

Balzac: A Note

*Originally published in the August 1917
edition of The International under the
pseudonym of Anonymous.*

It is said of the artist as of the philosopher that he is inevitably limited by the spirit of his age, the Zeitgeist; that it is his highest attainment to represent that spirit in fullness. Yet the Zeitgeist is only a phase of "The Holy Spirit of Man" after all, a sort of mood conditioned by economic and climatic conditions as well as by the only noble engine of human progress, the influence of the truly great men of the race. So the Artist at his best is both the creator and preserver of mankind; he is also, in a sense, the destroyer. For he burns out the inessential and the accidental elements, and leaves only the Truth.

Honoré de Balzac was not so dynamic a force as Mohammed. One cannot be equally creator and preserver. Those men who push humanity directly, the poets and prophets, are not so perfect as the great historians in the matter of representation. The poet is always yearning to create a new heaven and a new earth; his desire blinds his vision. Shelley leaves an entirely wrong impression of his contemporaries; his passion colors his sensorium. Shakespeare, a careless easy voluptuary, minion of lordlings, and squire of fast dames, was a reactionary, so far as he was anything. The poet in him was emasculated by the court favorite. But his outlook on humanity was whole. He saw all, and, bar a trifle of snobbishness, the appanage of all Anglo-Saxons, he saw steadily and straight.

Balzac was an artist of this type. He was not biased, as Shakespeare was, by "evil communications." His mind was in reality much more comprehensive than Shakespeare's. He knew the whole of society from the top; he was not handicapped like Shakespeare by being

a climber. The Swan of Avon made a lot of portraits "out of his head"; they are fantastic and romantic figures, boyish dreams rather than things seen. Balzac paints only from nature. Practically every character in the *Comédie humaine* is to be found in our own environment today. Shakespeare admittedly took his material from existing story or legend. Balzac's model was life, direct. It is evident to the student that Shakespeare was observing at second hand most of the time.

The mind of the great Frenchman was moreover of infinite grasp. His whole plan was coherent. His characters appear and reappear in novel after novel, always consistent, always real. Shakespeare's characters rarely reappear; where they do, there is no development, no increase of our knowledge concerning them. Consider only the case of Falstaff, the best of such. Here the only scene that tells us more than the Gadshill scene is the death scene. Beside Balzac, Shakespeare's characters are mechanical and unreal. They are too poetic to be solid. Further, the portraits of the nobles, to take one case, are the merest smudged sketches. Who can distinguish Rivers from Hastings, or a dozen others, for example? It is only in rare instances that he takes the least trouble over them. Balzac, on the contrary, often risks boring the reader by being at too great pains to introduce his characters properly.

For these causes we must admit that Balzac is one of the first minds that the race has produced. Zola tried the same thing; but oh! with what laborious effort, what sweat of office-work! Balzac worked as hard, but in a more concentrated and natural manner. There is no forcing evident in his method. He is natural, too, where Zola is symbolistic and artificial; he is the supreme master of reality. Again, Balzac is a universalist; nothing is too small or too great to escape him. He has a sense of proportion which no other master even approaches. In a day like ours, when the Russian masters are beginning to come into their own, it is absurd that their archetype

should fail to be recognized by all as such, as the first man to read, and the last. There is nothing in Tolstoy, Turgenev, or Dostoyevsky which has not been done, and done better, by Balzac. It may be admitted that the study of Balzac is a life's work in itself; but how sublime and interesting a study! There is not a dull page in all that array of volumes.

To the American reader there is one peculiar charm. Balzac never, no matter in what height of tragedy, forgets the ever-present problem of money. He interweaves economic necessity with every tale. This is one of the great reasons of his power. Other writers occasionally introduce the topic; some base their whole theme upon it; but no one else keeps the matter in mind in the consistent way that Balzac does, treats it as a true strand of the cord of life, as it is. What Zola does in *La Curée*, consciously, Balzac does all the time, without seeming to perceive it. In this, and a thousand other subtle ways, he conveys the reader to a world which must instinctively be recognized by every one as reality shorn of all accidental and indifferent elements, as the Truth of Life itself. Balzac is not an author to pick up and to throw down again. He is a man to live with. He is perhaps the only writer who is genuinely educative, who is of actual use to the reader in his effort to comprehend the world he lives in. He is worth much more to the ambitious youth than any correspondence course whatever. He is the next best master to Life itself; and his lessons are not so long, so painful, and so badly arranged. One can learn more in a month from Balzac than in a year from Life. In this world to be forewarned is to be forearmed; and Balzac shows every situation, and the way it develops, in so vivid a form that one is compelled to live it in the person of every one of the actors of the drama. It is impossible to escape from the spell of the magician; you are obliged to understand his villains as well as his heroes. For he never creates false values. His figures are never puppets, carefully labelled.

One realizes throughout that even the worst of us is human, that faults spring from destiny just as inexorably as more gracious qualities.

One does not understand life without the aid of literature, for one is limited by one's own small experience. Balzac puts one wise in the quickest, the most universal, and the most thorough way. It is absurd to try to wander about the planet without this supreme guide to its inhabitants. Also, one must assimilate one's own heart and mind to that guide; and to do that, one must have him on one's bookshelf, always with a gap showing the absence of the particular volume in immediate use.