

FRENCH REALISM



THE TYRANNY OF REALISM

- ▶ Lady Gaga's "Telephone" video is "an unrealistic depiction of prison life." *Archer* is unrealistic. Angry Birds Space is unrealistic. *The Hunger Games* is realistic.
- ▶ Know Your Meme, but also Know Your Genre; your Style
- ▶ Realism is a recent historical invention; just one code among many
- ▶ The ideology of realism: *realism is the only ethical artistic choice* (thanks Lukács)



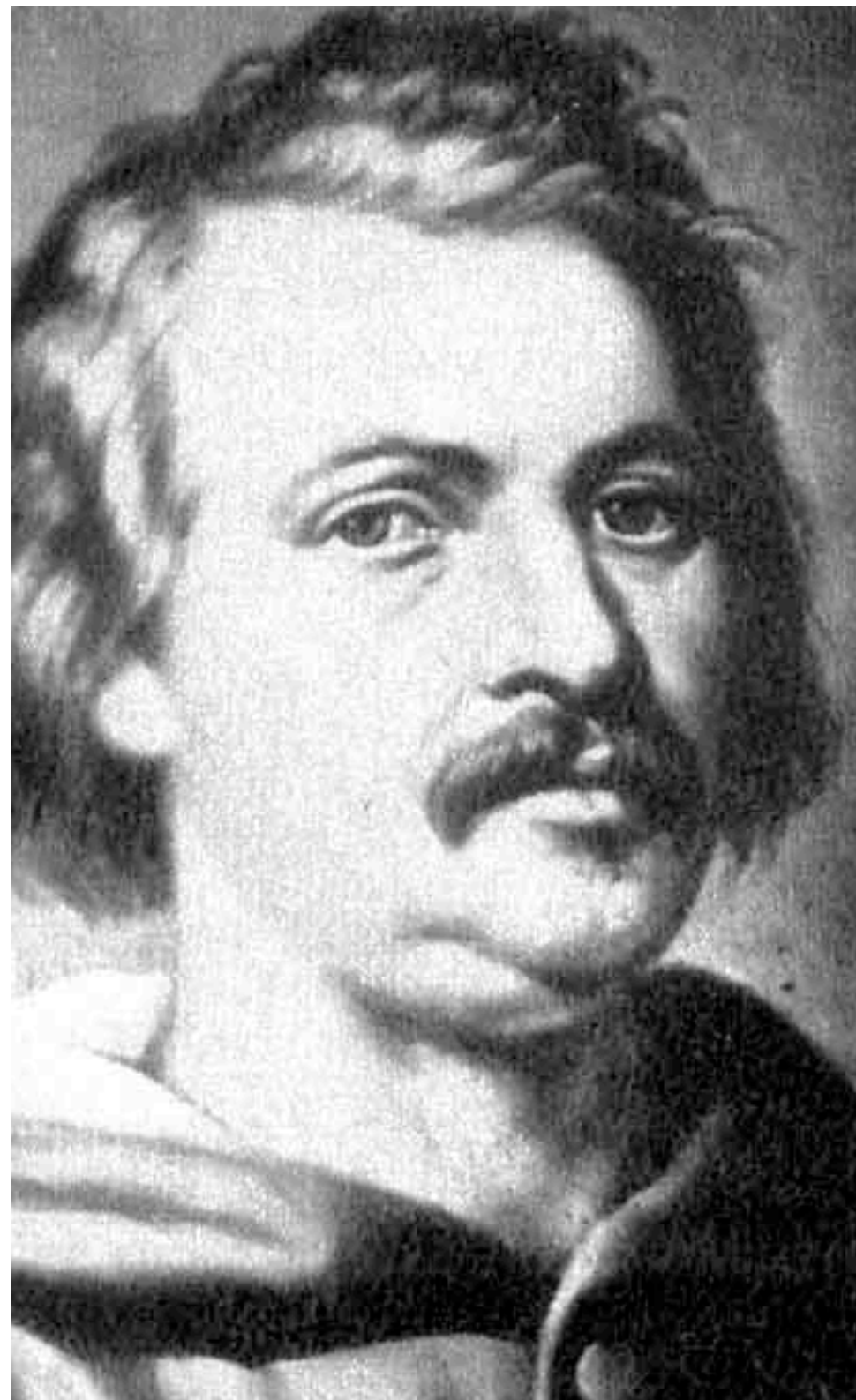


1799-1850

**HONORÉ DE
BALZAC**

LIFE

- ▶ Middle class; notary's clerk turned journalist
- ▶ Freakish workaholic: 15 hours of writing/day; a lot of coffee
- ▶ *La Comédie humaine*: Dante; interlinked; plan
- ▶ *La Comédie humaine*: 95 finished; 48 partial or planned







SARRASINE

- ▶ Oppositional language (1-2)
- ▶ Romantic v. realist (5)
- ▶ Sex v. gender (Z., Adonis, Antinous, Sappho)
- ▶ France (S) v. Italy (Z)
- ▶ West v. East (3, 14, 28)
- ▶ Balzac is writing a realist *anatomy of society*



OPPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE

Seen through the medium of that strange atmosphere, [the trees] bore a vague resemblance to specters carelessly enveloped in their shrouds, a gigantic image of the famous *Dance of Death*. Then, turning in the other direction, I could gaze admiringly upon the dance of the living! a magnificent salon, with walls of silver and gold, with gleaming chandeliers, and bright with the light of many candles...

Thus, at my right was the depressing, silent image of death; at my left the decorous bacchanalia of life; on the one side nature, cold and gloomy, and in mourning garb; on the other side, man on pleasure bent. And, standing on the borderland of those two incongruous pictures..., I played a mental *macedoine*, half jesting, half funereal. With my left foot I kept time to the music, and the other felt as if it were in a tomb.

ROMANTIC VS. REALIST

This mysterious family had all the attractiveness of a poem by Lord Byron, whose difficult passages were translated differently by each person in fashionable society; a poem that grew more obscure and more sublime from strophe to strophe. The reserve which Monsieur and Madame de Lanty maintained concerning their origin, their past lives, and their relations with the four quarters of the globe would not, of itself, have been for long a subject of wonderment in Paris.

WEST VS. EAST

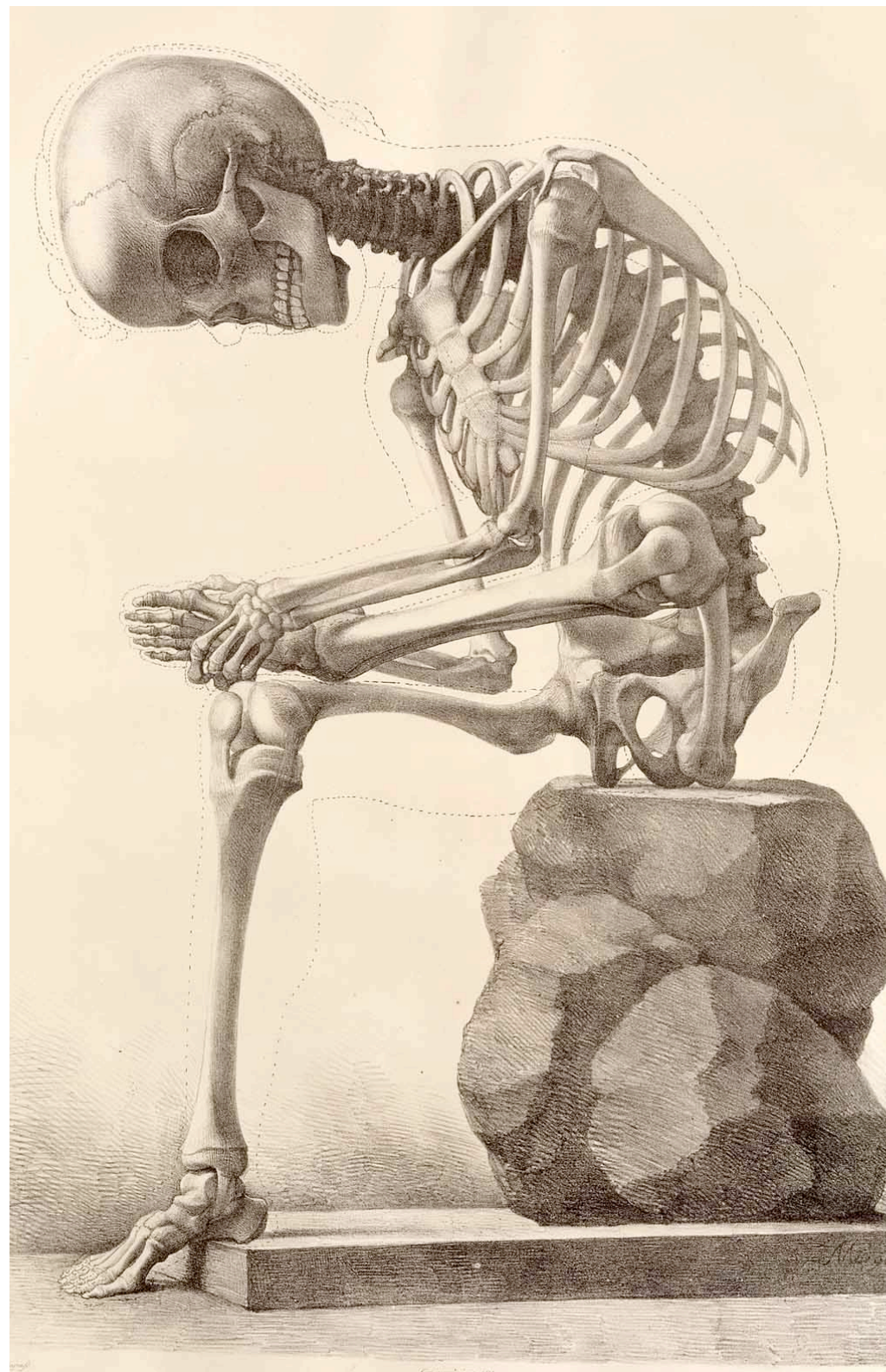
Who would not have married Marianina, a girl of sixteen, whose beauty realized the fabulous conceptions of Oriental poets! Like the Sultan's daughter in the tale of the *Wonderful Lamp*, she should have remained always veiled [5].

Lastly, this species of Japanese idol [the old man] had constantly upon his blue lips, a fixed, unchanging smile, the shadow of an implacable and sneering laugh, like that of a death's head [14].

In the evening, installed at an early hour in his box, alone, reclining on a sofa, [Sarrasine] made for himself, like a Turk drunk with opium, a happiness as fruitful, as lavish, as he wished [28].

ANATOMY

- ▶ Constant references to Romanticism and its fantastic flights of fancy
- ▶ Byron, Radcliffe (the gothic), popular superstition, the undead (6-7, 10)
- ▶ All this will be undone in an “objective” look at the origin of the Lanty family, and the old man. The model is anatomy (18-19): a careful, descriptive dissection—division, separation of tissue



THE ANATOMY OF SOCIETY

He removed the most beautiful of the rings with which his skeleton fingers were laden, and placed it in Marianina's bosom. The young madcap laughed, plucked out the ring, slipped it on one of her fingers over her glove...

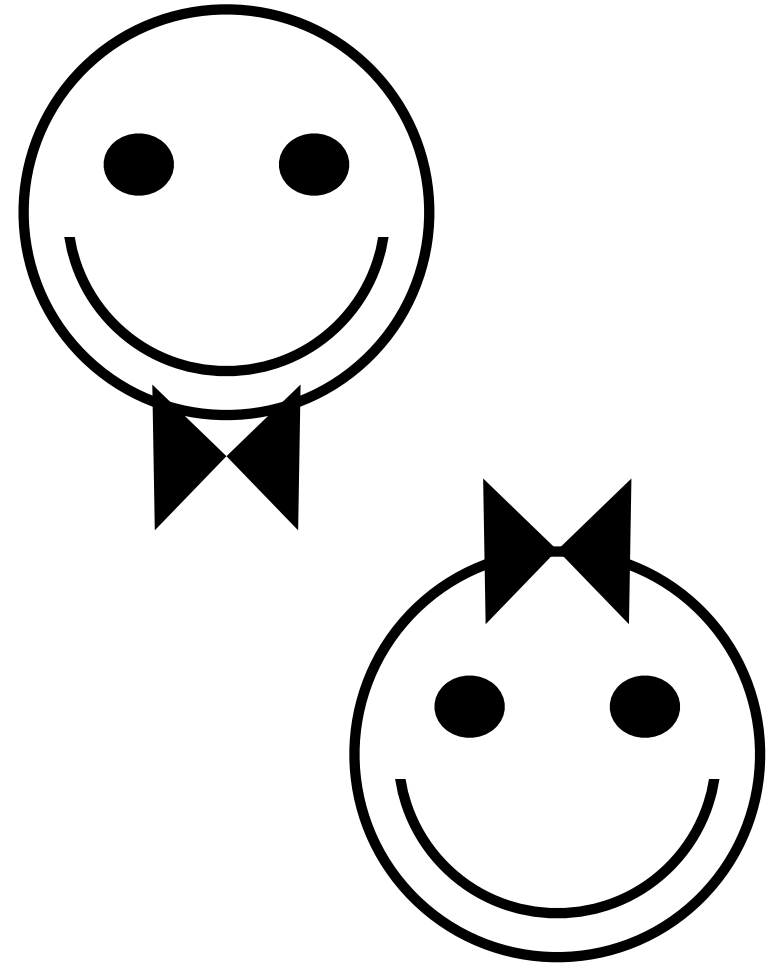
"At all events, it is true, is it not, that you like to hear stories of the fierce passions, kindled in our heart by the enchanting women of the South?"

"Yes. And then?"

"Why, I will come to your house about nine o'clock tomorrow evening, and elucidate this mystery for you." (18-19)

MALE VS. FEMALE

- ▶ Men make art (2, 21); the “active” position
- ▶ Women make life, are life; a “passive” position
- ▶ Zambinella is not a man, but makes art; Zambinella can “give life to nothing” (45), and hence is not a woman
- ▶ Deadlock; Zambinella is the slash between art/life, male/female
- ▶ But androgyny or *mixing* (1, 5, 10, 16, 30, 45) critiques realism’s *anatomical* love of opposition, division, splits, categories



“those two faces of the human medal” (10)

MALE ART / FEMALE LIFE

Sparkling glances here and there eclipsed the lights and the blaze of the diamonds, and fanned the flame of hearts already burning too brightly... Thus, at my right was the depressing, silent image of death; at my left the decorous bacchanalia of life; on the one side nature, cold and gloomy, and in mourning garb; on the other side, man on pleasure bent [2].

Instead of learning the elements of the Greek language, he drew a picture of the reverend father who was interpreting a passage of Thucydides, sketched the teacher of mathematics, the prefect, the assistants, the man who administered punishment, and smeared all the walls with shapeless figures. Instead of singing the praises of the Lord in the chapel, he amused himself, during the services, by notching a bench; or, when he had stolen a piece of wood, he would carve the figure of some saint [21].

ANDROGYNY (ἌΝΔΡ+ΓΥΝ᾽Η)

Then, turning in the other direction... (1)

Filippo, Marianina's brother, inherited, as did his sister, the Countess' marvelous beauty. To tell the whole story in a word, that young man was a living image of Antinous, with somewhat slighter proportions (5)

Just see what a mixed company there is!... I was stupefied at the picture presented to my eyes. By virtue of one of the strangest of nature's freaks, the thought half draped in black, which was tossing about in my brain, emerged from it and stood before me personified, living; it was alive and dead (10).

We stood for a moment gazing at that marvel of art, which seemed the work of some supernatural brush. The picture represented Adonis stretched out on a lion's skin. "He is too beautiful for a man," she added (16).

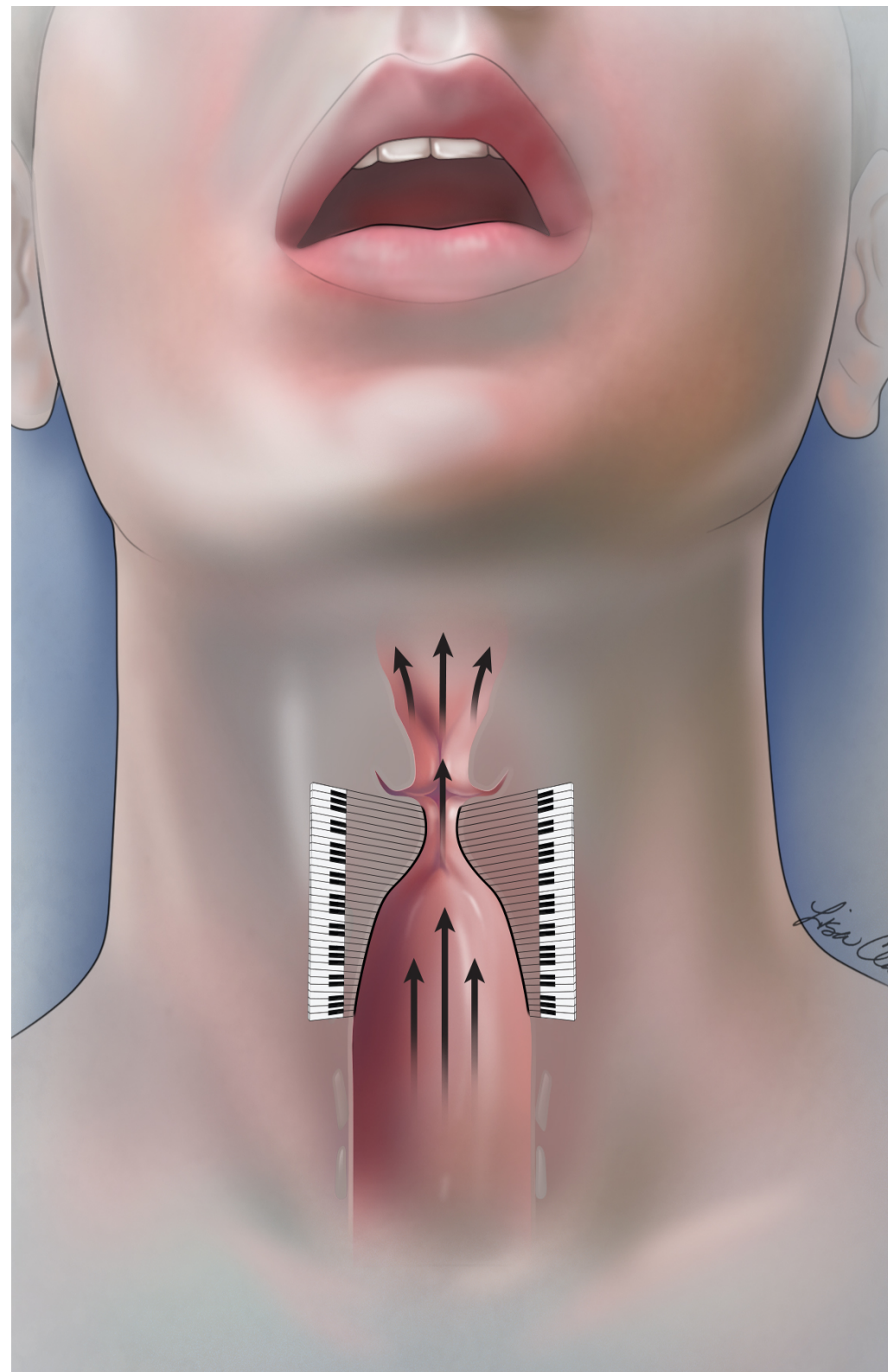
ANDROGYNY (ΑΝΔΡ+ΓΥΝ'Η)

Sarrasine's valet had never seen his master so painstaking in the matter of dress. His finest sword, a gift from Bouchardon, the bow-knot Clotilde gave him, his coat with gold braid, his waistcoat of cloth of silver, his gold snuff-box, his valuable watch, everything was taken from its place, and he arrayed himself like a maiden about to appear before her first lover (30).

“‘I ought to kill you!’ shouted Sarrasine, drawing his sword in an outburst of rage. ‘But,’ he continued, with cold disdain, ‘if I searched your whole being with this blade, should I find there any sentiment to blot out, anything with which to satisfy my thirst for vengeance? You are nothing! If you were a man or a woman, I would kill you (45).

S/Z

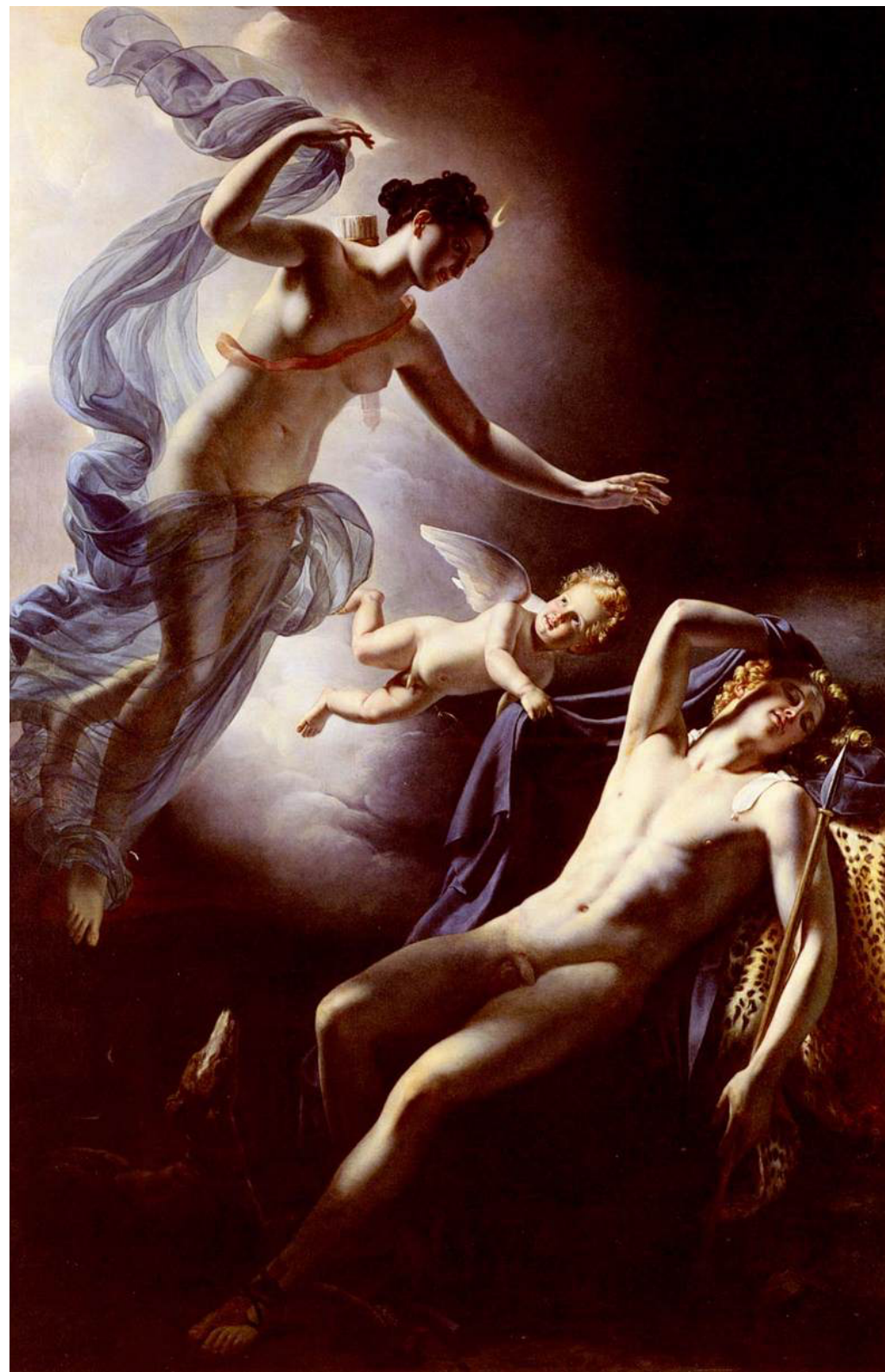
- ▶ S=Sarrasine; Z=Zambinella
- ▶ They are the same sound, but with a (meaningful) difference: *sonore* v. *sourde* (singing and deaf)
- ▶ In English, we say *voiced* and *unvoiced* (b/p; d/t; g/k; s/z; **thin/that**; v/f; j/ch) [note that voice can be gendered in English; “vocal fry”]
- ▶ Barthes chose Girodet’s image of Endymion (46) for the cover of his book, *S/Z*
- ▶ But it was printed across two pages in the US, across a fold or cut—the / in *S/Z*





THE CUT

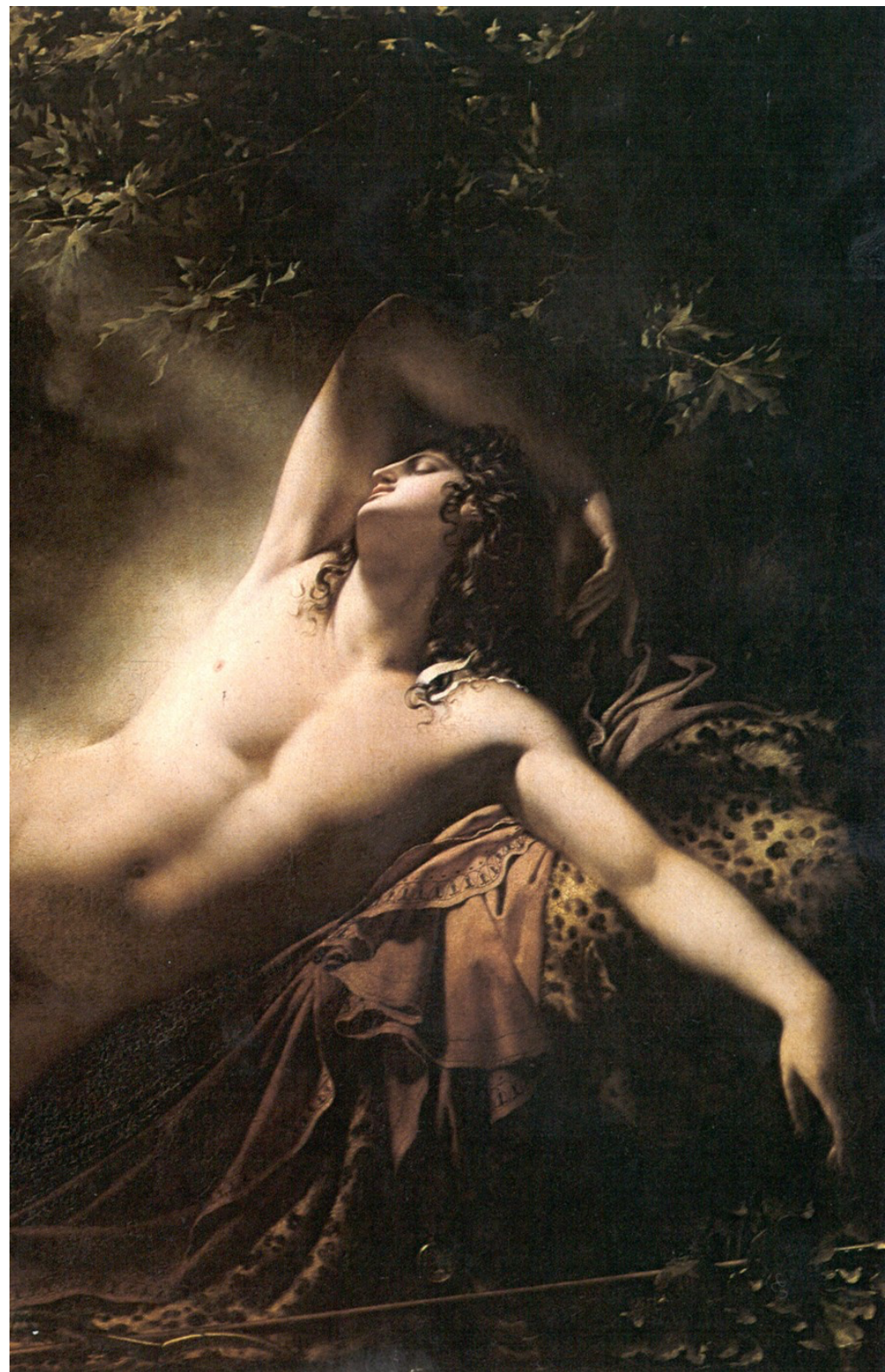
- ▶ To illustrate his reading of "Sarrasine," Barthes wanted an image of a beautiful androgynous figure; he chose Endymion, who is placed into an eternal sleep (the "passive" position) so that the goddess Selene can have sex with him each night
- ▶ Barthes chose Girodet's image of Endymion (46) for the cover of his book, *S/Z*
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THE CUT

- ▶ Castration for music was practiced from about 1550 onward, and hit a peak of popularity in the 1700s, when hundreds or possible thousands of boys were castrated annually (usually from poor families); mostly for the church, but also for some secular music (Handel wrote roles for castrati)
- ▶ Italy outlawed castration in 1861 (when it became a nation), and the last castrato (Moreschi) performed in the Sistine Chapel in 1902



...You just use what you were born with...



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1849-1902

ÉMILE ZOLA

LIFE

▶ Middle-class clerk turned journalist

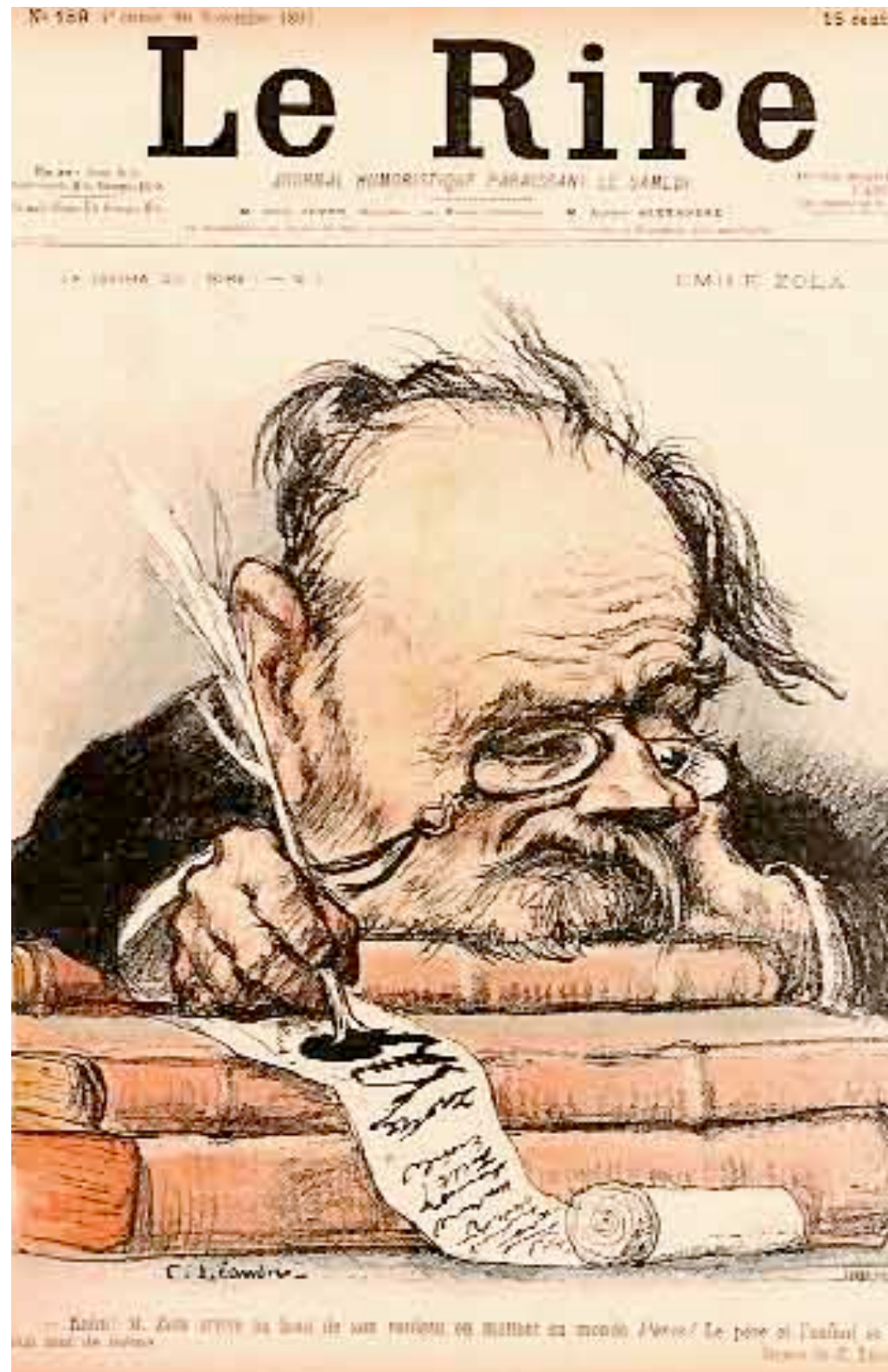
▶ Politically active and controversial (his famous *j'accuse*)

▶ *Les Rougon-Macquart*: 20 novel cycle, interlinked stories about two families, based on ideas of heredity—sound familiar?



WRITING

- ▶ “Landscape realism” (1-2); there is a world outside the characters; in it, they are small, insignificant if not captured by the objective (lens); environment
- ▶ The “effect of the real” (35) means not only a dilation of space, but all of time; the world’s expanse also has a past – a trivial, pointless past
- ▶ Why does “realism” mean “bitter irony” (42)?
- ▶ Why do Americans insist on happy endings? (43); no irony



LANDSCAPE REALISM

Père Merlier's mill was pleasing to look upon. It stood exactly in the center of Rocreuse, where the highway made an elbow. The village had but one street, with two rows of huts, a row on each side of the road; but at the elbow meadows spread out, and huge trees which lined the banks of the Morelle covered the extremity of the valley with lordly shade. There was not, in all Lorraine, a corner of nature more adorable. To the right and to the left thick woods, centenarian forests, towered up from gentle slopes, filling the horizon with a sea of verdure... Below the meadows were damp. Gigantic chestnut trees cast dark shadows. On the borders of the meadows long hedges of poplars exhibited in lines their rustling branches. Two avenues of enormous plane trees stretched across the fields toward the ancient Chateau de Gagny, then a mass of ruins. In this constantly watered district the grass grew to an extraordinary height. It resembled a garden between two wooded hills, a natural garden, of which the meadows were the lawns, the giant trees marking the colossal flower beds (1-2).

EFFECT OF THE REAL

Françoise, nevertheless, plunged beneath the trees. It solaced her to be alone. She sat down for an instant, but at the thought that time was passing she leaped to her feet. How long had it been since she left the mill? Five minutes? –half an hour? She had lost all conception of time. Perhaps Dominique had concealed himself in a copse she knew of, where they had one afternoon eaten filberts together. She hastened to the copse, searched it. Only a blackbird flew away, uttering its soft, sad note (35).

REALISM'S BITTER COSMIC IRONY

The French rushed into the courtyard, headed by their captain. It was his only success of the war, and so he straightened up to his full height and laughed with the friendly air of a dashing cavalier. Seeing Françoise lying senseless between the bodies of her husband and her father, in the smoking ruins of the mill, he waved his sword, shouting:

“Victory! Victory!” (42)

On seeing the wounded miller, who was endeavoring to comfort Françoise, and noticing the body of Dominique, his joyous look changed to one of sadness. Then he knelt beside the young man and, tearing open his blouse, put his hand to his heart.

“Thank God!” he cried. “It is yet beating! Send for the surgeon!”

At the captain’s words Françoise leaped to her feet.

“There is hope!” she cried. “Oh, tell me there is hope!” (43)