

## HONORE DE BALZAC

1799-1850

### Chronology

Born in Tours, France on May 20, 1799, to Bernard-Francois Balzac, the town's deputy mayor who was descended from Gascon peasants, and Anne-Laure Sallambier, of the Parisian bourgeoisie; he is the oldest of four children; 1799-1807 grows up in Tours, but spends little time with his parents; 1807-1813 attends the College de Vendome, in Vendome; his family only visits him once or twice; 1814-1816 attends the lycee in Tours for one year; moves with his family to the Marais district of Paris, and attends two further schools; receives degree; 1816-1819 studies law at the University of Paris while clerking for Guyonnet-Merville; 1819-1821 spends two years in a garret in Paris, trying to write, while being supported by his family; 1821 meets Laure de Berny, a woman twenty-two years his senior, with whom he has a liaison until 1830, and who remains his friend and supporter until her death in 1836; 1821-1829 publishes gothic novels under

several pseudonyms, including Lord R'hoone and Horace de Saint Aubin; works as a printer and publisher, incurring heavy debts; meets Zulma Carraud; is involved with the Duchess of Abrantes; 1829 father dies; publishes Les Chouans, his first important novel, under the name Balzac; 1830-1831 publishes dozens of short stories and articles; begins using the name "de Balzac", with the publication of La Peau de Chagrin; 1833 publishes Eugenie Grandet, a huge success; meets Countess Eveline Hanska, whom he will marry months before his death; 1834 publishes La Recherche de l'Absolu and Pere Goriot; outlines to Mme. Hanska his plans for La Comedie Humaine: a three-part organization, including "Studies of Manners," "Philosophical Studies," and "Analytical Studies"; 1836-1838 starts a legitimist magazine, Chronique de Paris, which soon goes bankrupt; continues to struggle with personal and family debts; starts a silver mining operation in Sardinia which fails; 1840 writes several plays, including Vautrin, which is a failure on stage; founds the Revue Parisienne; 1841 is seriously ill, but organizes the publication of his novels as La Comedie Humaine (to contrast with Dante's Divine Comedy); 1842-1848 continues to write voluminously, even as his health deteriorates; visits Mme. Hanska in Dresden and travels with her throughout Europe; visits Russia; 1848 publishes La Cousine Bette and Le Cousin Pons, his last two masterpieces;

1849 travels to the Ukraine; 1850 returns to Paris; becomes very ill in the summer, and dies late in the evening of August 18, 1850 with his mother at his bedside; is buried in Pere-Lachaise cemetery, as Victor Hugo delivers the moving eulogy.

### **Activities of Historical Significance**

Honore de Balzac, along with Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola, is a leading practitioner of the nineteenth-century French novel. And along with Victor Hugo, Balzac dominated the literary scene of the first half of the century. A prolific and successful writer, he lived extravagantly and passionately, and worked tirelessly, completing, for instance, the first section of Les Illusions Perdues in a mere eight days. It was in part the exhausting pace of literary production which he set for himself which led to his death at the relatively young age of 50. Yet in that time he wrote over 100 novels.

His major achievement was the creation of La Comedie Humaine, a group of ninety-five novels (he at one time had envisaged 144 titles) depicting the rich variety of life in France between 1789 and the 1840's. Whether describing life in the French countryside and towns, such as he does in Les Illusions Perdues,

or portraying the crowded urban scenes of Paris, as in Pere Goriot, Balzac captured not only the motivations, desires, fears, and ambitions of his individual characters, but also painted in often devastating detail the social contexts in which his figures moved and acted.

Balzac began his writing at a time when the Romantic movement was in full flower in France. Poets, such as Lamartine and Vigny, and novelists, such as Hugo and Chateaubriand, were the major figures of the literary world of the 1820's. Sir Walter Scott's historical novels served as early models for the young novelist; Anne Radcliffe, Rabelais, Rousseau, Goethe, and Byron were also influences on Balzac in the late 1820s. Furthermore, in his personal life and his passion and energy for writing, Balzac embodied much of the Romantic personality. His flamboyant dress and his turquoise-encrusted walking stick were fabled Parisian sights. (He would normally write from midnight to eight, drinking endless cups of coffee, and sending off his night's work to the printer before breakfast.) The poet Charles Baudelaire called him a passionate visionary. Yet his novels contain the seeds of the realism which dominated French fiction well into the twentieth century. Writers such as Flaubert and the Goncourts, and later Zola and the naturalists would extend the principles

and techniques of observation and documentation which give Balzac's opus its depth and breadth. In fact his depictions of French society have been considered more revealing and insightful than those of the social scientists of the time. Sainte-Beuve, a leading critic of the time, and a frequent adversary of Balzac, wrote, shortly after his death, "Who has painted better than he the old men and the beautiful women of the Empire? . . . Who has better grasped and depicted in all its amplitude the bourgeois society triumphant under the dynasty of the weak?"

### **Overview of Biographical Sources**

As befits an author of his importance, who was also extremely popular during his lifetime, the biographical and critical literature on Balzac is enormous. William Royce's comprehensive 1929 bibliography lists over 4,000 items, and this before the great increase in academic scholarship on nineteenth-century French literature. The MLA bibliography details another 1,787 books and articles on Balzac published between 1965 and 1989.

One of the earliest biographies of Balzac was written by his friend and fellow writer Theophile Gautier, and was published in

1858 in a single volume with a brief critical analysis of La Comedie Humaine by Hippolyte Taine, one of the most important nineteenth-century literary critics in France. (Taine's essay was finally translated into English in 1973.) In the same year, Balzac's sister, Laure Surville, published a memoir entitled Balzac, sa vie et ses oeuvres. In 1875, Spoelberch de Lovenjoul published the first major critical study of Balzac's work, Histoire des Oeuvres d'Honore de Balzac, which was revised twice in the 1880s but never translated into English. (In 1976 David Bellos published a study on French Balzac criticism which outlines the growth of his reputation in the nineteenth century.) Early discussions of his literary achievement, including comments by Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant, derided his rough and sloppy style. Academic critics of the early twentieth century such as Brunetiere and Lanson, who preferred the classical literature of the 16th century, held similar views and influenced much of the study of Balzac's life and work into the 1930s.

Because of the nature of Balzac's lifestyle, his life has not been one that is easily chronicled. Many of the French biographies and some of the English ones, such as those by Frederick Lawton (1910) and Francis Gribble (1930), tend to stress "the sentimental, the sensational and the anecdotal."

With the centennial of Balzac's death in 1950, and in the years following, scores of books, both biographical and critical, have appeared in English, including works by Hunt, Pritchett, and the translation of Maurois's standard life. Literary studies by Leo Bersani, Anthony Pugh, Charles Affron, William Stowe, Samuel Rogers and many others have explored the many facets of the powerful novelistic achievement represented by La Comedie Humaine. The ongoing interest in Balzac's work assures him an everlasting place in the pantheon of French fiction.

### **Evaluation of Principal Biographical Sources**

Bardeche, Maurice. Balzac. Paris: Julliard, 1980. (A) As yet untranslated, this 700-page volume is a highly detailed life. Full of wit, this entertaining intellectual biography examines Balzac the philosopher as well as Balzac the writer. Bardeche argues that Balzac built the entire system of the Comedie Humaine around several basic ideas about the relationship of the individual to the society in which he lives. The forces of tradition (society) and innovation (individual) may collide, deforming and often destroying the individual.

Gerson, Noel. The Prodigal Genius: the Life and Times of Honore de Balzac. New York: Doubleday, 1972. **(G,Y)** A lively life by a prolific popular biographer, but generally lacking depth. More anecdotal than analytical, it only sketches the social context of Balzac's world. Gerson captures well Balzac's flamboyant energy, his womanizing and his amazing work schedule, but does not help us fully grasp his creative literary genius.

Hunt, Herbert J. Honore de Balzac: a biography. London: Athlone Press, 1957. **(A)** A concise distillation of the vast information on Balzac, clear and straightforward. Hunt captures the flavor of the period, and concludes with an excellent chapter summarizing the preceding material. Hunt does not claim to bring "new facts or new documents to light," but rather recapitulate what was known at the time. This work, which focuses on Balzac's life, including his passionate eccentricities, may be read in conjunction with Hunt's detailed study of the novelist's work, Balzac's Comedie Humaine (London: Athlone Press, 1959).

Maurois, Andre. Prometheus: the Life of Balzac. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. **(A)** A vast and rich biography, extensively documented. (Even though footnotes have been left out of the English translation, it still runs 560 pages.) Maurois states in

his foreword that his work is not a critical study, and lists many other critics and literary historians who have analyzed diverse aspects of Balzac's work. He nevertheless offers numerous judgments on the qualities of Balzac's writing. He argues that although Balzac's works cannot be accounted for by his life, the events of that life nourished the Comedie Humaine. This will be the standard source for the foreseeable future.

Pritchett, V. S. Balzac. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973. (G,Y)

A heavily illustrated work, placing Balzac within the context of French cultural life of the 19th century. It is anecdotal and quite readable; by providing numerous contemporary illustrations of nineteenth-century Paris, of people Balzac knew and places he frequented, the work gives the reader an excellent sense of Balzac's world. Frequent quotations from Balzac's writings-- letters and novels--also give a flavor of his literary style.

Zweig, Stefan. Balzac. New York: Viking Press, 1946. (A)

Translated from the German text left unfinished by Zweig at his death in 1942 and completed by Richard Friedenthal, this work is more impressionistic and subjective than the Maurois biography.

Zweig held Balzac in high regard, calling him the greatest writer of his age. His biography reflects the warm affection he had for the novelist.

### **Primary Sources**

Very few Balzacian primary materials such as manuscripts are held in United States libraries. The largest specialized collections are to found in the Hobart-Royce Collection at Syracuse University and in the Croue Collection at the University of Chicago. However, numerous libraries do hold copies of the first edition of Balzac's complete works, including La Comedie Humaine, published in Paris between 1842 and 1855.

Balzac's correspondence, particularly that with Madame Hanska and Zulma Carraud, has been published; many of these letters have been translated into English. (Most of the letters between Balzac and Laure de Berny were later burned by her son.) The standard French editions of the letters is the 5-volume collection edited by Roger Pierrot in the 1960s; Lettres a Mme Hanska, in three volumes was also published during that period. English translations date from earlier French editions; his letters to Mme. Carraud appeared in 1937, Letters to his Family

in 1934, and his correspondence with Eve Hanska in several different editions between 1900 and 1920.

### **Fiction and Adaptations**

Because of the inherent visual richness of the world which Balzac presents in his fiction, several of his numerous works have been adapted to the motion picture screen, both in the United States and France. One of the most important is the 1921 silent film "The Conquering Power," a film version of Eugenie Grandet, in which Rudolph Valentino appeared in his first starring role. A 1915 five-reel production of La Peau de Chagrin was directed by Richard Ridgely, while a 1923 version of the same work, "Slave of Desire," took considerable liberties with Balzac's original. La Duchesse de Langeais became "The Eternal Flame" in 1922 and Pere Goriot was screened as "Paris at Midnight" in 1926. In France, Jean Epstein directed "L'Auberge Rouge" in 1923, based on a novella of the same name. The playwright Jean Giraudoux wrote the screenplay for a 1942 film version of La Duchesse de Langeais. Gabriel Axel filmed "Le Cure de Tours" as a teleplay in 1980 starring Michel Bouquet and Micheline Boudet. In 1978, Guy Jorre directed "Pierrette" also for French television.

In 1980, Fritz Geissler wrote an opera in seven scenes based on La Peau de Chagrin. Charles Levade had created a lyric comedy from the same work in 1929. Other works which have served as a basis for musical works, usually operas or "dramas lyriques," include "La Grande Breteche," "Les petites miseres de la vie conjugale," "La belle Imperia mariee," and "Le sherif."

### **Museums, Historical Landmarks, Societies**

Maison de Balzac (Paris, France). Balzac's former residence in the Rue Raynouard is open to the public as a museum, with manuscripts and other memorabilia.

Musee Carnavalet (Paris, France). This museum of Parisian history contains many materials on the nineteenth-century world depicted in La Comedie Humaine, as well as items once belonging to Balzac.

Statue (Paris, France and New York). Copies of Rodin's famous sculpture can be found on the Boulevard Raspail and in the Rodin Museum. A copy is also on display at the Museum of Modern Art.

## Other Sources

Affron, Charles. "Honore de Balzac" European Writers, vol 5 (The Romantic Century), edited by Jacques Barzun. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985. A twenty-page presentation of Balzac's life and, more importantly, his writings. Provides insightful analysis into the themes, organization, and character development in La Comedie Humaine through discussion of selected works. Contains a useful bibliography.

"Balzac, Honore de". Dictionary of Modern French Literature. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986. A chronological presentation of the life and writings of Balzac, with a brief analysis of his place in nineteenth-century literature, and a useful bibliography of recent critical articles.

Festa-McCormick, Diana. Honore de Balzac. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979. A short introduction, in the Twayne World Author Series, to the works of Balzac, focusing on several major novels, but also incorporating biographical information.

Nelles, Charles. "Honore de Balzac" Great Lives from History. Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 1989. Concise outline of Balzac's life and work, with a brief annotated bibliography.