

The Human Comedy:

Introductions

&

Appendix

by

Honoré de Balzac

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HONORE DE BALZAC

“Sans genie, je suis flambe!”

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Introductions & Appendix

by

Honoré de Balzac

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 per-

formance 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 wonderous 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 *Comédie 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 Dernière 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 "Somerset" (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 spe-

cial 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 paramount* on the surface, the underwork is 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 ap-

*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 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.

proval 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*.*

*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*, which he wrote almost entirely himself, with slight assistance from his friends, MM. de Belloy and de Grammont. It covers a wide range, but the literary part of it is considerable, and this part contains that memorable and disastrous attack on Sainte-Beuve, for which the critic afterwards took a magnanimous revenge in his obituary *causerie*. Although the thing is not quite unexampled it is not easily to be surpassed in the blind fury of its abuse. Sainte-Beuve was by no means invulnerable, and an anti-critic who kept his head might have found, as M. de Pontmartin and others did find, the joints in his armor. But when, *a propos* of the *Port Royal* more especially, and of the

other works in general, Balzac informs us that Sainte-Beuve's great characteristic as a writer is *l'ennui, l'ennui boueux jusqu'à mi-jambe*, that his style is intolerable, that his historical handling is like that of Gibbon, Hume, and other dull people; when he jeers at him for exhuming "La mere Angelique," and scolds him for presuming to obscure the glory of the *Roi Soleil*, the thing is partly ludicrous, partly melancholy. One remembers that agreeable Bohemian, who at a symposium once interrupted his host by crying, "Man o' the hoose, gie us less o' yer clack and mair o' yer Jairman wine!" Only, in human respect and other, we phrase it: "Oh, dear M. de Balzac! give us more *Eugenie Grandets*, more *Pere Goriot*s, more *Peaux de Chagrin*, and don't talk about what you do not understand!"

Balzac was a great politician also, and here, though he may not have been very much more successful, he talked with more knowledge and competence. He must have given himself immense trouble in reading the papers, foreign as well as French; he had really mastered a good deal of the political religion of a French publicist. It is curious to read, sixty years after date, his grave assertion that "*La France a la conquete de*

Madagascar a faire,” and with certain very pardonable defects (such as his Anglophobia), his politics may be pronounced not unintelligent and not ungenerous, though somewhat inconsistent and not very distinctly traceable to any coherent theory. As for the Anglophobia, the Englishman who thinks the less of him for that must have very poor and unhappy brains. A Frenchman who does not more or less hate and fear England, an Englishman who does not regard France with a more or less good-humored impatience, is usually “either a god or a beast,” as Aristotle saith. Balzac began with an odd but not unintelligible compound, something like Hugo’s, of Napoleonism and Royalism. In 1824, when he was still in the shades of anonymity, he wrote and published two by no means despicable pamphlets in favor of Primogeniture and the Jesuits, the latter of which was reprinted in 1880 at the last *Jesuitenhetze* in France. His *Lettres sur Paris* in 1830-31, and his *La France et l’Etranger* in 1836, are two considerable series of letters from “Our Own Correspondent,” handling the affairs of the world with boldness and industry if not invariably with wisdom. They rather suggest (as does the later *Revue Parisienne* still more) the politi-

cal writing of the age of Anne in England, and perhaps a little later, when “the wits” handled politics and society, literature and things in general with unquestioned competence and an easy universality.

The rest of his work which will not appear in this edition may be conveniently despatched here. The *Physiologie du Mariage* and the *Scenes de la Vie Conjugale* suffer not merely from the most obvious of their faults but from defect of knowledge. It may or may not be that marriage, in the hackneyed phrase, is a net or other receptacle where all the outsiders would be in, and all the insiders out. But it is quite clear that Coelebs cannot talk of it with much authority. His state may or may not be the more gracious: his judgment cannot but lack experience. The “Theatre,” which brought the author little if any profit, great annoyance, and a vast amount of trouble, has been generally condemned by criticism. But the *Contes Drolatiques* are not so to be given up. The famous and splendid *Succube* is only the best of them, and though all are more or less tarred with the brush which tars so much of French literature, though the attempt to write in an archaic style is at best a very successful *tour de force*,

and represents an expenditure of brain power by no means justifiable on the part of a man who could have made so much better use of it, they are never to be spoken of disrespectfully. Those who sneer at their “Wardour Street” Old French are not usually the best qualified to do so; and it is not to be forgotten that Balzac was a real countryman of Rabelais and a legitimate inheritor of *Gauloiserie*. Unluckily no man can “throw back” in this way, except now and then as a mere pastime. And it is fair to recollect that as a matter of fact Balzac, after a year or two, did not waste much more time on these things, and that the intended ten *dizains* never, as a matter of fact, went beyond three.

Besides this work in books, pamphlets, etc., Balzac, as has been said, did a certain amount of journalism, especially in the *Caricature*, his performances including, I regret to say, more than one puff of his own work; and in this, as well as by the success of the *Chouans*, he became known about 1830 to a much wider circle, both of literary and of private acquaintance. It cannot indeed be said that he ever mixed much in society; it was impossible that he should do so, considering the vast amount of work he did and the manner in which

he did it. This subject, like that of his speculations, may be better finished off in a single passage than dealt with by scattered indications here and there. He was not one of those men who can do work by fits and starts in the intervals of business or of amusement; nor was he one who, like Scott, could work very rapidly. It is true that he often achieved immense quantities of work (subject to a caution to be given presently) in a very few days, but then his working day was of the most peculiar character. He could not bear disturbance; he wrote best at night, and he could not work at all after heavy meals. His favorite plan (varied sometimes in detail) was therefore to dine lightly about five or six, then to go to bed and sleep till eleven, twelve, or one, and then to get up, and with the help only of coffee (which he drank very strong and in enormous quantities) to work for indefinite stretches of time into the morning or afternoon of the next day. He speaks of a sixteen hours' day as a not uncommon shift or spell of work, and almost a regular one with him; and on one occasion he avers that in the course of forty-eight hours he took but three of the rest, working for twenty-two hours and a half continuously on each side thereof. In

such spells, supposing reasonable facility of composition and mechanical power in the hand to keep going all the time, an enormous amount can of course be accomplished. A thousand words an hour is anything but an extraordinary rate of writing, and fifteen hundred by no means unheard of with persons who do not write rubbish.

The references to this subject in Balzac's letters are very numerous; but it is not easy to extract very definite information from them. It would be not only impolite but incorrect to charge him with untruthfulness. But the very heat of imagination which enabled him to produce his work created a sort of mirage, through which he seems always to have regarded it; and in writing to publishers, editors, creditors, and even his own family, it was too obviously his interest to make the most of his labor, his projects, and his performance. Even his contemporary, though elder, Southey, the hardest-working and the most scrupulously honest man of letters in England who could pretend to genius, seems constantly to have exaggerated the idea of what he could perform, if not of what he had performed in a given time. The most definite statement of Balzac's that I remember is one which claims the

second number of *Sur Catherine de Medicis*, "La Confidence des Ruggieri," as the production of a single night, and not one of the most extravagant of his nights. Now, "La Confidence des Ruggieri" fills, in the small edition, eighty pages of nearer four hundred than three hundred words each, or some thirty thousand words in all. Nobody in the longest of nights could manage that, except by dictating it to shorthand clerks. But in the very context of this assertion Balzac assigns a much longer period to the correction than to the composition, and this brings us to one of the most curious and one of the most famous points of his literary history.

Some doubts have, I believe, been thrown on the most minute account of his ways of composition which we have, that of the publisher Werdet. But there is too great a consensus of evidence as to his general system to make the received description of it doubtful. According to this, the first draft of Balzac's work never presented it in anything like fulness, and sometimes it did not amount to a quarter of the bulk finally published. This being returned to him from the printer in "slip" on sheets with very large margins, he would set to work on the correction; that is to say, on the practical rewrit-

ing of the thing, with excisions, alterations, and above all, additions. A “revise” being executed, he would attack this revise in the same manner, and not unfrequently more than once, so that the expenses of mere composition and correction of the press were enormously heavy (so heavy as to eat into not merely his publisher’s but his own profits), and that the last state of the book, when published, was something utterly different from its first state in manuscript. And it will be obvious that if anything like this was usual with him, it is quite impossible to judge his actual rapidity of composition by the extent of the published result.

However this may be (and it is at least certain that in the years above referred to he must have worked his very hardest, even if some of the work then published had been more or less excogitated and begun during the Wilderness period), he certainly so far left his eremitical habits as to become acquainted with most of the great men of letters of the early thirties, and also with certain ladies of more or less high rank, who were to supply, if not exactly the full models, the texts and starting-points for some of the most interesting figures of the *Comedie*. He knew Victor Hugo, but certainly not at

this time intimately; for as late as 1839 the letter in which he writes to Hugo to come and breakfast with him at Les Jardies (with interesting and minute directions how to find that frail abode of genius) is couched in anything but the tone of a familiar friendship. The letters to Beyle of about the same date are also incompatible with intimate knowledge. Nodier (after some contrary expressions) he seems to have regarded as most good people did regard that true man of letters and charming tale-teller; while among the younger generation Theophile Gautier and Charles de Bernard, as well as Goslan and others, were his real and constant friends. But he does not figure frequently or eminently in any of the genuine gossip of the time as a haunter of literary circles, and it is very nearly certain that the assiduity with which some of his heroes attend *salons* and clubs had no counterpart in his own life. In the first place he was too busy; in the second he would not have been at home there. Like the young gentleman in *Punch*, who “did not read books but wrote them,” though in no satiric sense, he felt it his business not to frequent society but to create it.

He was, however, aided in the task of creation by the ladies

already spoken of, who were fairly numerous and of divers degrees. The most constant, after his sister Laure, was that sister's schoolfellow, Madame Zulma Carraud, the wife of a military official at Angouleme and the possessor of a small country estate at Frapesle, near Tours. At both of these places Balzac, till he was a very great man, was a constant visitor, and with Madame Carraud he kept up for years a correspondence which has been held to be merely friendly, and which was certainly in the vulgar sense innocent, but which seems to me to be tinged with something of that feeling, midway between love and friendship, which appears in Scott's letters to Lady Abercorn, and which is probably not so rare as some think. Madame de Berny, another family friend of higher rank, was the prototype of most of his "angelic" characters, but she died in 1836. He knew the Duchesse d'Abrantes, otherwise Madame Junot, and Madame de Girardin, otherwise Delphine Gay; but neither seems to have exercised much influence over him. It was different with another and more authentic duchess, Madame de Castries, after whom he dangled for a considerable time, who certainly first encouraged him and probably then snubbed him, and who is thought to have been the model

of his wickeder great ladies. And it was comparatively early in the thirties that he met the woman whom, after nearly twenty years, he was at last to marry, getting his death in so doing, the Polish Madame Hanska. These, with some relations of the last named, especially her daughter, and with a certain "Louise"—an *Inconnue* who never ceased to be so—were Balzac's chief correspondents of the other sex, and, as far as is known, his chief friends in it.

About his life, without extravagant "pudding" of guesswork or of mere quotation and abstract of his letters, it would be not so much difficult as impossible to say much; and accordingly it is a matter of fact that most lives of Balzac, including all good ones, are rather critical than narrative. From his real *debut* with *Le Dernier Chouan* to his departure for Poland on the long visit, or brace of visits, from which he returned finally to die, this life consisted solely of work. One of his earliest utterances, "*Il faut piocher ferme,*" was his motto to the very last, varied only by a certain amount of traveling. Balzac was always a considerable traveler; indeed if he had not been so his constitution would probably have broken down long before it actually did; and the expense of these

voyagings (though by his own account he generally conducted his affairs with the most rigid economy), together with the interruption to his work which they occasioned, entered no doubt for something into his money difficulties. He would go to Baden or Vienna for a day's sight of Madame Hanska; his Sardinian visit has been already noted; and as a specimen of others it may be mentioned that he once journeyed from Paris to Besancon, then from Besancon right across France to Angouleme, and then back to Paris on some business of selecting paper for one of the editions of his books, which his publishers would probably have done much better and at much less expense.

Still his actual receipts were surprisingly small, partly, it may be, owing to his expensive habits of composition, but far more, according to his own account, because of the Belgian piracies, from which all popular French authors suffered till the government of Napoleon the Third managed to put a stop to them. He also lived in such a thick atmosphere of bills and advances and cross-claims on and by his publishers, that even if there were more documents than there are it would be exceedingly difficult to get at facts which are, after

all, not very important. He never seems to have been paid much more than 500 pounds for the newspaper publication (the most valuable by far because the pirates could not interfere with its profits) of any one of his novels. And to expensive fashions of composition and complicated accounts, a steady back-drag of debt and the rest, must be added the very delightful, and to the novelist not useless, but very expensive mania for the collector. Balzac had a genuine taste for, and thought himself a genuine connoisseur in, pictures, sculpture, and objects of art of all kinds, old and new; and though prices in his day were not what they are in these, a great deal of money must have run through his hands in this way. He calculated the value of the contents of the house, which in his last days he furnished with such loving care for his wife, and which turned out to be a chamber rather of death than of marriage, at some 16,000 pounds. But part of this was Madame Hanska's own purchasing, and there were offsets of indebtedness against it almost to the last. In short, though during the last twenty years of his life such actual "want of pence" as vexed him was not due, as it had been earlier, to the fact that the pence refused to come in, but

only to imprudent management of them, it certainly cannot be said that Honore de Balzac, the most desperately hard worker in all literature for such time as was allotted him, and perhaps the man of greatest genius who was ever a desperately hard worker, falsified that most uncomfortable but truest of proverbs—“Hard work never made money.”

If, however, he was but scantily rewarded with the money for which he had a craving (not absolutely, I think, devoid of a touch of genuine avarice, but consisting chiefly of the artist's desire for pleasant and beautiful things, and partly presenting a variety or phase of the grandiose imagination, which was his ruling characteristic), Balzac had plenty of the fame, for which he cared quite as much as he cared for money. Perhaps no writer except Voltaire and Goethe earlier made such a really European reputation; and his books were of a kind to be more widely read by the general public than either Goethe's or Voltaire's. In England (Balzac liked the literature but not the country, and never visited England, though I believe he planned a visit) this popularity was, for obvious reasons, rather less than elsewhere. The respectful vogue which French literature had had with the English in

the eighteenth century had ceased, owing partly to the national enmity revived and fostered by the great war, and partly to the growth of a fresh and magnificent literature at home during the first thirty years of the nineteenth in England. But Balzac could not fail to be read almost at once by the lettered; and he was translated pretty early, though not perhaps to any great extent. It was in England, moreover, that by far his greatest follower appeared, and appeared very shortly. For it would be absurd in the most bigoted admirer of Thackeray to deny that the author of *Vanity Fair*, who was in Paris and narrowly watching French literature and French life at the very time of Balzac's most exuberant flourishing and education, owed something to the author of *Le Pere Goriot*. There was no copying or imitation; the lessons taught by Balzac were too much blended with those of native masters, such as Fielding, and too much informed and transformed by individual genius. Some may think—it is a point at issue not merely between Frenchmen and Englishmen, but between good judges of both nations on each side—that in absolute veracity and likeness to life, in limiting the operation of the inner consciousness on the outward observa-

tion to strictly artistic scale, Thackeray excelled Balzac as far as he fell short of him in the powers of the seer and in the gigantic imagination of the prophet. But the relations of pupil and master in at least some degree are not, I think, deniable.

So things went on in light and in shade, in homekeeping and in travel, in debts and in earnings, but always in work of some kind or another, for eighteen years from the turning point of 1829. By degrees, as he gained fame and ceased to be in the most pressing want of money, Balzac left off to some extent, though never entirely, those miscellaneous writings—reviews (including puffs), comic or general sketches, political diatribes, “physiologies” and the like—which, with his discarded prefaces and much more interesting matter, were at last, not many years ago, included in four stout volumes of the *Edition Definitive*. With the exception of the *Physiologies* (a sort of short satiric analysis of this or that class, character, or personage), which were very popular in the reign of Louis Philippe in France, and which Albert Smith and others introduced into England, Balzac did not do any of this miscellaneous work extremely well. Very shrewd observations are to be found in his reviews, for instance his indi-

cation, in reviewing La Touche’s *Fragoletta*, of that common fault of ambitious novels, a sort of woolly and “ungraspable” looseness of construction and story, which constantly bewilders the reader as to what is going on. But, as a rule, he was thinking too much of his own work and his own principles of working to enter very thoroughly into the work of others. His politics, those of a moderate but decided Royalist and Conservative, were, as has been said, intelligent in theory, but in practice a little distinguished by that neglect of actual business detail which has been noticed in his speculations.

At last, in the summer of 1847, it seemed as if the Rachel for whom he had served nearly if not quite the full fourteen years already, and whose husband had long been out of the way, would at last grant herself to him. He was invited to Vierzschovnia in the Ukraine, the seat of Madame Hanska, or in strictness of her son-in-law, Count Georges Mnischev; and as the visit was apparently for no restricted period, and Balzac’s pretensions to the lady’s hand were notorious, it might have seemed that he was as good as accepted. But to assume this would have been to mistake what perhaps the greatest creation of Balzac’s great English contemporary and coun-

terpart on the one side, as Thackeray was his contemporary and counterpart on the other, considered to be the malignity of widows. What the reasons were which made Madame Hanska delay so long in doing what she did at last, and might just as well, it would seem, have done years before, is not certainly known, and it would be quite unprofitable to discuss them. But it was on the 8th of October 1847 that Balzac first wrote to his sister from Vierschovnia, and it was not till the 14th of March 1850 that, “in the parish church of Saint Barbara at Berditchef, by the Count Abbe Czarski, representing the Bishop of Jitomir (this is as characteristic of Balzac in one way as what follows is in another) a Madame Eve de Balzac, born Countess Rzevuska, or a Madame Honore de Balzac or a Madame de Balzac the elder” came into existence.

It does not appear that Balzac was exactly unhappy during this huge probation, which was broken by one short visit to Paris. The interest of uncertainty was probably much for his ardent and unquiet spirit, and though he did very little literary work for him, one may suspect that he would not have done very much if he had stayed at Paris, for signs of exhaustion, not of genius but of physical power, had shown them-

selves before he left home. But it is not unjust or cruel to say that by the delay “Madame Eve de Balzac” (her actual baptismal name was Evelina) practically killed her husband. These winters in the severe climate of Russian Poland were absolutely fatal to a constitution, and especially to lungs, already deeply affected. At Vierschovnia itself he had illnesses, from which he narrowly escaped with life, before the marriage; his heart broke down after it; and he and his wife did not reach Paris till the end of May. Less than three months afterwards, on the 18th of August, he died, having been visited on the very day of his death in the Paradise of bric-a-brac which he had created for his Eve in the Rue Fortunee—a name too provocative of Nemesis—by Victor Hugo, the chief maker in verse as he himself was the chief maker in prose of France. He was buried at Pere la Chaise. The after-fortunes of his house and its occupants were not happy: but they do not concern us.

In person Balzac was a typical Frenchman, as indeed he was in most ways. From his portraits there would seem to have been more force and address than distinction or refinement in his appearance, but, as has been already observed, his period was one ungrateful to the iconographer. His char-

acter, not as a writer but as a man, must occupy us a little longer. For some considerable time—indeed it may be said until the publication of his letters—it was not very favorably judged on the whole. We may, of course, dismiss the childish scandals (arising, as usual, from clumsy or malevolent misinterpretation of such books as the *Physiologie de Mariage*, the *Peau de Chagrin*, and a few others), which gave rise to the caricatures of him such as that of which we read, representing him in a monk's dress at a table covered with bottles and supporting a young person on his knee, the whole garnished with the epigraph: *Scenes de la Vie Cachee*. They seem to have given him, personally, a very unnecessary annoyance, and indeed he was always rather sensitive to criticism. This kind of stupid libel will never cease to be devised by the envious, swallowed by the vulgar, and simply neglected by the wise. But Balzac's peculiarities, both of life and of work, lent themselves rather fatally to a subtler misconstruction which he also anticipated and tried to remove, but which took a far stronger hold. He was represented—and in the absence of any intimate male friends to contradict the representation, it was certain to obtain some currency—as in his

artistic person a sardonic libeler of mankind, who cared only to take foibles and vices for his subjects, and who either left goodness and virtue out of sight altogether, or represented them as the qualities of fools. In private life he was held up as at the best a self-centered egotist who cared for nothing but himself and his own work, capable of interrupting one friend who told him of the death of a sister by the suggestion that they should change the subject and talk of “something real, of *Eugenie Grandet*,” and of levying a fifty per cent commission on another who had written a critical notice of his, Balzac's, life and works.*

With the first of these charges he himself, on different occasions, rather vainly endeavored to grapple, once drawing up an elaborate list of his virtuous and vicious women, and showing that the former outnumbered the latter; and, again, laboring (with that curious lack of sense of humor which distinguishes all Frenchmen but a very few, and distinguished

*Sandeau and Gautier, the victims in these two stories, were neither spiteful, nor mendacious, nor irrational, so they are probably true. The second was possibly due to Balzac's odd notions of “business being business.” The first, I have quite recently seen reason to think, may have been a sort of reminiscence of one of the traits in Diderot's extravagant encomium on Richardson.

him eminently) to show that though no doubt it is very difficult to make a virtuous person interesting, he, Honore de Balzac, had attempted it, and succeeded in it, on a quite surprising number of occasions.

The fact is that if he had handled this last matter rather more lightly his answer would have been a sufficient one, and that in any case the charge is not worth answering. It does not lie against the whole of his work; and if it lay as conclusively as it does against Swift's, it would not necessarily matter. To the artist in analysis as opposed to the romance-writer, folly always, and villainy sometimes, does supply a much better subject than virtuous success, and if he makes his fools and his villains lifelike and supplies them with a fair contrast of better things, there is nothing more to be said. He will not, indeed, be a Shakespeare, or a Dante, or even a Scott; but we may be very well satisfied with him as a Fielding, a Thackeray, or a Balzac. As to the more purely personal matter I own that it was some time before I could persuade myself that Balzac, to speak familiarly, was a much better fellow than others, and I myself, have been accustomed to think him. But it is also some time since I came to the con-

clusion that he was so, and my conversion is not to be attributed to any editorial retainer. His education in a lawyer's office, the accursed advice about the *bonne speculation*, and his constant straitenings for money, will account for his sometimes looking after the main chance rather too narrowly; and as for the Eugenie Grandet story (even if the supposition referred to in a note above be fanciful) it requires no great stretch of charity or comprehension to see in it nothing more awkward, very easily misconstrued, but not necessarily in the least heartless or brutal attempt of a rather absent and very much self-centered recluse absorbed in one subject, to get his interlocutor as well as himself out of painful and useless dwelling on sorrowful matters. Self-centered and self-absorbed Balzac no doubt was; he could not have lived his life or produced his work if he had been anything else. And it must be remembered that he owed extremely little to others; that he had the independence as well as the isolation of the self-centered; that he never sponged or fawned on a great man, or wronged others of what was due to them. The only really unpleasant thing about him that I know, and even this is perhaps due to ignorance of all sides of the matter, is a

slight touch of snobbishness now and then, especially in those late letters from Vierzschovnia to Madame de Balzac and Madame Surville, in which, while inundating his mother and sister with commissions and requests for service, he points out to them what great people the Hanskas and Mniszechs are, what infinite honor and profit it will be to be connected with them, and how desirable it is to keep struggling engineer brothers-in-law and ne'er-do-well brothers in the colonies out of sight lest they should disgust the magnates.

But these are “sma’ sums, sma’ sums,” as Bailie Jarvie says; and smallness of any kind has, whatever it may have to do with Balzac the man, nothing to do with Balzac the writer. With him as with some others, but not as with the larger number, the sense of *greatness* increases the longer and the more fully he is studied. He resembles, I think, Goethe more than any other man of letters—certainly more than any other of the present century—in having done work which is very frequently, if not even commonly, faulty, and in yet requiring that his work shall be known as a whole. His appeal is cumulative; it repeats itself on each occasion with a slight difference, and though there may now and then be the same

faults to be noticed, they are almost invariably accompanied, not merely by the same, but by fresh merits.

As has been said at the beginning of this essay, no attempt will be made in it to give that running survey of Balzac’s work which is always useful and sometimes indispensable in treatment of the kind. But something like a summing up of that subject will here be attempted because it is really desirable that in embarking on so vast a voyage the reader should have some general chart—some notes of the soundings and log generally of those who have gone before him.

There are two things, then, which it is more especially desirable to keep constantly before one in reading Balzac—two things which, taken together, constitute his almost unique value, and two things which not a few critics have failed to take together in him, being under the impression that the one excludes the other, and that to admit the other is tantamount to a denial of the one. These two things are, first, an immense attention to detail, sometimes observed, sometimes invented or imagined; and secondly; a faculty of regarding these details through a mental lens or arrangement of lenses almost peculiar to himself, which at once combines, enlarges,

and invests them with a peculiar magical halo or mirage. The two thousand personages of the *Comedie Humaine* are, for the most part, “signaled,” as the French official word has it, marked and denoted by the minutest traits of character, gesture, gait, clothing, abode, what not; the transactions recorded are very often given with a scrupulous and microscopic accuracy of reporting which no detective could outdo. Defoe is not more circumstantial in detail of fact than Balzac; Richardson is hardly more prodigal of character-stroke. Yet a very large proportion of these characters, of these circumstances, are evidently things invented or imagined, not observed. And in addition to this the artist’s magic glass, his Balzacian speculum, if we may so say (for none else has ever had it), transforms even the most rigid observation into something flickering and fanciful, the outline as of shadows on the wall, not the precise contour of etching or of the camera.

It is curious, but not unexampled, that both Balzac himself when he struggled in argument with his critics and those of his partisans who have been most zealously devoted to him, have usually tried to exalt the first and less remarkable of these gifts over the second and infinitely more remark-

able. Balzac protested strenuously against the use of the word “gigantesque” in reference to his work; and of course it is susceptible of an unhandsome innuendo. But if we leave that innuendo aside, if we adopt the sane reflection that “gigantesque” does not exceed “gigantic,” or assert as constant failure of greatness, but only indicates that the magnifying process is carried on with a certain indiscriminateness, we shall find none, I think, which so thoroughly well describes him.

The effect of this singular combination of qualities, apparently the most opposite, may be partly anticipated, but not quite. It results occasionally in a certain shortcoming as regards *verite vraie*, absolute artistic truth to nature. Those who would range Balzac in point of such artistic veracity on a level with poetical and universal realists like Shakespeare and Dante, or prosaic and particular realists like Thackeray and Fielding, seem not only to be utterly wrong but to pay their idol the worst of all compliments, that of ignoring his own special qualifications. The province of Balzac may not be—I do not think it is—identical, much less co-extensive, with that of nature. But it is his own—a partly real, partly fantas-

tic region, where the lights, the shades, the dimensions, and the physical laws are slightly different from those of this world of ours, but with which, owing to the things it has in common with that world, we are able to sympathize, which we can traverse and comprehend. Every now and then the artist uses his observing faculty more, and his magnifying and distorting lens less; every now and then he reverses the proportion. Some tastes will like him best in the one stage; some in the other; the happier constituted will like him best in both. These latter will decline to put *Eugenie Grandet* above the *Peau de Chagrin*, or *Le Pere Goriot* above the wonderful handful of tales which includes *La Recherche de l'Absolu* and *Le Chef-d'oeuvre Inconnu*, though they will no doubt recognize that even in the first two named members of these pairs the Balzacian quality, that of magnifying and rendering grandiose, is present, and that the martyrdom of Eugenie, the avarice of her father, the blind self-devotion of Goriot to his thankless and worthless children, would not be what they are if they were seen through a perfectly achromatic and normal medium.

This specially Balzacian quality is, I think, unique. It is

like—it may almost be said to *be*—the poetic imagination, present in magnificent volume and degree, but in some miraculous way deprived and sterilized of the specially poetical quality. By this I do not of course mean that Balzac did not write in verse: we have a few verses of his, and they are pretty bad, but that is neither here nor there. The difference between Balzac and a great poet lies not in the fact that the one fills the whole page with printed words, and the other only a part of it—but in something else. If I could put that something else into distinct words I should therein attain the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life, the *primum mobile*, the *grand arcanum*, not merely of criticism but of all things. It might be possible to coast about it, to hint at it, by adumbrations and in consequences. But it is better and really more helpful to face the difficulty boldly, and to say that Balzac, approaching a great poet nearer perhaps than any other prose writer in any language, is distinguished from one by the absence of the very last touch, the finally constituting quiddity, which makes a great poet different from Balzac.

Now, when we make this comparison, it is of the first interest to remember—and it is one of the uses of the com-

parison, that it suggests the remembrance of the fact—that the great poets have usually been themselves extremely exact observers of detail. It has not made them great poets; but they would not be great poets without it. And when Eugenie Grandet starts from *le petit banc de bois* at the reference to it in her scoundrelly cousin's letter (to take only one instance out of a thousand), we see in Balzac the same observation, subject to the limitation just mentioned, that we see in Dante and Shakespeare, in Chaucer and Tennyson. But the great poets do not as a rule *accumulate* detail. Balzac does, and from this very accumulation he manages to derive that singular gigantesque vagueness—differing from the poetic vague, but ranking next to it—which I have here ventured to note as his distinguishing quality. He bewilders us a very little by it, and he gives us the impression that he has slightly bewildered himself. But the compensations of the bewilderment are large.

For in this labyrinth and whirl of things, in this heat and hurry of observation and imagination, the special intoxication of Balzac consists. Every great artist has his own means of producing this intoxication, and it differs in result like the

stimulus of beauty or of wine. Those persons who are unfortunate enough to see in Balzac little or nothing but an ingenious piler-up of careful strokes—a man of science taking his human documents and classing them after an orderly fashion in portfolio and deed-box—must miss this intoxication altogether. It is much more agreeable as well as much more accurate to see in the manufacture of the *Comedie* the process of a Cyclopean workshop—the bustle, the hurry, the glare and shadow, the steam and sparks of Vulcanian forging. The results, it is true, are by no means confused or disorderly—neither were those of the forges that worked under Lipari—but there certainly went much more to them than the dainty fingering of a literary fretwork-maker or the dull rummagings of a realist *a la Zola*.

In part, no doubt, and in great part, the work of Balzac is dream-stuff rather than life-stuff, and it is all the better for that. What is better than dreams? But the coherence of his visions, their bulk, their solidity, the way in which they return to us and we return to them, make them such dream-stuff as there is all too little of in this world. If it is true that evil on the whole predominates over good in the vision of

this “Voyant,” as Philarete Chasles so justly called him, two very respectable, and in one case very large, though somewhat opposed divisions of mankind, the philosophic pessimist and the convinced and consistent Christian believer, will tell us that this is at least not one of the points in which it is unfaithful to life. If the author is closer and more faithful in his study of meanness and vice than in his studies of nobility and virtue, the blame is due at least as much to his models as to himself. If he has seldom succeeded in combining a really passionate with a really noble conception of love, very few of his countrymen have been more fortunate in that respect. If in some of his types—his journalists, his married women, and others—he seems to have sacrificed to conventions, let us remember that those who know attribute to his conventions such a power if not altogether such a holy influence that two generations of the people he painted have actually lived more and more up to his painting of them.

And last of all, but also greatest, has to be considered the immensity of his imaginative achievement, the huge space that he has filled for us with vivid creation, the range of amusement, of instruction, of (after a fashion) edification

which he has thrown open for us all to walk in. It is possible that he himself and others more or less well-meaningly, though more or less maladroitly, following his lead, may have exaggerated the coherence and the architectural design of the *Comedie*. But it has coherence and it has design; nor shall we find anything exactly to parallel it. In mere bulk the *Comedie* probably, if not certainly, exceeds the production of any novelist of the first class in any kind of fiction except Dumas, and with Dumas, for various and well-known reasons, there is no possibility of comparing it. All others yield in bulk; all in a certain concentration and intensity; none even aims at anything like the same system and completeness. It must be remembered that owing to shortness of life, lateness of beginning, and the diversion of the author to other work, the *Comedie* is the production, and not the sole production, of some seventeen or eighteen years at most. Not a volume of it, for all that failure to reach the completest perfection in form and style which has been acknowledged, can be accused of thinness, of scamped work, of mere repetition, of mere cobbling up. Every one bears the marks of steady and ferocious labor, as well as of the genius which had at last

come where it had been so earnestly called and had never gone away again. It is possible to overpraise Balzac in parts or to mispraise him as a whole. But so long as inappropriate and superfluous comparisons are avoided and as his own excellence is recognized and appreciated, it is scarcely possible to overestimate that excellence in itself and for itself. He stands alone; even with Dickens, who is his nearest analogue, he shows far more points of difference than of likeness. His vastness of bulk is not more remarkable than his peculiarity of quality; and when these two things coincide in literature or elsewhere, then that in which they coincide may be called, and must be called, Great, without hesitation and without reserve.

George Saintsbury.

APPENDIX

THE BALZAC PLAN OF THE COMEDIE HUMAINE

The form in which the Comedie Humaine was left by its author, with the exceptions of *Le Depute d'Arcis* (incomplete) and *Les Petits Bourgeois*, both of which were added, some years later, by the Edition Definitive.

The original French titles are followed by their English equivalents. Literal translations have been followed, excepting a few instances where preference is shown for a clearer or more comprehensive English title.

[Note from Team Balzac, the Etext preparers: In some cases more than one English translation is commonly used for various translations/ editions. In such cases the first translation is from the Saintsbury edition copyrighted in 1901 and that is the title referred to in the personages following most of the stories. We have added other title translations of which we are currently aware for the readers' convenience.]

Balzac

Comedie Humaine

Scenes de la Vie Privee

Scenes From Private Life

La Maison du Chat-qui Pelote

At the Sign of the Cat and Racket

Le Bal de Sceaux

The Ball at Sceaux

La Bourse

The Purse

La Vendetta

The Vendetta

Mme. Firmiani

Madame Firmiani

Une Double Famille

A Second Home

La Paix du Menage

Domestic Peace

La Fausse Maitresse

The Imaginary Mistress Paz

Etude de femme

A Study of Woman

Autre etude de femme

Another Study of Woman

La Grande Breteche

La Grand Breteche

Albert Savarus

Albert Savarus

The Human Comedy: Introductions & Appendix

Memoires de deux Jeunes Mariees

Letters of Two Brides

Une Fille d'Eve

A Daughter of Eve

La Femme de Trente Ans

A Woman of Thirty

La Femme abandonnee

The Deserted Woman

La Grenadiere

La Grenadiere

Le Message

The Message

Gobseck

Gobseck

Le Contrat de Mariage

A Marriage Settlement

A Marriage Contract

Un Debut dans la vie

A Start in Life

Modeste Mignon

Modeste Mignon

Beatrix

Beatrix

Honorine

Honorine

Le Colonel Chabert

Colonel Chabert

La Messe de l'Athee

The Atheist's Mass

L'Interdiction

The Commission in Lunacy

Pierre Grassou

Pierre Grassou

Ursule Mirouet

Ursule Mirouet

Eugenie Grandet

Eugenie Grandet

Les Celibataires:

Pierrette

Le Cure de Tours

The Celibates:

Pierrette

The Vicar of Tours

Un Menage de Garcon

A Bachelor's Establishment

The Two Brothers

The Black Sheep

The Human Comedy: Introductions & Appendix

Les Parisiens en Province:

L'illustre Gaudissart

La Muse du département

Parisians in the Country:

Gaudissart the Great

The Illustrious Gaudissart

The Muse of the Department

Les Rivalites:

La Vieille Fille

Le Cabinet des antiques

The Jealousies of a Country Town:

The Old Maid

The Collection of Antiquities

Le Lys dans la Vallée

The Lily of the Valley

Illusions Perdues:—I.

Les Deux Poetes

Un Grand homme de province a Paris, 1re partie

Lost Illusions:—I.

The Two Poets

A Distinguished Provincial at Paris, Part 1

Illusions Perdues:—II.

Un Grand homme de province, 2e p.

Eve et David

Lost Illusions:—II.

A Distinguished Provincial at Paris, Part 2

Eve and David

Balzac

Scenes de la Vie Parisienne

Scenes from Parisian Life

Splendeurs et Miseres des Courtisanes:

Esther heureuse

A combien l'amour revient aux vieillards

Ou menent les mauvais Chemins

La derniere Incarnation de Vautrin

Scenes from a Courtesan's Life:

Esther Happy

What Love Costs an Old Man

The End of Evil Ways

Vautrin's Last Avatar

Un Prince de la Boheme

A Prince of Bohemia

Un Homme d'affaires

A Man of Business

Gaudissart II.

Gaudissart II.

Les Comediens sans le savoir

The Unconscious Humorists

The Unconscious Comedians

Histoire des Treize: The Thirteen:

Ferragus

La Duchesse de Langeais

La Fille aux yeux d'or

The Thirteen:

Ferragus

The Duchesse de Langeais

The Girl with the Golden Eyes

Le Pere Goriot

Father Goriot

Grandeur et Decadence de Cesar Birotteau

The Rise and Fall of Cesar Birotteau

The Human Comedy: Introductions & Appendix

La Maison Nucingen

The Firm of Nucingen

Les Secrets de la princesse de Cadignan

The Secrets of a Princess

The Secrets of the Princess Cadignan

Les Employes

The Government Clerks Bureaucracy

Sarrasine

Sarrasine

Facino Cane

Facine Cane

Les Parents Pauvres:—I.

La Cousine Bette

Poor Relations:—I.

Cousin Betty

Les Parents Pauvres:—II.

Le Cousin Pons

Poor Relations:—II.

Cousin Pons

Les Petits Bourgeois

The Middle Classes

The Lesser Bourgeoise

Balzac

Scenes de la Vie Politique

Z. Marcas

Scenes from Political Life

Z. Marcas

Une Tenebreuse Affaire

The Gondreville Mystery

An Historical Mystery

Le Depute d'Arcis

The Member for Arcis

The Deputy for Arcis

Un Episode sous la Terreur

An Episode Under the Terror

L'Envers de l'Histoire Contemporaine:

Mme. de la Chanterie

The Seamy Side of History:

The Brotherhood of Consolation:

Madame de la Chanterie

L'Initie

Initiated

The Initiate

The Human Comedy: Introductions & Appendix

Scenes de la Vie Militaire
Scenes from Military Life

Les Chouans
The Chouans

Une Passion dans le desert
A Passion in the Desert

Scenes de la Vie de Campagne
Scenes from Country Life

Le Medecin de Campagne
The Country Doctor

Le Cure de Village
The Country Parson
The Village Rector

Les Paysans
The Peasantry
Sons of the Soil

Balzac

Etudes Philosophiques
Philosophical Studies

La Peau de Chagrin
The Magic Skin

La Recherche de l'Absolu
The Quest of the Absolute
The Alkahest

Jesus-Christ en Flandre
Christ in Flanders

Melmoth reconcilie
Melmoth Reconciled

Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu
The Unknown Masterpiece
The Hidden Masterpiece

L'Enfant Maudit
The Hated Son

Gambara
Gambara

Massimilla Doni
Massimilla Doni

Les Marana
The Maranas Juana

Adieu
Farewell

Le Requisitionnaire
The Conscript
The Recruit

El Verdugo
El Verdugo

The Human Comedy: Introductions & Appendix

Un Drame au bord de la mer

A Seaside Tragedy

Louis Lambert

A Drama on the Seashore

Louis Lambert

L'Auberge rouge

The Red Inn

Les Proscrits

The Exiles

L'Elixir de longue vie

The Elixir of Life

Seraphita

Seraphita

Maitre Cornelius

Maitre Cornelius

Sur Catherine de Medicis:

Le Martyr calviniste

La Confidence des Ruggieri

Les Deux Reves

About Catherine de' Medici:

The Calvinist Martyr

The Ruggieri's Secret

The Two Dreams

Author's Introduction

In giving the general title of “The Human Comedy” to a work begun nearly thirteen years since, it is necessary to explain its motive, to relate its origin, and briefly sketch its plan, while endeavoring to speak of these matters as though I had no personal interest in them. This is not so difficult as the public might imagine. Few works conduce to much vanity; much labor conduces to great diffidence. This observation accounts for the study of their own works made by Corneille, Moliere, and other great writers; if it is impossible to equal them in their fine conceptions, we may try to imitate them in this feeling.

The idea of *The Human Comedy* was at first as a dream to me, one of those impossible projects which we caress and then let fly; a chimera that gives us a glimpse of its smiling woman's face, and forthwith spreads its wings and returns to a heavenly realm of phantasy. But this chimera, like many another, has become a reality; has its behests, its tyranny, which must be obeyed.

The idea originated in a comparison between Humanity

and Animality.

It is a mistake to suppose that the great dispute which has lately made a stir, between Cuvier and Geoffroi Saint-Hilaire, arose from a scientific innovation. Unity of structure, under other names, had occupied the greatest minds during the two previous centuries. As we read the extraordinary writings of the mystics who studied the sciences in their relation to infinity, such as Swedenborg, Saint-Martin, and others, and the works of the greatest authors on Natural History—Leibnitz, Buffon, Charles Bonnet, etc., we detect in the *monads* of Leibnitz, in the *organic molecules* of Buffon, in the *vegetative force* of Needham, in the correlation of similar organs of Charles Bonnet—who in 1760 was so bold as to write, “Animals vegetate as plants do”—we detect, I say, the rudiments of the great law of Self for Self, which lies at the root of *Unity of Plan*. There is but one Animal. The Creator works on a single model for every organized being. “The Animal” is elementary, and takes its external form, or, to be accurate, the differences in its form, from the environment in which it is obliged to develop. Zoological species are the result of these differences. The announcement and defence

of this system, which is indeed in harmony with our preconceived ideas of Divine Power, will be the eternal glory of Geoffroi Saint-Hilaire, Cuvier's victorious opponent on this point of higher science, whose triumph was hailed by Goethe in the last article he wrote.

I, for my part, convinced of this scheme of nature long before the discussion to which it has given rise, perceived that in this respect society resembled nature. For does not society modify Man, according to the conditions in which he lives and acts, into men as manifold as the species in Zoology? The differences between a soldier, an artisan, a man of business, a lawyer, an idler, a student, a statesman, a merchant, a sailor, a poet, a beggar, a priest, are as great, though not so easy to define, as those between the wolf, the lion, the ass, the crow, the shark, the seal, the sheep, etc. Thus social species have always existed, and will always exist, just as there are zoological species. If Buffon could produce a magnificent work by attempting to represent in a book the whole realm of zoology, was there not room for a work of the same kind on society? But the limits set by nature to the variations of animals have no existence in society. When Buffon de-

scribes the lion, he dismisses the lioness with a few phrases; but in society a wife is not always the female of the male. There may be two perfectly dissimilar beings in one household. The wife of a shopkeeper is sometimes worthy of a prince, and the wife of a prince is often worthless compared with the wife of an artisan. The social state has freaks which Nature does not allow herself; it is nature *plus* society. The description of social species would thus be at least double that of animal species, merely in view of the two sexes. Then, among animals the drama is limited; there is scarcely any confusion; they turn and rend each other—that is all. Men, too, rend each other; but their greater or less intelligence makes the struggle far more complicated. Though some savants do not yet admit that the animal nature flows into human nature through an immense tide of life, the grocer certainly becomes a peer, and the noble sometimes sinks to the lowest social grade. Again, Buffon found that life was extremely simple among animals. Animals have little property, and neither arts nor sciences; while man, by a law that has yet to be sought, has a tendency to express his culture, his thoughts, and his life in everything he appropriates to his

use. Though Leuwenhoek, Swammerdam, Spallanzani, Reaumur, Charles Bonnet, Muller, Haller and other patient investigators have shown us how interesting are the habits of animals, those of each kind, are, at least to our eyes, always and in every age alike; whereas the dress, the manners, the speech, the dwelling of a prince, a banker, an artist, a citizen, a priest, and a pauper are absolutely unlike, and change with every phase of civilization.

Hence the work to be written needed a threefold form—men, women, and things; that is to say, persons and the material expression of their minds; man, in short, and life.

As we read the dry and discouraging list of events called History, who can have failed to note that the writers of all periods, in Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome, have forgotten to give us a history of manners? The fragment of Petronius on the private life of the Romans excites rather than satisfies our curiosity. It was from observing this great void in the field of history that the Abbe Barthelemy devoted his life to a reconstruction of Greek manners in *Le Jeune Anacharsis*.

But how could such a drama, with the four or five thousand persons which society offers, be made interesting? How,

at the same time, please the poet, the philosopher, and the masses who want both poetry and philosophy under striking imagery? Though I could conceive of the importance and of the poetry of such a history of the human heart, I saw no way of writing it; for hitherto the most famous storytellers had spent their talent in creating two or three typical actors, in depicting one aspect of life. It was with this idea that I read the works of Walter Scott. Walter Scott, the modern troubadour, or finder (*trouvere=trouveur*), had just then given an aspect of grandeur to a class of composition unjustly regarded as of the second rank. Is it not really more difficult to compete with personal and parochial interests by writing of Daphnis and Chloe, Roland, Amadis, Panurge, Don Quixote, Manon Lescaut, Clarissa, Lovelace, Robinson Crusoe, Gil Blas, Ossian, Julie d'Etanges, My Uncle Toby, Werther, Corinne, Adolphe, Paul and Virginia, Jeanie Deans, Claverhouse, Ivanhoe, Manfred, Mignon, than to set forth in order facts more or less similar in every country, to investigate the spirit of laws that have fallen into desuetude, to review the theories which mislead nations, or, like some metaphysicians, to explain what *Is*? In the first place, these actors,

whose existence becomes more prolonged and more authentic than that of the generations which saw their birth, almost always live solely on condition of their being a vast reflection of the present. Conceived in the womb of their own period, the whole heart of humanity stirs within their frame, which often covers a complete system of philosophy. Thus Walter Scott raised to the dignity of the philosophy of History the literature which, from age to age, sets perennial gems in the poetic crown of every nation where letters are cultivated. He vivified it with the spirit of the past; he combined drama, dialogue, portrait, scenery, and description; he fused the marvelous with truth—the two elements of the times; and he brought poetry into close contact with the familiarity of the humblest speech. But as he had not so much devised a system as hit upon a manner in the ardor of his work, or as its logical outcome, he never thought of connecting his compositions in such a way as to form a complete history of which each chapter was a novel, and each novel the picture of a period.

It was by discerning this lack of unity, which in no way detracts from the Scottish writer's greatness, that I perceived

at once the scheme which would favor the execution of my purpose, and the possibility of executing it. Though dazzled, so to speak, by Walter Scott's amazing fertility, always himself and always original, I did not despair, for I found the source of his genius in the infinite variety of human nature. Chance is the greatest romancer in the world; we have only to study it. French society would be the real author; I should only be the secretary. By drawing up an inventory of vices and virtues, by collecting the chief facts of the passions, by depicting characters, by choosing the principal incidents of social life, by composing types out of a combination of homogeneous characteristics, I might perhaps succeed in writing the history which so many historians have neglected: that of Manners. By patience and perseverance I might produce for France in the nineteenth century the book which we must all regret that Rome, Athens, Tyre, Memphis, Persia, and India have not bequeathed to us; that history of their social life which, prompted by the Abbe Barthelemy, Monteil patiently and steadily tried to write for the Middle Ages, but in an unattractive form.

This work, so far, was nothing. By adhering to the strict

lines of a reproduction a writer might be a more or less faithful, and more or less successful, painter of types of humanity, a narrator of the dramas of private life, an archaeologist of social furniture, a cataloguer of professions, a registrar of good and evil; but to deserve the praise of which every artist must be ambitious, must I not also investigate the reasons or the cause of these social effects, detect the hidden sense of this vast assembly of figures, passions, and incidents? And finally, having sought—I will not say having found—this reason, this motive power, must I not reflect on first principles, and discover in what particulars societies approach or deviate from the eternal law of truth and beauty? In spite of the wide scope of the preliminaries, which might of themselves constitute a book, the work, to be complete, would need a conclusion. Thus depicted, society ought to bear in itself the reason of its working.

The law of the writer, in virtue of which he is a writer, and which I do not hesitate to say makes him the equal, or perhaps the superior, of the statesman, is his judgment, whatever it may be, on human affairs, and his absolute devotion to certain principles. Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bossuet, Leibnitz,

Kant, Montesquieu, *are* the science which statesmen apply. “A writer ought to have settled opinions on morals and politics; he should regard himself as a tutor of men; for men need no masters to teach them to doubt,” says Bonald. I took these noble words as my guide long ago; they are the written law of the monarchical writer. And those who would confute me by my own words will find that they have misinterpreted some ironical phrase, or that they have turned against me a speech given to one of my actors—a trick peculiar to calumniators.

As to the intimate purpose, the soul of this work, these are the principles on which it is based.

Man is neither good nor bad; he is born with instincts and capabilities; society, far from depraving him, as Rousseau asserts, improves him, makes him better; but self-interest also develops his evil tendencies. Christianity, above all, Catholicism, being—as I have pointed out in the *Country Doctor* (*le Medecin de Campagne*)—a complete system for the repression of the depraved tendencies of man, is the most powerful element of social order.

In reading attentively the presentment of society cast, as it

were, from the life, with all that is good and all that is bad in it, we learn this lesson—if thought, or if passion, which combines thought and feeling, is the vital social element, it is also its destructive element. In this respect social life is like the life of man. Nations live long only by moderating their vital energy. Teaching, or rather education, by religious bodies is the grand principle of life for nations, the only means of diminishing the sum of evil and increasing the sum of good in all society. Thought, the living principle of good and ill, can only be trained, quelled, and guided by religion. The only possible religion is Christianity (see the letter from Paris in “Louis Lambert,” in which the young mystic explains, *a propos* to Swedenborg’s doctrines, how there has never been but one religion since the world began). Christianity created modern nationalities, and it will preserve them. Hence, no doubt, the necessity for the monarchical principle. Catholicism and Royalty are twin principles.

As to the limits within which these two principles should be confined by various institutions, so that they may not become absolute, every one will feel that a brief preface ought not to be a political treatise. I cannot, therefore, enter on

religious discussions, nor on the political discussions of the day. I write under the light of two eternal truths—Religion and Monarchy; two necessities, as they are shown to be by contemporary events, towards which every writer of sound sense ought to try to guide the country back. Without being an enemy to election, which is an excellent principle as a basis of legislation, I reject election regarded as *the only social instrument*, especially so badly organized as it now is (1842); for it fails to represent imposing minorities, whose ideas and interests would occupy the attention of a monarchical government. Elective power extended to all gives us government by the masses, the only irresponsible form of government, under which tyranny is unlimited, for it calls itself law. Besides, I regard the family and not the individual as the true social unit. In this respect, at the risk of being thought retrograde, I side with Bossuet and Bonald instead of going with modern innovators. Since election has become the only social instrument, if I myself were to exercise it no contradiction between my acts and my words should be inferred. An engineer points out that a bridge is about to fall, that it is dangerous for any one to cross it; but he crosses it himself

when it is the only road to the town. Napoleon adapted election to the spirit of the French nation with wonderful skill. The least important members of his Legislative Body became the most famous orators of the Chamber after the Restoration. No Chamber has ever been the equal of the *Corps Legislatif*, comparing them man for man. The elective system of the Empire was, then, indisputably the best.

Some persons may, perhaps, think that this declaration is somewhat autocratic and self-assertive. They will quarrel with the novelist for wanting to be an historian, and will call him to account for writing politics. I am simply fulfilling an obligation—that is my reply. The work I have undertaken will be as long as a history; I was compelled to explain the logic of it, hitherto unrevealed, and its principles and moral purpose.

Having been obliged to withdraw the prefaces formerly published, in response to essentially ephemeral criticisms, I will retain only one remark.

Writers who have a purpose in view, were it only a reversion to principles familiar in the past because they are eternal, should always clear the ground. Now every one who, in the domain of ideas, brings his stone by pointing out an

abuse, or setting a mark on some evil that it may be removed—every such man is stigmatized as immoral. The accusation of immorality, which has never failed to be cast at the courageous writer, is, after all, the last that can be brought when nothing else remains to be said to a romancer. If you are truthful in your pictures; if by dint of daily and nightly toil you succeed in writing the most difficult language in the world, the word *immoral* is flung in your teeth. Socrates was immoral; Jesus Christ was immoral; they both were persecuted in the name of the society they overset or reformed. When a man is to be killed he is taxed with immorality. These tactics, familiar in party warfare, are a disgrace to those who use them. Luther and Calvin knew well what they were about when they shielded themselves behind damaged worldly interests! And they lived all the days of their life.

When depicting all society, sketching it in the immensity of its turmoil, it happened—it could not but happen—that the picture displayed more of evil than of good; that some part of the fresco represented a guilty couple; and the critics at once raised a cry of immorality, without pointing out the morality of another position intended to be a perfect con-

trast. As the critic knew nothing of the general plan I could forgive him, all the more because one can no more hinder criticism than the use of eyes, tongues, and judgment. Also the time for an impartial verdict is not yet come for me. And, after all, the author who cannot make up his mind to face the fire of criticism should no more think of writing than a traveler should start on his journey counting on a perpetually clear sky. On this point it remains to be said that the most conscientious moralists doubt greatly whether society can show as many good actions as bad ones; and in the picture I have painted of it there are more virtuous figures than reprehensible ones. Blameworthy actions, faults and crimes, from the lightest to the most atrocious, always meet with punishment, human or divine, signal or secret. I have done better than the historian, for I am free. Cromwell here on earth escaped all punishment but that inflicted by thoughtful men. And on this point there have been divided schools. Bossuet even showed some consideration for great regicide. William of Orange, the usurper, Hugues Capet, another usurper, lived to old age with no more qualms or fears than Henri IV. or Charles I. The lives of Catherine II. and of

Frederick of Prussia would be conclusive against any kind of moral law, if they were judged by the twofold aspect of the morality which guides ordinary mortals, and that which is in use by crowned heads; for, as Napoleon said, for kings and statesmen there are the lesser and the higher morality. My scenes of political life are founded on this profound observation. It is not a law to history, as it is to romance, to make for a beautiful ideal. History is, or ought to be, what it was; while romance ought to be “the better world,” as was said by Mme. Necker, one of the most distinguished thinkers of the last century.

Still, with this noble falsity, romance would be nothing if it were not true in detail. Walter Scott, obliged as he was to conform to the ideas of an essentially hypocritical nation, was false to humanity in his picture of woman, because his models were schismatics. The Protestant woman has no ideal. She may be chaste, pure, virtuous; but her unexpansive love will always be as calm and methodical as the fulfilment of a duty. It might seem as though the Virgin Mary had chilled the hearts of those sophists who have banished her from heaven with her treasures of loving kindness. In Protestant-

ism there is no possible future for the woman who has sinned; while, in the Catholic Church, the hope of forgiveness makes her sublime. Hence, for the Protestant writer there is but one Woman, while the Catholic writer finds a new woman in each new situation. If Walter Scott had been a Catholic, if he had set himself the task of describing truly the various phases of society which have successively existed in Scotland, perhaps the painter of Effie and Alice—the two figures for which he blamed himself in his later years—might have admitted passion with its sins and punishments, and the virtues revealed by repentance. Passion is the sum-total of humanity. Without passion, religion, history, romance, art, would all be useless.

Some persons, seeing me collect such a mass of facts and paint them as they are, with passion for their motive power, have supposed, but wrongly, that I must belong to the school of Sensualism and Materialism—two aspects of the same thing—Pantheism. But their misapprehension was perhaps justified—or inevitable. I do not share the belief in indefinite progress for society as a whole; I believe in man's improvement in himself. Those who insist on reading in me

the intention to consider man as a finished creation are strangely mistaken. *Seraphita*, the doctrine in action of the Christian Buddha, seems to me an ample answer to this rather heedless accusation.

In certain fragments of this long work I have tried to popularize the amazing facts, I may say the marvels, of electricity, which in man is metamorphosed into an incalculable force; but in what way do the phenomena of brain and nerves, which prove the existence of an undiscovered world of psychology, modify the necessary and undoubted relations of the worlds to God? In what way can they shake the Catholic dogma? Though irrefutable facts should some day place thought in the class of fluids which are discerned only by their effects while their substance evades our senses, even when aided by so many mechanical means, the result will be the same as when Christopher Columbus detected that the earth is a sphere, and Galileo demonstrated its rotation. Our future will be unchanged. The wonders of animal magnetism, with which I have been familiar since 1820; the beautiful experiments of Gall, Lavater's successor; all the men who have studied mind as opticians have studied light—two not

dissimilar things—point to a conclusion in favor of the mystics, the disciples of St. John, and of those great thinkers who have established the spiritual world—the sphere in which are revealed the relations of God and man.

A sure grasp of the purport of this work will make it clear that I attach to common, daily facts, hidden or patent to the eye, to the acts of individual lives, and to their causes and principles, the importance which historians have hitherto ascribed to the events of public national life. The unknown struggle which goes on in a valley of the Indre between Mme. de Mortsauf and her passion is perhaps as great as the most famous of battles (*Le Lys dans la Vallée*). In one the glory of the victor is at stake; in the other it is heaven. The misfortunes of the two Birotteaus, the priest and the perfumer, to me are those of mankind. La Fosseuse (*Medecin de Campagne*) and Mme. Graslin (*Cure de Village*) are almost the sum-total of woman. We all suffer thus every day. I have had to do a hundred times what Richardson did but once. Lovelace has a thousand forms, for social corruption takes the hues of the medium in which it lives. Clarissa, on the contrary, the lovely image of impassioned virtue, is drawn in lines of distracting

purity. To create a variety of Virgins it needs a Raphael. In this respect, perhaps literature must yield to painting.

Still, I may be allowed to point out how many irreproachable figures—as regards their virtue—are to be found in the portions of this work already published: Pierrette Lorrain, Ursule Mirouet, Constance Birotteau, La Fosseuse, Eugenie Grandet, Marguerite Claes, Pauline de Villenoix, Madame Jules, Madame de la Chanterie, Eve Chardon, Mademoiselle d'Esgrignon, Madame Firmiani, Agathe Rouget, Renee de Maucombe; besides several figures in the middle-distance, who, though less conspicuous than these, nevertheless, offer the reader an example of domestic virtue: Joseph Lebas, Genestas, Benassis, Bonnet the cure, Minoret the doctor, Pillerault, David Sechard, the two Birotteaus, Chaperon the priest, Judge Popinot, Bourgeat, the Sauviats, the Tascherons, and many more. Do not all these solve the difficult literary problem which consists in making a virtuous person interesting?

It was no small task to depict the two or three thousand conspicuous types of a period; for this is, in fact, the number presented to us by each generation, and which the Human Comedy will require. This crowd of actors, of characters,

this multitude of lives, needed a setting—if I may be pardoned the expression, a gallery. Hence the very natural division, as already known, into the Scenes of Private Life, of Provincial Life, of Parisian, Political, Military, and Country Life. Under these six heads are classified all the studies of manners which form the history of society at large, of all its *faits et gestes*, as our ancestors would have said. These six classes correspond, indeed, to familiar conceptions. Each has its own sense and meaning, and answers to an epoch in the life of man. I may repeat here, but very briefly, what was written by Felix Davin—a young genius snatched from literature by an early death. After being informed of my plan, he said that the Scenes of Private Life represented childhood and youth and their errors, as the Scenes of Provincial Life represented the age of passion, scheming, self-interest, and ambition. Then the Scenes of Parisian Life give a picture of the tastes and vice and unbridled powers which conduce to the habits peculiar to great cities, where the extremes of good and evil meet. Each of these divisions has its local color—Paris and the Provinces—a great social antithesis which held for me immense resources.

And not man alone, but the principal events of life, fall into classes by types. There are situations which occur in every life, typical phases, and this is one of the details I most sought after. I have tried to give an idea of the different districts of our fine country. My work has its geography, as it has its genealogy and its families, its places and things, its persons and their deeds; as it has its heraldry, its nobles and commonalty, its artisans and peasants, its politicians and dandies, its army—in short, a whole world of its own.

After describing social life in these three portions, I had to delineate certain exceptional lives, which comprehend the interests of many people, or of everybody, and are in a degree outside the general law. Hence we have Scenes of Political Life. This vast picture of society being finished and complete, was it not needful to display it in its most violent phase, beside itself, as it were, either in self-defence or for the sake of conquest? Hence the Scenes of Military Life, as yet the most incomplete portion of my work, but for which room will be allowed in this edition, that it may form part of it when done. Finally, the Scenes of Country Life are, in a way, the evening of this long day, if I may so call the social drama. In that part

are to be found the purest natures, and the application of the great principles of order, politics, and morality.

Such is the foundation, full of actors, full of comedies and tragedies, on which are raised the Philosophical Studies—the second part of my work, in which the social instrument of all these effects is displayed, and the ravages of the mind are painted, feeling after feeling; the first of the series, *The Magic Skin*, to some extent forms a link between the Philosophical Studies and Studies of Manners, by a work of almost Oriental fancy, in which life itself is shown in a mortal struggle with the very element of all passion.

Besides these, there will be a series of Analytical Studies, of which I will say nothing, for one only is published as yet—*The Physiology of Marriage*.

In the course of time I purpose writing two more works of this class. First the *Pathology of Social Life*, then an *Anatomy of Educational Bodies*, and a *Monograph on Virtue*.

In looking forward to what remains to be done, my readers will perhaps echo what my publishers say, “Please God to spare you!” I only ask to be less tormented by men and things than I have hitherto been since I began this terrific labor. I

have had this in my favor, and I thank God for it, that the talents of the time, the finest characters and the truest friends, as noble in their private lives as the former are in public life, have wrung my hand and said, Courage!

And why should I not confess that this friendship, and the testimony here and there of persons unknown to me, have upheld me in my career, both against myself and against unjust attacks; against the calumny which has often persecuted me, against discouragement, and against the too eager hopefulness whose utterances are misinterpreted as those of overwhelming conceit? I had resolved to display stolid stoicism in the face of abuse and insults; but on two occasions base slanders have necessitated a reply. Though the advocates of forgiveness of injuries may regret that I should have displayed my skill in literary fence, there are many Christians who are of opinion that we live in times when it is as well to show sometimes that silence springs from generosity.

The vastness of a plan which includes both a history and a criticism of society, an analysis of its evils, and a discussion of its principles, authorizes me, I think, in giving to my work the title under which it now appears—*The Human Comedy*.

Is this too ambitious? Is it not exact? That, when it is complete, the public must pronounce.

Paris, July 1842

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