

## Balzac: Our Contemporary

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HONORÉ DE BALZAC WROTE in *Le Lys dans la Vallée* that “novels embody ideas.” He wrote almost 100 novels and short stories; what are his ideas? We owe him an answer in celebrating his bicentenary (1799-1850) but more importantly because not a few of his ideas deal with the moral-political problems of France and other liberal democracies at present. His contemporaneity is no surprise because all great literature is about the abiding problems of civilization, and the writings of the “Shakespeare of novels” are no exception.

In the mid-eighteenth century Montesquieu (1689-1755) pointed out that politicians “do not speak to us of anything but of manufacturing, commerce, finance, riches and even of luxury” (*De l'Esprit des Lois*, III, 3). A century later Balzac made a similar discovery: “Our time is the triumph of commerce, of industry, and of the bourgeois wisdom which have created Holland” (*La Cousine Bette*). France becoming Holland is Balzac’s master theme. He saw the bourgeois triumph as a great turning point in European history, whose impact on many private lives he would disclose in novel after novel.

He has a character state that “I am of my time, I honor money” (*La Cousine Bette*). A sordid scramble for wealth is the most obvious sign of Europe’s new way of life. He also creates an imaginary man whose “possession of gold had become his monomania” (*Eugénie Grandet*). Greed is in fact the central vice in Balzac’s moral diagnosis of early bourgeois modernity. “There is not a Juvenal,” he reports, “who can paint the world’s horror when sheltered by gold and gemstones” (*Le Père Goriot*).

He also registers the first appearance of commercial ads: “paid advertisements, immense revolution” (*César Birotteau*). He probably means an immense and longlasting novelty. Does not the ad-drenched consumer society of today bear out his prophecy? He also directs attention to the importance of banking in calling it a “new Kabbalah” (*César Birotteau*). I suppose he means that modern banking is for many people as dark a secret as a mystic doctrine. Every age has its Kabbalah and that of today is of institutional money flows. Financial, business, accounting matters fill some of Balzac’s pages in almost wearisome detail.

I

Of course no one knew better than Balzac that his country differed from Holland in one important respect: its regnant bour-

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geoisie emerged from the seismic upheaval of the Revolution. He called it "the great shipwreck that ended the 18th century" (*Le Lys*). It hangs heavily over his fictional people. Few were untouched by it and for some it was the most decisive event in their life. That is certainly true of the emigrants returning to France after years, even decades, in exile. Balzac records feelingly their lack of comfort returning to a new moral-political landscape. We will see later that he shares their discomfort.

Montesquieu refers to "the sort of people that one has abandoned in all ages" (*Esprit*, IV, 2). That takes in almost all the people of traditional France. Well, the Revolution woke them up to new life and energy, giving the country a dynamism unknown before. The big change took place in the imagination: sneering at the past, the people will now sail boldly into a future of new undertakings and adventures. A man of volcanic energy himself, Balzac liked to create characters of the same temper. They give his novels drama, vivacity, excitement.

Balzac has a character state that "our epoch accepts men for their personal value" (*La Cousine Bette*). That probably means not for their birth but for their talents exercised in the new commercial and other opportunities opening up for the first time. People would no longer be what their parents were. Shaking off peasant rags, they flocked into old cities stirred to new growth. Men and women now eagerly sought money, pleasures, adventures, and social advancement. A new feeling was in the air as the most important, if least tangible, fruit of the Revolution.

With new monetary and sensual rewards accessible for the first time, ambition was unleashed among growing numbers of people. But in Balzac's view the moral sense became numb in the creative exuberance of a reborn France. All sorts of means escape the indulgent cen-

sure of conscience when the end is sought zealously. Moral decline and bourgeois life therefore seem to go together. Here is the dark side of Balzac's writings; fictional vice is more common than virtue. Is it farfetched to see in Balzac's work the start of that moral erosion that is in wide evidence today in western Europe and in America?

Balzac comes upon three "terrible passions" that tyrannize human nature (*Les Chouans*). These are love, avarice, and ambition. They are always active everywhere in different degree but the last two enjoy special force in modern society. They have swept away or at least weakened self-restraints prescribed traditionally. Modernity's spectacular control of physical nature seems to go hand in hand with weakened control of human nature. Balzac's novels are rich in people effective technically but morally feeble.

Balzac creates imaginary men and women "whose life has been dedicated to one dominant idea" (*Eugénie Grandet*). He even believes that "we will all end up by a mania pushed to madness" (*Le Cousin Pons*). And so he offers us Eugénie Grandet, miser; Vautrin, archcrook; Baron Hulot, lustful wretch; Rastignac, *arriviste*; Madame Marnuffe, *femme fatale*; and Goriot, blindly overloving father. All are victims of excess of one kind or another. A soul kept in harmony by reason is hard to find.

Balzac is like Molière in creating archetypes, though the novelist provides more rounded and complex characters. Someone counted that Balzac cites Molière some 204 times in his writings, much more than any other writer. Balzac is in dialogue with French literature of the past while carrying out a pioneering portrayal of many bourgeois types. More importantly, however, he immersed himself in the life of his time, thus discovering its shortcomings.

What happened in the Revolution was that people concerned with property

pushed aside people concerned with honor. The change was not entirely to Balzac's liking as he shows in his open nostalgia for some of the Old Regime: loyalty to tradition, self-sacrificial devotion to duty, the ordered civility of refined manners, pious otherworldliness, and the search for heroic goals. Especially deplored by him was the end of *noblesse oblige*. True, it was part of an unfortunate class structure but yet it assured the compassionate care of the strong for the weak. Now with wealth and power in new hands, selfishness seems without counterweight. "Happiness makes one egotistical," Balzac has one of his characters point out (*La Recherche de l'Absolu*).

Though promoting commerce and the bourgeois life, the Revolution was also a spirited search for noble goals that are embodied in its slogan: "*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*." But Balzac claims that the third term has dropped out of the new landscape. For what he calls "individualism" is in his view "the most horrible of all evils" (*Une Fille d'Eve*). He notes the "ferocious egoism of the world" (*Le Colonel Chabert*). The self has apparently gained a moral and intellectual authority that has replaced all other authorities lost in the shipwreck. So do as you will for your truth is the only truth. Here Balzac echoes Rousseau in the belief of the Genevan that the bourgeois man is a degraded citizen, if a citizen at all.

The new society is moved not so much by new ideas—it can even be called empty of beliefs—as by material or economic interests. But according to Balzac such interests bring out the "bad tendencies" of the people, as he points out in the preface to his novels assembled as the *Human Comedy*. But interests clash among an energetic and self-centered people and so France is now torn by many conflicts. How indeed can civic harmony arise in a universal riot of self-assertions? Can such conflicts be avoided

in fact when a new fever takes hold of economic growth?

One rift is especially serious: the Revolution has created in France "two enemy nations" (*La Recherche*). This division of pro and contra the Revolution weighed very heavily on Balzac. I believe he tried to re-unite the two nations across the deep chasm of fanaticism. This motive shows up in his care in identifying the good and the bad in both the old and the new. Like Tocqueville and others of his time, he sought a mix of the good of both sources in order to guide France to better things. The mix was different, leaning to one side or the other, but the common goal at the time was reconciliation via reform to avoid another revolution. Balzac was very much a man of his time in mingling a little hope with much mis-giving.

In some novels the city of Paris seems as alive as some of Balzac's characters, and the reader enjoys walking its streets with them. Balzac even boasts that Paris "will always be the most adorable of all countries" (*La Peau de Chagrin*). He probably had in mind, among other aspects, its civilized refinement and intellectual vitality. But he is not blind to the fact that it is also the center of the new jungle of bourgeois egoism. It is where man eats man. "Paris is for them," he declares, "what the virgin forest is for ferocious animals" (*Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes*). So the most civilized of all cities is like the nasty, brutish, conflict-ridden state of nature sketched by Hobbes. That is what unbridled ambition leads to.

Not that Balzac admires the countryside. He even sneers at "the Beotian life of the provinces" (*Le Curé de Tours*). And here too each person looks on the other as an enemy: "...everything that was above him was for him an enemy toward whom all actions must be considered good" (*Une Ténébreuse Affaire*). Apparently egoism did not start with the Revo-

lution, although Balzac holds that it became stronger after it. Anyway, a bleak view of people and country finds a home in Balzac's pages.

As noted before, Balzac named his novels a "human comedy," but the term is not free of irony because happy endings and mirth are rare. Yet tragedy does not crop up either because tragedy typically deals with heroic or noble figures, who are also rare in the novels. The "majority naturally mediocre" allegedly makes up the bulk of modern society (*César Birotteau*). Their grief and sorrow, which are real enough, fall outside both comedy and tragedy. Pity is what more commonly touches the heart.

## II

Knowing it or not, novelists are evangelists of a sort. Balzac knew it in calling himself a "simple doctor in social medicine" in his last great novel, *La Cousine Bette*. Therapy follows closely upon diagnosis in the art of medicine. This takes us to the reforms in French life that are dear to Balzac. He shows us how things ought to be in showing us how they are.

But first a word of caution. He is not writing "a political treatise" and he will avoid the "political dissensions of the moment" (Préface). He probably means it while also comforting busybody censors. What is more important is his open hostility to "that political drunkenness, the most dangerous of all," as he writes in *Les Chouans*, his first great novel. "Never have zeal" (*Le Lys*) is his warning, unheeded even more in our century than in his. He is also caustic on "the cold puritans who amusing themselves in making in France some philanthropic experiences believe that they have raised the moral level of the people" (*La Cousine Bette*).

What makes him especially cool toward reform is his belief in the almost inevitable abuse of power: "all power without counterweight, without self-criti-

cal obstacles, leads to abuse, to madness. The arbitrary, it is the lunacy of power" (*La Cousine Bette*). If you love reform, love it moderately.

One more reason explains his little taste for reform. Reality often mocks reform efforts. There was in his day a strong trend, at least in rhetoric, toward democracy. He recorded it clearly: the "sovereign is certainly today the people" (*La Duchesse de Langeais*). We live in a time "where everything is levelled down" (*César Birotteau*). And what was the result of the insurgent democratic spirit? Whatever their trappings, the short-lived governments of Balzac's time were all an "aristocracy of bankers and lawyers" (*La Peau de Chagrin*). In such circumstances naivete about reform is also madness.

## III

But yet he prescribes some medicine. He asks France to re-submit itself to two "Eternal Truths": religion and monarchy (Préface). Monarchy is a needed form of authority. People "have a lively need for order" (*La Duchesse*). He adds that "societies do not exist except by hierarchy" (*Le Lys*). Society apparently needs the cohesion provided by a multi-layered structure. This view is of course an open challenge to the modern passion for equality. Balzac is not a man who goes with the flow.

One fictional character notes that "religious sentiment is missing in France" (*La Cousine Bette*). Here is one aspect of Balzac's view that modern society is empty of beliefs. Especially absent according to him is belief in an afterlife "upon which the social structure has been supported for 1800 years" (*Eugénie Grandet*). How easy is it for man alone and unaided to fall into vice Balzac illustrates with sad frequency. So he has an imaginary character exclaim that religion "will always be a political necessity" (*La Duchesse*). Even some atheists agree.

Can moral decline be arrested with-

out a revival of religion? Here is a contemporary question raised by Balzac's remarks on religion. He clearly votes no, but one point is to be added: he would not favor a revival of the Protestant faith because in his view it encourages that challenge to authority which modern France already has in harmful excess.

One more word belongs here: along with many others of his time Balzac celebrates the triumph of science, especially of medicine. Science will apparently lead the way to life's highest values in the future since it allegedly contains the truth. But Balzac's hankering after the past, some of it anyway, does not sit well with this view. As to religion, the needed centerpiece of the future according to Balzac, how much respect can it win if the truth is allegedly found outside it? The questions emerging from the novels are very much alive today.

He defends not the individual but the family as "the true social element" (Préface). He slights the individual because he is uncomfortable with the modern passion for liberty. The "principles of liberty when badly directed are powerless to create the happiness of people" (*Le Lys*). Badly defined liberty is the unrestricted dedication to passions and pleasures. For many people it is eros badly directed. It is liberty without virtue. It is liberty without a moral sense anchored in religious sentiment. As noted before, the passionate, self-willed individual of modern life is a horror to him.

The family is an authority and all the more needed when other authorities are absent. The family provides the child with the moral guidance needed as an adult. The restraints practiced in youth promote restraints practiced later on. The sacrifices required in the family train one for the civic sacrifices needed by the social order in war and peace.

The healthy family requires leadership by the father; the family needs hierarchy also. But bourgeois life draws men

into money-making at the expense of care of the family. Fortunately, women's virtues come to the rescue in safeguarding the family's common good. Balzac writes: "Feel, love, suffer, sacrifice will always be the text of the life of women" (*Eugénie Grandet*). They thereby carry out the praiseworthy role of standing against family-destroying and society-destroying egoism. They are even superior to men in Balzac's ranking because sacrifice stands higher than self-indulgence.

There is no sympathy in Balzac's novels for love outside marriage. "The indissoluble marriage," he claims, "is indispensable to European societies" (*La Rabouilleuse*). He also contrasts "the great road of virtue" with "the muddy path of the courtesan" (*Le Lys*). Moreover, a "life begun in pleasures" will end badly, as he illustrates for some fictional actresses. The erotomania of Baron Hulot in *La Cousine Bette* is an unforgettable portrait of human wretchedness.

Balzac also has a woman character exclaim: "We are, we women, more mistreated by civilization than we would be by nature" (*La Femme de Trente Ans*). This means, perhaps, that women suffer less from bodily inferiority than from social arrangements. But the reader will not find in Balzac any proposals for corrective measures. He even adds that "To emancipate women is to corrupt them" (*La Femme de Trente Ans*). This view, however, should not arouse feminist indignation for he deplores no less the lawless caprice of men.

Women make up a large share of the 3,000 or so people encountered in entering the world of Balzac. He pays more attention to women than perhaps any previous writer. Why? These speculations may help toward an answer. First, his chief interest of course is France, which he calls "the most female country of the world" (*La Duchesse*). Like a woman, "France is often deceived...by generous ideas, by warm sentiments...." (*La*

*Duchesse*) Altogether natural then is his special attention to the feminine.

Second, women were his chief readers, making some of his novels best sellers. Women are especially interested in women and so to boost sales you write about them. This commercial interest is not to be slighted because of Balzac's lifelong money problems. Third, he concerns himself much more with private than with public life. The first is especially woman's realm. And fourth, he calls himself "the historian of 'moeurs'" (*La Femme de Trente Ans*). Women more than men dominate society's morals and manners. So all in all women stand in the forefront.

There is an unintended irony in Balzac's special attention to women. New to literacy and leisure, at least in the middle class, women advanced their education by reading him. More educated, they asserted their views with more self-confidence. Eventually they even advanced their ideas on public policy. Their views became part of the public opinion that sooner or later rules democracy. So Balzac widened and strengthened a political regime little to his liking.

This point calls for another word. The environment of modern democracy is saturated with popular entertainment. Novels are entertainment as well as popular enlightenment, as Balzac writes in admitting that his aim is to please "masses who want poetry and philosophy under striking images" (Préface). Thus Balzac

advanced for men as well as for women the constituent ingredients of modern democracy.

To return to his reforms: he is clearly a conservative given his little sympathy for equality and also for liberty as commonly practiced. But that will win him little praise even among conservatives because some of his ideas seem familiar at present, even banal, but fairness demands that we recognize that what is banal today was discerning and provocative 150 years ago. Perhaps Balzac's novels helped open a path to conservative terrain today.

He can even be placed among the reactionaries in view of his reverence for some of the past, including authority, Catholic piety, and order. He himself admits that, "at the risk of being regarded as a retrograde spirit, I align myself on the side of Bossuet and of Bonald instead of going with the modern innovators" (Préface). We must credit him with knowing himself. It is therefore a mystery that at Balzac's funeral Victor Hugo hailed him as a "revolutionary." Maybe Hugo was at the wrong funeral.

But a generous spirit can find two defenses of Hugo. In his writings Balzac stressed his conservative side to disarm censors looking over his shoulders. He was also enjoying a laugh at the expense of his many innovation-loving friends. He himself called France a "country of railleries" (*Le Lys*). No one can deny his nationality. Maybe Hugo was joking too.