

BALZAC'S HISTORICAL RELIABILITY

by ROBERT BEUM

THE revival of interest in Balzac among the English-reading public in the late 1960's and in the 1970's – attested to, for example, by the success of new translations by Donald Adamson, Marion Crawford, Herbert J. Hunt, Rayner Heppenstall, and others – has raised once again the question of how reliable Balzac is as a student of historical manners. Though Balzac has never been considered a mere historical impressionist doubts have sometimes been expressed about the authenticity of some of his portraiture. Usually it is for 'exaggeration' that Balzac is faulted. It may be significant that the form this exaggeration takes is almost never specified or otherwise made intelligible, the result being that the charge creates the impression of calumny where constructive correction would be more useful. 'Seeing little that was good in this social order [the bourgeois monarchy of Louis Philippe], Balzac, in his *Cousin Bette*, *Droll Stories*, and *Eugénie Grandet*, has given us a stimulating but exaggerated picture of bourgeois society' (F.C. Palm and F.E. Graham, *Europe Since Napoleon*, New York, 1934, p. 63). In historical and in literary criticism, as in the litigations of life, the law ultimately demands a specified charge. In this particular case, as in some others, it does nothing for the credibility of the prosecution when one discovers it in an egregious error in the very framing of the charge: the sprightly, good-natured, erotic *Droll Stories* are set in an era prior to the vast dominance of the bourgeoisie; they make light of the clergy and of lovers' foibles, but not of the merchants and bankers, from whose lambasting Balzac affords himself a merry vacation.

The problem may be put in perspective quickly. To find Balzac unreliable as social historian does nothing to diminish Balzac the raconteur and *savant*. On the other hand, Balzac is no belletrist or aesthete; much that he gives us is given because it purports to offer accurate cultural depiction and interpretation. We may be quite sure that Balzac's shade will be chagrined at any historical inaccuracies or distortions we may uncover in him, for the prejudice and irresponsibility he himself found in historians wrought him to indignation: 'to those who thoroughly examine the history of modern times, it is evident that historians are privileged liars, who

lend their pens to popular beliefs, exactly as most of the newspapers of the day express nothing but the opinions of their readers' (Introduction to *About Catherine de Medici*). Balzac's charge is uttered with characteristic passion, but is not ill-founded. Before the Soviets' blatant rewriting of history there was the Tudors' portrayal of Richard III, and all along, as Lynn M. Case reminds us, a republican-progressivist version of modern history has passed as 'objective': 'While the republican and democratic historians of our century tried to be unbiased, they were still too much influenced by the political philosophy of their time to see much good in the [French] Restoration' (Preface to Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny's *The Bourbon Restoration*, Philadelphia, 1966). This reminds us how greatly it is to Balzac's credit that his social-historical portraiture is spoken well of by modern historians: on the whole, it cannot be a case of birds of a feather taking in one of their own. The consensus – particularly in twentieth-century scholarship – is that Balzac accurately lays open the realities of life under Revolution, Empire, and Restoration. But no adequate and handy survey or summation of this consensus exists. Anyone who produces it will do us a favor. In the interim, one might present at random some reliable witnesses to Balzac's reliability.

Aside from the fact of his avowed intention to supply a corrective to the standard, i.e., Protestant and progressivist, version of modern European history, *prima facie* evidence for Balzac's historical authenticity is his accuracy – granted by everyone – in observation of particulars, as in features of terrain, architecture, and dress and ornament; and his fairness in political representation (his *royalisme* does not prevent him from giving liberals and Bonapartists their due, nor does it blind him to the typical and individual weaknesses of noblesse and royalists). On his brilliance and fairness as analyst of French politics ca. 1789-1846 the various commentaries of translator Herbert J. Hunt are noteworthy: *Honoré de Balzac, a Biography*, 1957; *Balzac's 'Comédie Humaine'*, 1959; and his Introductions to his translations of *Cousin Pons*, 1968; and *Une Ténébreuse Affaire* (A Murky Business), 1972. Hunt notes that Balzac gives 'a scrupulous account of judicial principles and procedure in the transitional period between Consulate and Empire,' a verdict corroborated by Colin Smethurst in 'Balzac and Stendhal: a comparison of electoral scenes,' (*Balzac and the Nineteenth Century*, ed. D.G. Charlton, J. Gaudon, and Anthony R. Pugh, Leicester, 1972).

Nora E. Hudson's neglected masterpiece *Ultra-royalism and the*

French Restoration (Cambridge, 1936) amasses details elegantly and its accuracy and fairness in delineating the ultraroyalist position and the fortunes of the early French Right make it a text of which Balzac would have approved; and Miss Hudson (p. 189) pays Balzac the social analyst and historian a handsome compliment.

Less sympathetic to royalism but no less illuminating on the era of the Holy Alliance, H.G. Schenk's *The Aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars* (London, 1947) includes an interesting comment on Balzac's historical faithfulness (p. 220). Philippe Bertault, perhaps the most erudite and deep-looking of twentieth-century authorities on Balzac, offers more extended commentary in *Balzac and the Human Comedy*, trans. Richard Monges (New York, 1963), pp. 36-42. Also germane are: Frantz Funck-Brentano, *The Old Regime in France*, trans. Herbert Wilson (New York and London, 1929), pp. 96 and 364; Preston Slosson, *Europe Since 1815* (New York, 1954), p. 214: 'Balzac showed French life at every social level, in a romantic spirit but with scientific accuracy'; Gordon A. Craig, *Europe Since 1815* (New York, 1961), p. 72; and Stanley Loomis, *Paris in the Terror* (Philadelphia and New York, 1964), p. 355. Balzac's early editor, the captious George Saintsbury, whose heavy and condescending Prefaces consistently underrate Balzac's achievements, observed that the architect of the *Comédie humaine* was 'a considerable student of history'. Twentieth-century studies confirm that remark.

The social-political theory Balzac derived from his historical scrutiny, and which he in turn illustrates through it, is the same theocratic royalism which forms the common ground of Bonald and De Maistre - 'those two eagles of thought' Balzac calls them in the first part of *Lost Illusions*. But though Balzac particularly admired those two among the royalist theocrats, his views were not so much learned from them as confirmed by them. His *ultraisme* was neither an academic acquisition nor a hearthside prejudice, but was derived, as Charlotte Touzalin Muret justly remarks in her invaluable *French Royalist Doctrines Since the Revolution* (1933, repr. 1972), from careful observation and original reflection. Within the *Comédie humaine* itself the fullest expression of Balzac's views on the social order is in *The Country Doctor* (*Le Médecin de Campagne*). Letter XII of *Memoirs of Two Young Brides* (*Mémoires de deux Jeunes Mariées*) provides a clear and very concise exposition of the fundamentals, as does the paragraph beginning 'Les avarés ne croient point à une vie à venir' near the end of the third section ('Provincial Love') of *Eugénie Grandet*.

In expository form Balzac's views are developed in the pamphlet *Droit d'aînesse* (1824), where his training in the law is shown to advantage in the analysis of primogeniture; in a later pamphlet, *Enquête sur la politique des deux ministres* (1831); in the first few pages of his long introduction to *Sur Catherine de Médicis*, and in the closing pages of the novel itself.