in particular to the oral testimony of Barbey d'Aurevilly and Jean Gigoux, Mirbeau injects new life into his subject. But in the process, the ideal woman of *Les Lettres à /'étrangère* loses her mystery and, what is more serious, acquires some mannerisms pertaining to other Mirbelian female protagonists. These recurrent mannerisms suggest that the author may have injected into his portrayal of Mme Hanska a vision of women yet to be defined.

Mirbeau recalls that in 1850, after eighteen years of correspondence, the aristocratic widow left her estate in Wierszchownia and married Balzac. When, finally, the couple arrived late at night in Paris, bizarre events forced them to resort to a locksmith before being able to enter their new home. The weary Balzac, whose poor health had made the journey more tedious, immediately retired, leaving Mme Hanska alone to weep in despair. According to Mirbeau, from this moment on Balzac and his wife avoided each other; they were mutually disappointed, he who dreamed of wealth and she of glory. Balzac soon discovered that Mme Hanska was not as "colossalement riche" (405) as he

had anticipated; she in turn found herself married to a very sick man, so different from the renowned novelist she had admired.

On the very eve of her husband's death, we penetrate into Mme Hanska's room. Gigoux, through whose eyes we see the room, speaks of stale odors which permeate it: "Avec cela m'arrivaient aux narines, des odeurs d'amour, d'écoeurantes odeurs de nourriture aussi, et de boisson, que la chaleur aigrissait" (434). Soon after, an old woman comes to inform Mme Hanska of Balzac's precarious condition. The wife reacts strangely, to say the least: "[Mme Hanska] se bouchait les oreilies, ne voulant rien entendre. Elle la pria même [la vieille femme] de ne revenir que 'quand tout serait fini' " (430). She wears very little clothing and frantically paces back and forth, bumping into furniture like a trapped animal. She appears quite unlike the mysterious and distant woman of *Les Lettres à l'étrangère.* In fact, Gigoux reduces her to nothingness, not even a "bête," beast or fool: "Elle, elle n'était plus rien... plus rien... Ce n'était plus un être de raison, ce n'était pas même une folle... pas même une bête... ce n'était rien" (430). She shows neither sorrow nor sadness when Balzac finally dies. Instead she resents the inconvenience and the formalities which death entails. The disorder of her room, her skimpy clothing and her indifference, all make Mme Hanska appear as a sensuous but unfeeling courtesan in a bordello: "Mes vêtements, des jupons, traînaient sur les fauteuils, pendaient des meubles, jonchaient le tapis, en un désordre tel et si ignoble, que, n'eût été la splendeur royale du lit, n'eussent été les cuivres étincelants de la psyché, je me serais cru échoué, après boire, au hasard d'une rencontre nocturne, chez une racoleuse d'amour" (434). Gigoux's harsh portrayal brings to mind the "femme fatale" and the "belle dame sans merci" of the "fin de siècle" Decadents with whom Mirbeau shares certain affinities.[14]

Balzac's contemporaries did not enter Mme Hanska's room, nor did they benefit from Gigoux's revelations and Mirbeau's elucidations ("éclaircissements," 404), which only became available after *1913.* For her contemporaries, Mme Hanska remained dignified: "Andromaque elle-même quand elle perdit Hector ... Elle émerveilla ... tout le monde par la correction tragique" (438). Mirbeau's readers, however, have a chance to notice various changes in the personality of the protagonist. Mme Hanska is seen, now as a mysterious woman or "l'étrangère," now as a courtesan or "racoleuse d'amour," and finally she becomes the ideal widow who recaptures the respect and admiration of the reader of *La 628-E-8.* Yet, when Gigoux compares Mme Hanska to the mythological Andromaque, his tribute seems only half-sincere: "Le plus comique, c'est, je crois, qu'elle fut sincere dans sa comédie" (438).[15] He seems to suggest that Mme Hanska only acts the part of Andromaque without

actually possessing the attributes of the worthy widow. The final word "comédie" puts the emphasis on "play-acting" rather than sincerity, even though sincerity seems more desirable in this instance.

Since the épisode of Balzac's death appears in a literary work, we may wonder if it is not embellished. The degree of embellishment may be determined by comparing the protagonist of "La Mort de Balzac" with other Mirbelian women. A comparison of this nature leads us to discuss recurring traits which give Mirbeau's fiction its characteristic relief.

In Mirbeau's earliest novel, *Le Calvaire* (1887), Jean Mintié falls in love with an innocent-looking Juliette Roux. As soon as their relationship reaches the breaking point, Juliette seeks new excitement, indulges in nightly orgies, loses her freshness, and begins to look tired, disheveled and unkempt. Jean Mintié admires Juliette, even after their final separation, and when he again meets her in the streets, he finds her most attractive and desirable: "Elle avait
un chapteau rose, était fraîche, souriante, semblait heureuse ...."[16] From a distance, Juliette resembles the ideal woman once more. Jean sees her younger-looking and idol-like: "L'idole impure, éternellement souillée, vers laquelle couraient des foules haletantes . . ." (*Le Calvaire 3*43). Mme Hanska undergoes a similar transformation. First seen as the "ideal woman," she is later compared to a "racoleuse d'amour," and then again, to the ideal widow Andromaque.

In *Le jardin des supplices* (1898), the anonymous narrator, who falls in love with Clara, is attracted by her beauty and mystery, and by the sadistic desires he later senses in her. Clara takes pleasure in human suffering, in feeling her dress torn by a blood-thirsty crowd, and in the atrocious scenes of the garden of tortures. Her sadism often reaches such an intensity that it results in pain and causes her to lose consciousness. During these moments of crisis, the helpless narrator sees Clara reach total exhaustion. Only then does she briefly recapture fleeting moments of innocence: "Et elle s'endormait ... d'un sommeil calme, lumineux et lointain, et profond, comme un grand et doux lac, sous la lune d'une nuit d'été."[17]

In *Le journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), by confronting her tyrannical masters, Celestine repeatedly loses her temper, and this results in her eventual dismissal. She later marries Joseph, a former servant, turned café owner in the provinces. Their rather uneventful provincial existence frees Celestine from servitude, but not from dreams of adventure and crime: "j'irai toujours où il [Joseph] me dira d'aller ... jusqu'au crime ... !"[18] In spite of Celestine's attraction to crime, her behavior appears relatively innocent when we compare it with the bizarre and excentric practices of her decadent and tyrannical masters.

Although Mirbeau endows all his heroines with the kind of uniqueness a reader hardly forgets, each woman conforms to a certain pattern of behavior. At first sight, she gives the impression of relative innocence. In the long run, certain signs contradict this: the forehead hardens, unpleasant furrows mold the corners of the mouth, and the voice takes on harsh vibrations. These are symptoms of anger and annoyance. The elegant dress becomes torn or dirty. The outward deterioration suggests a corresponding moral degeneration. The facial expressions suggest a change in the heroine's attitude as well. The gradual transformations convey a dynamic quality to the female protagonist and endow her with life. She retains a certain vitality in spite of Mirbeau's pessimistic portrayal of humanity in general, and of women in particular.

The same mixture of innocence and corruption which characterizes the courtesan Juliette, the sadist Clara, or the servant girl Celestine, also describes the aristocratic Mme Hanska. In fact, "La Mort de Balzac" reveals some shocking aspects about the woman whom we traditionally think of as a "grande-dame" and a loving wife. Gigoux soon destroys these illusions as well as the elements of mystery and distance which Balzac had included in his *Lettres à l'étrangère.* His tale of unfaithfulness, eroticism and indifference erases the distance that separates the reader from Balzac's "ideal woman." The destruction is accomplished by scrutinizing Mme Hanska's face and searching for microscopic flaws: "Elle avait un pli amer, presque méchant, au coin de la bouche" (435). Gigoux quickly adds a moral touch: "Et la bouche, d'un dessin si joliment sensuel, prenait alors une expression vulgaire, basse, qui avait quelque chose de répugnant ... Sa voix, toute changée, sans cet accent chantant ... devenait agressive" (435). When in a moment of impatience Mme Hanska asks Gigoux to leave, her tone is "sec" and her voice is "dure" (433).

After describing the expression on the face and the tone of the voice, Gigoux proceeds to criticize Mme Hanska's dress: "Je vis qu'elle allait sortir clans cet état de presque complète nudité ... Je criai: 'Où allez-vous? ... Habillez-vous un peu, au moins. Et puis, calmez-vous!' Je me levai, l'obligeai à revêtir une sorte de peignoir blanc, très sale . . ." (433). The strategic position of the word "sale" at the end of the sentence, reinforced by an adverb of intensity, creates an effective contrast with the word "blanc" which immediately precedes. Mme Hanska's half-nakedness and the sad condition of her "peignoir" suggest the downfall of the ideal woman and accentuate further the traits which bring her closer to the courtesan to whom Gigoux has already compared her.

Perhaps the most trite, and yet the most expressive and fetishistic detail

concerns hand gestures. Gigoux describes Mme Hanska's nervous pacing, back and forth, before the reader-spectator; like an actress on the stage, she sighs

and files her nails: "Elle allait de son fauteuil à la fenêtre, revenait de la fenêtre à son fauteuil, tantôt limant ses ongles avec rage, tantôt poussant des soupirs" (428). At the thought that Victor Hugo might visit Balzac and that she may have to face him, Mme Hanska frantically resumes filing her nails with increased vigor: "Et elle limait ses ongles avec plus de frénésie" (428). The precision with which Gigoux remembers the trite gesture, forty years after Balzac's death, is like an obsession.[19] He by no means is the first one to be so obsessed. "La Mort de Balzac" is neither the first nor the only story in which a Mirebelian female protagonist files her nails while being intently watched by an admirer. In fact, the gesture acquires greater significance because of its recurrence in other works. Indeed, already in *Le Calvaire* (1887), Juliette filed, polished and buffed her nails until they became hard as agate. She filed her nails with a persistence and a passion so great that Jean Mintié gave in to her, abandoning his literary ambitions in order to please her.

In a short story entitled "Clotilde et moi," the narrator dreams of a sentimental encounter with Clotilde, in a romantic setting near the English seashore. Clotilde on the other hand only seems interested in inflicting torment on her male companion and postponing the moment of gratification: "La figure grave, le front serré d'un pli que je n'aimais pas ... elle poussait un soupir, se remettait à polir ses ongles et ne repondit pas," or yet, "après avoir limé et poli consciencieusement ses ongles ... elle s'ennuya."[20] To make the situation typically uncomfortable, whenever Clotilde speaks, she does so in an imperious and irritating tone of voice.

This recurrent emphasis on facial expressions, the annoying vividness of hand gestures, the elegance or disrepair of clothing that was sometimes torn or dirty, even more, the impression of innocence which is inevitably followed by the discovery of cruel behavior in the loved woman, these devices seem common to Mirbelian heroines and lend them elusiveness and mobility, and ultimately create impressionistic portraits. Mirbeau was a friend, an ardent admirer and supporter of many impressionists, and in particular of Claude Monet, of whom he speaks in *La 628-E-8.* Monet's studies of nature, his pond of lilies, or his cathedral of Rouen, represent on canvas a succession of instants in the life of a landscape or a monument. Monet created his paintings of the cathedral of Rouen at varying moments of daylight, and each time his paintings underwent many changes. To what degree Mirbeau felt inspired to adapt Monet's ideas to literature is not certain. There is no doubt, however, that Mirbeau's female protagonists come to life through a succession of images, now of innocence and idealism, now of cruelty. The image changes depending on the angle, or the distance, or the circumstances from which the women are

seen. Each change sheds new light on the protagonist, accentuating different aspects of her personality. What is more, the observer, through whose eyes we see Mme Hanska, be it Mirbeau, Gigoux, or the narrator (a male point of view), injects personal feelings into the portrait, inevitably distorting its psychological dimension. Mirbeau was always searching for new ideas and techniques of expression. He has even shown interest in representing reality "cinematographiquement." The cinema, like the car, was just emerging.

Whatever the technology, impressionistic or cinematic, the final creation contains subjective elements. This was evident to Mirbeau in the numerous accounts he had read or heard about Balzac: "II y avait un peu de vrai, clans toutes ces histoires malsonnantes, mais du vrai mal compris, du vrai déformé, comme toujours" (401). Ironically, he himself does not avoid "le vrai mal compris" or "le vrai déformé" he so well points out in the writings of others. Indeed, in "La Mort de Balzac," he goes beyond describing Balzac's foibles, e.g., his fondness for titles of nobility and for money. He goes on to imply that Balzac and his wife avoided each other from the moment they arrived in Paris, and finally he uses an emotionally colored eyewitness account to support this idea. On the other hand, the impressionistic portrayal with its subtle but progressive deformation, and the use of recurring characteristics, suggest that the historical Mme Hanska is transformed when she becomes a Mirbelian protagonist. He endows her with the traits of a femme fatale, transforms her into a "belle dame sans merci," whose behavior strongly resembles that of his other heroines, Juliette and Clara, Clotilde and Celestine. "Eveline's" melodious and quasi-heavenly name, like the tender name of Juliette, or Clara or Celestine, barely disguises an egoistic, voluptuous and cruel nature, confirming what Mirbeau believed to be true: "Plus les noms sont charmants, plus méchantes sont les maladies."[21]

On the other hand, Mme Hanska's attitude and behavior illustrate what Mirbeau has already suggested in *Le Jardin des supplices*, namely, that women, regardless of the social background from which they come, behave in the same manner: "les grandes dames et les bourgeoises ... C'est la même chose ... Chez les femmes, ii n'y a pas de catégories morales, it n'y a que des catégories sociales."[22] In Mirbeau's poetic landscape, the women aristocrats and the courtesans behave identically. Such a simplification affords the modern reader little comfort. Yet, like Monet's cathedral of Rouen, or his pond of lilies, each woman is observed by Mirbeau through a prism of ever-changing reflections and nuances of light, and becomes endowed with life, individuality and elusiveness, which compensate to some degree for the moral simplification: they are beautiful, self-centered creatures who repel and attract.

Mirbeau's transposition of Gigoux's story does not flatter Mme Hanska. On the contrary, it aroused protests from her daughter.[23] In a letter to *Le Temps,* she explained that her mother had met Gigoux two years after Balzac's death, therefore the events could not have taken place as they appear in *La 628-E-8.* Since the publication of her letter, critics have searched for documents to support Mirbeau's story, while others persist in discrediting it. In the heat of the debate, it was forgotten that *La 628-E-8* is a literary work which no doubt contains elements of truth, though not necessarily elements true to fact as in a biography.

There is a strong temptation to suggest that Mirbeau's own marriage may have influenced his vision of women in general, and his portrait of Mme Hanska in particular. Although he had the good fortune of marrying a talented and beautiful widow whose wealth, loving devotion and encouragement freed him from material worries and allowed him to devote his life to creative writing, his marriage was not free from disappointments. The future Mme Mirbeau, whom Robert de Montesquiou calls a "celebre courtisane du Second Empire," was a wealthy widow before she remarried, though not an aristocrat like Mme Hanska.[24]

One cannot help noticing interesting parallels between the marriage of Balzac and that of Mirbeau. Both married wealthy widows, who are compared to courtesans (by Montesquiou and Gigoux). Both were writers and married for love. This similarity notwithstanding, Mirbeau's letters to various friends suggest that, in his relations with women, he had met with disappointments long before he got married. On the other hand, his friendship with Claude Monet and his admiration for the artist lend support for Mirbeau's impressionistic art in portraying women. Furthermore, the recurring characteristics allow us to view Mme Hanska as part of Mirbeau's poetic landscape, as one of his "belles dames sans merci." Movie versions of *Le jardin des supplices* and of *Le journal d'une femme de chambre* and recent editions of the two novels have given Clara and Celestine a renewed lease on life. On the contrary, the protagonist of "La Mort de Balzac" died with the birth of *La 628-E-8,* for the book appeared without the Balzac episode. The latter remains nonetheless a testimony of Mirbeau's attempt to mold reality into a characteristic relief of his own poetic landscape.

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1. Octave Mirbeau, *La 628-E-8* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1907). The first edition, and all subsequent ones, appeared without "La Mort de Balzac." The Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet, in Paris, has an untruncated copy which may be consulted by permission only. To satisfy the curiosity of literary historians, the Balzac episode appeared in the appendix of a later edition. The pagination which follows the French quotations refers to this edition, catalogued at the Bibliothèque Nationale as 8° G 14133. The mysterious title of *La 628-E-8* represents the registration number of Mirbeau's car.

2. Octave Mirbeau, *La 628-E-8* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, Fasquelle Editeur, 1908) 1.

3. While Emile Zola was president of the Société des Gens de Lettres, it commissioned from Auguste Rodin a statue of Balzac. Rodin's sculpture, like Mirbeau's story, became the object of controversy. The extensive research undertaken by Rodin for his work led him to Gigoux, and it is apparently Rodin who brought Mirbeau and Gigoux together.

4. Albert Arrault, *Madame Hanska. Le Dernier Amour de Balzac* (Tours: Arrault et Cie, [1949]) 215.

5. François Ponsard, "Autour de Jean Gigoux," *Le Temps* (20 November 1907). The artist Jean Gigoux, born in Besançon on January 8, 1808, died in 1894. He remained an intimate friend of Mme Hanska until her death in 1882.

6. According to Jules Renard, "Mirbeau est un réaliste qui traite la vérité sans tact, avec des procédés tout romantiques." *Journal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960) 1200 (entry dated September 26, 1908).

7. Northrop Frye's reference to the poet's "mental landscape" in *The Critical Path* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1971) 22 inspired us to apply the idea to the novels of Mirbeau.

8. According to Albert Arrault, "cette énigme ... fut ... reprise au XXe siècle par un des plus notables écrivains de la langue française, l'un des plus infâmes aussi, par certain ouvrage sorti de sa plume." *Le Dernier Amour de Balzac* 207.

Marcel Bouteron wrote an "Apologie pour Mme Hanska," *Revue des Deux Mondes,* 24 (5 December 1924) 811-829. Among supporters of Mirbeau's views is Charles Léger, "L'Etrangère et Jean Gigoux" (Answer to Princess Radziwill), *Mercure de France,* Modern Series, 188, No. 672 (15 June 1926) 577-588.

9. A great admirer of Balzac, Mirbeau possessed a rare edition of his works. He often referred to Balzac in his correspondence. In a letter, he told Paul Hervieu how Arthur Meyer, editor-in-chief of the *Gaulois,* urging Mirbeau to follow in the steps of Balzac, advised him to abandon short stories and become "chroniqueur." He later transposed the incident in *Dans l'antichambre* (histoire d'une minute), illustrations et gravures d'Edgar Chahine (Paris: A Romagnol editeur, 1905).

10. In *Le Dernier Amour de Balzac* 223, Albert Arrault comments: "Quel morceau de choix pour le féroce et sadique écrivain du *Jardin des supplices!* Sur ce thème, il imagina un horrible récit ...." His choice of the word "imagina" is not altogether incorrect if we interpret it to mean a "creative" act.

11. The situation in "La Mort de Balzac" reminds us of a similar one in *Le Calvaire* where Juliette ruins an aspiring writer and then seduces a sculptor. Mme Hanska, who is married to a well-known novelist, befriends the portraitist Jean Gigoux. In "La Mort de Balzac," as in *Le Jardin des supplices,* eroticism is associated with death. Furthermore, we are in Mme Hanska's room, considered off-limits to the public. She appears barely covered, revealing herself to us as she is. In *Le journal d'une femme de chambre,* Mirbeau's readers have a chance to observe people who reveal their secrets as they undress in intimate settings, similar to the one in "La Mort de Balzac."

12. (Anonymous), "La Mort de Balzac," *Annales Romantiques, Revue d'Histoire du Romantisme,* 4 (1907) 397.

13. The detail seems true to fact, supported by Victor Hugo, who recalls that "une odeur insupportable s'exhalait du lit," in *Choses vues* (Paris: Editions de la Bibliothèque Mondiale, n.d.) 224.

14. According to Mario Praz in his *Romantic Agony,* trans. Angus Davidson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), the image of the "belle dame sans merci" and that of the "fatal woman" evolved through the ages. He describes her first as an arrogant and cruel female character (190), and gradually builds up the portrait to include great beauty and excessive frivolity. The latter prevents us from distinguishing between the woman's sincerity and affectation. He finally summarizes her image from the romantic point of view as: "an archetype which united in itself all forms of seduction, all vices, and all delights" (209-210, 213). Furthermore, the "femme fatale" of the 1890s is a foreigner, preferably English. This is true in the case of Mirbeau's Clara, whom Praz uses as an example of the "perfect belle dame sans merci" (268-269). Mme Hanska, however, goes back to an earlier period, which took interest in Slavic influences.

15. Gigoux's comparison of Mme Hanska to Andromaque reminds us of Albert Arrault's description: "Mme Honoré de Balzac, par son attitude digne et douloureuse, érmerveilla tout le monde. Sous ses voiles de deuil, elle était royalement belle. Ses beaux yeux noirs remplis de larmes, elle accepta les hommages qui lui furent prodigués et qui melèrent à son amour et à sa douleur un sentiment d'orgueil et de fierté." *Le Dernier Amour de Balzac* 211.

16. Octave Mirbeau, *Le Calvaire* (Paris: Librairie Ferreyrol, 1913) 346.

17. Octave Mirbeau, *Le jardin des supplices* (Paris: Garnier, 1957) 258.

18. Octave Mirbeau, *Le journal d'une femme de chambre* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1937) 447.

19. Praz includes fetishism as another trait attributed to the "belle dame sans merci" and the fatal woman. *Romantic Agony 271.*

20. Octave Mirbeau, "Clotilde et moi," in *Un Gentilhomme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1920) 243, 241.

In the first half of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days,* Winnie devotes much of her time to filing her nails. This is not just a banal and futile gesture. It suggests humor, tenderness and a certain joy derived from trivial daily occupations. As long as Winnie's hands remain above ground, she takes pleasure in filing her nails. The absurdity of this gesture only becomes evident to the spectator in the second half of the play where Winnie appears buried to her neck, but at no time does the absurdity of the gesture seem to be of any consequence to her.

21. Octave Mirbeau, *La 628-E-8* (Paris: Bibliotheque Charpentier, Fasquelle Editeur, 1908) 6.

22. Octave Mirbeau, *Le jardin des supplices* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1957) xxi.

23. Excerpts from the about-to-be-published *La 628-E-8* appeared in *Le Temps (6* November 1907). On the 9th, *Le Temps* published a letter of protest from Countess Mniszek, Mme Hanska's daughter, some eighty years old, and living in retirement in a convent. Mirbeau responded *(Le Temps,* 20 November 1907) by eliminating the entire episode on Balzac, which has never been published *in the space* assigned to it.

Although the Countess Mniszek assures us that Mme Hanska met Gigoux two years after Balzac's death, Gaston Prinet situates the meeting earlier, "à la fin de I'année 1851." In "La Mort de Balzac par Octave Mirbeau," *L'Intermediaire des Chercheurs et Curieux* 90, No. 1657 (20-30 January 1927): 64.

24. Robert de Montesquiou, Bibliothèque Nationale, manuscrit inédit, n.a.f. 15293, f. 71.

[This article inspired by Octave Mirbeau's work ***La 628-E-8*** (Paris, Fasquelle, 1907), first appeared in ***Nineteenth Century French Studies*** **15: 3 (1987): 302-314.** It is the first novel on the automobile. The pagination has been preserved as it appears in *NCFS. La 628-E-8* is the object of an international colloquium that will take place in Strasbourg in 2007. For information check the Octave Mirbeau home page.] http://membres.lycos.fr/octavemirbeau/