

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE HUMAN COMEDY:
INTRODUCTIONS AND
APPENDIX

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Introductions and Appendix

HONORE DE BALZAC

"Sans genie, je suis flambe!"

Volumes, almost libraries, have been written about Balzac; and perhaps of very few writers, putting aside the three or four greatest of all, is it so difficult to select one or a few short phrases which will in any way denote them, much more sum them up. Yet the five words quoted above, which come from an early letter to his sister when as yet he had not "found his way," characterize him, I think, better than at least some of the volumes I have read about him, and supply, when they are properly understood, the most valuable of all keys and companions for his comprehension.

"If I have not genius, it is all up with me!" A very matter-of-fact person may say: "Why! there is nothing wonderful in this. Everybody knows what genius is wanted to make a name in literature, and most people think they have it." But this would be a little short-sighted, and only excusable because of the way in which the word "genius" is too commonly bandied about. As

a matter of fact, there is not so very much genius in the world; and a great deal of more than fair performance is attainable and attained by more or less decent allowances or exhibitions of talent. In prose, more especially, it is possible to gain a very high place, and to deserve it, without any genius at all: though it is difficult, if not impossible, to do so in verse. But what Balzac felt (whether he was conscious in detail of the feeling or not) when he used these words to his sister Laure, what his critical readers must feel when they have read only a very little of his work, what they must feel still more strongly when they have read that work as a whole – is that for him there is no such door of escape and no such compromise. He had the choice, by his nature, his aims, his capacities, of being a genius or nothing. He had no little gifts, and he was even destitute of some of the separate and indivisible great ones. In mere writing, mere style, he was not supreme; one seldom or never derives from anything of his the merely artistic satisfaction given by perfect prose. His humor, except of the grim and gigantic kind, was not remarkable; his wit, for a Frenchman, curiously thin and small. The minor felicities of the literature generally were denied to him. *Sans genie, il etait flambe; flambe* as he seemed to be, and very reasonably seemed, to his friends when as yet the genius had not come to him, and when he was desperately striving to discover where his genius lay in those wonderful works which "Lord R'Hoone," and "Horace de Saint Aubin," and others obligingly fathered for him.

It must be the business of these introductions to give what

assistance they may to discover where it did lie; it is only necessary, before taking up the task in the regular biographical and critical way of the introductory cicerone, to make two negative observations. It did not lie, as some have apparently thought, in the conception, or the outlining, or the filling up of such a scheme as the *Comedie Humaine*. In the first place, the work of every great writer, of the creative kind, including that of Dante himself, is a *comedie humaine*. All humanity is latent in every human being; and the great writers are merely those who call most of it out of latency and put it actually on the stage. And, as students of Balzac know, the scheme and adjustment of his comedy varied so remarkably as time went on that it can hardly be said to have, even in its latest form (which would pretty certainly have been altered again), a distinct and definite character. Its so-called scenes are even in the mass by no means exhaustive, and are, as they stand, a very "cross," division of life: nor are they peopled by anything like an exhaustive selection of personages. Nor again is Balzac's genius by any means a mere vindication of the famous definition of that quality as an infinite capacity of taking pains. That Balzac had that capacity – had it in a degree probably unequaled even by the dullest plodders on record – is very well known, is one of the best known things about him. But he showed it for nearly ten years before the genius came, and though no doubt it helped him when genius had come, the two things are in his case, as in most, pretty sufficiently distinct. What the genius itself was I must do my best to indicate hereafter,

always beseeching the reader to remember that all genius is in its essence and quiddity indefinable. You can no more get close to it than you can get close to the rainbow, and your most scientific explanation of it will always leave as much of the heart of the fact unexplained as the scientific explanation of the rainbow leaves of that.

Honore de Balzac was born at Tours on the 16th of May, 1799, in the same year which saw the birth of Heine, and which therefore had the honor of producing perhaps the most characteristic writers of the nineteenth century in prose and verse respectively. The family was a respectable one, though its right to the particle which Balzac always carefully assumed, subscribing himself "*de* Balzac," was contested. And there appears to be no proof of their connection with Jean Guez de Balzac, the founder, as some will have him, of modern French prose, and the contemporary and fellow-reformer of Malherbe. (Indeed, as the novelist pointed out with sufficient pertinence, his earlier namesake had no hereditary right to the name at all, and merely took it from some property.) Balzac's father, who, as the *zac* pretty surely indicates, was a southerner and a native of Languedoc, was fifty-three years old at the birth of his son, whose Christian name was selected on the ordinary principle of accepting that of the saint on whose day he was born. Balzac the elder had been a barrister before the Revolution, but under it he obtained a post in the commissariat, and rose to be head of that department for a military division. His wife,

who was much younger than himself and who survived her son, is said to have possessed both beauty and fortune, and was evidently endowed with the business faculties so common among Frenchwomen. When Honore was born, the family had not long been established at Tours, where Balzac the elder (besides his duties) had a house and some land; and this town continued to be their headquarters till the novelist, who was the eldest of the family, was about sixteen. He had two sisters (of whom the elder, Laure, afterwards Madame Surville, was his first confidante and his only authoritative biographer) and a younger brother, who seems to have been, if not a scapegrace, rather a burden to his friends, and who later went abroad.

The eldest boy was, in spite of Rousseau, put out to nurse, and at seven years old was sent to the Oratorian grammar-school at Vendome, where he stayed another seven years, going through, according to his own account, the future experiences and performances of Louis Lambert, but making no reputation for himself in the ordinary school course. If, however, he would not work in his teacher's way, he overworked himself in his own by devouring books; and was sent home at fourteen in such a state of health that his grandmother (who after the French fashion, was living with her daughter and son-in-law), ejaculated: "*Voila donc comme le college nous renvoie les jolis enfants que nous lui envoyons!*" It would seem indeed that, after making all due allowance for grandmotherly and sisterly partiality, Balzac was actually a very good-looking boy and young man, though the

portraits of him in later life may not satisfy the more romantic expectations of his admirers. He must have had at all times eyes full of character, perhaps the only feature that never fails in men of intellectual eminence; but he certainly does not seem to have been in his manhood either exactly handsome or exactly "distinguished-looking." But the portraits of the middle of the century are, as a rule, rather wanting in this characteristic when compared with those of its first and last periods; and I cannot think of many that quite come up to one's expectations.

For a short time he was left pretty much to himself, and recovered rapidly. But late in 1814 a change of official duties removed the Balzacs to Paris, and when they had established themselves in the famous old *bourgeois* quarter of the Marais, Honore was sent to divers private tutors or private schools till he had "finished his classes" in 1816 at the age of seventeen and a half. Then he attended lectures at the Sorbonne where Villemain, Guizot, and Cousin were lecturing, and heard them, as his sister tells us, enthusiastically, though there are probably no three writers of any considerable repute in the history of French literature who stand further apart from Balzac. For all three made and kept their fame by spirited and agreeable generalizations and expatiations, as different as possible from the savage labor of observation on the one hand and the gigantic developments of imagination on the other, which were to compose Balzac's appeal. His father destined him for the law; and for three years more he dutifully attended the offices of an attorney and a notary,

besides going through the necessary lectures and examinations. All these trials he seems to have passed, if not brilliantly, yet sufficiently.

And then came the inevitable crisis, which was of an unusually severe nature. A notary, who was a friend of the elder Balzac's and owed him some gratitude offered not merely to take Honore into his office, but to allow him to succeed to his business, which was a very good one, in a few years on very favorable terms. Most fathers, and nearly all French fathers, would have jumped at this; and it so happened that about the same time M. de Balzac was undergoing that unpleasant process of compulsory retirement which his son has described in one of the best passages of the *Oeuvres de Jeunesse*, the opening scene of *Argow le Pirate*. It does not appear that Honore had revolted during his probation – indeed he is said, and we can easily believe it from his books, to have acquired a very solid knowledge of law, especially in bankruptcy matters, of which he was himself to have a very close shave in future. A solicitor, indeed, told Laure de Balzac that he found *Cesar Birotteau* a kind of *Balzac on Bankruptcy*; but this may have been only the solicitor's fun.

It was no part of Honore's intentions to use this knowledge – however content he had been to acquire it – in the least interesting, if nearly the most profitable, of the branches of the legal profession; and he protested eloquently, and not unsuccessfully, that he would be a man of letters and nothing else. Not unsuccessfully; but at the same time with distinctly qualified

success. He was not turned out of doors; nor were the supplies, as in Quinet's case only a few months later, absolutely withheld even for a short time. But his mother (who seems to have been less placable than her husband) thought that cutting them down to the lowest point might have some effect. So, as the family at this time (April 1819) left Paris for a house some twenty miles out of it, she established her eldest son in a garret furnished in the most Spartan fashion, with a starvation allowance and an old woman to look after him. He did not literally stay in this garret for the ten years of his astonishing and unparalleled probation; but without too much metaphor it may be said to have been his Wilderness, and his Wanderings in it to have lasted for that very considerable time.

We know, in detail, very little of him during the period. For the first years, between 1819 and 1822, we have a good number of letters to Laure; between 1822 and 1829, when he first made his mark, very few. He began, of course, with verse, for which he never had the slightest vocation, and, almost equally of course, with a tragedy. But by degrees and apparently pretty soon, he slipped into what was his vocation, and like some, though not very many, great writers, at first did little better in it than if it had not been his vocation at all. The singular tentatives which, after being allowed for a time a sort of outhouse in the structure of the *Comedie Humaine*, were excluded from the octavo *Edition Definitive* five-and-twenty years ago, have never been the object of that exhaustive bibliographical and critical attention which

has been bestowed on those which follow them. They were not absolutely unproductive – we hear of sixty, eighty, a hundred pounds being paid for them, though whether this was the amount of Balzac's always sanguine expectations, or hard cash actually handed over, we cannot say. They were very numerous, though the reprints spoken of above never extended to more than ten. Even these have never been widely read. The only person I ever knew till I began this present task who had read them through was the friend whom all his friends are now lamenting and are not likely soon to cease to lament, Mr. Louis Stevenson; and when I once asked him whether, on his honor and conscience, he could recommend me to brace myself to the same effort, he said that on his honor and conscience he must most earnestly dissuade me. I gather, though I am not sure, that Mr. Wedmore, the latest writer in English on Balzac at any length, had not read them through when he wrote.

Now I have, and a most curious study they are. Indeed I am not sorry, as Mr. Wedmore thinks one would be. They are curiously, interestingly, almost enthrallingly bad. Couched for the most part in a kind of Radcliffian or Monk-Lewisian vein – perhaps studied more directly from Maturin (of whom Balzac was a great admirer) than from either – they often begin with and sometimes contain at intervals passages not unlike the Balzac that we know. The attractive title of *Jane la Pale* (it was originally called, with a still more Early Romantic avidity for *baroque* titles, *Wann-Chlore*) has caused it, I believe, to be more commonly read than

any other. It deals with a disguised duke, a villainous Italian, bigamy, a surprising offer of the angelic first wife to submit to a sort of double arrangement, the death of the second wife and first love, and a great many other things. *Argow le Pirate* opens quite decently and in order with that story of the *employe* which Balzac was to rehandle so often, but drops suddenly into brigands stopping diligences, the marriage of the heroine Annette with a retired pirate marquis of vast wealth, the trial of the latter for murdering another marquis with a poisoned fish-bone scarf-pin, his execution, the sanguinary reprisals by his redoubtable lieutenant, and a finale of blunderbusses, fire, devoted peasant girl with *retrousee* nose, and almost every possible *tremblement*.

In strictness mention of this should have been preceded by mention of *Le Vicaire des Ardennes*, which is a sort of first part of *Argow le Pirate*, and not only gives an account of his crimes, early history, and manners (which seem to have been a little robustious for such a mild-mannered man as Annette's husband), but tells a thrilling tale of the loves of the *vicaire* himself and a young woman, which loves are crossed, first by the belief that they are brother and sister, and secondly by the *vicaire* having taken orders under this delusion. *La Derniere Fee* is the queerest possible cross between an actual fairy story *a la Nordier* and a history of the fantastic and inconstant loves of a great English lady, the Duchess of "Sommerset" (a piece of actual *scandalum magnatum* nearly as bad as Balzac's cool use in his acknowledged work of the title "Lord Dudley"). This

book begins so well that one expects it to go on better; but the inevitable defects in craftsmanship show themselves before long. *Le Centenaire* connects itself with Balzac's almost lifelong hankering after the *recherche de l'absolu* in one form or another, for the hero is a wicked old person who every now and then refreshes his hold on life by immolating a virgin under a copper-bell. It is one of the most extravagant and "Monk-Lewis" of the whole. *L'Excommunie*, *L'Israelite*, and *L'Heritiere de Birague* are mediaeval or fifteenth century tales of the most luxuriant kind, *L'Excommunie* being the best, *L'Israelite* the most preposterous, and *L'Heritiere de Birague* the dullest. But it is not nearly so dull as *Dom Gigadus* and *Jean Louis*, the former of which deals with the end of the seventeenth century and the latter with the end of the eighteenth. These are both as nearly unreadable as anything can be. One interesting thing, however, should be noted in much of this early work: the affectionate clinging of the author to the scenery of Touraine, which sometimes inspires him with his least bad passages.

It is generally agreed that these singular *Oeuvres de Jeunesse* were of service to Balzac as exercise, and no doubt they were so; but I think something may be said on the other side. They must have done a little, if not much, to lead him into and confirm him in those defects of style and form which distinguish him so remarkably from most writers of his rank. It very seldom happens when a very young man writes very much, be it book-writing or journalism, without censure and without "editing," that he does

not at the same time get into loose and slipshod habits. And I think we may set down to this peculiar form of apprenticeship of Balzac's not merely his failure ever to attain, except in passages and patches, a thoroughly great style, but also that extraordinary method of composition which in after days cost him and his publishers so much money.

However, if these ten years of probation taught him his trade, they taught him also a most unfortunate avocation or by-trade, which he never ceased to practise, or to try to practise, which never did him the least good, and which not unfrequently lost him much of the not too abundant gains which he earned with such enormous labor. This was the "game of speculation." His sister puts the tempter's part on an unknown "neighbor," who advised him to try to procure independence by *une bonne speculation*. Those who have read Balzac's books and his letters will hardly think that he required much tempting. He began by trying to publish – an attempt which has never yet succeeded with a single man of letters, so far as I can remember. His scheme was not a bad one, indeed it was one which has brought much money to other pockets since, being neither more nor less than the issuing of cheap one-volume editions of French classics. But he had hardly any capital; he was naturally quite ignorant of his trade, and as naturally the established publishers and booksellers boycotted him as an intruder. So his *Moliere* and his *La Fontaine* are said to have been sold as waste paper, though if any copies escaped they would probably fetch a very comfortable price now.

Then, such capital as he had having been borrowed, the lender, either out of good nature or avarice, determined to throw the helve after the hatchet. He partly advanced himself and partly induced Balzac's parents to advance more, in order to start the young man as a printer, to which business Honore himself added that of typefounder. The story was just the same: knowledge and capital were again wanting, and though actual bankruptcy was avoided, Balzac got out of the matter at the cost not merely of giving the two businesses to a friend (in whose hands they proved profitable), but of a margin of debt from which he may be said never to have fully cleared himself.

He had more than twenty years to live, but he never cured himself of this hankering after *une bonne speculation*. Sometimes it was ordinary stock-exchange gambling; but his special weakness was, to do him justice, for schemes that had something more grandiose in them. Thus, to finish here with the subject, though the chapter of it never actually finished till his death, he made years afterwards, when he was a successful and a desperately busy author, a long, troublesome, and costly journey to Sardinia to carry out a plan of resmelting the slag from Roman and other mines there. Thus in his very latest days, when he was living at Vierzschovnia with the Hanska and Mniszech household, he conceived the magnificently absurd notion of cutting down twenty thousand acres of oak wood in the Ukraine, and sending it *by railway* right across Europe to be sold in France. And he was rather reluctantly convinced that by the time a single

log reached its market the freight would have eaten up the value of the whole plantation.

It was perhaps not entirely chance that the collapse of the printing scheme, which took place in 1827, the ninth year of the Wanderings in the Wilderness, coincided with or immediately preceded the conception of the book which was to give Balzac passage into the Promised Land. This was *Les Chouans*, called at its first issue, which differed considerably from the present form, *Le Dernier Chouan ou la Bretagne en 1800* (later 1799). It was published in 1829 without any of the previous anagrammatic pseudonyms; and whatever were the reasons which had induced him to make his bow in person to the public, they were well justified, for the book was a distinct success, if not a great one. It occupies a kind of middle position between the melodramatic romance of his nonage and the strictly analytic romance-novel of his later time; and, though dealing with war and love chiefly, inclines in conception distinctly to the latter. Corentin, Hulot, and other personages of the actual Comedy (then by no means planned, or at least avowed) appear; and though the influence of Scott is in a way paramount¹ on the surface, the underwork is

¹ Balzac was throughout his life a fervent admirer of Sir Walter, and I think Mr. Wedmore, in his passage on the subject, distinctly undervalues both the character and the duration of this esteem. Balzac was far too acute to commit the common mistake of thinking Scott superficial – men who know mankind are not often blind to each other's knowledge. And while Mr. Wedmore seems not to know any testimony later than Balzac's *thirty-eighth* year, it is in his *forty-sixth*, when all his own best work was done, except the *Parents Pauvres*, that he contrasts Dumas with Scott saying that *on relit Walter Scott*, and he does not think any one will re-read Dumas. This may be

quite different, and the whole scheme of the loves of Montauran and Mademoiselle de Verneuil is pure Balzac.

It would seem as if nothing but this sun of popular approval had been wanting to make Balzac's genius burst out in full bloom. Although we have a fair number of letters for the ensuing years, it is not very easy to make out the exact sequence of production of the marvelous harvest which his genius gave. It is sufficient to say that in the three years following 1829 there were actually published the *Physiologie du Mariage*, the charming story of *La Maison du Chat-que-Pelote*, the *Peau de Chagrin*, the most original and splendid, if not the most finished and refined, of all Balzac's books, most of the short *Contes Philosophiques*, of which some are among their author's greatest triumphs, many other stories (chiefly included in the *Scenes de la Vie Privee*) and the beginning of the *Contes Drolatiques*.²

unjust to the one writer, but it is conclusive as to any sense of "wasted time" (his own phrase) having ever existed in Balzac's mind about the other.

² No regular attempt will after this be made to indicate the date of production of successive works, unless they connect themselves very distinctly with incidents in the life or with general critical observations. At the end of this introduction will be found a full table of the *Comedie Humaine* and the other works. It may perhaps be worth while to add here, that while the labors of M. de Lovenjoul (to whom every writer on Balzac must acknowledge the deepest obligation) have cleared this matter up almost to the verge of possibility as regards the published works, there is little light to be thrown on the constant references in the letters to books which never appeared. Sometimes they are known, and they may often be suspected, to have been absorbed into or incorporated with others; the rest must have been lost or destroyed, or, which is not quite impossible, have existed chiefly in the form of project. Nearly a hundred titles of such things are preserved.

But without a careful examination of his miscellaneous work, which is very abundant and includes journalism as well as books, it is almost as impossible to come to a just appreciation of Balzac as it is without reading the early works and letters. This miscellaneous work is all the more important because a great deal of it represents the artist at quite advanced stages of his career, and because all its examples, the earlier as well as the later, give us abundant insight on him as he was "making himself." The comparison with the early works of Thackeray (in *Punch*, *Fraser*, and elsewhere) is so striking that it can escape no one who knows the two. Every now and then Balzac transferred bodily, or with slight alterations, passages from these experiments to his finished canvases. It appears that he had a scheme for codifying his "Physiologies" (of which the notorious one above mentioned is only a catchpenny exemplar and very far from the best) into a seriously organized work. Chance was kind or intention was wise in not allowing him to do so; but the value of the things for the critical reader is not less. Here are tales – extensions of the scheme and manner of the *Oeuvres de Jeunesse*, or attempts at the *goguenard* story of 1830 – a thing for which Balzac's hand was hardly light enough. Here are interesting evidences of striving to be cosmopolitan and polyglot – the most interesting of all of which, I think, is the mention of certain British products as "mufflings." "Muffling" used to be a domestic joke for "muffin;" but whether some wicked Briton deluded Balzac into the idea that it was the proper form or not it is

impossible to say. Here is a *Traite de la Vie Elegante*, inestimable for certain critical purposes. So early as 1825 we find a *Code des Gens Honnetes*, which exhibits at once the author's legal studies and his constant attraction for the shady side of business, and which contains a scheme for defrauding by means of lead pencils, actually carried out (if we may believe his exulting note) by some literary swindlers with unhappy results. A year later he wrote a *Dictionnaire des Enseignes de Paris*, which we are glad enough to have from the author of the *Chat-que-Pelote*; but the persistence with which this kind of miscellaneous writing occupied him could not be better exemplified than by the fact that, of two important works which closely follow this in the collected edition, the *Physiologie de l'Employe* dates from 1841 and the *Monographie de la Presse Parisienne* from 1843.

It is well known that from the time almost of his success as a novelist he was given, like too many successful novelists (*not* like Scott), to rather undignified and foolish attacks on critics. The explanation may or may not be found in the fact that we have abundant critical work of his, and that it is nearly all bad. Now and then we have an acute remark in his own special sphere; but as a rule he cannot be complimented on these performances, and when he was half-way through his career this critical tendency of his culminated in the unlucky *Revue Parisienne*

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