



BALZAC IN
BRAZIL
J. G. Van Tine

Balzac in Brazil

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In Memory of

Julia Bergstrom

and

Ella Bergstrom Van Tine

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

At eighteen, when sports exacted more tribute than literature, I read Balzac's extraordinary novel, *Old Man Goriot*. It was not extraordinary for me. What I chiefly remember is pushing myself to get through it. In those days, I could at times be awed by the narrative manner of Hemingway or Faulkner but was unaware that Balzac's way of telling stories might pose the greater challenge to understanding society.

Balzac, social climber and incorrigible explainer, compels us with his unique achievement, yet his stature has been bitterly contested. Hostility to Balzac emerged early in his fame. Beginning with his sometime friend C.A. Sainte-Beuve, who complained of a "juvenile style" and compared Balzac's work to a used-clothes store for the poor, his way with ideas and particularly with language irritated many. Balzac felt it keenly, resented it, and labored endlessly over his sentences, pleased nonetheless that his success disturbed enemies and friends alike.

The quarrel over style and narrative politics proved durable. In the decade after Balzac's death, Hippolyte Taine, often a trenchant critic, portrayed

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him as a flawed narrator who inadvertently produced his more unsettling effects. What forces, he asks, rule Balzac's Paris? Answer: passion and self-interest. Taine concludes with an indictment: "Politeness adorns these forces, hypocrisy disguises them, foolishness covers them with beautiful names; but, in fact, nine out of ten actions are egotistical ...because in this great hubbub, everyone is left to his own devices; the constant thought of each animal is to nourish and defend itself.... That is why Balzac considers society a conflict of egotisms, where force, guided by cunning, triumphs." For Taine as for many readers today, this is a disruptive view of society: Balzac "unwittingly makes vice interesting and excusable, since he paints elevated and noble sentiments in a mediocre fashion while admirably painting vulgar and low sentiments, and since, from time to time, carried away by his subject, he throws in maxims that are contrary to public peace and perhaps even alarming to personal honor."

What do we learn from Taine's warning about threats to civil peace? Is Balzac determined to dupe his readers? Are his maxims ("alarming to personal honor") a rehearsal for the third French Revolution within two generations? Admittedly, Balzac's claims for his characters are sometimes misleading; he heightens and intensifies systematically, often cultivating mystery and melodrama. On the other hand, he reveals an opposing passion for unmasking and explaining.

Charles Baudelaire touches the conflict between drives and restraints when praising Balzac's characters, who "from the peaks of the aristocracy to the lowest depths of the plebeian class...are more fiercely alive, more active and cunning in their struggles, more patient in their misfortunes, more glutinous in their pleasures, more angelic in their devotions, than any real-world comedy might reveal to us. In short, every one of Balzac's characters, even the porters, has some sort of genius. Every soul is a weapon loaded to the muzzle with willpower. Indeed, this is Balzac himself." Both men knew what opposes will power loaded to the muzzle: social structures and restraining authorities. And conscience should punish or hinder the rest, though Balzac excels in revealing how much turbulent ambiguity survives.

One of my narrators believes that nothing is stronger than our desire to deceive ourselves. Another insists that the fundamental moral issue in society is how to ignore morality without being branded a criminal. In recent years Balzac novels have fascinated me by such contradictions and anomalies, by their mixture of original insight and caricature, of audacious political scope and hackneyed formulas, yet the muddle between soaring designs and pedestrian sequences drew me in, as did the density of deceptions and myths that most of us know well. One example: he boasts of the vivacity and importance of his characters while routinely belittling

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them. Another example: wealth, once the exclusive possession of the aristocracy, is maniacally sought and compulsively wasted. A further example touching his romance with royal birth: each child seems to enter the world as a prince or princess, after which bad things happen, or as one caustic humorist put it, their parents turn them into frogs. Like so many social transactions, the downward transformations in Balzac require duplicity and are effected secretly. The results of insult and degradation, however, are evident: fierce struggles to regain original identity.

I grant that my novel does not offer a featherbed for readers who prefer quick and unambiguous action. Why the wide range of narrators? Why twelve voices instead of one? Clearly twelve narrators diffuse the focus and seem to delay the revelations. Can one rely on readers to understand what these twelve misconstrue or conceal? The narrators in *Balzac in Brazil* form competing viewpoints in clusters of four: Balzac, his mother, his sister and their friend Doctor Nacquart form an inner circle, each positioned to tell intimate tales. Then four veterans of conflicts over influence and political control: Beyle, who wrote *The Red and the Black*; the higher bureaucrats Moreste and Lebeau; and the publisher Charles Regnier. These men enjoy the privileges of an elite. We enter a different sphere with the restless young: Teddy Guilbert, Lucien Lambert, Eve and Jean-Luc Cartier, all starved for confirmation in a society that

has other intentions.

In pursuing private gain, each narrator also speaks for group or class conscience, as is evident in Lebeau's professional code and Beyle's nurturing of the young. But who accounts for Society's unwitting fixations? Its beguiling forbidden self? Its hidden motives cramping the young and shaping their options? One of Balzac's characters says that his young contemporaries have but one alternative: rebel or self-destruct. *Balzac in Brazil* pursues other choices.

Narrators for Balzac in Brazil

Guy Moreste

Higher civil servant whose position has been strengthened by a large inheritance. Acquainted since boyhood with Henri Beyle and Antoine Lebeau.

Dr. Jean-Baptiste Nacquart

The Balzac family's oldest friend: "If you knew a boy with mistrustful eyes, you never quite reconcile him with the man who is at ease with this world's famous ones."

Laure Surville, née Balzac

An ambitious diarist with consuming expectations: "My brother knows the secrets of women. Maybe he will explain us to ourselves."

Antoine Lebeau

Section Chief for the political police in Paris. Once an Assistant to Cuvier at the Museum of Natural History: "Most of us are convinced that control in the laboratory and control of the populace are two aspects of the same discipline."

Henri Beyle

Former army officer, former military procurer, and

author of a little-known novel: “We flatter ourselves as a superior people, yet our thought is prosaic, our authors predictable, our fashions tyrannical, and our youth simple-minded. Balzac, now all the rage, jousts with these restrictions.”

Honoré de Balzac

Businessman, political journalist, art collector, and celebrated novelist in an epoch rich in talent, ideas and innovation.

Madame Balzac

“Our name is Balzac, not de Balzac, but my son had to claim noble lineage and make us a target for ridicule.”

Teddy Guilbert

Poet and journalist. Factotum to Balzac.

Lucien Lambert

A student: “The Master is looking for a secretary to accompany him to Brazil. It is a magnificent opportunity, but am I up to the challenge?”

Eve Cartier

Friend to Lucien Lambert, cousin to Jean-Luc Cartier. Young, impulsive, impatient with obscurity.

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Jean-Luc Cartier

An ex-soldier with diverse commitments.

Charles Regnier

A publisher with a reputation as a kingmaker: “Sing or die. We crave exuberance and splendor. We are starved for visionary riches.”