

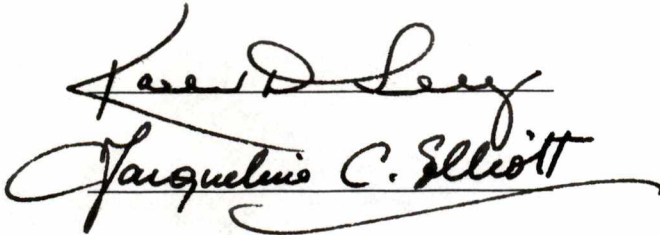
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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Patricia Mary Bateman entitled "A Table chez Balzac: Realistic Device and Stylistic Manipulation." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.

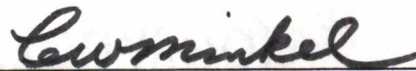


Albert H. Wallace, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Vice Provost
and Dean of The Graduate School

A TABLE CHEZ BALZAC: REALISTIC DEVICE
AND STYLISTIC MANIPULATION

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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Patricia Mary Bateman

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A further vote of thanks goes to my family and friends--who, whether they were interested or not, have been forced to learn something about Honoré de Balzac!

ABSTRACT

In his chef masterpiece LA COMEDIE HUMAINE Honoré de Balzac gathers his characters together at meals with remarkable frequency. As a Frenchman, to whom gustatory pleasure is fundamental, it is automatic to bond relationships and to discuss any topic from family matters to contemporary issues during lengthy meals. So, for Balzac, the father of French realism, the dinner table is a natural avenue for realistic presentation.

At the same time, Balzac uses mealtimes as an aid to successful composition: many of his characters gathered at the table embody a theme or a dilemma presented by conflicting themes; the meal may also introduce the complication, climax or denouement of the plot, thus helping to regulate its structure; alternatively, by presenting more than one meal and contrasting the locale, the atmosphere or the appurtenances, the author elucidates developing circumstantial change; finally, by introducing a wide variety of conversational topics at the mealtime, the author limits subjective intrusion into the text. Therefore, while Balzac uses mealtimes to present a realistic portrait of contemporary society he also uses them to mould his style.

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INTRODUCTION

French enthusiasm for culinary excellence can be traced back as far as the 1st Century B.C. when the conquering Romans were amazed by the prodigious appetites and lengthy repasts of the defeated Gauls. During the Renaissance of the 16th Century, the emphasis on quantity was replaced by an appreciation of quality reportedly through the influence of Catherine de Medici and her Florentine cooks; and by the 17th Century, when France was dominant both politically and culturally in Western Europe, French cuisine was established as the ultimate standard (Clark 32). From that time until today an appreciation of food is a national characteristic of which the Frenchman is proud. It is therefore perhaps instinctive for Balzac to include so many meals in his novels.

Religion is another aspect of French culture which might have played a role in the inclusion of mealtimes in Balzac's novels. Despite the formal separation of the State and the Roman Catholic Church after the Revolution in 1789, France remained predominantly Roman Catholic and the Church continued to have a strong voice, particularly in education. Young Honoré was sent as a boarder to the Catholic College at Vendôme and spent the majority of his formative years there. He undoubtedly studied the scriptures diligently and attended mass regularly; the significance of the meals in religious culture cannot have escaped his attention. Many of the important events in the New Testament center around mealtimes. Jesus himself is accused of being a "glutton and a wine bibber" because, in carrying out

His ministry, He visits peoples' houses and often eats with them. In one specific instance, after He calls Matthew to join Him, He is criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners and again, He tells the rich tax collector Zaccheaus to descend from the tree and eat with Him. At times Jesus also uses mealtimes to explain His doctrine; for example in a discussion of fasting He uses the metaphor of a wedding to explain why it is not necessary to fast as rigidly as the Pharisees. Similarly He uses meals as the central focus of certain of the parables. For example the Parable of the Prodigal Son culminates in a feast, and a meal is at the center of the Parable of the Great or Wedding Feast. It is also notable that the first miracle, the changing of the water to wine, took place at a wedding at Cana, and that during the Miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand Jesus divided the people into groups--as if for a meal--before He distributed the loaves and the fishes.

These few examples show the importance of meals in Jesus' teaching. But the importance of these meals in Roman Catholic tradition is overshadowed by the influence of the Last Supper. Jesus' last meal before His crucifixion, the Passover meal, took place among His friends. At this meal He foretold the details of the events leading up to His death as well as his Resurrection. There was an atmosphere of intimacy and a sadness which was eased by the first celebration of the Eucharist. As a result of this historic meal all Christians have obeyed Jesus' instructions to commune regularly with Christ through the taking of the bread and the wine. As if to

reinforce the comforting message of the Sacrament, after His Resurrection Jesus appears to His mourning disciples on the road to Emmaus and is only recognized by them once He has blessed and broken the bread. He also appears to them as they are gathered fearfully behind locked doors, and again He eats with them. At another appearance, at Lake Tiberias, He provides the food by filling the disciples' fishing nets and He subsequently stays to eat with them. The notion of eating together was maintained in the early Church in the form of a fellowship meal or agape as an expression of the Christian duty to love one another.

The Eucharist is crucial in the Roman Catholic religion because of the dogma of transubstantiation, so it can be anticipated that it influenced Balzac unconsciously. Furthermore, in the detailed accounts of mealtimes in the New Testament he may have found a model for his own descriptive creation.

So, in using mealtimes in his novels, Honoré de Balzac is incorporating into his work his cultural, religious and literary heritage. But, in his chef d'oeuvre LA COMEDIE HUMAINE, his primary goal is to paint a realistic tableau of contemporary French society. In the Avant Propos he states:

En dressant l'inventaire des vices et des vertus, en rassemblant les principaux faits des passions, en peignant les caractères, en choisissant les événements principaux de la Société, en composant des types par la réunion des traits de plusieurs caractères homogènes, peut-être pouvais-je arriver à écrire l'histoire oubliée par tant d'historiens, celle des mœurs. (7)

This would appear to be Balzac's definition of realism. A realistic novel not only requires an accurate imitation of life as it exists, but by the use of precise description and sensuous detail it renders abstract men and women so persuasively that the reader is convinced that they really lived, talked and acted in the way that the author depicts them. As we have seen, the culinary tradition in France, combined with the necessity of food for human existence, would have required the inclusion of meals in a realistic novel before the Revolution. In post revolutionary France the need became more emphatic.

One of the underlying causes of the peoples' revolt was the disparity between the lavish banquets of the aristocracy and the lack of food for the poor. It is no coincidence that the members of the royal family were known as "le boulanger, la boulangère and le petit mitron" and even if Marie Antoinette's infamous statement "Qu'ils mangent des brioches" is not documented fact, the existence of this legend bears witness to the contemporary emphasis on food.

During the July Monarchy, the period which Balzac was documenting, the newly established bourgeoisie saw entertaining and eating in style as a sign of equality with the aristocracy. Meanwhile, these same bourgeois had used their commercial talent to open restaurants for all classes in society, making mealtimes a communal experience rather than exclusively a private one. Yet certain of the bourgeoisie, particularly in the provinces, were soon labelled as avaricious as they found themselves unable to adapt to lavish spending

and persisted in finding ways to economize at the expense of entertaining. The meal, in post revolutionary France, became a barometer of success and character and as such a necessary inclusion in any realistic depiction of society.

In his novels Balzac, the father of realism, uses many mealtimes in a planned way to develop the plot but there are also times when he appears to turn to them, as if by instinct, to reformulate his thoughts as well as to reestablish contact with the reader.

To the best of my knowledge no-one else has studied this particular aspect of Balzac's technique. James W. Brown of Dalhousie University in his book Fictional Meals and their Function in the French Novel, 1789-1848 uses a semiotic approach to determine the intention of the author in the use of the literary meal. In his chapter on Balzac he concludes:

In assessing the role of meal scenes in Balzac's novels, one may deduce that the gastronomical sign reveals more about the sociology of Balzac's narrative universe than about food. (53)

This is probably the reason for a dearth of material on Balzac among other studies of food in literature for, atypically, Balzac rarely details the contents of a meal; the setting and table interaction are commonly the focus of his observations.

This paper will suggest that in addition to using meals to illustrate the mores of contemporary society Balzac uses them as a realistic tool to regulate plot development and structure. It will, however, also point out that on occasion the author reverts to meals, perhaps instinctively, when he finds that he has erred from his own definition of a realistic novel.

I have chosen to use Le Père Goriot "a supreme case of composition" (HJ 107), as a model in each chapter of this study. Then to demonstrate that these are not isolated incidences, I shall cite examples from other novels comprising the two sections of LA COMEDIE HUMAINE entitled "*Scènes de la Vie de Province*" and "*Scènes de la Vie Parisienne*." These by no means represent all the possibilities available, so to indicate the wealth of options, I shall use examples from as many different novels as possible. In so doing I shall discuss meals from some of Balzac's best novels: Le Père Goriot, Cousin Pons, Pierrette, Un Grand Homme de Province à Paris, Cousine Bette, La Vieille Fille, Histoire de la Grandeur et de la Décadence de César Birotteau, Ursule Mirouët, La Rabouilleuse, Eugénie Grandet, Les Deux Poètes, Les Souffrances de l'Inventeur and Comment Aiment les Filles.

CHAPTER I

MEALS AND THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

As we have seen, for Balzac the bon viveur, as for Balzac the father of realism, mealtimes offer an opportunity for discussion and social interaction. It is to him both natural and stylistically realistic to use them in abundance throughout LA COMEDIE HUMAINE in order to develop his thesis and his plot. Since thematic development is a continuing process for which the mealtime is an ideal vehicle, most meals further the evolution of the theme. However, thematic development need not be the only function of a dinner or breakfast. Thus many of the examples cited in this paper could be included in more than one chapter, but except for the model, Le Père Goriot, I have limited the discussion to the single most pertinent function of the meal, e.g. whether it be thematic, structural, circumstantial or diversionary.

In Le Père Goriot the first meal which is described in detail is a breakfast. The narrator has already introduced the lodgers in the long opening description; here, through their conversation and their interaction, he brings them to life. Prior to the arrival of the pensioners, the domestics, Christophe and "la grosse Sylvie" (877), while eating their own breakfast and preparing the lodgers', are skimming the cream for their own coffee and discussing the mysterious events of the previous night. Sylvie, typically, is at first attracted to what Christophe is saying because it regards money; she questions

him directly about the size of the tip he had obtained for extra services rendered; from there follows quite naturally a discussion of the avariciousness that characterizes much of the household:

Encore, qu'est-ce qu'ils donnent! fit Christophe, une méchante pièce et de cent sous. Voilà depuis deux ans le père Goriot qui fait ses souliers lui-même. Ce grigou de Poirot se passe de cirage, et le boirait plutôt que de le mettre à ses savates. Quant au gringalet d'étudiant, il me donne quarante sous. Quarante sous ne payent pas mes brosse, et il vend ses vieux habits, par-dessus le marché. Que baraqué! (877)

Cupidity and greed dominate Balzac's treatment of the theme of money in this novel.

While the breakfast preparations are continuing, Sylvie awakens her mistress whose instructions reveal a rapacious nature: "Arrange le reste du mouton avec des pommes de terre, et donne des poires cuites, de celles qui coûtent deux liards la pièce" (879). Later the author can suggest clearly both her thoughts and countenance as she watches Eugene, the law student, helping himself to the left-over mutton and a large slice of bread: "Mme Vauquer mesurait toujours (le morceau) de l'oeil" (882). Furthermore, Sylvie has learnt to imitate her mistress's ways and at the same time save herself a reprimand. After Mistigris, the cat, has succeeded in knocking a plate off the bowl of milk destined for the lodgers and has drunk some of its contents, she assures Mme Vauquer: "Ne vous inquiétez pas, madame; ce sera le café du père Goriot. Je mettrai de l'eau dedans, il ne s'en apercevra pas" (879). Mme Vauquer personifies the theme of parsimony and avidity.

The first lodger to arrive for breakfast is M. Vautrin. His already established reputation as a mysterious character, has been

further heightened by Christophe's admission that, after the departure of two nocturnal visitors the night before he was paid money by Vautrin as, "une manière de dire 'Tais-toi'" (877). In addition, Christophe comments on the fact that outsiders have been asking him about, "Un gros monsieur qui a des favoris qu'il teint" (878) and that he has been asked at the market if he had ever seen Vautrin remove his shirt. Vautrin's appearance adds to the reader's certainty that he is an enigmatic figure by detailing his carefully staged openness: instead of skulking, he is very outgoing. He hums a love song, and greets Mme Vauquer with a roguish and disarming gallantry, putting his arms around her waist, and demanding: "Ah je suis gentil, n'est-ce pas?" (880). His table chatter reveals his understanding of the limited need for diplomacy in the boarding-house milieu: it is necessary to sacrifice the dignity of certain members of the assemblage as a means of amusing and elevating the others. Hence, M. Poirot and Mlle Michonneau are the butt of Vautrin's barbs and insinuations. To Eugène, on the other hand, he is patronizing: "Mais . . . nous ne tenons pas à vous le faire croire. Vous êtes encore trop jeune pour bien connaître Paris" (884).

Vautrin is a man of the world who understands his world and in particular its microcosm, Paris, which he terms a "bourbier" (886):

Ceux qui s'y crottent en voiture sont d'honnêtes gens, ceux qui s'y crottent à pied sont des fripons. Ayez le malheur d'y décrocher n'importe quoi, vous êtes montré sur la place du Palais-de-Justice comme une curiosité. Volez un million, vous êtes marqué dans les salons comme une vertu. Vous payez trente millions à la Gendarmerie et à la Justice pour maintenir cette morale-là. Joli! (886)

His description of Mme de Restaud's activities is presented as typical of the society women of Paris:

Hier en haut de la roue, chez une duchesse . . . ce matin en bas de l'échelle chez un escompteur: voilà les Parisiennes. Si leurs maris ne peuvent entretenir leur luxe éffrené, elles se vendent. Si elles ne savent pas se vendre, elles éventreraient leurs mères pour y chercher de quoi briller. Enfin elles font les cent mille coups. Connu, connu! (884)

His sympathy for Mlle Victorine Taillefer, who has been disinherited, gives him the opportunity to make Quixotic promises that sound somber and ominous coming from him:

O femmes, innocentes, malheureuses et persécutées . . . voilà donc où vous en êtes? D'ici à quelques jours je me mêlerai de vos affaires, et tout ira bien. (881)

for as he sings, "d'une voix ironique": *"J'ai longtemps parcouru le monde"* (882).

Vautrin is enough of the realist to see the hypocrisy of society and enough of the revolutionist to determine to rebel against it. He makes no pretenses to Eugène that his revolutionary machinations are not mostly motivated by his own ambitions. But there is enough ambiguity about him to suggest to some that he has good intentions.

Once everything is ready for breakfast, Mlle Victorine and her aunt Mme Couture enter the dining room. They have already been to mass and it is clear that Mlle Victorine is ill at ease--she is cold and "elle tremble comme la feuille" (881). But her shivering is not necessarily induced by the weather rather she is terrified by the prospect of her upcoming meeting with her father. Her mother's death has allowed her father to disinherit her in favor of her good-for-nothing brother. Her fear is that her father's door, today,

will be as firmly closed to her as ever, when all she wants is his love, not his money. Ironically, Vautrin seems to her a person capable of getting this message to her father: "Si vous saviez un moyen d'arriver à mon père, dites-lui bien que son affection et l'honneur de ma mère me sont plus précieux que toutes les richesses du monde" (882). Mlle Victorine is so preoccupied by this quest, that despite the lively conversation around her at the table and her muted attraction to Eugène, she hardly hears anything. She is a child suffering from unrequited paternal love, whose innocent priorities place familial love above money or social status.

The next three residents to appear for breakfast are M. Poiret, Mlle Michonneau and M. Goriot. M. Poiret and Mlle Michonneau, as we have seen, are treated with derision by Vautrin. M. Poiret is presented as a "blockhead" who echoes other people's words and thoughts. Since he and Mlle Michonneau do everything together, it is fair to assume that M. Poiret is dominated by his spinster friend. Mlle Michonneau resents the treatment she receives and she watches Vautrin as "un cheval de régiment entendant le son de la trompette" (885). She is suspicious and resentful and awaits an occasion to get revenge. Though these two bland personalities take little part in the dialogue, Balzac takes considerable pains to describe them as "different" and to prefigure their treachery: "ils dorment comme des souches" (879) and a metaphor: "ils sont tous deux si secs que s'ils se cognent, ils feront feu comme un briquet" (886) and Mme Vauquer jokes: "Gare au châte de mademoiselle Michonneau . . . il prendra

comme de l'amadon" (886), indicating that the exterior appearance might hide a combustible spark. They are the embodiment of treacherous greed.

Goriot, who comes in with Poiret and Michonneau is the essence of suffering, paternal love. The reader is already aware that his reduced financial situation is a result of the greed of his two daughters. Thus the poignancy of his stoic acceptance of the abuse showered on him by some of his fellow residents, who assume that he is supporting several mistresses, is heightened in its pathos. The fiction of Goriot's sacrifices for the ladies who are "joliment ficelées" (878) adds amusement and intrigue to the table discussion. Their reactions differ: Eugène, a romantic who has observed him weeping as he crushes the last and most sentimentally valuable piece of personal silver, pities him: Mme Vauquer, a vengeful moralist, considers him a ridiculous dirty old man: "Il est clair qu'il s'est ruiné pour ces femmes-là" (884) and Vautrin a man of unrestrained emotion, lauds Goriot's action sardonically as indicative of, "combien il est passionné" (886). This cruel banter not only furthers the characterization of the participants, it also emphasizes Goriot's deleterious devotion.

In addition to indirect references to Goriot's character Balzac uses description to trace his emotional pain: "il jeta sur les deux interlocuteurs un regard lumineux et plein d'inquiétude" (883) when he realizes that he has failed to prevent Mme de Restaud's visit to the money lender. In his dejection he cries "douloureusement" and eats

"machinalement et sans savoir ce qu'il [mange]" (883). He seems, "plus stupide et absorbé" (883) than ever before. On the other hand he watches Eugène "avidement" (884) as he describes Mme de Restaud at the ball and Mme Vauquer informs the reader that Goriot's eyes lit up.

Thus, through the eyes of the other characters, as through Goriot's actions and reactions at this breakfast, the reader understands the pathetic devotion of Goriot to his daughters. He has disposed of all the wealth that he has carefully saved in an effort to buy the love of his daughters.

Eugène de Rastignac, the last person to join the breakfasting tenants, comes in after returning from a lecture at the school of law. He is being initiated into the mores of Parisian society. The previous evening, he had been dazzled by the splendor of a ball at the house of his cousin, la comtesse de Beauséant, "une maison magnifique, des appartements habillés de soie . . . où je me suis amusé comme un roi" (882) he says expansively, ignoring Vautrin's provocative comments. He has fallen in love with the most beautiful creature he has ever seen, and nothing Vautrin says is going to spoil his euphoria. Yet he is confused by the fact that his lady was out in the streets of Paris, without her carriage, early on the morning after the ball. His confusion grows to astonishment when Vautrin pronounces the name of the lady, Mme de Restaud, and subsequently suggests that she is financed by Goriot. Vautrin goes on to point out Eugène's naïvety at being astonished, and intimates the young man needs his tutoring: "Vous êtes encore trop jeune pour bien connaître Paris" (884). His growing

confusion, coupled with Vautrin's description of Paris as "un bourbier," do not square with his more noble image. Eugène is typical of young provincial men who come to Paris with inadequate funds to be able to participate in the high society that attracts them. Will his ambition lead him to crime in the manner of Vautrin? Will he compromise his own moral standards in order to be accepted by society? Or, will he resist the temptations which face him and seek to earn an honest living? The dilemma of how to proceed haunts him as it does any ambitious youth.

At this particular meal Balzac has created a group of characters gleaned from his own observance of students and of the petty bureaucratic class in Paris. To each of them money seems as important as blood: to the servants money is a means of survival; to Mme Vauquer it represents the future rehabilitation of her establishment and hence her respectability; to Vautrin money is the means of ensuring that he can rise above the inequalities in society; to Mlle Michonneau it is the means of striking out at a world which despises her; to Eugène, as to Vautrin, money means triumph since it is the means of satisfying his desire to rise to a position of prominence in society; to Goriot it represents the means of purchasing a few words and moments with his daughters which he can construe as devotion sufficient to enable him to go on living; only to Victorine does money mean nothing.

It is natural then that money, the overriding theme in Le Père Goriot should dominate this first important breakfast. However, money is but one of several intertwining themes which are embodied in the

pensioners. As the title Le Père Goriot suggests, a second important theme is that of paternal love. In Goriot Balzac develops a man who is obsessed by the need to be loved by his daughters and this mania is reinforced at this breakfast by what the reader hears and sees. He knows that his indulgences will only reap ingratitude yet he cannot admit it; instead he persuades himself that he is happy so long as his daughters are happy. Victorine, on the other hand, displays the kind of love for her father which Goriot covets from his daughters, although her love is sadly misplaced. Ironically, when Vautrin's plot to assassinate her brother is successful, her father accepts her, but only as the inheritor of his fortune, not as his daughter.

In a larger sense, the lodgers represent an extended family. Here in Mlle Michonneau one notices the hatred and suspicion which later develop into "family" betrayal. One also feels that Vautrin, in understanding Eugène's dilemma takes on a paternal role which seems to justify his referring to himself as his "petit papa Vautrin" (933).

Each of the characters around the breakfast table embodies at least one of the major themes in Le Père Goriot--money and paternal love. By describing the participants and their interaction near the beginning of the novel the author intentionally uses an every day situation to advance his plot and to bring his own ideas together.

In Cousin Pons he uses the same technique to embody the themes of money and familial love and friendship. The protagonist, a musician and collector of bric-à-brac, is a "gourmand" (533). Since he spends all his earnings on his collection of bric-à-brac, to satisfy his

appetite, he invites himself to meals with his successful friends and relatives. As his musical influence wanes he becomes the subject of derision among his hosts and this is particularly true in the Camuset de Merville home. Pons persists in demeaning himself because, in spite of the underlying motive of food, he believes in the value of the family.

Prior to the meal which changes this situation, he is insulted by Mme Camusot de Merville and her daughter Cécile. Their attitude toward his collection is derisory, particularly in light of the fact that they do not recognize the value of the fan painted by Watteau which Pons offers to his cousin as a gift. Subsequently, even though he has been invited to dinner and has brought a special gift, the women lie about a supposed meeting with M. le President de Merville in order to avoid dining with him. Pons realizes that their story is a ruse when he sees both the servants and Cécile laughing at him in their quarters. He is utterly humiliated.

This aborted meal, which shatters Pons's faith in family love, leads into a dinner with the German pianist, Schmucke, with whom he shares rooms in the house of Mme Cibot. Despite their careers in the theatre, where corruption is rife, Pons and Schmucke are honest and loyal friends, "dans l'ordre moral, de la perfection dont il est doué l'odorat des chiens; ils flairent les chagrins de leurs amis, ils en devinent les causes, ils s'en préoccupent" (544). Schmucke is, "effrayé par le bouleversement de la physionomie de Pons" (566). He comforts his friend by comparing Parisian society to a tornado from

which one should expect nothing. Parisians are good people, nice people, he explains, but he would rather be with Pons because he can see him whenever he wants to. Pons' eyes are opened, and he recognizes true friendship:

Pons prit la main de Schmucke, la mit entre ses mains, il la serra par un mouvement où l'âme se communiquait tout entière, et tous deux ils restèrent ainsi pendant quelques minutes, comme des amants qui se revoient après une longue absence. (567)

As they eat together they have no need to talk and both become tearful as they recognize what they mean to each other. Cognizant of the value of friendship Pons accepts that Mme Cibot can probably prepare adequate meals and he agrees to stay at home in future and eat with his friend.

Schmucke, a man with simple taste, is happy both in his work and in his domestic arrangements at Mme Cibot's lodging. His only regret is that his friend persists in degrading himself through his penchant for dining out. So, when Pons returns early from the Camusots he welcomes him ecstatically: *"Tinner! tinner... Mais c'esdre imbossible!"* (566) and yet he is frightened by Pons' dejection. He surreptitiously asks Mme Cibot to order in a special meal of *"feau à la pourchoise, ein pon boisson, ein poudille te fin te Porteaux, dout ce qu'il y aura te meilleur en vriantise: gomme tes groguettes te risse ed ti lard vîmé!"* (566). He comforts his friend and, despite "une ignorance crasse en Bric-à-bracologie" (567) he suggests that, *"nus pricapraquerons ensemble!"* (567). He is so excited by the prospect of Pons dining with him the next evening that he:

sauta d'un bout de la table à l'autre, en entraîna la nappe, les plats, les carafes, et saisit Pons par une étreinte comparable à celle d'une gaz s'emparant d'un autre gaz pour lequel il a de l'affinité. (569)

Finally, after dinner, to ensure that Pons does not revert to his dolorous state Schmucke goes for a walk with him and appears to be protecting him.

One of the people from whom they both need to be protected is Mme Cibot. At this meal, she appears to be concerned about Pons and she brings her two "casse-noisettes" (540) their meal. As her pet name indicates, she is fond of them: yet she charges Schmucke thirty sous a day for a meal which she prepares for twenty; she listens in on their conversations, "selon son droit de femme de ménage légitime" (566); she nurtures her friendship for Pons with an eye to receiving tickets to the theatre; finally she persuades them that if she charged them three francs for their evening meal she would be being generous! Her monologue before she goes to ask advice about her financial affairs from the fortune teller, Mme Fontaine, and her hen clarifies her priority:

Depuis que ces deux messieurs sont venus chez nous, nous avons deux milles francs de placés à la caisse d'épargne. En huit ans! quelle chance! Faut-il ne rien gagner au dîner de monsieur Pons, et l'attacher à son ménage? La poule à mme Fontaine me dira cela. (569)

Since she sees no evidence of heirs, she flatters herself that she might inherit from her gentlemen and at one point she even contemplates seducing Pons!

The themes of greed and love are interwoven in these three characters. Mme Cibot, who treats her two "casse-noisettes" like family cannot help scheming in the hopes of inheriting from them. Later in the novel, when the true value of Pons's bric-à-brac is

revealed, Mme Cibot betrays this friendship and first helps the despicable M. Remonecq to remove eight of the most valuable paintings from the collection and then tries to falsify Pons' will. Finally, when she believes that this deception has failed, she steals a painting for her own enrichment. Her greed overrides her friendship and she becomes a traitor.

In this dinner scene, by painting Pons and Mme Cibot with opposing attitudes toward money and love of their extended families, Balzac ensures that his two primary themes, greed and love, are recognized. He reemphasizes their importance by allowing greed to dominate Mme Cibot's relationship with the two men and familial love to overshadow Pons' genuine friendship with Schmucke.

The character who embodies both lack of materialism and unconditional friendship is Schmucke. He is only interested in Pons's collection because it gives pleasure to his friend and although his commitment may seem exaggerated, the purity of his love highlights the plight of Mme Cibot and Pons--nothing less than total devotion leads to happiness.

Balzac uses much the same technique in Cousin Pons as he does in Le Père Goriot. By describing the reactions of the characters to a particular circumstance at a mealtime he presents his own ideas as a realistic device while developing the plot. However, in this case, his tendency to intertwine the characteristics and to hyperbolize makes his characters less credible and so diminishes the realistic effect.

In Pierrette, a shorter text which forms part of Les Célibitaires, the characterization is straightforward. However, unlike the previous meals discussed, this breakfast scene does not appear at the beginning of the novel and so does not introduce the protagonist, rather, its purpose is to emphasize the changed situation in the household. To understand the theme embodied in the characters it is necessary to provide some background information. Sylvie and Jerome-Denis Rogron were abused as children; to their chagrin neither of them has married, but through Sylvie's good management they built up a good haberdashery business in Paris, which when it sold, brought enough money for them to retire to Provins. Pierrette, on the other hand, is the offspring of a loving marriage but she is orphaned when her father is killed in military action, and her mother dies shortly thereafter. Thus all three protagonists have fractured family backgrounds. Initially when Pierrette comes to Provins, the Rogrons feel the three of them can perhaps make a family unit, but Pierrette's popularity and innate goodness arouse jealousy in Sylvie. She ceases to be proud of her ward and reverts to treating her as she herself was treated in childhood. Pierrette, reduced to being the household maid, is terrorized by Sylvie's demands and shows increasing signs of illness. Sylvie, meanwhile, plans to entice Colonel Gonraud into marriage thus ensuring her position in society. The situation in the house deteriorates further early on the morning of this breakfast when Brigaud, Pierrette's childhood friend who has relocated to be close to her, serenades her and is overheard by Sylvie.

Pierrette is happy to have had contact with Brigaud and, as usual, she rises early to complete her household chores. Her preparations are painstaking and laborious for she hates reproof and her mistress can never be satisfied. She is horrified then when Sylvie comes down to breakfast and immediately attacks her, accusing her of having a lover: "Et vous n'avez peut-être pas parlé à votre amoureux?" (728). Unbeknownst to Pierrette, Sylvie has come to the irrational conclusion that it is "her" Colonel who has treated Pierrette to a serenade and she is passionately jealous. Even though Pierrette denies any wrongdoing, she is subjected to a series of abusive comments from Sylvie: "Je vous connais bien des défauts, mais je ne vous savais pas celui du mentir" (728); "Avez-vous plu par hasard à quelques-uns des hommes qui viennent ici?" (730); "Mais si tout cela n'est qu'hypocrisie, si je dois voir en vous un serpent que j'aurai réchauffé dans mon sein, vous seriez infâme, une horrible créature" (730). This only ends when, after having changed her tactic to one of gentleness, Sylvie still fails to elicit a confession and so threatens Pierrette with punishment from God. Pierrette flees, "comme une biche effrayée à travers le jardin, épouvantée de cette question morale" (731).

During the meal Pierrette shows a little more courage as she denies Sylvie's assertion that the fine particles of coffee grounds floating on the top of the coffee which she has prepared are ash from the fireplace: "Mais, ma cousine, c'est du café" (732). Yet although she knows that her conscience is clear, she is unable to look directly at Sylvie since the latter's eyes frighten her and make her feel guilty:

"La colère de sa cousine lui faisait croire a quelque crime" (733).

She resolves to remain silent in case she is forbidden to see Brigaud:

"Peut-être lui ôterait-on Brigaud" (733), but the abuse she suffers induces stomach cramps and sickness and she crawls, uncared for to her bedroom.

Through Pierrettes actions, her speech, and her thoughts, the reader is aware that she is an innocent and conscientious young lady who is abused into submission by the relatives from whom she seeks affection. In spite of her physical weakness, by refusing to divulge Brigaud's identity she demonstrates a moral strength which is sustained by love for her young friend.

Sylvie, as we have seen is a tyrant; she is also vindictively jealous and quick tempered. As Pierrette announces breakfast, "le teint de Sylvie se plaqua de vert et jaunit: toute sa bile se mit en mouvement" (731). She nags Pierrette continuously as she looks for "un sujet de reproche, et elle se colérait intérieurement de n'en pas trouver" (731). Her jealousy is such that she in turn cannot look Pierrette in the eye. When she finally invents the ash on the coffee as an excuse to lose her temper, she demonstrates the "effroyable lueur que son oeil dégageait en colère," (732) and her tongue matches her eyes as she threatens to banish her cousin to the kitchen. Her veiled accusations as she tries to goad a confession from Pierrette are sarcastic and hurtful: "elle cause du haut d'une maison et répond à quelqu'un qui se trouve en bas . . . "; "A son âge! c'est commencer de bonne heure, . . . "; "Elle n'était pas malade ce matin, va!" (733).

Rather than accept Pierrette as a member of the family, she treats her as a servant. The author indicates that Pierrette begins to think as if she were indeed a slave: "La persécution avait appris à Pierrette les ruses nécessaires aux esclaves" (728), "elle eut à la fois les mille pensées de l'esclave" (733). And, in an omniscient statement of sympathy after Sylvie's brief attempt at gentleness, he insists that: "Une des plus douces choses qui puissent consoler les Souffrants, les Martyrs, les Artistes au fort de la Passion divine que leur imposent l'Envie et la Haine, est de trouver l'éloge là où ils ont toujours trouvé la censure et la mauvaise foi" (730). Sylvie is described physically as having "le visage aigre et froid" (729), "une voix terrible" (731) with "un accent terrible de l'hyène," (730) which speaks with "paroles si dures, si âpres, des suppositions si blessants" (733) and eyes which she uses "pour imprimer une terreur salutaire à ses inférieurs" (732). She has no conception of family love and is totally self-centred in her thoughts and actions.

Rogron, on the other hand, is more concerned about his ward. He does not condemn her without proof, asking Sylvie: "Qu'a-t-elle fait de si grave?" (733) and he is concerned about her health: "Elle est malade" (733). Yet although he must have realized that there was no ash in Sylvie's coffee, he does not defend Pierrette because he is weak. He is a self-centered man who, on arriving at breakfast, first recounts his dreams of the previous night, and then worries about his face being patchy. The author suggests that he lusts after Mlle de Chargeboeuf, "Depuis que Rogron aimait, ne profanons-pas

ce mot, désirait mademoiselle de Chargeboeuf, il s'inquiétait beaucoup de son air et de lui-même" (731). Sylvie considers him inconsequential, berates him for not showing more interest in her tirade and yet she does not listen to his "sottes questions" (731). Rogron has neither the strength nor the intelligence to intercede on behalf of his ward.

These three characters embody three different aspects of the theme of familial love. Pierrette is full of love and wants, above all, to be loved. Sylvie, on the other hand, "une vieille fille chez qui les sentiments que nourrit la famille n'avaient jamais été réveillés, à qui les besoins de l'enfance, les précautions voulues par l'adolescence étaient inconnus, ne pouvait avoir aucune des indulgences et de compatissances inspirées par les mille événements de la ménagère conjugale" (729), is totally insensitive and only interested in herself. Rogron, although he is a little more sensitive, does not understand family love, is not strong enough to fight his sister on behalf of Pierrette and pursues a conjugal relationship as a means of satisfying his lust. The author uses this unhappy meal to criticize a dearth of family love. Only the protagonist, who is ill as a result of the mistreatment she has received, has any conception of true love. Through his portrayal of Pierrette's physical and mental suffering and the conditions that cause them, Balzac presents a realistic portrayal of the results of her situation.

In Un Grand Homme de Province à Paris Balzac again uses a meal in the center of the novel to illustrate a change in circumstances.

This time, however, he uses two groups of people with the protagonist in the middle to illustrate the main themes in the novel.

Lucien de Rubempré has come to Paris believing that he has a future as a poet, but he is soon corrupted by a group of young men who are exploiting the opportunities offered in the new profession of journalism. While reviewing theater productions he meets his mistress, the actress Coralie, and Balzac uses a dinner at their home to criticize the unscrupulous behavior of the journalists.

The dinner which they host shows Lucien and Coralie at the height of their glory. Lucien has been hailed as a brilliant new journalist, and Coralie is adored by her public. Some thirty guests are invited, among them journalists and some of Lucien's original Parisian friends who are members of the group of writers and artists known as the brotherhood.

As his guests arrive Lucien is clearly enjoying his role as host, "[il] éprouva le plus indéfinissable mouvement de bonheur, de vanité satisfaite et d'espérance en se voyant le maître de ces lieux" (802). Coralie and her friend Florine are prettily and extravagantly dressed, and, to his satisfaction, the guests consider themselves to be "les amis de Lucien" (803). But once he begins talking with his colleagues from the brotherhood, he is less sure of himself as he admits that his present mode of living is dependent upon Coralie's elderly admirer.

Lucien assures Michel, Fulgence and Joseph that he will always be one of them: "Un homme qui pour vous restera le même en quelque

situation qu'il se trouve" (804), but the members of the brotherhood "se regardèrent en échangeant un sourire moqueur" (804). He assures the members of the brotherhood that he only attacked their colleague Nathan's work so that he could follow it up with a complimentary rebuttal which will undoubtedly be more favorable than an initial article of praise could have been: "Je n'ai consenti à écrire l'attaque . . . qu'à la condition d'y répondre moi-même . . . Vienne le livre d'Arthez et je suis en position de lui être utile" (804). While he is talking to this set of friends, he believes that he can help them more as a journalist than as a writer.

But as the meal progresses and Lucien hears his journalist friends joking that successful reviews are bound to lead to failure:

Eh! malheur à ceux que le Journal ne discutera pas, et auxquels il jettera des couronnes à leur début. Ceux-là seront relégués comme des saints dans leur niche et personne n'y fera plus la moindre attention. (805)

He does not take Michel, Fulgence and Joseph's part. They, as artists and intellectuals, question whether their success should be dependent upon journalistic dishonesty; as Fulgence notes: "Comme dans la nature, où elle résulte de deux principes qui se combattent . . . Le triomphe de l'un sur l'autre est la mort" (805). Lucien wallows in the praise of his fellow journalists as they hail him as a second Bossuet and prepare to baptize him a Journalist and he hardly notices as his brotherhood friends take their hats and symbolically leave the dinner. Lucien has not only been trapped into the mores of Parisian society, he has also deserted his ambition to become a writer and joined the journalists in their questionable art.

The members of the brotherhood are clearly serious young men who despise what Lucien has become. Their departure from the dinner occasions a satirical attack on them by the journalists who remain:

Des jeunes hommes graves qui s'assemblent dans un *musico* philosophique et religieux de la rue des Quatre-Vents, où l'on s'inquiète du sens général de l'Humanité. . . . (807)

Verou fears that "il vient un moment où elles (ces théories-là) se transforment en coups de fusil ou en guillotine" (807). These three have come to the party as representatives of their group because "[ils] devaient se trouver moins dépaysés que les autres au milieu d'une orgie" (803). Lucien's baptism is more than they can accept and they take their leave. They were out of place at this rather boisterous party. As Coralie says, "Tes amis de la rue des Quatre-Vents étaient tristes comme des condamnés à mort" (809). It is Lucien who sees that they are in fact the judges and not the criminals.

The journalists lack sincerity in their discussion and jesting. They exude confidence while admitting to manipulating opinion. After the brotherhood members have left, the conversation turns to politics and it is clear that they are prepared to write whatever is required. As Claude Vignon comments, "Je serai toujours dans le plus profond étonnement de voir un gouvernement abandonnant la direction des idées à des drôles comme nous autres" (809). Even the government is aware that the press already controls the masses.

Coralie takes little part in the dinner conversation as it is primarily a male gathering, but a criticism of the lifestyle of this sector of society underlies the whole dinner. The following is an example:

"- Eh! bien, mes enfants, dit Lucien en affichant un petit ton de supériorité, vous verrez que le petit farceur peut devenir un grand politique.

- Je ne demande pas mieux que de m'être trompé, dit Michel

- Tu vis avec Coralie en attendant mieux lui demanda Fulgence

- Oui, reprit Lucien d'un air qu'il voulait rendre naïf. Coralie avait un pauvre vieux négociant qui l'adorait, elle l'a mis à la porte . . .

- Enfin, dit Fulgence, tu es maintenant un homme comme un autre, tu feras ton chemin". (803)

At this meal the two themes which dominate the novel, a disapproval of journalism and of the lifestyle which the journalists lead, are explored through two groups of characters with the protagonist demonstrating the difficulty of choice. The intellectuals take themselves very seriously and despise the frivolity and insincerity of the journalists. The journalists are fun loving, unscrupulous exploiters who are fully aware of their power. These characters embody an inditement of a corrupt society, and of journalism in particular, while at the same time criticizing the idealism of the intellectuals.

Lucien faces a dilemma. He may have enough talent to join the brotherhood, but even if he has, he will live in penury. As it is he is infatuated with Coralie and all that she has to offer, and he knows that he can be a good journalist. Ideally he would like to find a middle path, but that part does not exist. The brotherhood is too idealistic and the journalists' and Coralie's lifestyle are too corrupt.

Thus around this table Balzac presents a microcosm of another sector of Parisian society. Through it, he criticizes idealism, journalism and "gallanterie", yet he has a certain sympathy for his protagonist since none of his choices is attractive. Perhaps this is why he entitled the collection of which Un Grand Homme de Province à Paris is part, Illusions Perdues.

Each of these four meals, taken from different location in the novels, and using both large and small groups in diverse settings, is used intentionally by Balzac to create a realistic impression. In all cases, the characters are objectified through careful description of the actions, reactions and speech, as embodiments of Balzacian ideas. In Père Goriot, Cousin Pons and Un Grand Homme de Province à Paris the characters often embody several interwoven themes, thus mirroring the main themes in the novel. However, in Pierrette only one theme is evident, and it is the main theme of the short story.

These examples are merely representatives of the way in which the meal is a successful realistic tool presenting themes through detailed characterization. Most of the meals in LA COMEDIE HUMAINE are used in this way, but as we shall see in the succeeding chapters, they frequently also serve a secondary purpose.

CHAPTER II

MEALS AND STRUCTURAL REGULATION

Balzac stated that in writing LA COMEDIE HUMAINE his goal was to portray "la vie dans sa totalité" where "la société française allait être l'historien" (Charvet 224), and he would simply be the secretary. If he succeeded in his ambition one might question whether the work is well structured since everyday life tends to lack a regular structure. Edwin Preston Dargan says LA COMEDIE HUMAINE is like "a pyramid constructed above a labyrinth [consisting of] intercommunications, intentions, devices, where the workmen are the ideas, hurrying to and fro, each charged with a special burden or message" (Dargan 46); as for the pyramid:

Its three sides correspond irregularly to the three main divisions that the author preferred, the Study of Manners; the Philosophical Studies; the Analytical Studies. Block by block the stones of the pyramid have been swung into place. Each fragment, each story, fits closely into the structure. On the surface of the pyramid, traversing from one block to another, have been delineated large frescoes of the Human Comedy, the people who constantly reappear. (Dargac, 43)

This analogy suggests an intentional structure incorporated into the complete work. But the pressure under which Balzac wrote, and his concentration on the details of a realistic presentation of the whole, made structuring in the individual novels an harrowing task.

Daily life is often regulated by the schedule for meals "after breakfast" or "before dinner" are commonly used expressions to suggest a certain order and structure in the flow of daily activities. At meals one can also discuss plans or problems and clear up

misunderstandings, and develop strategies for action. Throughout his novels, Balzac uses mealtimes to indicate the time of day rather than using chronometrical time; his characters also often conduct business while satisfying their gustatory needs. Many of the most significant mealtimes are found at the beginning, middle or end of his longer novels using the twenty-four-hour unit of a day paradigmatically.

Just as the lengthy meal at Mme Vauquer's pension introduces the characters in Le Père Goriot, so the denouement is signalled by a meal. In itself it is brief, however the events leading up to the novel's climax and the tragic ending is foretold as the lodgers sit down to eat. The previous day, Goriot had been happier than at any other time in the story, and he is now contentedly planning to occupy a miserable little corner of the apartment he and his daughter, Delphine, have furnished as a tryst for her and her lover, Eugène. But, on this very day, his happy mood has been dashed by new changes and reversals in his daughters' situations.

Immediately prior to the dinner hour, Goriot receives a visit from each of daughters, and it is the news that they bring, coupled with their argumentative behavior, which cause Goriot's dejected demeanor at the table. Delphine, following her father's suggestion, has demanded control of her own money from her husband, Le Baron Nucingen. Nucingen has used her money to prop up an illegal real estate deal, but he swears to her that with it he will be able to salvage their future and that she will then have her original investment and more. In the meantime he offers to deed her some land.

On hearing this Goriot is beside himself, cursing Nucingen and condemning himself for no longer being in a position to help her.

Delphine does nothing to ease his pain, replying heartlessly:

Oui, si je suis dans un abîme, il y a peut-être de votre faute .
 . . Nous avons si peu de raison quand nous nous marions!
 Connaissons-nous le monde, les affaires, les hommes, les mœurs?
 Les pères devraient penser pour nous. (1039)

The shock of Delphine's revelation is augmented by the arrival of his second daughter, Anastasie. She is in more trouble than her sister, for she has sold her husband's family diamonds in order to pay her lover's vast gambling debts. Goriot is so blind to her faults that he blames her husband for driving her to take a lover. When she in return suggests that Goriot could sell his pension securities to pay her outstanding debts, his admission that "Je ne les ai pas, Nasie. Plus, plus rien, plus rien! C'est la fin du monde" (1043) leads his daughters to fight about which of them deserves his support. As their argument becomes more vicious, Goriot cries: "Mes enfants, je meurs si vous continuez," and repeats to himself: "Elles me tuent!" (1047). For the first time he realizes that there is nothing he can do to remove his daughters' troubles. In his emotionally spent state and Eugène has to help him to his bed. These shocking interviews have enfeebled Goriot to such an extent that Eugène determines to dine at the pension so as to be near him rather than to accept Delphine's invitation to join her. After bidding her adieu he joins the other lodgers at the dinner table.

Most of the lodgers previously named have, for different reasons left the pension, but of those remaining only three are specified at

this dinner--Goriot, Eugène and the medical student Bianchon.

Bianchon's presence immediately draws attention to the state of Goriot's health and, as any medical student might, "[il] s'était mis de manière à bien examiner la figure du vermicellier" (1049). Goriot is apparently unconscious of his actions and like an automaton seats himself at the table and smells the bread to judge the quality of the flour in the same manner as he had at a previous meal (889). Bianchon notes that:

Quoique le bas de la figure soit assez calme, les traits supérieurs du visage se tirent vers le front malgré lui, vois! Puis les yeux sont dans l'état particulier qui dénote l'invasion du sérum dans le cerveau. Ne dirait-on pas qu'ils sont pleins d'une poussière fine? (1049)

Bianchon makes "un geste sinistre" (1049) as he watches him from across the table and moves so that he can be closer to him. Then he utters his fatal conclusion: "A moins que je ne me trompe, il est flambé" (1049), and gives a detailed summary of his symptoms. Furthermore he announces that there is no cure, and since his conclusion that a violent shock must have driven him to this condition is correct, the death sentence is credible. Eugène concurs, "en se rappelant que les deux filles avaient battu sans relâche sur le coeur de leur père" (1049). The meal has no formal ending, but the scene ends with Eugène uttering an ironic disinculpation of Mme de Nucingen: "Au moins . . . Delphine aime son père, elle!"

Thus, this short meal is used as a climax to the scene which shows the true, selfish nature of Delphine and Anastasie and which, in turn, directly prepares for the denouement--Goriot's demise. Eugène's

unwarranted absolving Delphine of blame intensifies the reader's perception of Eugène's disillusionment and helps to justify his cynical declaration of war on Parisian society at the end of the novel: "A nous deux maintenant."

The same scene could have taken place in the privacy of Goriot's room but it would have been much less poignant. The reader observes and listens to the other boarders as they watch and listen to the three main protagonists, and he has the illusion of being there. The three characters are rendered very true to life and the open concern of the two young men for their elderly companion establishes the mood for the coming events. The mealtime is used as a realistic device to introduce the denouement on two levels, the death of Goriot and the birth of Eugène's decision to fight.

In Cousine Bette, Valérie Marneffe too makes a decision to fight society, and in doing so she will ruin the libertine Baron Hulot and his family. The reasons for Valérie's motivation, and the means by which she will achieve her goal, are clarified during a scene culminating in a dinner in her apartment. The introduction to the dinner at which Valérie is introduced in the plot finds Baron Hulot dropping Bette at home. Her neighbor, Valérie, who is arriving at the same time, is curious about Bette's cousin, and, as she steals a second glance at him from the landing of the staircase, she is struck by the baron's fascination with her, for he is, "cloué sur place par l'admiration, dévoré de désir et de curiosité" (180). She rushes upstairs to her apartment and, with her husband, goes unabashedly to

the window only to be told by him that the gentleman is the esteemed Baron Hulot, the head of her husband's department.

The apartment which Valérie and her husband occupy, and in which they sit down to eat, presents the aspect of "faux luxe" (182). The only exceptions are Valérie's rooms which are "tendus en perse, à meubles en bois de palissandre, à tapis en moquette" (182). Since Valérie has been disinherited by her father, this contrast suggests that she has already resorted to selling herself in order to augment her income.

As they sit down to dinner, their pecuniary plight is the sole topic of conversation between the couple; Valérie's first remark indicates: "Samanon ne veut prendre tes lettres de change qu'à cinquante pour cent, et demande en garantie une délégation sur tes appointements" (183). For his part, after bemoaning the fact that their furniture will be seized the following day, Marneffe demonstrates his weak character by blaming Valérie's father and society for their present misfortune: "Et ton père, qui s'avise de mourir sans faire de testament! Ma parole d'honneur, ces gens de l'Empire se croient tous immortels comme leur Empereur" (184). Valérie argues that the countess probably burned the will, reasoning that it is unlikely that she would have been forgotten: "Comment m'aurait-il oubliée, lui qui nous donnait de temps en temps des trois ou quatre billets de mille francs à la fois?" (184). She decides what needs to be done and leaves the table. Unlike her husband she is not a person to stand idly by when her interests are in question. She will do what has to be done, and she advises her husband to do his part by contacting Cousine Bette.

The author accentuates the need for drastic measures by reminding the reader of the contemporary situation: "Le dîner . . . eût expliqué la crise financière que subissait cette famille, car la table est le plus sûr thermomètre de la fortune dans les ménages parisiens" (183). Then to bring the reader back to the plight of the Marneffe household, he proceeds, atypically, to describe the meager meal in some detail:

Une soupe aux herbes et à l'eau de haricots, un morceau de veau aux pommes de terre, inondé d'eau rousse en guise de jus, un plat de haricots et des cerises d'une qualité inférieure, le tout servi et mangé dans des assiettes et des plats écornés avec l'argenterie peu sonore et triste du maillechoirt Les serviettes servaient depuis une semaine. (183)

Furthermore, the maid who serves the meal is distinguished from servants who serve in the untroubled households of the Parisian middle class. Balzac often shows the disparity between appearances and reality by the behavior of the servants, and in this instance, the maid removes some of the food prematurely in order to feed her lover.

In addition to clarifying the need for money in the household, these occurrences make it clear that Marneffe is as weak as his wife is strong. Rather than take action, he blames Valérie's father for their poverty, and he is aware of his wife's amorous affairs - he even appears to give a covert blessing to whatever plans she has for taking advantage of the baron: "Tu as *fait* mon directeur" (183). At this brief meal, Valérie's resolve to seduce the baron, then, is presented and explored psychologically and justified by gestures, oblique remarks and the behavior of the maid. In recognizing the need to contact Bette, Valérie ensures the complication of the plot. Bette will become

Valérie's friend and ally, and her resolve to get revenge will be the driving force behind Valérie's behavior.

Valérie is therefore introduced at the dinner table both as a contributor in her own right to Hulot's ruin, and as the tool whereby Bette can get her revenge on the Hulot family. It is made clear that Valérie's motives are driven by her selfish ambition to be well off. It also becomes apparent during the course of the meal that she can depend on her own husband for passive support. This lean, poorly served meal is a realistic setting for the anatomy of motives, so important to Balzac.

Mlle Cormon, in La Vieille Fille, is motivated by a desire to marry because she feels that love has passed her by. The climax of the plot is placed at a dinner in her house when a certain M. de Troisville has been invited to stay by her uncle M. l'Abbé de Sponde. Seeing this as an opportunity for herself, Mlle Cormon's orders for the preparations for his arrival are frantic: Mariette is to hurry to the market and is told, "sans jeter l'argent, n'épargne rien, prends-y tout ce qu'il y aura de bien, de bon, de délicat" (290). A room must be specially prepared and a suitable bed found, and Mlle herself must be suitably dressed. The activity becomes the talk of the town, and after M. l'Abbé innocently answers an enquiry by explaining that he anticipates that his guest will settle in Alençon the rumors develop until there is no doubt but that he is to be Mlle Cormon's groom. The aristocratic section of town approve the match, the bourgeoisie, convinced that he has fought against France, disapproves. Everyone is

interested, and they all plan to attend Mlle Cormon's salon after dinner that evening.

Meanwhile, Mlle Cormon is also letting her imagination run loose: "La vieille fille était inondée d'espérance" (290): "Les yeux de mademoiselle Cormon étincelèrent pour la seule fois de sa vie" (291): "Elle était en proie à une irritation Tout son sang, fouetté par l'espérance, était en mouvement" (293). The narrator sums it up: "Ainsi tout fut d'accord dans cette journée pour produire le grand coup de théâtre qui décida de la vie de mademoiselle Cormon" (291).

At dinner the Abbé leaves the entertaining to his niece,

[elle] regardait comme un de ses devoirs de parler: non qu'elle fût bavarde, elle avait malheureusement trop peu d'idées et savait trop peu de phrases pour discourir; mais elle croyait accomplir ainsi l'un des devoirs sociaux prescrits par la religion qui nous ordonne d'être agréable à notre prochain. (267)

The conversation is full of misunderstandings and non sequiturs to which she is oblivious. In catering to her guest's every whim, Mlle Cormon mistakes his well mannered responses, lowering her eyes demurely when she reads more into his suggestion that her house is just the type that he is looking for, taking care not to lean on him too heavily as she takes his arm to go into the dining room in case he should think her too forward, reading more into his comment that, "vous ferez un heureux . . ." to win her (297). In her actions and her thoughts Mlle Cormon believes that she is charming her future husband, and by the time she serves coffee and liqueurs in the salon, "Mademoiselle Cormon apparut si radieuse, si triomphante, qu'on la trouva belle" (300).

Her guest, on the other hand, notices nothing unusual in his reception. He compliments his hostess politely on her house and on the arrangements that she has made to make him welcome, he smiles when he believes that she has made a joke, pays her harmless compliments, and tolerates the vacuous conversation. He does not indulge in effusive appreciation of his meal, but "en buvant les vins délicieux . . . il parassait reconnaître des amis et les retrouver avec un vif plaisir" (298). Indeed, since "[il] ne se donna pas la peine d'étudier Mademoiselle Cormon" (297) one can assume that he is aware of nothing unusual and has no inkling of Mlle Cormon's turmoil.

To the guests in the salon, however, the Dresden china, the Amphoux liqueurs and Mlle Cormon's appearance are proof of their suspicion that the match must have been arranged by correspondence. They, like their hostess, are full of anticipation.

The climax to the dinner occurs as Mlle Cormon is pouring her guest a cup of coffee, her back to M. de Troisville and M. de Valois who are talking. She overhears the following conversation:

M. de Valois. "Monsieur le vicomte vient, dit-on, s'établir ici?"

M. de Troisville. "Oui, monsieur, je viens y chercher une maison . . . (*Mademoiselle Cormon se retourne, la tasse à la main*) Et il me la faut grande, pour loger . . . (*Mademoiselle Cormon tend la tasse*) ma famille. (*Les yeux de la vieille fille se troublent*)

M. de Valois. "Vous êtes marié?"

M. de Troisville. "Depuis seize ans, avec la fille de la princesse Sherbelloff". (300)

Immediately, Mlle Cormon faints. M. du Bosquier carries her to her bedroom where she is later visited by her doctor and proclaimed to

be recovering. The Abbé attributes her illness to that morning's journey from the country in the rain, and the Chevalier concurs. Jacquelin, Mlle Cormon's faithful man-servant, removes the special liqueurs, and the women begin to gossip.

As a result of this humiliation, Mlle Cormon agrees to marry M. du Bosquier who transforms her house to suit his bourgeois lifestyle, and his salon becomes very radical. The old family servants are sacked, and as he propagates anti-royalist sentiments in his campaign for elected office, the nature of the town is changed. Despite the fact that the marriage is never consummated, Mme du Bosquier remains stoically loyal to her vow that a wife should support her husband even when his beliefs contradict her own principles.

The dramatic meal at Mlle Cormon's house is the turning point in La Vieille Fille. Although Mlle Cormon's dream is fulfilled it is also shattered. She gains a husband, but she never became a wife, and she loses her uncle, her friends, her servants and her property. By presenting the frantic preparations and the force of Mlle Cormon's unrealistic hopes prior to the arrival of M. de Troisville, Balzac prepares the reader for the dramatic climax. During the meal, the contrast between M. de Troisville's state of mind and Mlle Cormon's turmoil is exemplified in their conversation, their thoughts and their actions so that the strength of Mlle Cormon's reaction is understandable. The welcoming dinner for M. de Troisville is used intentionally as a means to present the turning point in the life of the protagonist in this novel when her radiant happiness turns to unmitigated misery.

It is common to find mealtimes coinciding with the structure of the plot in most of the novels studied for this topic and the three examples of meals cited here are placed at the end, at the beginning and in the middle. Their functions are respectively to introduce the denouement, the complication, and the climax. Although the first two are but briefly described they function as well as the more detailed third meal. The author can surround his table with those characters he considers to be crucial to the outcome; he can also bring in interlopers who fill the need to accentuate some plot detail or psychological trait. The interaction and the third person descriptions are essential to Balzac's special brand of realism and for this he found few ordinary settings more conducive than the dining area. Here, while behaving as most people do on such occasions, characters can breathe life into their aspirations as well as recount and comment on previous events of significance to the plot.

Interestingly, in the "nouvelles" and the short stories there are many fewer memorable meals. In some cases, either the length of the work or the internal time frame is not long enough to warrant the inclusion of a detailed meal. In others, the plot is ostensibly of secondary import and the works appear to be more as essays than stories. As such they are not representative of Balzac's carefully wrought realistic works where mealtimes greatly contribute to the establishment of the sense of verisimilitude. Generally then, in Balzac, the meal gives a structural time frame for the novel in addition to providing a focal point for discussion and character analysis.

CHAPTER III

MEALS AND CIRCUMSTANTIAL CHANGE

Since the mealtime was a barometer of fortune at the time of the July Monarchy in France, it can be anticipated that Balzac will use it as a tool to illustrate circumstantial change; James Brown comments "the primary function of meal scenes in LA COMEDIE HUMAINE is to signal differentiation" (24) and he singles out food and ritual as being semiotic. Balzac, however, uses meals for more than painting society. To demonstrate circumstantial change he contrasts interaction and setting to illustrate either the amelioration or the deterioration of personal circumstances, and he accentuates differences between life in Paris and that in the provinces. In these instances Balzac uses the meal both as a realistic device in terms of portraying society "dans sa totalité" and as an aid to his style. In other cases, a character is followed through multiple texts. Here the evolution is not so evident to the reader as it is not designed by the author. Nonetheless they exemplify another aspect of the overall importance of meals in LA COMEDIE HUMAINE.

Two meals in Le Père Goriot present contrasting circumstances which demonstrate both sides of the dilemma which faces Eugène. In the first, after a visit to the hôtel Beauséant he returns to dine at the pension where he faces the dismal reality of his surroundings:

Le spectacle de ces misères et l'aspect de cette salle lui furent horribles. La transition était trop brusque, le contraste trop complet, pour ne pas développer outre mesure chez lui le sentiment de l'ambition. D'un côté les fraîches et charmantes images de la nature sociale la plus élégante, des

figures jeunes, vives, encadrées par les merveilles de l'art et du luxe, des têtes passionnées pleines de poésie; de l'autre, de sinistres tableaux bordés de fange, et de faces où les passions n'avaient laissé que leurs cordes et leur mécanisme. (914)

The reality of his situation is further accentuated by the "offres captieuses" (915) with which his aunt had just presented him as a means of escape--acceptance in society through her contacts and a relationship with Mme de Nucingen. He resolves to follow the Comtesse's advice while, at the same time, pursuing an honest career in law. But the author reminds us of Vautrin's earlier warning that Eugène is too young to understand Paris: "Il était encore bien enfant! Ces deux lignes sont des asymptotes qui ne peuvent jamais se rejoindre" (915).

As Eugène sits down at the table, Vautrin is aware of his agitation and uses it to his own advantage. He goads him by calling him "monsieur le marquis" (915), he takes a superior air as he looks at him "d'un air paternel et méprisant comme s'il eût dit: Marmot! dont je ne ferais qu'une bouchée" (915), and he makes it clear to him that he understands his problem, "Vous êtes de mauvaise humeur, parce que vous n'avez peut-être pas réussi auprès de la belle comtesse de Restaud" (915).

Although Vautrin, ever the tempter, clearly understands Eugène, the latter still fights against him. Eugène sees his present situation quite clearly:

Je ne suis plus disposé à souffrir les plaisanteries de ceux qui m'appellent monsieur le marquis . . . Ici, pour être vraiment marquis, il faut avoir cent mille livres de rente, et quand on vit dans la maison Vauquer on n'est pas précisément le favori de la Fortune. (915)

Eugène has learned from his experience with Mme de Restaud: "Elle m'a fermé sa porte pour lui avoir dit que son père mangeait à notre table . . . Qui vexera le père Goriot s'attaquera désormais à moi . . . il vaut mieux que nous tous" (915). He shows an air of authority when he agrees with Vautrin that "il faut savoir bien tenir une épée et bien tirer le pistolet" (915). Vautrin sees clearly how useful such a perceptive young man would be to him after a bit of tutoring, and he is merely bemused by Eugène's truculent challenge. But when the latter refers to his own nocturnal activities, Vautrin minces no words about how readily he disposes of protégés who threaten him: "Nous aurons ensemble un petit bout de conversation quand vous le voudrez" (916).

The mood at the meal after this altercation is quiet and depressed. Eugène, having asserted himself is preoccupied as he considers where and how to get the money to follow his aunt's plan, Vautrin has been silenced by Eugène, and Goriot, who should rejoice, and does not understand "que les dispositions des esprits étaient changées à son égard," (916) and is morose. Bianchon tries to brighten it up by returning to one of his favorite subjects, phrenology, and jokingly suggests that Goriot must be the father of the girls since there is but one bump on his head, that of paternity. Left alone with the old man, Eugène takes his hand and "le contemplant avec une sorte d'attendrissement" says "Vous êtes un brave et digne homme" (917).

Eugène has been forceful, confident and sensitive during and after this scene at the table. The scene has focused his inner vision. He sees Vautrin for what he is, and he despises the way the world is

inclined to treat the Goriots. But, the description, Vautrin's comments, the narrator, and Eugène's actions rightly point out, he does not see the implausibility of the course that he has resolved to take. This naïvety is illustrated from a different viewpoint at the hôtel de Beauséant where Eugène has been invited to dine.

His initial impression of his surroundings is in direct contrast to the situation at the Maison Vauquer:

Tous deux allèrent dans une salle à manger où le vicomte attendait sa femme, et où resplendissait ce luxe de table qui sous la Restauration fut poussé, comme chacun le sait, au plus haut degré. Monsieur de Beauséant . . . n'avait plus guère d'autre plaisirs que ceux de la bonne chère . . . Sa table offrait donc un double luxe, celui du contenant et celui du contenu. (947)

Eugène had never before eaten in the midst of hereditary luxury and he is awed:

en voyant cette argenterie sculptée, et les mille recherches d'une table somptueuse, en admirant pour la première fois un service fait sans bruit, il était difficile à un homme d'ardente imagination de ne pas préférer cette vie constamment élégante à la vie de privations . . . il en eut une si profonde horreur qu'il se jura de la quitter au mois de janvier. (948)

Despite the luxurious decor, however, the atmosphere, like that of the Maison Vauquer is oppressive and gloomy. Mme de Beauséant's liaison with M. D'Ajuda is in jeopardy. Her husband is going to meet his mistress. In their brief exchanges, it is clear that in spite of their elegant surroundings, there is no happiness in their lives. Eugène is as yet too naïve to understand Paris, and his assumptions as he dines with the Beauseant's shield him from the facts.

The contrast in the material comforts afforded in these two scenes accentuates Eugène's desire to rise above his present situation.

His thoughts inform the reader that it is a contrast of which he is well aware. However, the fact that he is in control of the situation in the first scene, where he understands the consequences of Vautrin's behavior, contrasts with his inexperience which, in the second scene, prevents him from seeing the latent misery in this society marriage. The parallels which are evident in the presentation of the meals indicate Balzac's use of contrasting social settings to reveal the sameness of human unhappiness.

Two meals in Histoire de la Grandeur et de la Décadence de César Birotteau, are used, as the title suggests, to illustrate the changed personal circumstances of the protagonist, César. There is an exceptional closeness in the extended Birotteau family, and they dine together regularly. The two meals demonstrate family unity both before and after the collapse of César's fortune. At the same time, while the atmosphere in both suggests impending change, the results are incongruous.

César, the victim both of his own egotism and of the unscrupulousness of others, has wasted his money celebrating his receipt of the Croix and has speculated in an unwise and risky land deal. As a result he is threatened with bankruptcy. Before the dinner, the reader learns that, "Ce dîner du dimanche chez les Ragon devait être la dernière joie des dix-neuf années heureuses du ménage de Birotteau, joie complète d'ailleurs" (508). The Ragons are the hosts, Uncle Pillerault, Judge Popinot and his nephew Anselme, the Abbé Loraux and the Matifat's are the other guests.

Mlle Césarine Birotteau has taken great care in getting dressed for she knows that Anselme will also be present and, shortly after their arrival, these two young people are absorbed in their own conversation. The love between César and his wife Constance is equally touching. Those around the table are under the impression that César has shielded Constance from his troubles, and indeed he had, until he recognized that she might be adversely affected. Constance shows no bitterness, but during the meal she is reminded of her husband's weaknesses as she observes Pillerault and the judge smiling at some of his innocent comments. She resorts to advising him quietly on his next course of action: "César . . . va dès le trois chez monsieur le baron de Nucingen, afin d'être sûr de ton échéance de quinze longtemps à l'avance" (512). As for César, he says little while his affairs are being discussed at the table, but he is touched by the love of his daughter and his wife. His affection is demonstrated as he grasps their hands as they leave the gathering and says sadly, "Mes chères biches blanches, je vous ai donné de tristes étrennes!". The relationship between these two is one of love and mutual respect, and it carries over to their daughter.

The Ragons, who will suffer financially from César's collapse, are hospitable, and although the judge and Uncle Pillerault have misgivings about the outcome of the legal suit which might save César, neither believes that he has behaved immorally. The other guests contribute little to the meal.

Despite the apparently harmonious atmosphere there is evidence of tension. Mme Ragon "avait poussé le pied de son frère," and Pillerault "avait couvert la voix du juge" (510) to try and prevent them from introducing the topic of Roguin's disappearance with César's money. During the discussion, Constance is concerned about the outcome of the court case and her anxiety is later manifest in the privacy of Mme Ragon's boudoir: "Elle pleura dans les bras de sa fille et de Madame Ragon sans vouloir avouer la cause de sa peine" (512). They all fear for the future and find comfort in the safety of the family.

Eighteen months later, Uncle Pillerault, Judge Popinot, the Ragons, Anselme, l'Abbé Loraux and the Birotteaus meet again for a meal. In the interim the physical unity of the family has been shattered as the women have been forced to find jobs, and César labors day and night while lodging with Uncle Pillerault. The only time they get together is on Sunday when they attend Mass and spend a few hours in mutual comfort afterwards. César's guilt is overwhelming, and he has become obsessed with paying off his debts. But the extended family had been wisely investing the Birotteau earnings, and saving César's royalties, and on this particular day Pillerault, on the pretext of holding a meal to celebrate the anniversary of their engagement, plans a meal at the very place where Constance had given César her consent. César is at first reluctant to come and his mournful mood is not dispelled by Constance's tenderness. César and Constance, Anselme and Césarine are sent for a walk while the meal is being prepared, and by the time they return to the house, the unity between these two couples

of different generations is reestablished.

In the interim, the support of the extended family for the unfortunate Birotteaus has not wavered. The difference between this family reunion and the last is the atmosphere. The feeling is one of anticipation and not of tension. Finally Pillerault announces his surprise:

Mon neveu, depuis dix-huit mois, les économies de ta femme, de ta fille et les tiennes ont produit vingt mille francs. J'ai reçu trente mille francs pour le dividende de ma créance, nous avons donc cinquante mille francs à donner à tes créanciers. Monsieur Ragon a reçu trente mille francs pour son dividende. Monsieur le notaire de Sceaux t'apporte donc une quittance du paiement intégral, intérêt compris, fait à tes amis. Le reste de la somme est chez Crottat, Pour Lourdois, la mère Madou, le maçon, le charpentier, et tes créanciers les plus pressés. L'année prochaine, nous verrons. Avec le temps et la patience, on va loin. (572)

Immediately, César's gloomy self-castigation dissolves: "La joie de Birotteau ne se décrit pas, il se jeta dans les bras de son oncle en pleurant" (572). As a final symbolic gesture, Ragon suggests: "qu'il porte aujourd'hui sa croix" and l'Abbe Loraux fastens it in César's buttonhole.

The change in César's circumstances is signalled by a change in atmosphere. On the eve of his disgrace he is a weak man who has squandered his fortune, on the eve of his restoration he has become a determined individual whose mood changes from morose, single-minded industry to tears of joy as he looks at himself (and his Croix) in the mirror at least twenty times during the evening. He is well on the way to restitution and with the help of his family he will be exonerated.

Although the second meal is less detailed than the first, by keeping the same personalities but changing the venue to one which evokes happier times, the author signals change. The anticipation of the hosts, as well as César's delight, demonstrate his release from guilt, symbolized by the restoration of the Croix.

In Ursule Mirouët the similarity in the brief description of two meals exemplifies the changed status of the Minoret family as they fight to wrest Ursule's inheritance from her. In the early days, the lunch which Mme Minoret-Levrault gives to celebrate her son's return lasts more than two hours and is noisy like all provincial lunches and enlivened by excellent wines. Later Mme Minoret holds a superb dinner every Sunday. The ordinary white china at the former meal is replaced by a complete dinner service costing at least twenty thousand francs at the latter. To celebrate her son's return, "Zelie avait fait venir du coquillage, du poisson de mer et quelques raretés gastronomiques" (336), whereas for her weekly reunions later on, "Zelie faisait venir des raretés de Paris" (426).

These two descriptions which closely parallel each other both precede scenes in which the relatives of Ursule's guardian plot to rob the heiress of her inheritance and her honor. Although they only describe the appurtenances to the meal, the stylistic similarities indicate that they are used to demonstrate that the Minorets are succeeding in their plan in the same way as a complete meal scene would.

In La Rabouilleuse, rather than using the underlying atmosphere to convey an evolving situation as he did in César Birotteau, Balzac uses an overt difference in ambiance to demonstrate the protagonist's gullibility.

On his arrival in Issoudun from Paris, Joseph Bridau an ugly, struggling artist, is entertained first by the Hochon's, his mother's godmother and her husband, and then by his uncle, Rouget, whose covetous cohorts wish to deny Joseph's family their rightful inheritance. M. Hochon is a miser and resents having to feed Agathe Bridau and her son. Balzac, focuses on the food served:

Après une soupe dont le bouillon clair annonçait qu'on tenait plus à la qualité, on servit un bouilli triomphalement entouré de persil. Les légumes, mis à part dans un plat, comptaient dans l'ordonnance du repas. Ce bouilli trônait au milieu de la table, accompagné de trois autres plats: des oeufs durs sur de l'oseille placés en face des légumes; puis une salade tout accommodée à l'huile de noix en face de petits pots de crème où la vanille était remplacée par de l'avoine brûlée, et qui ressemble à la vanille comme le carée de chicorée ressemble au moka. Du beurre et des radis dans deux plateaux aux deux extrémités, des radis noirs et des cornichons complétaient ce service, qui eut l'approbation de madame Hochon. (1002)

James Brown comments on the purpose of this unusual attention to gastronomic detail by Balzac:

. . . upon close inspection the reader ascertains that such items as bouillon, persil, oeufs, and radis in abundance hardly signal grande cuisine. Indeed the narrator's irony becomes apparent in his portrayal of the adulterated or altered dishes such as the inclusion of vegetables as part of the main course and the pots de crème made with a vanilla substitute the meal is all form and no substance. (29)

The cheese dessert, a regional speciality sounds attractive, but the true nature of Hochon is revealed when Gitte, the maid, announces that

there is no more rotten fruit to be served. Only Joseph's badgering compels him to serve something more palatable.

What Joseph observes accentuates the frugality of this meal. As he descends the stairs to dinner he notices "Monsieur Hochon coupant lui-même pour chacun des tranches de pain, il comprit, pour la première fois de sa vie, Harpagon de Molière" (1001). Later on when he asks for more, we have further evidence of Hochon's similarity to Molière's character:

[Hochon] se leva, chercha lentement une clef dans le fond de la poche de sa redingote, ouvrit une armoire derrière lui, brandit le chateau d'un pain de douze livres, en coupa cérémonieusement une autre rouelle, la fendit en deux, la posa sur une assiette et passa l'assiette à travers la table au jeune peintre (1002)

Again, on the subject of the rotten fruit,

Joseph partit d'un éclat de rire comme s'il était dans son atelier avec des camarades, car il comprit tout à coup que la précaution de commencer par les fruits attaqués était dégénérée en habitude. (1003)

Finally, he glances at his cousin François Hochon and his friend Baruch Borniche as if to ask: "Est-ce à ce régime-là que vous devez vos figures prospères?" (1003). His disillusionment must have been transparent since Mme Hochon, on leaving the dining room, apologizes to him: "Eh! bien mon pauvre garçon, ce dîner ne te donnera pas d'indigestion; mais j'ai eu bien de la peine à te l'obtenir" (1004). Although the artist is delighted by the simple good heartedness of Mme Hochon, the meal is neither welcoming nor congenial.

On his arrival at the Rouget household for dinner, Joseph is welcomed politely. Rouget, Max and Flore are joined by Baruch and

François. Suddenly Joseph becomes aware that some of the paintings are extremely valuable, and when his uncle insists that Joseph should have them, he is euphoric. The dinner itself is magnificent:

Ce fut un de ces dîners de province qui durent cinq heures. Les vins les plus exquis animèrent la conversation. Au dessert, à neuf heures, le peintre, assis entre Flore et Max vis-à-vis de son oncle, était devenu quasi-camarade avec l'officier, qu'il trouvait le meilleur enfant de la terre. (1018)

What Joseph does not understand is that Max and Flore conspired to persuade Rouget to donate his paintings to his nephew without anyone's having the least knowledge of their value.

Joseph misinterprets the motives of his hosts at both meals. At the first meal, Hochon appears unwelcoming and mean-spirited even though he has the Bridaus's interests at heart; at the second, Rouget and his cohorts, who are determined not to help the Bridaus, are welcoming and unwittingly generous. By using two different meals to demonstrate Joseph's susceptibility to outward impressions, Balzac shows that this young man will never have the guile to fight Max and Flore.

In writing Eugénie Grandet, Balzac uses one meal to illustrate the differences between life in Paris and those in the provinces. It can be divided into three parts: the preparations for the meal, Charles eating with the women, and Grandet's arrival for lunch.

Grandet himself is determined that their routine should not be changed to suit his parisian nephew. He informs him on the eve of his arrival:

Ici nous déjeunons à huit heures. A midi, nous mangeons un fruit, un rien de pain sur le pouce, et nous buvons un verre de

vin blanc; puis nous dînons, comme les Parisiens, a cinq heures.
(521)

And when Nanon tries to persuade him to cut a larger piece of bread for the meal he assures her that she will have plenty, besides, "ces jeunes gens de Paris, tu verras que ça ne mange point de pain" (530)

The women, on the other hand, recognize that Charles has led a very different life in Paris. Eugénie sends Nanon to the shop to buy extra coffee, because she has heard "que le café se faisait bien fort à Paris" (537) and declares that she is prepared for Grandet to beat her: "Eh! bien, il nous battra, nous recevrons ses coups à genoux" (538). She is inspired by love:

Elle prit les plus vertes feuilles de la vigne, arrangea son raisin aussi coquettement que l'aurait pu dresser un vieux chef d'office, et l'apporta triomphalement sur la table. Elle fit main basse, dans la cuisine, sur les poires comptées par son père, les disposa en pyramide parmi des feuilles. Elle allait, venait, trottait, sautait. Elle aurait bien voulu mettre à sac toute la maison de son père; mais il avait les clefs de tout. Nanon revint avec deux oeufs frais. En voyant les oeufs, Eugénie eut l'envie de lui sauter au cou. (538)

Charles knows nothing of the sacrifices that are being made for him: "Le Parisien! Il avait mis autant de coquetterie à sa toilette que s'il se fût trouvé au château de (sa maîtresse) la noble dame qui voyageait en Ecosse" (539) He enters the dining-room and immediately shocks the assembled women: "Mais je ne déjeune jamais avant midi, le moment où je me lève Tiens, mais il est onze heures, j'ai été matinal" (539).

He is described as "le dandy" (539) and is "semblable aux gens habitués au luxe" (540). Needless to say his manners fascinate Eugénie,

La jeune fille examinait son cousin coupant ses mouillettes et y prenait plaisir, autant que la plus sensible grisette de Paris en prend à voir jouer un mélodrame où triomphe l'innocence. Il est vrai que Charles, élevé par une mère gracieuse, perfectionné par une femme à la mode, avait des mouvements coquets, élégants, menus, comme le sont ceux d'une petite-maîtresse. (540)

He asks for more butter, takes his eggs for granted and makes fun of their method of coffee making, "Vous êtes bien arriérés! Je vous apprendrai à faire du bon café dans une cafetière à la Chaptal" (541). These mannerisms and requests indicate that this household and the meal which is "très simple, peu coûteux, mais qui dérogeait terriblement aux habitudes invétérées de la maison" (538) is inferior to anything he might expect in Paris.

The social schism is further accentuated by Mme Grandet's horror when her nephew asks if there is a theatre in Saumur: "Aller au spectacle . . . voir des comédiens! Mais, monsieur, ne savez-vous pas que c'est un péché mortel?" (540).

Finally, when Grandet returns for lunch, even Charles begins to understand the parsimony which rules this provincial household. The sugar and egg shells are whisked away by the women. Grandet is strangely indulgent: "Ah! ah! vous avez fait fête à votre neveu, c'est bien, très bien, c'est fort bien! . . . Quand le chat court sur les toits, les souris dansent sur les planchers" (542). He does not sit down to his meal but takes a glass of wine and a thinly buttered slice of bread standing. When Charles asks for more sugar for his very strong coffee, he is told to add more milk.

Eugénie, at this point, shows the strength of her feelings as she takes her courage in her hands and replaces the sugar on the table.

She proceeds to offer both her father and Charles some of the fruit that she has prepared, and Balzac justifies her behavior by showing how common it is for young provincials to imitate Parisian mores:

Certes, la Parisienne qui, pour faciliter la fuite de son amant, soutient de ses faibles bras une échelle de soie, ne montre pas plus de courage qu n'en déployait Eugénie en remettant le sucre sur la table. L'amant récompensera sa Parisienne, qui lui fera voir orgueilleusement un beau bras meurtri dont chaque veine flétrie sera baignée de larmes, de baisers, et guérie par le plaisir; tandis que Charles ne devait jamais être dans le secret des profondes agitations qui brisaient le coeur de sa cousine, alors foudroyée par le regard du vieux tonnelier. (543)

It is clear to everyone that Charles has come from a different world. Grandet is determined to do nothing to compromise, but the women do all they can to make the young Parisian feel welcome. Charles, in his demeanor and comments, behaves as he would in Paris until Grandet's appearance when he is "incapable de soupçonner le régime et les moeurs de cette maison" (542). These two different worlds meet at this one meal in Saumur, and the effect is striking.

Lucien de Rubempré is one of the characters whose progress is followed in several episodes of LA COMEDIE HUMAINE. The three novels comprising Illusions Perdues see him rise from provincial obscurity to Parisian success to destitution and then, in Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes, under the tutelage of Vautrin, he rises again, only to sink to despair and ignominious suicide. The meals which document his progress vary in length and detail. The love and respect which surround him in Les Deux Poètes can be deduced from the description of a family supper before he goes to give a poetry reading at the house of his protectrice, Mme de Bargeton. Despite the poverty of their meager

dwelling, his sister, Eve, has laid his place with the only silver cutlery remaining to them and she has bought some strawberries which she presents on "une petite assiette coquettement arrangée avec des feuilles de vigne" (521). Lucien is so absorbed in reading a letter that he does not respond to his sister's questions and small talk. The pride which her brother displays at the end of the meal draws from her an admiring commentary: "Si elle a de l'esprit, elle doit bien t'aimer, cette femme! Et alors ce soir elle sera chagrine (sic), car toutes les femmes vont te faire mille coquetteries" (522). Lucien is motivated by his social ambition to such a degree that he sees only what Mme de Bargeton can offer him and is blinded to the importance of a loving family.

Un Grand Homme de Province à Paris follows Lucien's progress once he has won Mme de Bargeton's love and they have eloped to Paris. The very day after their arrival they discover that nothing is quite to their liking. For example:

Le dîner n'avait plus ce caractère d'abondance et d'essentielle bonté qui distingue la vie en province. Les plats coupés par la spéculation sortaient d'un restaurant voisin, ils étaient maigrement servis, ils sentaient la portion congrue. Paris n'est pas beau dans ces petites choses auxquelles sont condamnés les gens à fortune médiocre. (595)

As they eat their inadequate meal, Lucien believes that some change has come over Mme de Bargeton "[qui] parut plus digne, plus pensive qu'elle ne devait l'être" (595). The reality of an elopement is less romantic than the fantasy and neither of them feels comfortable in these strange surroundings.: "Cette chambre froide, sans soleil, à rideaux passés dont le carreau frotté semblait misérable, où le meuble était usé, de

mauvais goût, vieux ou d'occasion" (595). Fame and position in the provinces guarantees nothing in Paris, and so Mme de Bargeton accepts hospitality from her influential friends and abandons Lucien. He lives from hand to mouth until he is introduced to journalism - a profession which is portrayed as being comparatively lucrative albeit contemptible and whose proponents live in a social whirl. At one of their lavish meals where the journalists are reading samples of their work, Lucien's effort is welcomed enthusiastically, and his ego is nourished again; but so impressed is he by his success that he fails to see that he has aroused jealousy among his colleagues. The elegance of his surroundings is no less satisfying:

Le souper, servi dans une argenterie neuve, dans une porcelaine de Sèvres, sur du linge damassé, respirait une magnificence cossue. Chevet avait fait le souper, les vins avaient été choisis par le plus fameux négociant du quai Saint-Bernard (734)

Furthermore, he has fallen head over heels in love with Coralie who, as they sit down to dinner, whispers seductively in his ear, "Je t'aimerais laid et malade" (735).

Lucien is so dazzled by the supper that he dismisses the momentary troubling glimpses of reality which the scene provides: "Au lieu d'être saisi d'horreur à l'aspect du coeur même de cette corruption parisienne . . . il jouissait avec ivresse de cette société spirituelle" (741).

His happiness with Coralie and his new profession is short lived and, as he sees the impossibility of aspiring to be more successful than his colleagues, he joins them in a life of debauchery and

idleness. His debts grow and when he goes to his new found colleagues for advice they are flippant about his situation:

Quand le soir, à souper, le poète-journaliste expliquait sa situation à ses amis les viveurs, ils noyaient ses scrupules dans des flots de vin de Champagne glacé de plaisanteries. Les dettes! il n'y a pas d'homme fort sans dettes! Les dettes représentent des besoins satisfaits, des vices exigeants. Un homme ne parvient que pressé par la main de fer de la nécessité. (824)

Finally, after Coralie's creditors remove all her belongings, they breakfast:

. . . tristement au coin du feu dans leur belle chambre à coucher; Bérénice leur avait cuisiné des oeufs sur le plat dans la cheminée, car la cuisinière, le cocher, les gens étaient partis. Il était impossible de disposer du mobilier saisi. Il n'y avait plus dans le ménage aucun objet d'or ou d'argent, ni aucune valeur intrinsèque, mais tout était d'ailleurs représenté par des reconnaissances du Mont-de-Piété formant un petit volume des in-octavo très instructif. (823)

When Lucien returns to Angoulême he is not only indigent, his faithful Coralie is dead.

Les Souffrances de l'Inventeur begins as Lucien is walking back to Angoulême. He is dejected, exhausted, broke and hungry so he seeks a farm where he can recover. Here he learns that his sister and brother-in-law are in trouble with the law because of notes that he drew on their name and never repaid. He wants to die, but the farmer's wife is, "imbue comme tous les gens de la campagne de cette idée que la maladie exige de la nourriture" (883).

His self-reproach is heightened when he sees the penury in which his own family is struggling, particularly when Eve still finds it in her heart to send for some strawberries because "Lucien aime les fraises, il faut en trouver! . . ." (970). Lucien compares the welcome

they give him to the treatment received by "le frère prodigue". However his contrition is short lived as he allows his ego to be affected by a patriotic banquet held in his honor. At the dinner, where the dessert alone warrants, "soixante-cinq plats, remarquable par un Olympe en sucreries surmonté de la France en chocolat" (992) the toast to the king is followed by a toast "Au jeune poète . . . au héros du jour, qui a su allier à la grâce et à la poésie de Pétrarque, dans un genre que Boileau déclarait si difficile, le talent du prosateur" (993), to Lucien the Royalist, and to the glory he has brought to his school. Lucien is overwhelmed as the headmaster places a laurel wreath on his head and makes his own toast in reply:

Permettez-moi de signaler à vos hommages celle qui fut et ma première muse et ma protectrice et de boire aussi à ma ville natale: donc, à la belle comtesse de Sixte du Châtelet (Mme de Bargeton) et à la noble ville d'Angoulême. (993)

Lucien believes that by recognizing the comtesse he might be able to help his brother-in-law, David, to clear his name, but his vanity has caused him to throw caution to the wind, and in arranging to meet David at his hour of glory, he has allowed his enemies to draw him from hiding. The whole meal is a trap to secure David's arrest, and Lucien, because of his vanity, falls into it. His ego crushed, he reverts to penitence and, leaving a note to the family which suggests impending suicide, he leaves town.

Instead of taking his own life, however, he meets Father Carlos Herrera (Vautrin) and, driving to a dinner in Poitiers, pledges his soul to him in return for gold to pay his debt, "Mon père, je suis à vous" (1033).

Lucien reappears in Paris in Comment Aiment les Filles as Herrera's tool in his fight against society. By ignoring his old friends and cultivating new ones among the élite, he is climbing the social ladder again. But at a dinner given by Delphine de Nucingen, it is clear that he is not trusted. Eugène de Rastignac declares that Lucien is a better friend than foe, he is "redoutable" (719), and de Marsay replies:

Lui? . . . Je ne reconnais de redoutable que les gens dont la position est claire, et la sienne est plus inattaquée qu'inattaquable! Voyons! de quoi vit-il? D'où vient sa fortune? il a, j'en suis sûr, une soixantaine de mille francs de dettes. (719)

The conversation at the table then moves to the topic of the Baron de Nucingen's passion, "*Chai zoubire abbrest kèque chausse t'ingonni*" (720). He has seen a phantom wearing "*Eine jabot de casse plange, rope rosse, eine haigeharbe plange, foile planc . . . eine viguire fraiment piplique!*" in the middle of the night in the forest of Vincennes. Lucien recognizes the description as that of Esther, his mistress, who is being kept in seclusion by Herrera in order not to compromise his marriage plans for Lucien. Unconsciously Lucien smiles with pride at this description of his mistress, Esther. Their relationship has been kept secret by Vautrin so as not to jeopardize the possibility of an advantageous marriage for his protégé so this public display of recognition endangers Lucien's future. Indeed, after Bianchon comments "Au moment où monsieur le baron parlait de son inconnue, Lucien a laissé échapper un sourire qui me ferait croire qu'elle est de sa connaissance" (722), Nucingen vows to have Lucien followed.

Vautrin's answer to Lucien's indiscretion is to sell Esther to the baron, and the final meal at which Lucien is present takes place at the house that they used to share. Lucien is not yet defeated. Esther has refused to give herself to the baron and, although they are no longer able to be together each evening, Esther "lui tenait le pied entre les siens sous la table" (876). They take no part in the conversation even though "on buvait, on mangeait, tant et si bien en causant et en riant, qu'on atteignit à quatre heures du matin" (879). It is as if they are more interested in each other than the party going on around them.

Shortly after this meal, Lucien is rejected by society and falsely arrested for the murder of Esther. Finally, in absolute dejection, after revealing the true identity of Herrera, he commits suicide in jail.

The peaks and valleys in Lucien's life are revealed quite clearly by looking briefly at these meals. The character remains consistent as he repeatedly lets his ambition and pride overrule his common sense, with the inevitable result of failure and despair. It is noticeable that once he is in Vautrin's grasp, this character flaw is more controlled. Despite the consistency in the character depiction shown through these meals however, none of them functions in the same specific way as the meals in Le Père Goriot, Histoire de la Grandeur et de la Décadence de César Birotteau, Ursule Miroüet, La Rabouilleuse, and Eugénie Grandet, which present meals to illustrate circumstantial change in a single work. In this last example, as in each of the

examples previously cited, the meal is used by the author primarily as a natural means to realistic presentation within the novels, but when meals from several novels are isolated to form a chronology, they also trace the evolution of one character through a consistent, but not a purposefully comparative presentation.

CHAPTER IV

MEALS AND OBJECTIVE PRESENTATION

One of the criticisms levelled against Balzac's style concerns the use of his subjective intrusions and digressions. Although his goal was to paint an objective picture of contemporary French society, the conditions he describes are inevitably seen through his own eyes--no realistic novelist can write without some reference to his own experience. He can, however, create an apparently objective, thus realistic, work by using description and character depiction without resorting to subjective commentary. Yet, there are personal intrusions throughout *LA COMEDIE HUMAINE*. If, as this paper argues, the mealtime is an appropriate vehicle for realistic presentation, and if Balzac is to be unconditionally successful, at least these gatherings should be free from any subjective interjections. It is important to note, however, that at meals these occur less frequently than elsewhere in the text and that where they do appear they are decidedly less rambling. In general the intrusions fall into four categories: explanation of the political, economic and historical situation; clarification of the characters' behavior; direct address to the reader; and personal comment on contemporary society. There are other times when the author's digressions stray so far from the plot that they cause confusion. In these instances, Balzac uses meals as a regulatory device to re-establish the story line. Whether they limit subjective opinion or regroup the characters in the plot, mealtimes are

used by Balzac as a means to present society in a seemingly objective manner.

La Maison Nucingen is an unusual example of how it is possible for the author to reflect his own opinions, without resorting to subjective commentary, by using the characters as his mouthpiece. In this story there is only one intrusion, and that sets the scene:

Vous savez combien sont minces les cloisons qui séparent les cabinets particuliers dans les plus élégants cabarets de Paris. Chez Véry, par exemple, le plus grand salon est coupé en deux par une cloison qui s'ôte et se remet à volonté. La scène n'était pas là mais dans un bon endroit qu'il ne me convient pas de nommer. Nous étions deux, je dirai donc, comme le Prud'homme de Henri Monnier, 'Je ne voudrais pas la compromettre'. (592)

While eating in this restaurant, he has supposedly overheard a conversation in the next door "cabinet" between Finot, Blondet, Couture and Bixiou who are all up-and-coming businessmen. Their topic of conversation is Eugène de Rastignac who is now wealthy and influential. Their question is, how did he succeed? The answer centers on the banking exploits of Baron de Nucingen whose reputation as an honest financier belies the fact that he has three times feigned personal financial disaster and done his best to plunder the public without breaking the letter of the law. Rastignac has allied himself with Nucingen with the expectation of supplanting him in the market as he has already done in the bedroom. But it is Rastignac who is the dupe as Nucingen needs access to Rastignac's friends and connections. In unknowingly participating in Nucingen's stock scam he is merely diverting attention and blame from Nucingen. Largely by accident, however, Rastignac comes through the episode with enough of the capital

made available to him by Nucingen to start his own fortune. In reality, therefore, Rastignac's fortune, like Nucingen's, is based on defrauding his friends. Before this whole series of events is narrated, the four men have given a rambling summary of Balzac's own philosophical concerns: the morality of relationships founded on the acquisition of money; the Englishman's fear of being "improper"; the practices of lawyers; marriage; commerce; politicians; and gambling. There are descriptions of the characters involved in the rather complicated chronology of events and the relationships between them. There are historical references to the Bread strike in Lyons, to the revolutionary "bonnet rouge" and to the economic problems of 1826-1827. All of these topics, and more, are discussed in the light hearted banter typical of this type of young man. In this instance the meal provides the exclusive excuse for Balzac to air his opinions and to put them into an historical context as if he were an objective reporter.

In Le Père Goriot, widely considered to be the work in which Balzac demonstrates his art most successfully, the more complex structure of the long novel does not afford the opportunity for presenting the full intrigue at any one meal. Nonetheless the author rarely interposes his subjective comments because the dialogue is skillfully shaped so as to make explanatory addenda unnecessary. He does, however, feel that it is necessary to put the strange language used by the lodgers at one meal into social context:

Cette espèce d'argot varie, continuellement. La plaisanterie qui en est le principe n'a jamais un mois d'existence. Un événement politique, un procès en cour d'assises, une chanson des rues, les farces d'un acteur, tout sert à entretenir ce jeu d'esprit qui consiste surtout à prendre les idées et les mots

comme des volants, et à se les renvoyer sur des raquettes. La récente invention du Diorama, qui portait l'illusion de l'optique à un plus haut degré que dans les Panoramas, avait amené dans quelques ateliers de peinture la plaisanterie de parler en rama, espèce de charge qu'un jeune peintre, habitué de la pension Vauquer, y avait inoculée. (887)

Instead of trying his hand at interior monologue, he intrudes again in order to explain what lies behind Eugène's troubled countenance.

Eugène is beginning to question Delphine's true feelings. Why does she refuse to surrender to him? Balzac offsets his fears: "les femmes sont toujours vraies, même au milieu de leurs plus grandes faussetés, parce qu'elles cèdent à quelque sentiment naturel" (977). The final example in Le Père Goriot occurs during the meal at the Hôtel Beauséant when he gives a short lesson in social history:

La mode venait de supprimer les soupers qui terminaient autrefois les bals de l'Empire, où les militaires avaient besoin de prendre des forces pour se préparer à tous les combats qui les attendaient au dedans comme au dehors. (947)

As this paper has demonstrated, mealtime scenes are interspersed throughout Le Père Goriot, yet these are the only three noteworthy examples of authorial comment. The first of these three interjections seems necessary to our understanding of the event, the other two might have been avoided entirely, it appears, without any loss for the reader. By presenting different sections of society congregating around different dinner tables, the author again succeeds in painting his portrait of contemporary society without adding substantial subjective opinions.

Balzac, however, is not always as successful in avoiding his own commentary. A mealtime gathering offers a natural occasion for the

author to bring together people with differing opinions on such subjects as politics, economics and contemporary issues. As a result there are very few intrusions on these topics during mealtimes. But in Cousine Bette, a novel which presents several significant mealtime, scenes, he feels, perhaps as a result of his relationship with Mme Hanska, qualified to attribute to Wenceslas (Hulot's son-in-law, and another of Valérie's lovers) the traits which he considers to be national characteristics:

Il y a chez le Slave un côté enfant, comme chez tous les peuples primitivement sauvages, et qui ont plutôt fait irruption chez les nations civilisées qu'ils ne se sont réellement civilisés. (331)

The ensuing synopsis of Polish history concludes with the comment:

Le jour où cette nation, uniquement composée de courages sanguins, aura le bon sens de chercher un Louis XI dans ses entrailles, d'en accepter la tyrannie et la dynastie, elle sera sauvée. Ce que la Pologne fut en politique, la plupart des Polonais le sont dans leur vie privée, surtout lorsque les désastres arrivent. (332)

These are the only two mealtime intrusions that I found involving the historical situation of the time. As far as the political and economic situation of the time is concerned, the diners included all the points which the author wished to convey and there are no subjective explanations.

There are times when the author needs to explain the mood or actions of the characters present at dinner. Such is the case with the Baron Hulot at one of Valérie's dinners in Cousine Bette. While the general atmosphere is one of joy, the baron's moody preoccupation elicits a long flash-back from the author on the events of Hulot's day,

culminating in his unsuccessful effort to obtain another promotion for Valérie's husband (357). Valérie is the baron's mistress only as long as he remains useful to her husband as well as herself; his morose demeanor anticipates his speculation concerning the consequences of his failure.

Similarly, in Eugénie Grandet, when Grandet, having dismissed the women from the dinner table, begins to talk business to Charles de Bonfons and his uncle, displaying a chronic stutter and feigning deafness, Balzac needs to explain his behavior:

Ici, peut-être, devient-il nécessaire de donner l'histoire du bégayement et de la surdité de Grandet. Personne, dans l'Anjou, n'entendait mieux et ne pouvait prononcer plus nettement le français angevin que le rusé vigneron. Jadis, malgré toute sa finesse, il avait été dupé par un Israélite qui, dans la discussion appliquait sa main à son oreille en guise de cornet, sous prétexte de mieux entendre, et baragouinait si bien en cherchant ses mots, que Grandet, victime de son humanité, se crut obligé de suggérer à ce malin Juif les mots et les idées que paraissait chercher le Juif, d'achever lui-même les raisonnements du dit Juif, de parler comme devait parler le damné Juif, d'être enfin le Juif et non Grandet. (562)

In both of these cases the author's intervention explains the actions of his characters, a less than objective representational technique. At other times Balzac goes so far as to address the reader directly in order to clarify or justify his method--a practice which those who adhere to rigid strictures for realism find especially objectionable.

In La Rabouilleuse, for instance, after describing Flore's hypocritical devotion to Rouget during a family lunch he adds:

Peut-être blâmera-t-on la crudité de cette peinture, et trouvera-t-on les éclats du caractère de la Rabouilleuse empreints de ce vrai que le peintre doit laisser dans l'ombre. He! bien, cette scène, cent fois recommencée avec

d'épouvantables variantes, est, dans sa forme grossière et dans son horrible véracité, le type de celle que jouent toutes les femmes, à quelque bâton de l'échelle sociale qu'elles soient perchées, quand un intérêt quelconque les a diverties de leur ligne d'obéissance et qu'elles ont saisi le pouvoir. Comme chez les grands politiques, à leurs yeux tous les moyens sont légitimés par la fin. (993)

In Le Curé de Tours he explains to the reader that the Curé's hostess, Mme de Listomere, is already so well known that there is no need for him to paint her portrait:

Ici, l'historien serait en droit de crayonner le portrait de cette dame; mais il a pensé que ceux mêmes auxquels le système de *cognomologie* de Sterne est inconnue, ne pourraient pas prononcer ces trois mots: MADAME DE LISTOMERE! sans se la peindre noble, digne, tempérant les rigueurs de la piété par la vieille élégance des moeurs bonne, mais un peu roide; légèrement nasillarde; se permettant la lecture de la Nouvelle Héloïse, la comédie, et se coiffant encore en cheveux. (817)

And he gives us yet another version of this technique when he questions rather than simply addresses the reader. In La Muse du Département, for example, when Dinah, having ignored Lousteau for the majority of the meal, suddenly becomes attentive to him, the author asks: "N'avez-vous pas remarqué combien de grandes lâchetés sont commises pour de petites choses?" (91).

Direct comments to the reader, however, are not as common as authorial intrusions consisting of only one or two sentences paraphrasing the critique of contemporary mores which he has tried to express through the interaction during a dinner scene. One example occurs at an evening get together in Pierrette where Mlle Chargeboeuf, one of the younger guests, behaves in a very superior manner toward Pierrette. Balzac's intrusion, underlining his evaluation of the

venomous nature of some women, indicates that he considers his portrayal of Mlle Chargeboeuf to be inadequate:

Les hommes passent pour être bien féroces, et les tigres aussi; mais ni les tigres, ni les vipères, ni les diplomates, ni les gens de justice, ni les bourreaux, ni les rois ne peuvent, dans leurs plus grandes atrocités, approcher des cruautés douces, des douceurs empoisonnées, des mépris sauvages des demoiselles entre elles quand les unes se croient supérieures aux autres en naissance, en fortune, en grâce, et qu'il s'agit de mariage, de préséance, enfin des mille rivalités de femmes. (740)

In a similar way, the behavior of the landlady, Mlle Gamard, in Le Curé de Tours elicits a general comment on old maids:

. . . peut-être faut-il résumer ici les idées dont l'expression se trouve chez la vieille fille: la vie habituelle fait l'âme, et l'âme fait la physionomie. Si tout, dans la société comme dans le monde, doit avoir une fin, il y a certes ici-bas quelques existences dont le but et l'utilité sont inexplicables. La morale et l'économie politique repoussent également l'individu qui consomme sans produire, qui tient une place sur terre sans répandre autrui de lui ni bien ni mal; car le mal est sans doute un bien dont les résultats ne se manifestent pas immédiatement. Il est rare que les vieilles filles ne se rangent pas d'elles-mêmes dans la classe de ces êtres improductifs. Or, si la conscience de son travail donne à l'être agissant un sentiment de satisfaction qui l'aide à supporter la vie, la certitude d'être à charge ou même inutile doit produire inerte le mépris qu'il excite chez les autres. Cette dure réprobation sociale est une des causes qui à l'insu des vieilles filles contribuent à mettre dans leurs âmes le chagrin qu'expriment leurs figures. (809)

He also decries coquettish behavior. For instance the manner in which Valérie serves after dinner tea in Cousine Bette invites the following subjective comment on women's conduct:

Il y a, dans la manière dont une femme s'acquitte de cette fonction, tout un langage; mais les femmes le savent bien; aussi est-ce une étude curieuse à faire que celle de leurs mouvements, de leurs gestes, de leurs regards, de leur ton, de leur accent, quand elles accomplissent cet acte de politesse en apparence si simple. Depuis la demande: Prenez-vous du thé?--Voulez-vous du thé?--Une tasse de thé? froidement formulée, et l'ordre e'en apporter donné à la nymphe qui tient l'urne, jusqu'à l'énorme poème de l'Odalisque venant de la table à thé, la tasse à la

main, jusqu'au pacha du coeur et la lui présentant d'un air soumis, l'offrant d'une voix caressante, avec un regard plein de promesses voluptueuses, un physiologiste peut observer tous les sentiments féminins, depuis l'aversion, depuis l'indifférence, jusqu'à la déclaration de Phèdre à Hippolyte. Les femmes peuvent là se faire, à volonté, méprisantes jusqu'à l'insulte, humbles jusqu'à l'esclavage de l'Orient. (337)

Also, after describing the tone of the Princesse's voice as she seduces d'Arthez at the dinner table in Les Secrets de la Princesse de Cadignan, Balzac reiterates his disapproval of flirtation by inserting his own opinion on this type of behavior:

Les femmes savent donner à leurs paroles une sainteté particulière, elles leur communiquent je ne sais quoi de vibrant que étend le sens des idées et leur prête de la profondeur; si plus tard leur auditeur charmé ne se rend pas compte de ce qu'elles ont dit, le but a été complètement atteint, ce qui est le propre de l'éloquence (35)

And at the same meal he comments in the same vein on the allure of women's eyes:

Une des plus savantes manoeuvres de ces comédiennes est de voiler leurs manières quand les mots sont trop expressifs, et de faire parler les yeux quand le discours est restreint. Ces habiles dissonances, glissées dans la musique de leur amour faux ou vrai, produisent d'invincibles séductions. (33)

He expresses his prejudices in the same manner, albeit less frequently, on the social behavior of men. For instance in Cousine Bette, which constitutes an overt criticism of the libertine, he inserts these remarks at one of Valérie's dinners:

Beaucoup d'hommes veulent avoir ces deux éditions du même ouvrage, quoique ce soit une immense preuve d'infériorité chez un homme que de ne pas savoir faire de sa femme sa maîtresse. La variété dans ce genre est un signe d'impuissance. La constance sera toujours le génie de l'amour, l'indice d'une force immense, celle qui constitue le poète! On doit avoir toutes les femmes dans la sienne, comme le poètes crottés du dix-septième siècle faisaient de leurs Manons des Iris et des Chloés! (333)

In what appears to be a justification of man's behavior, however, during a meal in La Fille aux Yeux d'Or, he concludes: "L'homme se bronze ainsi: il use la femme, pour que la femme ne puisse pas l'user" (311).

One other human trait which he believes requires subjective comment surfaces when a breakfast discussion between César Birotteau and his dishonest ex-employee du Tillet in L'Histoire de la Grandeur et de la Décadence de César Birotteau, elicits his opinion on hatred:

Toutes les haines politiques ou privées, de femme à femme, d'homme à homme, n'ont pas d'autre fait qu'une semblable surprise. On ne se hait pas pour des intérêts compromis, pour une blessure, ni même pour un soufflet; tout est réparable. Mais avoir été saisi en flagrant délit de lâcheté? . . . le duel que s'ensuit entre le criminel et le témoin du crime ne se termine que par la mort de l'un ou de l'autre. (502)

In the same breakfast scene Balzac also slips in his opinion of the disadvantage of being honest: "Les honnêtes gens manquent de tact, ils n'ont aucune mesure dans le bien, parce que pour eux tout est sans détour ni arrière-pensée" (501).

The digressions, direct comments to the reader, and interjections cited above all present something Balzac believes the reader may not surmise from the realistic evidence intended to support it. By placing his characters at a meal, however, he succeeds in limiting his interjections because most of his opinions and prejudices are portrayed by the characters and their interaction.

At other times, however, when intervening lengthy descriptions and/or digressions might have confused the reader, he is forced to introduce a mealtime to unify and clarify the plot. In this way, Les

Employés uses three simultaneous meals taking place in different locations. It is a story of rivalry between two families for a vacant government position and describes how the personal ambitions of their superiors ensure the promotion of the less capable candidate. The novella opens with a long description of M. Rabourdin, one of the competing candidates, of his family, of his work, and of the well considered reforms that he would instigate in the civil service. The author continues by introducing the ambitious M. des Lupeaulx and the events which led to his present penury--the reason why he is unable to fulfill the property qualifications for a seat in the Chamber. Each of these introductions is extremely lengthy, and so rather than adding further detail by introducing the competing family at this point, the author sets the scene at a Ministerial dinner and forewarns: "le jour où commença réellement une lutte inattendue à propos de cette place . . ." (894).

At this gathering, the reader learns two things from the interaction: first that des Lupeaulx is infatuated with Mme Rabourdin which explains why he supports her husband's candidacy, and second that the Minister and his colleagues are conspiring to prevent des Lupeaulx from entering the Chamber. Another guest at the dinner, the Sieur Saillard, father-in-law of the second candidate, overhears the Minister's conversation, and takes the information home with him, where another gathering is in progress. Elizabeth Baudoyer, his daughter, realizes that she can use des Lupeaulx's ambition to further her husband's prospects. Meanwhile des Lupeaulx, drawn by his attraction

to Mme Rabourdin, leaves the Ministerial gathering to take after dinner tea with the Rabourdins. Mme Rabourdin is conscious of the advantage of cultivating this relationship.

This scenario, which is already convoluted, is fraught with lengthy digressions that fill in gaps in the plot and prefigure future developments. But by having the meals take place at the same time, with two characters from the Ministerial dinner joining the dinners taking place among the competing factions, the author ensures that the divisions and the complication are defined for the upcoming battle. He uses the meals to extricate himself from a lengthy and confusing introduction and to bring all the characters together in their respective camps.

Balzac uses mealtimes throughout LA COMEDIE HUMAINE to facilitate a realistic presentation of life in his time, but even in his most noteworthy novels he feels obligated to reinforce his depiction with interjections. Only in La Maison Nucingen, which consists of a relayed conversation, does he demonstrate that mealtime interaction can cover points of view on a wide range of topics quite naturally without any interruptions. When the work is more complex with a plethora of characters and contortions in the plot, he feels the need to use interjections as a crutch to support his presentation. When, in his less renowned novels, he allows digressions and commentary to stray from the plot he uses social gatherings centered on mealtimes to bring the characters and the plot back together thus refocusing the reader. Balzac was far from achieving what his friend Stendhal termed

the "illusion parfaite" when he took recourse in digressions and pedantry in his vast work. More often than not, however, as I have previously contended, his creation of the scene at the dinner table successfully avoids the need for extraneous explanation or commentary.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the prolific use of mealtimes in Honoré de Balzac's work is not only a natural result of his cultural background but is also a conscious device on his part. As a true Frenchman he was preoccupied with the contemporary state of his country and its people. *LA COMEDIE HUMAINE* is the expression of his concern. Any attempt to render an account of society as a whole risks the result of a gigantic chaos, however, by gathering his characters together at different meal tables, Balzac manages to objectify his opinions while delineating between people of all classes, opinions, and levels of intelligence. His incredible powers of observation coupled with his wide range of personal experience, allow the characters to discuss topics from politics and economics to banalities using language and gestures suitable to the particular milieu. His critique is thus credible, allowing the reader to feel involved in the action. In addition, Balzac uses the meal as an aid to organization in the novel and as a means of limiting subjective comment.

It is evident that certain mealtimes have been used as a device by which to allow his characters to articulate his own ideas. They allow Balzac to present abstractions in a common sense manner; is there any other habitual occurrence which incorporates all five senses to a greater extent than a mealtime? Apart from the obvious gustatory and olfactory impressions relating to the food, the table setting also

embodies the tactile, the visual and the auditory through the interactions of the participants. Balzac's attention to detail in the descriptions of the characters' actions and reactions, in addition to their speech, allows them to be objectified, thereby accentuating the themes which they embody.

Furthermore, in early 19th Century France, a mealtime gathering often offered one of the few opportunities to discuss political and social events. On occasion it also provided time for family planning, for dissent, or resolution of problems; these directly correspond to the structural elements of the novel in question - its peculiar complication, its climax and its denouement. One can only assume, therefore, that Balzac purposely uses the reality of a repast to regulate and clarify certain structural elements in his works.

In addition, he uses mealtimes to emphasize changing circumstances. Sometimes he illustrates the different status of characters, or of groups of characters, by contrasting two locales, while at other times he will allow his characters to present a contrast in circumstances by verbalizing his own thoughts. Other examples occasion the detailed description of the objects surrounding a meal, or the mood of the diners, which emphasizes some change in status. He uses the same techniques to compare mealtimes in the provinces to those in the city. This is sometimes achieved purposefully, within one novel, or for readers of more of LA COMEDIE HUMAINE it can be less intentional when the reader is reacquainted with a character from a previous novel in a different gathering.

At other times Balzac's obsessive desire to portray the reality of contemporary society demands subjective comment on day to day occurrences. Also, he sometimes appears to feel that his story line has not adequately communicated his point of view and he interjects his own ideas as reinforcement. Some digressions carry the reader so far from the story line that the author finds it convenient to introduce a meal to reunite the reader with the characters and the action. Although these digressions stray from his realistic aim, nevertheless they do further attest to the all encompassing significance of mealtimes in his work. And since they limit his personal intrusions, they complement the overall effect of his project and, as with the other cases discussed in this study, provide greater pleasure for the reader.*

*Another point of interest has arising from this study, though not germane to it, is the subject of bread! One could expect an abundance of bread at a French meal, but even in the meals cited in this paper, bread appears to be a rare commodity and can even be rationed (pp. 8, 33, 52, 54). Is this perhaps a result of catastrophic climatic conditions? The fact that Goriot imports flour from Odessa and recognizes that Mme Vauquer uses pasta flour for her bread would indicate that this is a possibility. It is a subject which invites further investigation.

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