



# Seraphita, Henry Miller

## Seraphita

IT HAS BEEN SAID that February 28, 1832, was probably the most important date in Balzac's life. It was the day that he received his first letter from Madame Hanska, the woman whom after seventeen years of courtship he was to marry, just four months before his death.

From his twenty-first to his twenty-ninth year Balzac wrote forty volumes under various pseudonyms. After the colossal failure of his publishing venture he suddenly came to himself and, resuming the role of writer, which he had thought to drop in order to gain more experience of life, he began to sign his own name to his work.

Having tapped the true source of inspiration, he was so overwhelmed with ideas and literary projects that for a couple of years he was scarcely able to cope with his energies.

It was a repetition of that singular state—"congestion de lumière," to use his own expression—which he had experienced when he was returned to his parents by the masters of the College of Vendôme in his fifteenth year; only this time he was paralyzed by the multiplicity of outlets open to him, and not by the struggle to assimilate what he had imbibed.

His whole career as a writer, indeed, was a Promethean drama of restitution. Balzac was not only tremendously receptive, as highly sensitized as a photographic plate, but he was also gifted with an extraordinary intuition.

He read faces as easily as he read books, and in addition he possessed, as it is said, "every memory." His was a protean nature, opulent, jovial, expansive, yet also chaste, reserved and secretive. For the extraordinary endowments with which Nature had blessed him he was

obliged to pay the penalty of submission. He looked upon himself as a spiritual “exile.”

It was a supreme task for him to coordinate his faculties, to establish order out of the chaos which his superabundant nature was constantly creating. His physiological flair was an expression of this obsessive passion “to establish order,” for then as now Europe was in the throes of dissolution.

His boast to finish with the pen what Napoleon had begun with the sword signified a deep desire to reveal the significance of the true relationships existing in the world of human society. It was Cuvier rather than Napoleon whom he took as a model.

From the time of his financial set-back, from 1827 to 1836, in short, Balzac lived a life which was in many ways reminiscent of Dostoievski’s lifelong bondage. Indeed, it is during this very period that, in order to stave off his creditors, Dostoievski undertook the translation of Eugenie Grandet.

Through excessive suffering and deprivation both Dostoievski and Balzac, destined to become the foremost novelists of the nineteenth century, were permitted to give us glimpses of worlds which no other novelists have yet touched upon, or even imagined.

Enslaved by their own passions, chained to the earth by the strongest desires, they nevertheless revealed through their tortured creations the evidences of worlds unseen, unknown, except, as Balzac says, “to those loftier spirits open to faith who can discern Jacob’s mystical stair.” Both of them believed in the dawn of a new world, though frequently accused, by their contemporaries, of being morbid, cynical, pessimistic and immoral.

I am not a devotee of Balzac. For me the Human Comedy is of minor importance. I prefer that other comedy which has been labeled “divine,” in testimony doubtless of our sublime incorrigibility.

But without a knowledge of Seraphita, the subject of this essay—possibly also Louis Lambert—there can be no real understanding of Balzac's life and work. It is the cornerstone of the grand edifice.

Seraphita is situated symbolically at the dawn of a new century. "Outside," says Balzac at the end, "the first summer of the nineteenth century was in all its glory." Outside, please notice. For Seraphita was conceived in the womb of a new day which only now, a hundred years later, is beginning to make itself clear.

It was in the midst of the most harassed period of his life, in the year 1830, that Balzac took up quarters in the Rue Cassini, "midway," as he says, "between the Carmelites and the place where they guillotine." Here were begun the truly herculean labors for which he is celebrated and which undoubtedly cut his life in half, for with anything like a normal rhythm he would have lived a hundred or more.

To give some idea of his activities at this period let me state briefly that in 1830 he is credited with seventy publications, in 1831 with seventy-five. Writing to his publisher, Werdet, in 1835, he says: "There is not a single other writer who has done this year what I have done . . . anyone else would have died."

He cites the seven books he has just finished, as well as the political articles he wrote for the *Chronique de Paris*. The important thing to note, however, is that one of the seven books he refers to was the most unusual book of his whole career, probably one of the most unique books in all literature: *Seraphita*. How long the actual writing of it took is not known; the first installment of it appeared June 1, 1834, in the *Revue de Paris*.

It appeared, together with *Louis Lambert* and *The Exiles*, in book form in December, 1835, the volume itself entitled *Le Livre Mystique*. The critics, judging it from the three installments of *Seraphita* which had appeared in the review, condemned it as "an unintelligible work." However, the first edition of the book was exhausted in ten days, and

the second a month later. “Not such bad fortune for an unintelligible work,” Balzac remarked.

Seraphita was written expressly for Madame Hanska with whom, after the receipt of her first letter, he maintained a lifelong correspondence. It was during a trip to Geneva that the book was conceived, and in December of 1833, just three months after his meeting with Madame Hanska, it was begun. It was intended, in Balzac’s own words, “to be a masterpiece such as the world has never seen.”

And this it is, despite all its faults, despite the prophecies of the critics, despite the apparent neglect and obloquy into which it has fallen. Balzac himself never doubted its value or uniqueness, as he sometimes did in the case of his other works.

Though subsequently included in *La Comédie Humaine*, it really forms part of the *Études Philosophiques*. In the dedication to Madame Hanska he speaks of it “as one of those balustrades, carved by some artist full of faith, on which the pilgrim leans to meditate on the end of man. . . .” The seven divisions of the book undoubtedly have an occult structure and significance.

As narrative it is broken by disquisitions and expositions which, in a lesser work, would be fatal. Inwardly regarded, which is the only way it can be looked at, it is a model of perfection. Balzac said everything he had to say, with swiftness, precision and eloquence. To me it is the style of the last quartets of Beethoven, the will triumphant in its submission.

I accept the book implicitly as a mystical work of the highest order. I know that, if obviously it seems to have been inspired by Swedenborg’s work, it was also enriched by other influences, among them Jacob Boehme, Paracelsus, Ste. Therèse, Claude Saint-Martin, and so on.

As a writer, I know that a book such as this could not have been written without the aid of a higher being: the reach of it, the blinding lucidity, the wisdom, not man’s certainly, the force and the eloquence of it,

betray all the qualities of a work dictated if not by God then by the angels.

The book is, in fact, about an angel in human guise, a being neither male nor female, or rather now one now the other, and yet always more, “not a being,” as one of the characters remarks, “but a whole creation.”

In any case, whether Seraphita or Seraphitus, whether, as the author states, “her sex would have puzzled the most learned man to pronounce on,” the subject of this book is a being, a being filled with light, whose behavior may baffle the blundering minds of the critics but never the earnest reader.

Those who know what the book is about will share the sentiment of that young student in Vienna who is reported to have accosted Balzac in the street and begged permission to kiss the hand that wrote Seraphita.

The events related are almost as simple and brief as those of Christ’s own life. As with that other drama, the hierarchical order of events works contrariwise to the historical, clock-time movement.

The adumbration is tremendous; time is stopped, and in the awesome, all-enveloping silence which shrouds the mysterious being called Seraphita, one can actually hear the growth of those wings which will carry her aloft to that world of which Balzac was aware ever since the Angel visited him as a boy at the College of Vendôme.

The story is symbolic and revelatory from beginning to end. It is not limited, as is Louis Lambert, to what I might call the intellectual aspect of occultism, but proceeds straight from the heart which Balzac knew to be the true, vital center of man’s being. It is a Rosicrucian drama pure and simple. It is about Love, the triumph of Love over Desire.

And who better qualified than Balzac to give us the dramatic recital of this conflict? Had he not himself confessed somewhere that if ever he should conquer over desire he would die of grief?

On the highest level of creative imagination, spiritually leagues beyond Faust, it forms a bridge between the creative instinct, as expressed through art, and the creative intuition which will eventually liberate man from the throes of art and permit him to make of his life a creation.

As the man of Desire incarnate, Balzac seems to have divined, in this supreme effort, that even the passion of creation must be transmuted. He recognized unerringly that the man of genius is only at the first stage of the great trine of Love, that his very desire for immortality, through immolation in the art form, is the expression of a selfish love, or love of self.

It was through the world of desire, however, that Balzac, perfectly aware of his limitations as a man and reconciled to the role of artist, succeeded in giving us a vehicle which would lead us to the mysteries.

Other more perfectly developed beings speak a language requiring an initiation which the great world of men and women will never experience. As the universal artist, Balzac makes clear even to the dullest mind the unlimited possibilities which are open to everyone. "The Brazen Rod belongs to all," says Seraphita. . . . "Neither the most obscure evangelists, nor the most amazing of God's prophets, have been superior to what you might become."

That he himself did not pursue the high course which he realized we must all eventually take, is not a condemnation of his wisdom or sincerity: the mystery that envelops man's behavior is hidden in the laws of karma and dharma. "The supreme virtue," he says towards the close of the book, "is resignation."

In addition to Seraphita there are four other characters portrayed: David, her aged servitor, a sort of Biblical figure, a rock of faith, who

seems to obey the law of inertia; Pastor Becker, an elderly man, who is the symbol of futile learning and against whom are directed the bitterest shafts; Minna, his daughter, a young girl whose love for Seraphita is really worship; and Wilfrid, a man in the prime of life, betrothed to Minna, but also devotedly in love with Seraphita.

The seven divisions of the book might be dramatically summed up as follows: The High Place, or the Annunciation, the Mystic Union of Two in One as revealed through Love, the Temptation and Triumph over Desire, the Ordeal of Doubt, Renunciation, the Path of Light, the Assumption.

The scene is laid in Norway, in a village called Jarvis. The story opens with the ascent by Minna and Seraphitus of the inaccessible peaks of the Falberg. The atmosphere is magical: "they could see the stars, though it was daytime."

Minna, aware of the supernatural quality of the adventure, exclaims: "We have not come here by unaided human strength." At the summit, whence they command an awesome view of the two worlds, Seraphitus plucks a saxifrage (whose etymological meaning is "stone-breaking flower") on which no human eye has yet rested and offers this unique blossom to her companion in memory of a day unique in her life, saying: "you will never again find a guide to lead you to this soeter."

Seraphitus speaks as only one can speak "who has attained to the highest places on the mountains of the earth." She recounts to Minna how our knowledge of the laws of the visible world are merely a means of enabling us to conceive of the immensity of higher spheres, declaring that Man is not the final creation. . . . "Below," she says, "you have hope, the beautiful rudiment of faith; but here faith reigns, the realization of hope."

And then, almost as if in Balzac's own voice, she continues: "I have no taste for the fruits of the earth. . . . I am disgusted with all things, for I have the gift of vision." By way of answering Minna's declarations of love, she exclaims, with a cry of despair: "I wanted a companion to go



with me to the realm of light. . . . I am an exile far from heaven; like a monster, far from earth. . . . I am alone. I am resigned, I can wait.”

Later, with Wilfrid, who sees her as a woman, Seraphita discourses on the true nature of love. “You desire me, but you do not love me,” she explains. Her own love, she points out, is devoid of self-interest.

“Rise to the heights,” she entreats, “where men see each other truly, though tiny and crowded as the sands of the seashore.” Wilfrid is baffled; he feels that whoever approaches her is engulfed in a vortex of light. He leaves her to consult Minna’s father. He finds Pastor Becker in the midst of a book called *Incantations*, by Jean Weir.

Throughout the narrative Pastor Becker is constantly returning to this book, as if in the hope of finding there an explanation of the mysteries which envelop him. Balzac describes him as having “the solid tenacity of happy ignorance.”

He is always enveloped in clouds of tobacco smoke—the fumes of learning, doubtless. In attempting to unravel the mysterious nature of Seraphita Wilfrid tells the Pastor that she is “one of those awe-inspiring spirits to whom it is given to constrain men, to coerce nature, and share the occult powers of God. She alternately kills and vivifies me!” he exclaims. In the thick clouds of smoke which enshroud the trio the saxifrage, still fresh, “gleams like another light.”

In answer to Wilfrid’s demand to know more about the birth and circumstances of Seraphita’s life, Pastor Becker announces that it will first be necessary “to disentangle the obscurest of all Christian creeds,” whereupon he proceeds to launch into a sustained and eloquent account of Swedenborg’s doctrine. It appears that he has read from beginning to end the seventeen volumes of Swedenborg’s work bequeathed to him by the Baron Seraphitus, deceased father of Seraphita.

The subject of angels, an obsession with the author, affords Balzac the opportunity to reveal his own true religion. He describes the three

stages of love—love of self, as exemplified by the human genius; love of the world at large, as exemplified by the prophets and those great men “whom the earth accepts as guides and hails as divine”; and love of heaven, which forms angelic spirits—such as Seraphita.

The angelic spirits he characterizes as “the flowers of humanity.” They must have either the love or the wisdom of heaven; but, he emphasizes, “they must dwell in that love before they dwell in wisdom.” Thus, he concludes, “the first transformation of man is to love” (*italics mine throughout*).

He then compares the superficial knowledge of the scientific man with that other wisdom which comes from the knowledge of the “correspondences,” adding that science saddens man, whereas love enraptures the angel. “Science is still seeking; love has found.” As if to give the clue to his own secret experience, he thereupon puts in Pastor Becker’s mouth these words: “It is enough to have the smallest inkling of it to transform one forever.”

Here, it seems to me, lies the true secret of Balzac’s greatness, for not to recognize the significance of this utterance in relation to his work is to misinterpret the man’s whole life. In the next instant, almost as if to corroborate the fact, he adds, again through Pastor Becker: “The perpetual ecstasy of the angels is produced by the faculty, bestowed on them by God, of giving back to Him the joy they have in Him.”

Does this not explain, in the deepest sense, the record of his almost superhuman efforts? Were not his Titanic struggles to create another universe a joyous restitution for the precious moments of illumination which had been vouchsafed him as a boy? In *Louis Lambert*, which precedes *Seraphita* by two years, we have the record of his parting with his real self, the double whom he calls Louis Lambert.

The description of the letter’s life after leaving the College, his life with the angels, is it not a projection of Balzac’s own aborted desire? And the punishment which he metes out to his double at the end, was it

also not an expression of his secret fears—the fear, I should say, of taking the straight and narrow path?

Perhaps in refusing to follow the angel in himself he displayed a discretion which was another kind of wisdom, but we know that as a result of his choice he was burdened with a guilt which assumed gigantic form in the demon of Work which drove him to a premature death. It is often said that he possessed extraordinary powers of illusion, so much so that he was able not only to create his own world, but to live in it.

But are we to regard this ability simply as another evidence of the artist's desire to escape reality, as is said? If by reality we mean the everyday world, yes, but if we refer to that other, greater reality, then surely it was not "escape," but a desire for union. In dedicating himself to art, Balzac, who had the potentiality and equipment for leading a hundred different lives, signified his willingness to accept the cross of suffering, to acknowledge his fate and to work it out heroically, confident that in doing so he was contributing to the welfare of humanity in his own unique way; confident, too, that if not in this life, then in the next, or the next, he would free himself of his shackles.

In Seraphita we have a sublime expression of his desire to live in and by the Light. But it was a light, as he remarks, "that kills the man who is not prepared to receive it."

To resume. . . . After this eloquent disquisition on Swedenborg, Pastor Becker proceeds to inform his listeners of Seraphita's origins. The Baron Seraphitus, who was "Swedenborg's most zealous disciple," had decreed at her birth that she was not to be baptized with earthly waters since she had already been bathed in the fires of heaven.

"She will always be a flower," were his words. We might add—a unique flower which does not reproduce its kind, a flower such as Seraphita herself had plucked for Minna on the mountain top, "a real miracle developed under the breath of the angels." In the midst of the

discussion which ensues, David, the aged servitor, rushes in to announce that Seraphita is wrestling with the demons.

The four of them set out for the Swedish castle wherein Seraphita dwells. Through the window they see her standing in prayer. Suddenly she vanishes before their eyes, to the accompaniment of celestial strains. This astonishing vision each one interprets differently: Pastor Becker felt doubt, Minna adoration, Wilfrid desire.

At this point the narrative is interrupted, seemingly to give a more detailed description of Wilfrid's character and of the genesis of his love for Seraphita. Actually, the description is a device by which Balzac permits himself to reveal the nature of his own secret struggles.

After remarking that Wilfrid was in the prime of life (practically Balzac's own age at the time), that he had studied the laws of humanity, had grown pale over books ("which are human actions in death"), he describes him as a Cain to whom hope yet remained and who seemed to be seeking absolution at the ends of the earth. ("Minna suspected the slave of glory in this man.") Is this an elliptic allusion to the murder of his real self, which he describes in Louis Lambert?

Was Balzac alluding to a love which he had killed, in order to walk the path of fame and glory? At any rate, the two pages which follow are to be read like palimpsest. Here is the tenor of it. . . . "He had escaped from social life from necessity, as a criminal flies to the cloister.

Remorse, the virtue of the weak, could not touch him. Remorse is impotence; it will sin again. Only repentance is strong; it can end everything. But Wilfrid, in traveling through the world, which he had made his sanctuary, nowhere found balm for his wounds; nowhere had he found a nature to which he could attach himself. Despair had dried up in him the well-spring of desire.

His was one of those spirits which, having come to a conflict with passion, have proved themselves the stronger, and so have nothing left to clutch in their talons; spirits which, the opportunity failing them for

putting themselves at the head of their peers to trample a whole people under their horses' hoofs, would pay the price of a dreadful martyrdom for the gift of a faith to be wrecked upon; like lofty rocks waiting for the touch of a staff which never comes, to enable them to shed springs of running water." It is difficult to imagine anything more naked and incriminating than these words which, I feel certain, Balzac meant to apply to himself.

But, as if this were not sufficient, goaded by an impulse to unburden himself, he continues: "Having drained the cup of earthly love he [Wilfrid] now saw the cup of election." Speaking retrospectively, both in the narrative and in his own soul, Balzac rushes on: "He went to tell her his life, to display the greatness of his soul by the greatness of his sins, to show her the ruins in his desert."

He stresses the fact that on this day when Wilfrid first saw Seraphita "the meeting wiped out all memories of his past life." (Did he not mean past lives?) At the very moment, so the narrative runs, when he is about to tell her of his life, of his great love, "a gulf opened before him in which the words of his delirium were lost, and whence a voice came up that transformed him: he was a boy again, a boy of sixteen."

In these all-transparent words Balzac fuses the two highest moments of ecstasy which he had known; the one, when he was a boy at the College of Vendôme and most assuredly saw and spoke with the angels, the other at the moment—or perhaps just prior to the moment—when he met Madame Hanska.

It was on September 26, 1833, that he met the latter for the first time, at Neufchâtel. In December of that year, as I remarked previously, he began the writing of Seraphita. Throughout his whole life, it is said by those competent to know, he experienced only a few weeks of real happiness.

The description of Wilfrid's emotions on meeting Seraphita is undoubtedly a transcript of Balzac's own feelings on meeting Madame Hanska, a record of his joy and aspirations at that moment. In the

woman whom he struggles seventeen years to attach himself to he gave human form to the cup of election whose life-giving waters he had already tasted. In her he sought the companion whom he hoped would accompany him to the realm of Light.

The brief union with Madame Hanska, the intensity of the experience, revived the memory of youthful visions and ecstasies; the angel in him awoke and spake. He re-became, for a spell, the Louis Lambert whom he had parted from in his youth, whose like he was never again to find since he had chosen the earthly sanctuary in which the real self was absent. "Who has not known," he says of Wilfrid, "what it is to become young and pure again [Wilfrid is only thirty-six] after growing cold with age and foul with impurities?"

Wilfrid loved suddenly, as he had never loved; he loved in secret, with faith and awe and hidden frenzies." Madame Hanska was rather a frail, defective human vessel, as we know, but for Balzac she was the being who served to keep the inner flame alight.

She it was, I am inclined to think, who preserved him from that sorrowful fate he had apportioned to Louis Lambert. It was she who organized his madness, who kept him rooted to the earth. But under the spell of this consuming love, the artist in him, which was in danger of being snuffed out, transformed the earth into a living creature, and in the heart of this animal the earth he lived and moved and had his being.

Here, about the middle of the book, comes the fourth chapter which, like the fourth everywhere, is the crux in which the rock is metamorphosed into the waters of life. Addressed primarily to Pastor Becker, the symbol of doubt, Seraphita's words are hurled like thunderbolts.

Pastor Becker is Europe, that Europe which, as we read subsequently, "can believe in no one but Him who will trample her under foot." As cruel and merciless to the man of genius as to the man in the street, Europe, Balzac realized, must perish.

What follows is prophetic of the dawn of a new day, a day in which not only the boundaries of nationalism will be dissolved, but every barrier which separates man from man and man from God. "What does it signify," says Seraphita, "which way the worlds are moving if the Being who guides them is proved to be absurd? . . .

Your scepticism permeates from above downwards . . . Your doubts include everything, the end as well as the means. . . . Everything is God. Either we are God, or God is not!" There is plenty in this chapter for the sceptic to sneer at, for the learned man to mock, for the scientific man to scorn, for the conqueror to despise, for the ideologist to crack with his sharp teeth, but how will these reply to Seraphita's challenge? "Old Man! this is the sum-total of your science and your long meditations."

Balzac was privileged to witness the downfall of Napoleon; he was contemporaneous with Goethe, "the last man of Europe"; he was esteemed by the Apocalyptic writer of the century, Dostoievski. He saw the end of Europe, which has yet to be played out dramatically, but he had also a vision of the world to come, a world in which there would be order, an order imposed from above where all action has its inception.

The tremendous fear which now paralyzes the nations of the world is nothing to the frenzy which will come when the present disorder gives way to chaos. Only a man like Balzac, who anchored himself in the very heart of chaos, could appreciate the meaning of "order." This order he gives us, in progressive hierarchies, throughout the remainder of the book.

It is an order which is founded on faith. "There is a being," says Seraphita, "who both believes and sees, who has knowledge and power, who loves, prays and waits . . . he both listens and replies.

In his eyes scepticism is not impiety . . . it is a stage of transition whence a man must go forward towards the light, or back into darkness." How better characterize the times than by these prophetic

words? “There is a supreme science,” she continues, “of which some men—too late—get a glimpse, though they dare not own it.

These men perceive the necessity for considering all bodies, not merely from the point of view of their mathematical properties, but also from that of their whole relations and occult affinities.” What more is there to be said?

Wilfrid returns home, appalled at finding his world in ruins; Pastor Becker returns to his Incantations. And Europe? Europe then, as now, returns to her vomit, like a mad dog. “However deep the inner revelation, however distinct the outward sign,” is Balzac’s comment, “by the morrow Balaam doubts both his ass and himself.” Europe can believe in no one but Him who will trample her under foot!

Victory over the earth, that is Seraphita’s cry. The Universe, she says, belongs to him who will, who can, who knows how to pray. “Sinai and Golgotha are not here nor there. The angel is crucified everywhere, and in every sphere.”

At this point in the narrative it is written: “On a sudden HE sat up to die!”

In the final chapter, rising heavenward, Balzac gives the clue to the spiritual cosmogony; “from the most vast to the smallest of the worlds, and from the smallest sphere to the minutest atom of the creation that constitutes it, each thing was an individual, and yet all was one.” Such is the aspect from above, whither Seraphita is led by the Guardian Angel.

Minna and Wilfrid, accompanying her part of the way, through the miracle of faith, are permitted a glimpse of the higher spheres wherein they see reflected the nakedness of their own souls.

So great was their joy, it is recounted, “that they felt an ardent desire to rush back into the mire of the universe, to endure trial there, so as to be able some day to utter at the sacred gate the answer spoken by the glorified Spirit.”



In the descent the “exiles” are privileged to look upon the rotting splendor of those who lorded it over the world—the conquerors and warriors, the learned and the rich. WHAT DO YE HERE IN MOTIONLESS RANKS?

Wilfrid shouts again and again. As they open their robes to reveal the bodies which are eaten away, corrupt and falling to dust, Wilfrid exclaims wrathfully: “Ye lead the nations to death. Ye have defiled the earth, perverted the Word, prostituted justice. . . .

Do ye think there is justification in showing your wounds? I shall warn those of my brethren who still can hear the Voice, that they may slake their thirst at the springs you have hidden.”

At this the gentle Minna turns to him and says: “Let us save our strength for prayer. It is not your mission to be a prophet, nor a redeemer, nor an evangelist. We are as yet only on the margin of the lowest sphere. . . .”

Outside the first summer of the nineteenth century was in all its glory.

The end