



**Honoré de Balzac: The Zoologist of Humankind!
A Not So Divine Human Comedy**

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**BALZAC WANTED 3 THINGS:
LOVE, MONEY AND GLORY**

1- "LOVE FOR ME IS LIFE"

"It is the last love of a woman that can satisfy the first love of a man!"

2- 'HERE I AM, OWING A HUNDRED THOUSAND FRANCS. AND I AM FORTY!'"

"POOR PEN! IT MUST BE DIAMOND! NOT BECAUSE ONE WOULD WISH TO WEAR IT! BUT BECAUSE IT HAS HAD SO MUCH USE!

3- "In brief, here is the game I play:

4 men will have had an immense life

Napoleon, Cuvier, O'Connell, and I want to be the 4th one!

Napoleon lived the life of Europe. He inoculated himself with armies.

Cuvier married the whole planet earth.

O'Connell incarnated a whole people, and me?

I have a whole society in my head!"

His HUMAN COMEDY!

Before we begin our Balzac adventure

Before we enter the world of the HUMAN COMEDY...

I must do 3 things:

1- First, to give you a vision of Paris, of Balzac's Paris, which is not the Paris we know today! Together with a political synopsis of his times

then

2- ask ourselves a very simple yet important question:

What is a novel?

And finally

3- tell you about his life, because there is an essential causality, which binds it all!

Balzac's childhood, his relationship with his parents, his adulthood, his loves, his successes and failures

All become part of the fertile humus of his Human Comedy

PARIS IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Paris, the Capital of the 19th century, as Walter Benjamin calls it, is still

Today essentially a 19th century city with here and there, a few medieval and Renaissance buildings.

In the 19th century, Paris is the vital center of the world, the model for all civilized nations... "Other cities are cities...Paris is a world" said Charles Quint of Spain.

“Tout ce qui est ailleurs est à Paris”

“Everything from elsewhere is in Paris” said Victor Hugo.

Paris represents progress, change, movement, “the capital of the 7 capital sins” says Zola

But at the time of Honoré de Balzac, Paris HAD NOT YET BEEN URBANIZED.

Balzac did not live long enough to witness the amazing transformation of Paris

No department stores

No railways stations

No temple banks

No steel and glass

No boulevards

No Eiffel Tower

No Sacré Coeur

The Arc de Triomphe is in the middle of a wooded area, surrounded by grass, at the Gates of the city

The Champs Elysées are a bucolic place of promenade

The Place de la Concorde does not have a fountain, no sculptures either

The Palais des Tuileries blocked today’s perspective on the Arc du Carroussel and the Louvre

Between the Tuileries and the Louvre, a maze of streets

The Left Bank is a medieval city, poorer than the Right Bank (today it is the contrary!) the streets are muddy...if you have mud on your shoes and trousers it means you live in the poor districts!

The Faubourg St Germain is aristocratic

The Chaussée d’Antin is mercantile, bourgeois

And everywhere else is poverty, dark, meandering un-salubrious streets...

This is what Balzac writes about Paris:

“Paris n’est-il pas un vaste champ incessamment remué par une tempête d’intérêts sous laquelle tourbillone une moisson d’hommes que la mort fauche plus souvent qu’ailleurs et qui renaissait toujours aussi serrés, dont les visages contournés, tordus, rendent par tous les pores l’esprit, les désirs, les poisons dont sont engrossés leurs cerveaux ; non pas les visages, mais bien des masques : masques de faiblesse, masques de force, masques de misère, masques de joie, masques d’hypocrisie : tous éxtenués, tous empreints des signes ineffaçables d’une haletante avidité ? Que veulent-ils ? De l’or, ou du plaisir ? (Pléiade, I, 255)

Paris, is it not a vast field, endlessly buffeted by a storm of interests, a storm at whose center there whirls a crop of human beings that death reaps more often than elsewhere, but which springs up anew, with ever increasing frequency. Ever packed together, their faces contorted and twisted, they exude through every pore their desires, their wit, the poisons that swell their brains; these are not faces, but masks—masks of strength, of weakness, of misery, of joy, of hypocrisy—all exhausted, all marked with the indelible signs of breathless avidity. What are they seeking? Is it money, or pleasure?

Paris is his muse, Paris is one of his characters, with a language and a will of its own!

POLITICAL SINOPSIS

Balzac will live through a very tormented political scene.

From 1799 to 1850, France goes through 8 different governments and 2 revolutions!

DIRECTOIRE 1795-1799

CONSULAT 1799-1804
Napoléon Bonaparte

1er EMPIRE Napoléon 1er 1804-1815
Napoléon II 1815

RESTAURATION-MONARCHIE CONSTITUTIONNELLE

LOUIS XVIII Bourbon 1815-1824

CHARLES X Bourbon 1824-1830

LES TROIS GLORIEUSES 26- 27-28 Juillet
1830

LOUIS PHILIPPE D'ORLEANS 1830-1848
Le Roi citoyen
La Monarchie de Juillet

REVOLUTION DE 1848

2ème REPUBLIQUE 1848-1851
Louis Napoléon Bonaparte
Le Prince Président

And his *Human Comedy* will reflect all these dynamic changes.

NOW TO THE NOVEL...WHAT IS A NOVEL?

In France the history of novel begins with medieval epics such as *The Song of Roland* or *The Novel of the Rose*...

But it is in the 19th century that the novel is going to blossom to meet its fullest expression during the 20th century.

The French revolution in 1789 broke with the past in many different ways....In Literature a sentiment of rupture will dominate the 19th century. The French revolution is a seismic force, which the novel will express in the most democratic way.

After the Revolution...There are two Frances:

- 1- The traditional one, the France of aristocrats and monarchists, and
- 2- The new one, the France of citizens, democrats and bourgeois

French novels are totally nurtured by this dichotomy....

a polarity between "Ancien régime [Old Regime] and Revolution"

The aristocrat versus the citizen.

The topography of Paris witnesses a similar social and psychological divide:

- The Rive Droite of the rich, aristocrats and bourgeois, and
- The Rive Gauche of the poor intellectuals and the artists

Language changes...what was considered "vulgar" before the Revolution, becomes fashionable.

THE ROMAN, THE NOVEL is THE democratic genre par excellence.

The novel is the new locus where conflicts and resolution between the old world and the new world take place.

Stendhal wrote: "Since democracy has created a new public, I consider the novel as the comedy of the 19th century"

The society which emerged from the Revolution is on the move all the time, heterogeneous, unstable, agitated...individuals like atoms...

The novel perfectly answers this new society with its diverse and flexible form, its mobility, its perception and treatment of time.

A mixed society needs a mixed genre. THE NOVEL ALLOWS FOR THIS DIVERSITY

Indeed...

We have:

The Psychological or Analytical Novel (Chateaubriand's *René*)

The Historical Novel (Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*)

The Social Novel which concentrates on depicting the working class, the poor districts of Paris (Victor Hugo *Les Misérables*, Eugène Sue *Les Mystères de Paris*)

The Pastoral Novel (country side, peasants, nature, artisans, domestics...a little idealized, emotion and sentimentality dominate)

The Gothic Novel, stories of crimes, bloody persecutions

The Romanesque Novel, or roman d'intrigue, written specially for women, bored housewives who dream of escaping their lives through reading

The Sentimental Novel, love stories usually written by women for women....sometimes questioning the position of woman in a society made by men for men

The Roman Feuilleton, novel in many different sequential parts, born thanks to cheap printing processes (Ponson du Téraïl's *Rocamboles*, Alexandre Dumas's *The 3 Musketeers* or *The Count of Monte-Cristo*) Zola will devour these novels...

The Stendhalian Novel, introspection, psychological realism, the cult of the individual. Man is the product of an historical situation and a social context.

In *Le Rouge et le Noir*, for example, it's the France of the Restoration, the return to "royalisme" monarchy and the triumph of aristocracy

The Stendhalian novel also focuses on the mechanism of love, as in *The Chartreuse de Parme*. Stendhal's love theory is based on the process of Crystallization, a process of deformation of reality... when one falls in love, a psychological deformation which concentrates one's emotions on the person one loves...

The Adventure Novel, police thrillers, exotic thrillers, science fiction novels

Novels for the Youth, Jules Verne, the Bibliothèque Rose is born....Comtesse de Ségur, Hector Malot's *Sans famille*

The Documentary Contemporary Novel, observing, describing society, people, different classes, different social environments, never idealized, realist like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, or naturalist like Zola's Les Rougon Macquart (20 novels including Germinal coal mines, love, alcoholism in *L'assomoir*, crime and trains in *La Bête Humaine*, art and artists in *L'oeuvre*) ...and Guy de Maupassant's *Bel Ami*, the story of a man who "arrives" through women...

The Novel becomes the instrument of modernity.

As Balzac said in the preface of his *Illusions perdues* (*Lost Illusions*)

"The writer is the voice of his century"

Another important facet of the French novel is its political dimension.

The novel indeed inscribes politics into the domestic.

For Balzac, the talent of the novelist bursts in the painting of the causes that engender effects, in the painting of the mysteries of the human heart, which are neglected by the historian.

Novelists actually believe they are better historians insofar as their comprehension of any situation goes much deeper than dates and facts.

The economical rationalism which pervades throughout 19th century France, together with the ubiquitous political thought toward different social classes will push the novel toward the study of social realities and the socio-psychological mechanism of society.

SO...

For writers in 19th century France, there are three possibilities:

- 1- to go on writing for the conservative, the Church and the aristocracy
- 2- to write for the bourgeois and represent their plutocratic perspective (plutocracy means the power of money)
- 3- or to represent the working classes, the oppressed, the outcast

For whom does Balzac write?

Balzac does not write for the "happy few". He always needs money so he writes a lot, showing an impressive fecundity, to reach the bourgeois public.

What does he write about?

He writes what he sees, hears, smells, and usually it is pretty gruesome. Nobody escapes him... He is fascinated by the dark side of the human heart.

He wants to write the forgotten history, the one that historians prefer to avoid...that is the **history of mores**. He wants to show society as it is and the reasons of societal changes, because society carries within itself the reason of its movements

Balzac's heroes are active, they want to realize their dreams "coûte que coûte" at any price...they reject society...they are desperately cynical, most of the time.

Balzac writes about the infinite variety of human nature...

His *Human Comedy* is an "inventory of vices and virtues"

"French society is the historian...I am just the secretary..."

Love, marriage, adultery...all illusion...In the market place of sentiments, women are often the victims, responsible for the debts of their husbands and lovers!

Bourgeois and aristocrats, businessmen, bankers, lawyers, doctors, ladies of leisure, corruption, hypocrisy,

Avarice, obsessions....

But also servants, peasants, criminals, rag pickers, whores,

The whole urban and provincial fauna is alive in Balzac's *Human Comedy*!

NOW TO THE MAN!

WHO IS BALZAC?

Here is a brief synopsis of his life

He was born the 20th of May 1799, ten years after the Revolution, in the town of Tours, Rabelais's home!

He is a provincial. His real name was Balssa.

Balzac's father was a peasant made good, a peasant risen to middle class, who became a deputy mayor and drank tree-sap in the hope of prolonging his life. His mother was a wealthy draper's daughter.

His father Bernard François Balssa, married Anne Charlotte Sallambier, the daughter of a rich haberdasher family in Paris, in 1797. She was 18 years old, and her husband to be 50! She was married off to him as a reward... Bernard

François had helped a friend of the Sallambier family Anne Charlotte never loved her husband. She felt cheated by life.

It is said that when Bernard François Balssa became a deputy, he bought the aristocratic particule "de" to add to his name, and changed Balssa to Balzac.

Another source says that:

Balzac soon grew dissatisfied with the fortune of his birth. His parents were comparatively well-to-do and eminently provincial bourgeois, but this was not good enough for the son. Accordingly, and apparently without justification, he claimed relationship with the D' Etrague family; and then, on finding in a fifth century document that a concession of land had been made by a De Balzac, immediately assumed the "de" as a prefix to his own name. Thus disguised as Honoré d'Etragues de Balzac he was able to deceive himself into believing that he really was a person of great importance and noble ancestry, and he deceived himself more successfully than he deceived his friends.

Honoré de Balzac was really the second child of this sad marriage. The first son had died at one month. His mother hated Honoré before he was born...That explains why Anne Charlotte never showed any love to her son Honoré.

Honoré was right away sent to a wet nurse for 4 years, and then sent to a boarding school for 8. It is said that he saw his mother only twice in all this time. His father did not give him much pocket money, so he was ridiculed by his well off school mates...Money, or rather lack of, is already marking him... Honoré de Balzac will be obsessed with money, as we shall see later...

The lack of love from his cold absentee father, and cold indifferent mother really hurt him. A sad childhood to say the least!

He was not a bright student. Rebelled against his teachers. Was punished and sent to the "dungeon" most of the time, and there, all alone, with poor lighting,

he read voraciously, everything he could get hold of, even dictionaries... Often falling into comas...This confinement into the punishment alcove contributed to his poor health and problematic eye sight...

In 1814 The Balzac family moves to Paris, and Honoré is sent to private tutors and schools for the next two years. Unhappy time for him again.

In 1816 Balzac enters the Sorbonne, studies Law, which he does not like. He wants to be a writer. His father agrees to give a year allowance, just enough not to starve, not a penny more!

This will urge Balzac to venture into business...to make money...a complete disaster...printing house, publication house, growing pineapples in Paris!, bringing trees from Sardinia...he tried so hard...but was just not made for business!

He had to escape from creditors....rented different abodes in Paris, under the name of his servant, asked for a password which his creditors did not have, and when they came to the door, he would escape through the service door at the back!

Balzac had enormous debts, even though his novels were selling well.

His luxurious tastes and presents to women, together with his failing business ventures, bankrupted him.

In 1819, for financial reasons, the Balzac family moves to the village of Villeparisis. Honoré de Balzac remains in Paris, He wants to be a writer. Lives in a shabby room, rue Lediguières, which he will later describe in *Peau de Chagrin*, a novel, a fantastic spiritual tale, which will gain him a lot of success.

1822. Balzac "produces" several novels under a pseudonym, Jean Louis, not literary successful, ignored by the critics, but selling well.

1829. He writes LES CHOUANS, an historical novel, inspired by Sir Walter Scott. No pseudonym. He uses his real name Honoré de Balzac. He gains notice as a serious author.

1830-1832 He composes 6 novelettes titled *Scenes of Private Life*.

1832 first letter from Evelina Hanska. A woman who will mark his life forever...as we shall discover in a little bit...

1833 Balzac conceives the idea of linking together his old novels. He signs a contract for this novel cycle, which was named **LA COMEDIE HUMAINE** in 1841. For 20 years he will work tirelessly at this project. Writing 14 to 18 hours a day, drinking large amounts of coffee as he wrote. We'll come back to this coffee addiction later.

He contracts the **Malady of Cushing**, then unknown, which provokes the fragility of the legs, the augmentation of the volume of the head and the torso...and Balzac will resemble more and more all the caricatures made of him.

Writing, and more writing, more debts and more debts

MARCH 14 1850. Balzac is in Ukraine. He marries Eve Hanska. He was seriously ill at that time, but still undertook a 2 month long journey from Ukraine back to Paris, during which he contracted bronchitis. He died 3 months later.

AUGUST 18 1850 Balzac's death.

He died in Paris in 1850, exhausted by a prodigious cerebral activity, poisoned by too much coffee, too much work, too much pain, too much too much of everything.

His mother was on his death bed, with a servant. It is only at the very end she understood how great was her son.

Victor Hugo also was there.

Balzac's face was purple, almost black. Unshaved, grey hair cut short, eyes open and fixed.

Heavily perspiring

The funeral service was held on Wednesday, August 20th, at the Church of Sainte Philippe du Roule. The rain was descending in torrents, but the procession, followed by a large crowd, walked the whole way across Paris to the Cemetery of Père-la-Chaise, where the interment took place. The pall-bearers were Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Monsieur Baroche, and Sainte-Beuve. At the grave Victor Hugo spoke, finishing with the words: **"No, it is not the Unknown to him. I have said this before, and I shall never tire of repeating it: it is not darkness to him, it is Light! It is not the end, but the beginning; not nothingness, but eternity!"**
"He will shine far above all those clouds which float over our heads, among the brightest stars of his native land."

NOW THE MAN

He was a hot blooded tempered man, tall, strong.

And Rodin's Monument to Balzac totally succeeded in capturing Balzac's powerful corporeality and temperament.

Digression on Rodin's sculpture of Balzac

The work was commissioned in 1891 by the Société des Gens de Lettres, which Balzac had founded, a full size plaster model was displayed in 1898 at a Salon in Champ de Mars. After coming under criticism the model was rejected by the société and Rodin moved it to his home in Meudon. On July 2, 1939 (22 years after the

sculptor's death) the model was cast in bronze for the first time and placed on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. Émile Zola had strongly supported Rodin for the job.

Casts and various studies of the sculpture today are located in different locations including The Norton Simon Museum of Art, the Musée Rodin de Meudon, The Hirshhorn Museum, the Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Today the artwork is considered the first truly modern sculpture due to Rodin's intended purpose of the piece

Balzac was very "Rabelaisian" in his sensuous dynamism. And the energy or the thirst for life-devouring pleasure will be a leitmotiv throughout the *Human Comedy*... This Rabelais connection is further illustrated in Balzac *CONTES DROLATIQUES*, written in Rabelais's style and language –Middle French. A work which tells the story of a virgin page's love for his mistress, filled with adultery, cuckolds, the sins of the flesh practiced in convents and monasteries,, very scatological....like Rabelais...

This work was published in 1833, but with a caution to the reader!!!

SO...BACK TO OUR EXCESSIVE MAN!

Excessive in everything...ate, drunk, and worked a lot.

FOOD EXCESS

Balzac's interest in food was encyclopedic.

The cycle of *La Comedie Humaine* contains **15 different kinds of fish and 16 kinds of fruit, as well as countless meals eaten by parvenu shopkeepers or lawyers.**

He gobbled and ate off his knife like a peasant- but his culinary sensibilities were refined.

His dinner parties often had themes. Once he served **a meal of nothing but onions: onion soup, his favorite onion puree, onion juice, onion fritters and onions with truffles. The idea was to showcase the purgative properties of the vegetable. It worked. All his guests were sick.**

Here is another example of food excess....

a meal eaten in Paris with his publisher, Monsieur Werdet, whom Balzac had invited to lunch.

Werdet thought Balzac's choice of restaurant- a deluxe establishment called Very - was a little grand.

Not wishing to drain the author's finances, he reined in his appetite and ordered a meager bowl of soup and a chicken wing. Balzac failed to follow suit.

According to the food historian Giles Mac Donagh, he ingested "**a hundred Ostend oysters, 12 Pre-Sale mutton cutlets, a duckling with turnips, a brace of roast partridges, a sole Normande, without counting hors d'oeuvres, entremets, fruits etc**".

The most exorbitant wines and liqueurs were taken throughout, as Werdet watched hungrily.

After his last juicy bite, Balzac turned to his guest and confessed he had no money on him. "**By the way, my dear fellow, you wouldn't have any cash on you, would you?**" **Werdet was horrified.** The 40 francs he had in his wallet weren't enough. So Balzac took five francs for the tip

and billed his hapless publisher for the rest- a whopping F62.50 - the next day.

Another aspect of his excessiveness

WORKING HABITS AND COFFEE

Balzac would work up to 18 hours a day. Thinking, writing, correcting proofs...To keep awake and lucid he drunk coffee!

Balzac was constantly high on coffee...because he always needed to finish a job for the next day. He died at age 51 when the poison had done its work: his stomach was completely ulcerous, literally eaten through by coffee. One wonders if he got a full night's sleep in the last thirty years of his life. This was precisely suicide by slow acting poison.

Indeed, Balzac drank huge amounts of thick, black coffee, no milk, not too diluted down with water...up to 30 cups a day...He called his kettle "The Screeching Owl!"

This excess caused Balzac to develop stomach cramps, high blood pressure, hypertrophy of the left ventricle of his heart...And eventually...death.

He also suffered from **arachnoiditis**, an **inflammation of one of the three brain covers, also due to excess coffee.**

His body became flabby, his skin sallow, and he developed nervous twitches in his face. In 1840 he had a bout with hepatitis and suffered acute lethargy, more facial twitchings, and headaches. Working by candlelight ruined his eyes.

If he did not have brewed coffee, he would chew coffee beans or swallow directly un-brewed coffee...

Poor man! I can only imagine that the extra stimulus he got from swallowing dry un-brewed coffee was the endorphin rush produced by the painful injury to his

stomach lining. He'd have been much better off taking speed! The amount of amphetamine it takes to produce that much buzz would have been far easier on the system.

HIS AMOROUS LIFE

Had numerous amorous conquests.

Knew women from Russia, Poland, Germany, Austria, England, Italy and Spain, traveled to most of all these countries...hence the large number of foreign women characters in his *Human Comedy*!

It is said that he received more than 12 000 letters from women who wanted to express their admiration, to say thank you because they recognized themselves in his characters, to say thank you for understanding women the way he did. From the humblest of servant to the noblest of duchesse!

His first important love affair, very osmotic, in the 1820s, was with a woman more than 20 years older than him...maybe a mother figure, the mother he did not have... Her name was Madame de Berny. When she died in 1838, Balzac will say that he felt his mother had died!

In 1832 he receives from Odessa, an anonymous letter from "L'étrangère" (The Foreigner). This will lead to a 16year love affair through correspondence! With a few meetings in between, in Ukraine, Russia, Italy, Spain, Switzerland... These letters are extremely intimate, extremely detailed...like Proust's correspondence with his mother...

The mysterious author of these letters...made herself known in the spring of 1833

COUNTESS EVELINA RZEWUSKA,

known as EVE HANSKA,

the wife of a wealthy polish Count, owner of a 21,000 acres, 3000 serfs (counting just males), 300 servants ESTATE, with its own orchestra and hospital!!!

He was obsessed with her: **"I cannot put two ideas together that you do not come between them"** he wrote to her.

Balzac suffered enormously because of her resistance to physical intimacy. She was in love with his mind, with his talent, his creations...but was repulsed by his physical appearance. Even when her husband died, she did not accept Balzac's relentless marriage proposals...Yet...mostly out of pity, she agreed to marry Balzac, a few months before he died in August 1850...

BALZAC THE DANDY

Wrote a ***Treatise on Elegant Living***.

a breezy philosophic tome written in 1830

. "A man becomes rich," is the book's best-known quote, "he is born elegant."

"Clothes are the most tremendous modification social man has experienced," they influence all of existence."

It is not enough to become or to be born rich to lead an elegant life: one must feel it.

Studied elegance is to true elegance what a wig is to hair.

Clothing does not consist so much in clothes as in a certain manner of wearing them.

The boor covers himself, the rich man or the fool adorns himself, and the elegant man gets dressed.

Very eccentric...wanted to be different, original.

Had dozens and dozens of gloves

A cane with a turquoise incrustated gold handle.

As we have seen, he used to dress as a monk and write at night, drinking up to 30 cups of coffee...

He wanted success.

He wanted to make money. Money is Balzac's obsession...it runs through his novels like the blood of life and death... He spent a lot to. Enjoyed luxurious Persian carpets and expensive furniture...Balzac was plagued by debts all his life long...He was hunted down by all the people he owed money to and that's why he moved all the time, from flat to flat...

He tried to make a business in editing and publishing...disaster! Tried to make a business in the production of pineapples in Paris! But with the climate...it did not work of course! Very ambitious. He wanted to rival Victor Hugo, and become another "grand", another "Great One" of the 19th century...

But, whereas Victor Hugo is a diversified literary talent –poetry, theater, novel-, Balzac is uniquely a novelist.

THE HUMAN COMEDY

THE NOVEL ACCORDING BALZAC

"IT IS EASY TO DREAM A BOOK

IT IS HARD TO WRITE IT"

In 1841, Balzac regroups all of his previously written novels into one literary and scientific work, to which he will add all his next novels....100 in all!

He called it

LA COMEDIE HUMAINE.

THE HUMAN COMEDY

He modeled his title on Dante's DIVINE COMEDY.

But Balzac opposes himself to Dante. What counts for Balzac is not GOD, but MAN. If Dante explores hell and paradise, Balzac explores society.

There are more than 2000 characters in the Human Comedy, and 460 of them reappear in different novels providing some unifying structure. But each novel can be read and understood separately. There is no chronological sequence in the reappearance of his characters... Creating a time vortex Proust will enjoy enormously!

This way to writing is very CINEMATOGRAPHIC....setting the scene, descriptions, zooming in, slowly or rapidly, attention to details THE ART OF THE LITTLE NOTHINGS, (L'ART DES PETITS RIENS),

Balzac has total control, like a movie director...In fact, most of his books were turned into movies, and very successfully!

Balzac had three goals:

1- to reproduce all the political and social events between 1789 and 1848. He wanted to **write the history of his time**, to be **the witness of an era**. To create a huge image of the present

2- to give **life to all professional "milieux" and social classes**. His immense intellectual curiosity propelled him into studying all French social classes. His *Human Comedy* is a **microcosm of French society**.

3- to study **all social and psychological phenomena**. Balzac started what we call **Human Sciences**.

In his own words Balzac wanted to **"faire concurrence à l'état civil"** to compete with civil status! He does not establish theories because theories incarcerate people.

YET...

Balzac is totally inspired by the scientific theories of

1- Geoffroy St Hilaire, the French naturalist inspired by Darwin. Balzac wanted to give his *Human Comedy* a scientific base...so his novels would be taken seriously...

According to St Hilaire, zoological species result from the different environments to which animals have been forced to adapt themselves. Balzac applies this theory to humankind.

Balzac is the zoologist of humankind.

Wolf, donkey, crow/policeman, sailor, minister...There are social species as there are zoological species.

He wrote in his preface: **"Man is neither good, nor bad...He is born with instincts and aptitudes...Society does not deprave him...society perfects him and make him better at what he does...It is GREED that develops his bad tendencies."**

2- He was also scientifically inspired by the work of **Lavater's PHYSIOGNOMY**

Lavater's physiognomy explains the various temperaments of human beings according to the shape of their face, their nose, their eyes, their body, their likeness to animals.

Some people look like pigs, horses, dogs, cats, or birds...and behave like them. Thick necks, small ear lobes, big nostrils...everything was linked to temperament...

In *Le Père Goriot*, Mme Vauquer has a nose like the beak of a parrot

She is fat like a church rat

She has the eye of a magpie

It is Lavater who wrote this very inspired aphorism

"Intuition is the clear conception of the whole at once"

3- **GRALL'S PHRENOLOGY**, which explained human nature through the shape and dimensions of the skull...

We can see where these "scientific" beliefs lead to....Racial laws...

4- Balzac also believed in **MESSMER'S ANIMAL MAGNETISM** in human beings...

Like Vautrin for example!

And

5- **CUVIER'S and LINNE'S TAXONOMY**, the science of classification

In any case,

He divided his *Human Comedy* into 6 parts:

- 1- Scenes of private life
- 2- Scenes of countryside life
- 3- Scenes of Parisian life
- 4- Scenes of military life

5- Scenes of provincial life

6- Scenes of political life

It is interesting to know that Russian literary critics actually divide the *Human Comedy* into 3 sections:

(1) studies of morals and manners, comprising scenes of private life, provincial life, Parisian life, political life, military life, and country life;

(2) philosophical studies; and

(3) analytic studies. These constitute, as it were, three circles of a spiral which connects facts to causes and principles.

But Balzac also depicts the lofty principles of

- cooperation (Lost Illusions),
- kindness (Bourgeat in Mass for an Atheist and others),
- integrity of character (Chabert in Colonel Chabert),
- heroism (Goguelat in The Country Doctor),
- uprightness (Niseron in The Peasants),
- steadfastness of spirit (David Séchard in Lost Illusions and Gerard in The Village Priest),
- mutual devotion (Pons and Schmucke in Cousin Pons), and
- self-sacrifice and spiritual purity (Eugenie Grandet in the novel of the same name and Josephine Claës in In Search of the Absolute).

In Russia, Balzac's work became known as early as the beginning of the 1830's. Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and particularly Dostoevsky and Gorky, are all indebted to Balzac!

Behind each part there is a predominant subject matter. For example:

In Scenes of private life, it is the physiology of marriage, adolescence

In Scenes of Parisian life it is the phenomenon of the big city, the anonymous status of man, the encouragement of vice

In Scenes of military life, the painting of exceptional men

In Scenes of provincial life it is the dead cities of the province, boredom

But the ubiquitous obsession is MONEY.

Balzac associates money to power, emotional and political power.

For the Russians, Balzac has succeeded to show the typical conflicts which arise out of the **"omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence of money"** Balzac was the first to present the struggle for property and inheritance and the history of an estate, a store, or an invention not as an adjunct to the story but rather as its main theme.

For the Russians, Balzac presented a history of French society from which **F. Engels "... learned more . . . than from the books of all the experts in the history, economics, and statistics of this period combined."**

Through his characters, Balzac exposed the material interests, which underlie politics, state power, and law.

For example, in the novel *Le père Goriot*, which we will discuss more in depth next week, money creates a musical background. The protagonist Rastignac is an opportunist and wants to make fortune, through women; the two sisters Goriot use money to show off, and ruin their father in the process; the usurer Gobsek lends money, makes money from money; Goriot ruins himself in order to

provide for his two money-grubber daughters. Mme Vauquer is stingy and counts every penny...

This obsession with money represents the whole atmosphere of the July Monarchy.

Balzac is a bourgeois author, and his preoccupations are the preoccupations of the people.

In his novel *The Cousin Bette*, Balzac writes: **"You are wrong if you think that it is Louis-Philippe who reigns above us all...there is the saintly, adored power of the one hundred cent coin"**.

All of Balzac's characters are obsessed. They suffer from **MONOMANY**, possessed by one passion (gambling, sex, crime, money, one's daughters).

The power of his descriptions is unrivaled.

His depiction of the human jungle offers us the irreducible reality of a world, which is losing its humanity, its spirituality.

Balzac's characters are not important in themselves. They become important as agents of a social group, as the locus of a conflict between social classes.

His characters are natural phenomena, they demonstrate the function of the individual in the life of the social body.... Balzac's Human Comedy is a kind of natural history of society.

When Balzac looked at a painting he wondered: "what are they doing? Are they sad? Have the crops been good? Do they have debts?"

Balzac is the master of social novel. He often referred to himself as "the Doctor of social sciences".

In his book *In Search for the Absolute* Balzac writes that

“like the geologist who rebuilds the history of the world from a stone, each cultural monument, each house, each mosaic is the expression of an entire society.”

ONE CANNOT ESCAPE THIS SOCIAL CAUSALITY.

***The Human Comedy* does not owe its unity to plots and recurring characters, but to the predominance of money and social causality.**

The Human Comedy is the history of French Society. Balzac has coordinated a complete history where each chapter is a novel, where each novel is an epoch.

Balzac considers capitalism as a social malady. He wrote in *Pathology of Social Life* that capitalism was an hypertrophy of the power of acquisition, an excessive taste for profit which dehumanized. He condemned egoism and the lack of spirituality of his epoch...Sounds quite familiar...no? In *Le Père Goriot* he writes of **the unintelligent luxury of the nouveau-riche** (“le luxe inintelligent du parvenu”).

Gold, the gold coin, the 5 Franc coin, stocks, bills, lottery, banks, gambling cards...here are the new idols of this new society. The Golden Calf has become a reality, more frightening than in the Old Testament.

Numbers, amounts, balance sheets, budgets have become exorcising formulas, the oracles of a new mythology.

The devastating effect of gold, of money, is that it poisons all human relations.

The quest for money and profit destroys family life, separates wife from husband, brother from brother, and transforms marriage and love into a business venture.

Matter controls the soul.

Money alienates men and women, destroys ideals, prostitutes artists, poets and authors, transforms genial creators into criminals, and heads of government into adventurers and gamblers. The social class the most affected is of course the bourgeoisie. But all classes, including the poor, the working class, are affected.

Equality is a mirage, "une chimère."

But there is huge difference between Balzac and Karl Marx.

Balzac perceives and measures the fight of the proletarian class like all other fights from all other social classes. For Balzac, the proletarian fight is a fight for profits and privileges, not for political power.

Balzac's understanding of revolution:

"Revolutions are born from material issues, out of material interests (lack of food, water, clothing, housing), then they extend to ideas, to finally transform themselves into principles".

BALZAC AND PARIS

Balzac admired the metropolis. Paris fascinates him, with its beauties, perversities, and vice.

He initiated the myth of **Paris as the new Babylone...**

Paris the Dangerous, Paris the Mysterious, Paris the Seductress.

He denounces the ineluctable decomposition and putrefaction of the "Bonne Société", the high bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, the jet-society...
He writes taking reality as his model.

Because of all that...

Balzac is known, admired and respected as **the father of Realism.**

He described without any fear, moral ugliness, physical ugliness, and social ugliness, like hypocrisy.

He had a lot of success among his readers, but the French academy did not accept him because of his insistence on the ugliness of society. (Like Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, mocked and censored)....sometimes truth is too heavy to take in...

REALITY AND FICTION A BLURRED SPACE

Balzac lived in his novels. There are many anecdotes about that.

When his friend Jules Sandeau talks to him about his sick sister....Balzac answers: "ah! Yes yes yes...but let's go back to reality...to whom am I going to marry Eugénie Grandet?" (one of his protagonists)

Balzac believes in the reality of his fiction. He believes in it with passion. He is possessed by his fiction. He sees his characters, speaks with them. We believe in his characters because Balzac believes in them.

When Balzac is about to die...he is agonizing....

and he calls for Dr Bianchon, the only doctor who can save him...

and who is Bianchon? A character in the *Human Comedy*....

BALZAC'S STYLE

Not at all classical.

No distillation of reality, no idealism. No purification of reality.

A torrent of words (Balzac writes fast...he does not polish like Flaubert who spent 3 months on one page!),

sometimes too heavy, at times a little pompous, grandiloquent emotions...characters drawn like Daumier's caricatures...

He writes for the grand public who likes strong emotions and demands sentimentality and melodrama.

No nuances.

No psychological depth...we can even speak of a psychological simplification. "**I AM NOT DEEP....BUT I AM WIDE**" he said of himself!

A little ostentatious at times...Balzac likes to show off his knowledge...

But Balzac can bear all these faults...

HIS ENORMOUS VITALITY SWALLOWS AND ABSORBS EVERYTHING.

See you next week for *Le Père Goriot*!

