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ASPECTS OF BALZAC

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC BY W. H. HELM AUTHOR OF
"STUDIÏS IH STVIS," ETC. LONDON EVELEIGH NASH

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CONTENTS The Methods op Balzac . women of the " human
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OF THE UNIVERSITY. OF THE METHODS OF BALZAC

SOME of his critics would have said that to talk of " the Methods of Balzac " was to offer a contradiction in terms, since Balzac and method were incompatible. They might have found much to support their objection. The novelist himself held that a man should fling himself headlong into his work, as Curtius plunged into the gulf. Perhaps the most pregnant saying in the general preface of 1842, wherein the scheme of the " Comédie " is set out, one fully borne out by the novels themselves, is that " La passion est toute l'humanité. Sans elle, la religion, l'histoire, le roman, l'art, seraient inutiles." This phrase is the keynote to the vast harmony which Balzac composed. The love of man for woman and woman for man is, of course, "la

ASPECTS OF BALZAC passion " in particular, and it is more abundantly displayed in Balzac's novels than in those of any other writer, quite as abundantly as mere lust is shown in the work of Zola or Maupassant. Such loves as those of Montauran and Marie de Verneuil, of Montriveau and the Duchesse de Langeais, of Félix de Vandenesse and Henriette de Mortsauf, are indeed of the influences that move the world. Yet passion takes other strong forms in the *' Comédie Humaine." The passion of power as seen in Jacques Collin the criminal, and Eugène de Rastignac the conqueror of society, of the artist as in "Le Chef-d'Œuvre Inconnu," of the miser as shown by old Grandet, even the craving for gold for the mere love of that particular metal as by Facino Cane, and the rarer passion of the alchemist seen in '* La Recherche de l'Absolu " — all are very fully analysed and exhibited. The callous and savage lust also of the enemy of the race, of the man or woman who preys upon other men and women as a crafty beast on its fellow-creatures, is pre

ASPECTS OF BALZAC sented with amazing force in such portraits as those of Philippe Bridau, Maxime de TraîUes, and Valérie MarneflFe. There are, however, among the essential factors of the *' Comédie " personalities to whom the word passion is hardly applicable. Nucingen, who stands for ever the crystallisation of the astute financier, whose, only restriction is the law, to whom conscience is only of account in considering its effect on the conduct of other men, is never passionate. Cool and far-seeing in his finance» cool and far-seeing in his relations with his wife, and with his allies in exacting tribute from the world, he is driven to recognise that money cannot buy affection either from wife or mistress ; but the infidelity of the one he turns to account in his schemes, and the costliness of the other only troubles him because he obtains so small a return for his expenditure. If passion is the dominant note in Balzac*s conception of life, it is also one of the most powerful influences on his method. Buffon distinguished between the genius

ASPECTS OF BALZAC which touches the heart through the intelligence, and the talent of expression which is accorded to all individuals of strong passions and quick imagination. Balzac possessed both the genius and the talent. The driving power of this rare combination was such that he could toil for days without rest, and with very little food, producing in one week what would, in mere writing, be a month's work for many an industrious author. When he had finished his book or his chapter, he would send it off to the printer, and when he received the proofs, first, second, or third revises, he would chop them about, rewrite here, cut out a little there, and add a great deal in this place or that until there was perhaps as much again as before, and the corrections in the end cost as much as the first setting. All this, however, was not concerned with the great and essential tasks of building the body, of giving life to its organs, and intelligence to its wits ; but with the refining of that body, the quickening of that life, and the 4

ASPECTS OF BALZAC sharpening of those wits. Sometimes, indeed, he even took life out of his work, as, in the opinion of Sainte-Beuve, happened when he rewrote ** *La Femme de Trente Ans.*" No writer to whom style was of the first importance would dream of using Balzac's method of introducing his characters to his readers. It is a commonplace of criticism that the characters should show themselves 'by their actions, and conversation, and recorded thoughts as the story proceeds ; but Balzac requires far more than this. He will devote fifteen or twenty pages — more on occasion — to the topography of a district, and we know our way about for the rest of the book, He will give as much attention to a description of every external and internal characteristic of a man or a woman, their physical peculiarities, beauties and blemishes, their tricks of expression and gesture, their clothing, even to the shoelaces and the quality of the silk of which the stockings are made, and, when he has finished the portraits, we 5

ASPECTS OF BALZAC know their subjects so well that, if we saw them stepping out of their houses or stepping into their baths, we could hardly ever fail to recognise them, Mr. Froude, in a notable passage of *"Oceana,"* touches on the affinities and differences of the real and the idéal, and asks the question, '* Has not a character which has acquired a place in the minds of mankind as real an existence, even though a créature of imagination merely, as if the person in question had been born with a material body and had lived a fixed number of years, and had worn clothes and taken his regular meals, and, in course of time, had died?*' He goes on to answer his own question. ** Ulysses, Hamlet, Julius Caesar are real persons. Each of them stands with a clear and fixed form before the minds of all of us.' / To those who have lived long in the Society of Balzac's people and met them again and again, now in this company, now in that, they are as real as any his

ASPECTS OF BALZAC torical character can be. Indeed, so great was the novelist's power of combining observation and intuitive knowledge in the présentation of his crowd of individual types, that we do actually meet many of them in the flesh, differently dressed no doubt, to avoid being hooted in the streets, with their curling locks cut short and their jewellery less abundant Who that knows his "Comédie Humaine" has not met Crevel and Matifat and Gaudissart a score of times, has not watched the dainty steps of Valérie as she passed to keep an assignation, or the slow and weary walk of Agathe Bridau, borne down with the misery of outraged maternity and unrequited dévotion ? Balzac tried continually in youth, and occasionally in the later years of his short life, %o attain a fine style. But he knew before he was thirty that he could never achieve his désir in that direction. He found his power in the représentation of human character^ and in that he knew that he was above rivalry. His first and 7

ASPECTS OF BALZAC strongest motive is the détermination to make his scènes and characters stand clearly out. He will write a hundred pages of introduction if necessary before he begins to develop his story, and we are called upon to listen to lengthy expositions of historical or geographical or social conditions in order that we may be prepared to understand the relations of the characters to one another and the milieu in which they move. We may find that these immense préparations weary us sometimes ; but if we go steadily through with them they do, in almost every instance, achieve their object. He demands that we shall recognise " the necessity of those préparations didactiques against which some ignorant and voracious people protest, seeking for émotions without wishing to hear of (les principes générateurs, ^^ desiring " la fleur sans la graine ^ t enfant sans la gestation. Is art, then, stronger than nature ? *' AUow him these liberties and he will usually achieve his object to his own and our satisfaction. He was fully aware that, had it been possible» 8

ASPECTS OF BALZAC it would have been better to be less discursive. In any fair attempt to estimate Balzac's success as a novelist, we must never allow ourselves to forget that his main object was not to write literature, but in history, the history of the manners and — morals of a particular period. On rare occasions, as in "L'Enfant Maudit" and "Maître Cornélius," he laid his scenes in the far distant past, and of course the "Contes Drolatiques," which are classified as part of the "Comédie Humaine," deal with the Heptameron or Rabelaisian age. But the "Contes" are given at the tail of the list, and are rather in the nature of those final joUifications named in old theatrical programmes at the end of a sentence which says, "the whole to conclude with the diverting extravaganza." "L'Enfant Maudit" and "Maître Cornélius" are mere episodes, and are really as far from the main intention of the "Human Comedy" as "Sur Catherine de Médicis," which is only dragged in to allow the whole of Balzac's

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/ ASPECTS OF BALZAC avowed works in fiction to be grouped in the one huge achievement, or ** *Séraphita*," a wonderful study of mysticism, which stands quite outside the general plan. The time of the "Comedy" proper is from 1799, when the brave and honourable Hulot leads the soldiers of the Republic against the Breton royalists, as described in "*Les Chouans*/' to 1846, when his scandalous brother, at eighty years of age or thereabouts, marries his Norman cook» at the end of "*La Cousine Bette*." In other words, the period of the novels is practically coterminous with the author's life, Balzac having been born in 1799, and having died in 1850. He paints, then, the conditions of social life, manners, thought, conversation, lovemaking, dress and affectations during the half-century which followed the overthrow of the Directory and the rise of Napoleon's star on the 18th Brumaire, and ended with the flickering out of the Bourbon star over the head of that ** king of grocers and linendrapers " who is the subject of many 10

ASPECTS OF BALZAC contemptuous allusions in Balzac's novels. His object was to provide a permanent picture of a period which he saw to be the end of an epoch. When he wrote ** *Les Chouans* "in 1827, railways were already ** in the air," and when, in 1842, he wrote * *Un Début dans la Vie*," he commenced with a référence to the changes which the introduction of railways would bring about, and a prophecy that his description of certain scènes of contemporary life would speedily possess the merits of an archaeological treatise. "Will not our nephews be enchanted to know the truth concerning the social life of an epoch which they will call 'the old times' ? " he adds. There lies a large part of the charm possessed by the ** *Comédie Humaine*." With a great deal of highly concentrated observation, and more of highly-expanded imagination, founded on an intuition which was Balzac's greatest gift, he was able to construct dramas, comédies and tragédies that were essentially true to life, just as Cuvier, as Balzac himself often reminds us, would II

/v ASPECTS OF BALZAC reconstruct an entire animal from the présence of a single bone or tooth. That he frequently " drops into " flowery verbiage, more often than not with rather unfortunate results, as contemporary critics were ever ready to point out, and that he justly regarded himself as a **poet" in the broad acceptation wherein the French employ the Word, must not be allowed to obscure the fact that his real genius lay in the conception of his plots and scènes and characters, and the vividness of their présentation, apart from any question of the ornaments of literature, Having finished his descriptions, Balzac was free to develop the picture of whatever phase of life served as the thème of the work in hand. In that wonderfuUy vivid représentation of a government office and the various officiais and clerks and officiais' wives and relations, " Les Employés," the novelist's power of realising types is seen at its heîght. Rabourdin, the too clever and industrious officiai, Baudoyer, his silly and successful rival, 12 /

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Bixiou, the witty cynic, Poiret, who cannot see the points of Bixiou's remarks, the Minister, the intriguing wives of Rabourdin and Baudoyer, the priests, the moneylenders, the servants, are drawn with a precision and effect that render the book the most vivid of its kind. The author, without forcing his 'situations,' conveys the story of the particular affair, always on the whole going steadily forward, until the culmination in the downfall of Rabourdin's hopes of preferment and his retirement to what will probably be a happier existence. It is so with the affairs of the heart, which, to speak more Hibernico[^] form the backbones of most of the novels. There may as a rule be no wedding bells to satisfy the English idea of a "happy ending," no suicide to gratify the tastes of the problematic-realistic class of reader, though suicides and wedding bells do occur at the ends of some of the stories ; but Balzac almost invariably stops at the point where the interest culminates, or, as in "Une Double Famille," adds a few Unes of 13

ASPECTS OF BALZAC sequel which suggest far more than they State. In such touches, as in the *'asides" which abound in his novels, Balzac has concentrated much of his deepest knowledge of human tendencies. The occasional difficulty of clearly appreciating Balzac's précise intention is partly due to the fact that his French is notoriously difficult, a fact which, more than anything else, has militated against his popularity in this country, Popular in the field where success is weighed by the tonnage of the paper he never would be, if every one could read easy French and his French had been as easy as that of " Paul et Virginie " or " Le Roi des Montagnes." To apprehend Balzac it is necessary to think occasionally, as well as to read, to remember as well as to think. The conduct of his men and women is so 'finely studied, the lights and shades of their soûls so delicately expressed, that you lose three parts of the sensé if you hurry . over the pages as you would over the jlatest "railway" novel. So little does 14

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Balzac appeal to the reader of the ordinary sensational fiction that he rarely ** piles up the agony " where it does not pile itself up in the natural course of the story. When one thinks what opportunities for curdling the blood a " popular " novelist of our own day would have found in writing " Les Chouans," " Le Curé de Village," or " La Femme de Trente Ans," and how little the author does actually dwell on the more lurid incidents of those stirring books, the width of the gulf which separates him, in method as well as in intellect and power, from the most successful purveyors of sensation in fiction begins to be appreciated. Moreover, the "situations" in Balzac are not introduced at measured distances. For " serial " purposes his plan is déplorable, and seeing also that the too economical publisher who cut out the chapter headings and printed most of the books without a break from end to end set a fashion which it seems impossible to overthrow where Balzac is concerned, the chance of the "Comédie Humaine" ever

ASPECTS OF BALZAC being widely enjoyed in this country, even if all the public elementary schools were to teach French instead of arithmetic, is scarcely problematical. Mr. Henry James, in that notable essay on Balzac which introduces *** Two Young Brides "* (Mr. Heinemann's English edition of *** Mémoires de deux jeunes Mariées "*), dwells on the double personality in which the author is revealed in the "Comédie Humaine." In one suggestive passage Mr. James writes : — ***Of* imagination, on one side, all compact, *v* he was on the other an insatiable reporter of the immediate, the material, the current combination, perpetually moved by the historian's impulse to fix them, preserve them, explain them. One asks one's self as one reads him what concern the poet has with so much arithmetic and so much criticism ; so many statistics and documents, what concern the critic and economist have with so many passions, characters, and adventures. The contradiction is always before us ; it springs from the inordinate scale of it

ASPECTS OF BALZAC the author's two faces; it explains more than anything else his eccentricities and difficulties. It accounts for his want of grâce, his want of the lightness associated with an amusing literary form, his bristling surface, his closeness of texture, so suggestive, yet at the same time so akin to the crowded air we have in mind when we speak of not being able to see the wood for the trees." The criticism is wholly just. To the appreciation and enjoyment of the *** Comédie Humaine* two personal qualities in the reader are essential — patience and reflection, The sentence would sound like a sentence of death if uttered concerning a novelist of the common type. The necessity of 'working up' the plot step by step to the sensational or sentimental end is not exemplified at all in most of Balzac's novels/ It is not that Balzac ignores the full possibilities of sensational effects any more than he is indifferent to the allurements of "fine writing." As to the sensation, *** La Grande Bretèche* " is assuredly 17
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ASPECTS OF BALZAC one of the most appalling tales we have, and the "exécution" of the informer in "Les Chouans" is hardly less horrible than the somewhat similar scene of the "exécution" of the spy in Zola's "La Débâcle." >^*^ The cynical, but not altogether heartless, caricaturist Jean-Jacques Bixiou, in the course of that vivid and acid narrative wherein he lays bare the roots of Rastignac's immense fortune, makes several remarks on literary style. Having described Isaure d'Aldrigger, with her "fair hair gushing in bubbling cascades over a little head frank and fresh as that of a naiad who had put her nose against the crystal window of her fountain to see the flowers of spring," he interjects : "that is our new style, made up of phrases which are spun out like the macaroni we were eating at dinner/" There is a good deal of this sort of floral décoration in the "Comédie" itself, especially in the matter of similes. Balzac, indeed, indulged to an inordinate degree in rather far-fetched similes, and has had many disciples in this branch i8

ASPECTS OF BALZAC of learning* The popular English novelist who recently described a lady in curl-papers as resembling the figure-head of a ship with barnacles sticking to it, was not more intemperate in his fancy than the French novelist on a hundred or a thousand occasions. Balzac tells us, for instance, that ** la plaisanterie française est une dentelle dont les femmes savent embellir la joie qu'elles donnent, et les querelles qu'elles inventent ; c'est une parure morale, gracieuse comme leur toilette. Mais la plaisanterie anglaise est un acide qui corrode si bien les êtres sur lesquels il tombe qu'il en fait des squelettes lavés et brossés." Of Valérie, on a very special occasion when she was looking her best, both as to herself and her costume, we are told that *' Elle ressemblait à ces beaux fruits coquettement arrangés dans une belle assiette et qui donnent des démangeaisons à l'acier du couteau." Hortense, when she had seen her husband's model of his " Samson and Dalila," for the female figure of which that same fascinating Valérie had sat, was 19

ASPECTS OF BALZAC so affected, we hear, that ** mille soupçons poussèrent dans son âme comme poussent, dans les Indes, ces végétations, grandes et touffues, du jour au lendemain/' If Balzac was often a little too free in his similes, he was also rather careless as to precise consistency of dates, in séquence of events and in the âges of his characters, and his arithmetical calculations are sometimes rather below the standard required even in the entrance examinations for secondary schools. It is rather remarkable that, after so many éditions, the most obvious errors of thîs sort should be so carefuUy repeated. If a misspelling is corrected, why should ît be greater sacrilège to correct a numéral ? For instance, Balzac tells us, in **Béatrix," that the pretty Miss Fanny O'Brien was twenty-one in 1813, and then in 1836 she was forty-two ; while her manservant, who was fifteen when he entered the house in 181 3, was also forty-two in 1836. Errors of memory of an unusual kind also occur, as when, in " Autre Etude

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC de Femme," Balzac makes Horace Bianchon the narrator on one page, and on the next page has forgotten this fact, and declares that "à un geste du complaisant docteur [Bianchon] le silence régna." A similar disregard of his own plan is seen when, in ** La Femme de Trente Ans," the author suddenly ** par une matinée de printemps," turns the story into a *' first person" narrative, with many a "je" and moi. In sampling the more tangible errors of the " Comédie Humaine," one must not forget the répétitions which often aggravate the ear of the mind. Such sentences as " Elle effraye par son silence et par ce regard profond d'une profonde fixité ; " or *' pendant une année entière, il avait soigné la marquise avec le dévouement le plus entier," are trivial blemishes, if blemishes at all ; but when we read of ** gravures d'Audran encadrées dans des cadres en acajou," and "tapisseries des Gobelins, encadrées des plus merveilleux cadres sculptés," the effect is far more unpleasing. ai

ASPECTS OF BALZAC * The spitefully hostile reviewer, in fact, had an easy time with Balzac, and could fill a column with errors of style judiciously selected, How easy it is to laugh at the taste of a novelist who actually makes a cultured nobleman say that his valet ** m'avait apporté quelques affaires, que je voulus placer dans ma chambre/" and to underline "affaires" in the quotation. ^ Let us come back from such évident weaknesses of literary craftsmanship to the contemplation of Balzac's actual achievement. His subject was society, his leading character woman, in a hundred forms. Woman, as he perceived, is not merely the counterpart of man, "When Buffon painted the lion, he sketched the lioness in a few sentences ; whilst, in human society, the woman is not always the female of the male." The history he projected ought to have " a triple form " ; it would not deal merely with men and things, but with men, women and things. Human society, indeed, has as many different créatures as there are varieties

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC in zoolog[^]. The différences between a soldier, a workman, a government official, a barrister, a loafer, a savant, a statesman, a merchant, a sailor, a poet, a pauper, a priest, are, although more difficult to appreciate, as considerable as those which distinguish the wolf, the lion, the ass, the crow, the shark, the seal, and the sheep. Every one of the human types here mentioned has its representatives among the prominent characters of the ** Human Comedy,*' and in most of these *' vocations" the obverse and reverse are shown. We have Hulot the noble soldier, and Philippe Bridau the scoundrel ; Bourgeat the noble workman, and Cérizet who sells his master ; Rabourdin the honest if over-zealous official, and Corentin the heartless and cunning spy ; Popinot the charitable lawyer, and Delbecq the astute engineer of gross injustice ; Bixiou the witty and entertaining idler, and Maxence Gilet who sponges on his mistress; Desplein the successful surgeon, and Balthazar Claes who ruins his family by his search for the 23

ASPECTS OF BALZAC philosopher's stone ; Sérizy, the admirable Minîster, and Baron Hulot who robs the State ; Portenduère, the gallant sailor, and the pirate captain of the Othello \ while as for merchants, poets, paupers» and priests, there are enough varieties of each class to provide for every demand. ^early ail thèse people are alive. It îs very rarely that Balzac fails to endow hîs créatures with a large share of vital force, even if they are mère " supers " at the back of a scène. He worked from the life, and he reproduced his originals, partly because he had observed them so well, but mainly because his power of induction, where human character was in question, was nothing less than inspiration, When Hilarius, in the delightful comic opéra " La Poupée," finds the *' doU " talking and sînging so perfectly, he has no suspicion of the truth, and, bursting with conceit, cries, **My work" every time ît moves or speaks. Balzac was immensely, and justly, proud of the figures he had constructed, and, as has so often been told, «4

ASPECTS OF BALZAC would talk to his sister and friends about the forthcoming marriage of Mademoiselle de Granville, or the appointment obtained for Mademoiselle Mirouët's fiancé^ with greater concern than of the happenings in his own family circle. Sainte-Beuve recalls how, during a whole season at Venice, one saw nothing but Rastignacs, Duchesses de Langeais and de Maufrigneuse, and how several actors and actresses of that comedy of Society are said to have carried out their assumed characters with literal exactitude. The same serious game was played with less completeness in Russia, Poland, and Hungary. "Not only mankind," writes Balzac, *' but the notable events of existence are faithfully represented by types. There are situations, typical phases, which reappear in every life, and one of my chief objects has been to describe them faithfully." He went beyond the typical experiences of humanity in such works as "Séraphita" and "Louis Lambert," where the influence of mysticism is so strongly exhibited, but «S

ASPECTS OF BALZAC with that aspect of his work we are not here concerned, Assuredly not devoid of "romantic" tendencies, he was far more "realistic" and we may regard him as the strongest link between the two schools of fiction. It was, primarily, to paint "la bête humaine" in every phase of its life, but especially in its more luxurious lairs, that he set out, first in the field to attempt the work. Sympathy with the failings of man, recognition of the resistless power of fate, of heredity, of environment, are clear in every novel from his pen. It is in his belief in the determinism of human actions that he stands, in his treatment of character and consequences, the most apart from other great novelists. If he was one of the first to liken a hero to a Greek god, he was also one of the most effective exponents of the fatalistic creed expressed in the Greek Tragedy, now so commonly exploited in fiction. He essayed the most stupendous task that any writer has ever undertaken, a task before which that of 26

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Herbert Spencer seems comparatively small. Only we must remember that while Spencer completed the task he had set himself, Balzac died in the midst of his work. Yet he lived to achieve immeasurably more than any other student or painter of social life has achieved. \ With the present temper and tendencies of fiction, the likelihood that Balzac's life-work will be equalled in the future seems about as great as that communication will be opened up with the Martians, or women in gênerai become indiffèrent to the fashioning of their clothes. 27

WOMEN OF THE "HUMAN COMEDY." A LADY whose reading is not wholly confined to the novels of the hour was heard to dismiss Balzac with the remark» uttered with évident belief in its absolute veracity, "There are no good women in his books." One knows this easy species of criticism too well. ** Dickens never drew a gentleman," "AU Thackeray's modest women are namby-pamby," are phrases which are repeated with as much assurance as the statements that "there are no snakes in Ireland," ** no owls in Iceland," and *' no cats mentioned in the Bible." With the propounders of sweeping literary généralisations it is certainly not worth while to enter upon any discussion during a casual meeting at a dinner table 29

ASPECTS OF BALZAC or a garden-party, where most of the Company care no more about the characters of the women in Balzac's novels than they care whether the fisher of the murex made a fortune by his fishing, or John Keats by his poems. To begin with, one would have to arrive at a mutual understanding of the qualities of goodness. This much may be conceded without any undue favour, that, with rare exceptions, the most admirable creations of Balzac, whether women or men, are persons whom Dr. Portman would not have considered suitable companions for Arthur Pendennis, and whose conventional ideas would have appeared quite dreadful to the worthy inhabitants of Cranford. Perhaps there is no surer evidence of inferiority in a work of the imagination, novel, play, or poem, than the unwritten suggestion to the reader to divide the characters into two distinct classes, the "good" people and the "bad." In any case, the game would be so difficult for the reader of Balzac's novels that it would 30

ASPECTS OF BALZAC cease to be amusing long before any noticeable result was achieved. The better and the worse might be sorted out, more or less unfairly, but the '* black ' and the '* white ' could not be classified without allowing a large appearance of grey on either side. It is well to get over this question of commonplace '**criticism,' nearly all the women whose characters are most admirably imagined and presented in the "Comédie Humaine" being, in the very English sense of the word, frail. Here and there we have an Eve Chardon, an Ursule Mirouët, an Honorine, pure as a Sophia Western or a Lady Castlewood ; but we must recognise the fact that it is a darker side of social existence which, on the whole, is presented to us what might almost as aptly have been called the " Human Tragedy, *" For the partial reassurance of anxious readers who know not Balzac and may have seen some of his novels in the hands of "young persons" it must be added that vice in the " Comédie Humaine " 31

ASPECTS OF BALZAC almost invariably leads to misery. The endings of "La Rabouilleuse," Valérie Marneffe, the "fille aux yeux d'or," and Julie d'Aiglemont, for examples, might satisfy the sternest Puritans, and indeed it may be doubted whether any novelist has shown the earthly penalty of sin in a more terrible light. In the analysis of the workings of the human heart, and of whatever organ may take its place in heartless people, of whom there are many in his novels, Balzac toiled more assiduously than any novelist before or since. Nowadays we talk more of the soul than the heart. It is the "psychology" of M. Bourget, for instance, that we discuss, not the "kerology," or whatever the correct dog-Greek may be. There is no doubt a very real distinction, the women of Balzac's imagination being for the most part moved by instincts almost as near to the animal as to the spiritual, in spite of the fine words in which their feelings are expressed. Sainte-Beuve declared that he was inclined to call Balzac the lover of his 32

ASPECTS OF BALZAC marquises; and Mr. Henry James, in his remarkable introduction to "Two Young Brides," to which référence has already been made, has said of the "great ladies" of the "Comédie Humaine" that "it is as surrounded by them, even as some magnificent, indulgent Pasha by his overflowing seraglio, that Balzac sits most at his ease." Whether we agree or not depends on individual impressions and not on matters of proof. Often Balzac appears quite as much at his ease with Madame Birotteau and Césarine, with Madame Grandet and Eugénie, with poor old Madame Desroches and Agathe Bridau, with the unhappy little Pierrette or the unfortunate little Ursule as with any of the luxurious and generally passion-troubled marquises of "the Faubourg." To one of the semi-great ladies — the provincial queens of the "Comédie," — by the way, Mr. Henry James is not entirely just. He tells his readers that "The whole episode of Madame de Bargeton's * bucking ' Lucien de Rubempré, on reaching Paris with him, under pressure of 33 c

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Madame d'Espard's shockability as to his coat and trousers, and other such matters, is either a magnificent lurid document or the baseless fabric of a vision. The great wonder is that, as I rejoice to put it, we can never really discover which, and that we feel, as we read, that we can't, and that we suffer at the hands of no other author this particular helplessness of immersion." The fact is, however, that not only did Lucien " chuck " Naïs quite as much as she " chuckled " him, but that the mutual disillusionment came before Madame de Bargeton had seen her cousin Madame d'Espard, after the flight to Paris. At the Vaudeville, during the first visit to the théâtre, we are told of Lucien that ** the présence of many pretty women, beautifully dressed in the very latest fashions, forced him to remark the out-of-date toilette of Madame de Bargeton. Although it was tolerably ambitious, the materials, colours, and style were alike old-fashioned. The coiffure also, which had so charmed him at Angoulême, now appeared in shocking taste compared 34

ASPECTS OF BALZAC with the délicate devices exhibited by the other women présent/" Similar thoughts were troubling the pretty — if ridiculously adorned — ^head of Naïs herself, " Il se préparait chez Madame de Bargeton et chez Lucien un désenchantement sur eux-mêmes dont la cause était Paris. La vie s'y agrandissait aux yeux du poète, comme la société prenait une force nouvelle aux yeux de Louise." It is not entirely gallant, therefore, to lay upon Madame de Bargeton and Madame d'Espard's " shockability " the entire responsibility for the breaking-up of the Angoulême romance. In the same lively and enthusiastic essay to which I have referred, and which contains one of the most obviously sincere and understanding tributes to Balzac in the English language, Mr. James has a striking passage on the particular question of Balzac's représentation of women. ** He gets (says the American critic), for further intensity, into the very skin of his jeunes mariées — into each alternately as they are 3.S

ASPECTS OF BALZAC différent enough ; so that any other mode of representing women, or of representing anybody, becomes, in juxtaposition, a thing so void of the active contortions of truth as to be comparatively wooden, He bears children with Madame de TEstorade, knows intimately how she suffers for them, and not less intimately how her correspondent suffers, as well as enjoys, without them. Big as he is, he makes himself small to be handled by her with young maternal passion, and positively to handle her in turn with infantile innocence." The expression of a belief in Balzac's imaginative power could scarcely go further than that "positively,^' but the extraordinary force of Balzac's analysis of mental workings must impress every careful reader, and justifies, more than any of his elaborate pictures of material objects, his place among the High-Priests of "realism." "Women (declares the abominable Colonel Philippe Bridau) are naughty children ; they are animals inferior to man, and 36

ASPECTS OF BALZAC we must make them fear us, for the worst thing that can happen to us is to be ruled by such créatures." The opinion thus given by the biggest blackguard that Balzac has invented or presented is but a coarse and brutal expression of the idea uttered by the angry hero of " Locksley Hall." Shall it not be scorn to me to harp on such a moulder'd string ? I am shamed thro' ail my nature to hâve loved so slight a thing. Weakness to be wroth with weakness ! woman's pleasure, woman's pain — Nature made them blinder motions bounded in a shallower brain. Balzac's own présentation of the ** woman " question, not formulated, but to be gathered from his analysis of émotions and "mental processes/" is that women are rather a distinct variety of the race than a higher or lower form. Among the women whose characters are most clearly drawn in the novels are Henriette de Mortsau, the heroine of " Le Lys 37

ASPECTS OF BALZAC dans la Vallée/' Julie d'Aiglemont in "La Femme de Trente Ans/' the Duchesse de Langeais in the " Histoire des Treize/* Coralie in " Illusions Perdues/' and Valérie Marneffe in "Cousine Bette." Thèse five cover between them a great part of the picture of woman's dealings with man in the "Human Comedy." Henriette quite openly prefers the romantic Félix de Vandenesse to her hypochondriacal husband, who allows her ample freedom, having almost perfect confidence in her fidelity. She remains virtuous, never allowing Félix more than an occasional kiss on her hair or her hand, and for ever urging upon him the enormous superiority of a union of souls over any physical sympathy. She dies at length of jealousy and virtue combined, the novelist leaving us in doubt — though hardly in doubt after all — as to whether all the time this unhappy wife had not been just as anxious to throw her bonnet over the nearest windmill as her lover to see her do it. Antoinette de Langeais, more bound by matrimony than Henriette, 38

ASPECTS OF BALZAC in spite of, or rather because of, the fact that she is separated from her husband, also remains " virtuous " — technically — till she dies. She dies, indeed, on the very day that her lover comes to carry her off, aided by the secret society to which he belongs, from the convent in which she had sought oblivion after her discovery of the terrible truth that surrender may come too late to be effective. Both these examples may suggest that the novelist believed in the proverb, *' everything comes to him who waits," if death does not come first — and what an if! Only, in the case of Armand de Montriveau and Antoinette de Langeais, when the gift so long sought came to him at last he would not have it, and when the gift she had so tardily sought came to her she was no longer "in being." Julie d'Aiglemont — we become so familiar with duchesses, marchionesses, and countesses in Balzac's novels that we talk about them by their Christian names as readily as if they were mère Hetty Sorels or DoUy Vardens — appears in two charac39

ASPECTS OF BALZAC ters. The man who, loving her from a
mère peep through a carriage window, Hterally dévotes his life to her and
for her, dying of pneumonia after hanging on the sill of her window
throughout a cold night **to save her honour," makes no impression on her
virtuous résolves, unless to strengthen them. Yet Julie, like a namesake of
hers on the other side of the Pyrénées, Whispering " I wîll ne'er consent "—
consented, but Donna Julia consented with the lover to whom she
whispered, whereas in Julie's case it was with another one. Coralie, the
piquant actress who takes Lucien's worthless heart by storm, and loves him
so devotedly, is one of the least selfish of the swarming amoureuses drawn
by Balzac. Frail, of course, she is, but compared with the poet for whose
love she is happy to die in misery she is an angel of light. We come then to
the last of the five types that were named together — Madame 40

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Mameflfe. If Philippe Bridau is, as I hold, the worst man drawn by Balzac, Valérie Marneffe may take her place at the other end of the chimney-pièce. Their figures in bronze would make a perfect pair of ornaments for the drawing-room of a wealthy blackmailer married to a woman who had destroyed her first husband. Valérie, linked by marriage to an odious man, selling her beauty to two men at once, giving it to a third, and promising the reversion to a fourth who has possessed it before any of the rest, and been deceived in his absence, is not merely immoral and false, she is a wicked mother who neglects her only child, a swindler who trades as much upon the better instincts—rare enough—of her lovers as upon her own shame. To sketch this fascinating and horrible créature in few words would be impossible. She is the very incarnation of the evil wrought by physical beauty, bright intellect, and entire lack of principle combined. Her horrible end, so utterly horrible as almost 41

ASPECTS OF BALZAC to pass into the ridiculous, and thus to prove the possibility of extrêmes meeting, is but one among scores of instances of the fréquent appearance of that '*poetic' justice, that lex talionis one may almost call it, in the '* Comédie Humaine/' whereby men who ruin others are ruined at the last themselves, and women whose attractions are the curse of men are brought to misery at the last by men with whose affections they have played. Balzac's idéal of woman is seen in Madame de Camps, whose character he presents with unusual economy of space, perhaps by leaving her defects, ** if that angel had a fault, " without mention ; though he does tell us that she made herself out to be three years younger than she actually was. Whatever her years, she was charming in mind and in person, and she was certainly under thirty, the âge of feminine perfection according to the Balzacian philosophy. " Have you, for your happiness, met a woman whose harmonious voice lent to her 42

ASPECTS OF BALZAC speech a charm equally diffused by her manners, who knows when to speak, and when to hold her tongue, who treats you wit' ^lelîcacy, whose words are happily chosen, whose language is refined ? Her raillery caresses, and her criticism does not wound ; she neither harangues nor argues, but is pleased to conduct a discussion, and puts an end to it at the rîght moment. Her manner is affable and cheerful, her politeness has nothing forced about it, her attentions are not servile ; respect is with her no more than une ombre douce ; she never wearies you, and she leaves you pleased with her and wîth yourself. Her character is expressed in the things around her. In her rooms, everything pleases the eyes, and you breathe, as it were, the air of a home. That woman is natural. There is no sign of effort, she does not advertise her attractions or her feelings. Her opinions are simply expressed, because they are genuine. Perfectly frank, she avoîds offending any one's self-esteem ; she accepts men as God has 43

ASPECTS OF BALZAC made them, pityin^ the bad, pardoning faults and absurdities, appreciating the différences of âge, and never allowing herself to be put out by anything, because she has the tact to foresee everything. Gentle and lively at the same time, she assists before offering consolation. You like her so much, that, if that angel does wrong, you feel yourself ready to justify her. " The détail that this charming woman married her second husband at Gretna Green may be brought to the notice of Englishi-eaders. No novelist has ever devoted more space and attention to the personal appearance of his characters than Balzac, who, more than any other, seeks in the physical form for the expression of the spiritual or intellectual nature. As a resuit, we see many curious-looking people. The personal appearance of Eugénie Grandet, for instance, who, in popular esteem, was once — and may still be — quite the " leading lady " of the ** Human Comedy," is not at ail of a kind that an 44

ASPECTS OF BALZAC ordinary novelist would consider suitable for a héroïne. She ' * belonged to that type of girl, strongly built, that one sees in the lower middle class, and whose charms appear rather commonplace ; but if she resembled the Venus of Mile, her figure was dignified by that sweetness of Christian sentiment which purifies a woman and lends her a distinction unknown to the sculptors of antiquity. She had an enormous head, with the forehead, masculine yet délicate, of the Jupiter of Phidias, and grey eyes on which her chaste existence, en s'y portant tout entière, imprimait une lumière jaillissante, (How can one translate such phrases with any hope of success ?) The traits of her round face, formerly fresh and rosy, had been affected by a small-pox clément enough to leave no markings, but which had destroyed the bloom of a skin that, nevertheless, was still so soft and fine that the pure kiss of her mother left for the moment a red mark upon it, Her nose was rather too big, but it was in harmony 45

ASPECTS OF BALZAC with a mouth the colour of red lead (mtntum)f of which the lips à mille raies were full of ajflfection and kindness. Her neck was of a perfect roundness. Her rounded bosom, carefully veiled, attracted the regard et faisait rêuer ; ît lacked, no doubt, a little of that grâce which can be acquired, but, for connoisseurs, the inflexibility of that haute taille would hâve been charming. Eugénie, tall and stronglybuilt, offered then nothing of that prettiness which pleases the world at large, but she was beautiful with that beauty so easily overlooked, and by which artists alone are captivated," A painter, seeking a model such as Raphaël found for his Madonnas, might hâve seen in Eugénie, under her unruffled brow, we are told, •* a world of love, and in her eyes the/i^ ne sais ^«^^ divine- Her features, the contour of her head, which passion had not impaired or worn, resembled the horizontal Unes so softiy traced in the background of some placid lake. That tranquil countenance, tinted, bordered with 46

ASPECTS OF BALZAC light like a pretty opening flower, gave rest to one's soul, and conveyed the charm of the conscience which was reflected there, and which redemandait le regard. One is tempted to give up as hopeless — ^as indeed it is — the attempt to convey Balzac's descriptions of women, in their full significance, in another language than the French in which they were written. Balzac's French is in many ways peculiar to himself. His adverse critics, at the time when his novels were appearing, found it easy, as I have shown elsewhere in these pages, to make sport of his adjectives and his similes and metaphors. Let us glance at another of his leading ladies, Mademoiselle Félicité des Touches, as charming to the eye at forty as at one-and-twenty, like many other of Balzac's beauties, yet whose charms, as described — in imitation of some phrases of Gautier's — by Balzac, might seem ridiculous if one took every word in its literal sense. She is less than five feet high, she has high cheek bones, rather straight hips, a neck which

47 . 1.

ASPECTS OF BALZAC shows "des plis d'une magnificence athlétique," and a shoulder-joint which ** semble appartenir à une femme colossale," while the tip of her nose possesses *' a sort of mobility which does wonders in those moments when she is indignant, angry, or antagonistic." The truth— ^r part of it at any rate — is that Balzac does not always mean exactly what he says. If we heard of an English girl that she had "une tête énorme," — referring to her actual head and not to her coiffure — or that "l'attache des bras," " semble appartenir à une femme colossale," we should expect to see, when we made her acquaintance, a young woman whose size of head and of shoulders was a deformity seriously detracting from her Personal charms. Yet in the cases of Eugénie and Félicité there is no suggestion that their creator regarded them as inviting pity for any defects in their beauty. One of the pitfalls for translators is in those many words which, in ordinary parlance, are "the same in 48

ASPECTS OF BALZAC both languages." There are dozens of instances in Balzac where horrible and terrible no more mean ** horrible" and " terrible " than en effet means " in effect," than vicaire means ** vicar/* curé " curate," libraire "librarian," or éditeur **editor," or, to come nearer home, than ** terrible '* means anything dreadful when a Kentish farmer déclare it is ** a terrible good year for hops." The French are accustomed to use adjectives that are stronger than the facts seem to us to justify, and for themselves the proper shade of meaning is readily appréciable. To translate énorme by ** large " or colossale by ** big," would perhaps be nearer the truth in the above quotations. Balzac, as his readers soon discover, is a great " généraliser." His Bretons and Normans, for example, will always be true to their racial characteristics, and so great is Balzac's belief in race that a blonde or a brun nette, as the case may be, will have certain tendencies, and will behave in given circumstances in a certain way. 49 ^

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Some of his physical généralisations —
^so to speak — may appear overdrawn to many. For example, he tells us of
Julie d'Aiglemont, that, " In common with nearly all the women who have
very long hair, she was perfectly white, Her skin, of a wonderful delicacy, a
symptom that rarely deceives, announced a true sensitiveness, evidenced
also by the type of her features, which had that marvellous finish that
Chinese artists give to their fantastic paintings. Her neck was perhaps a
little long, but that sort of neck is the most graceful, and lends to a woman's
head a vague affinity with the magnetic undulations of a snake. Even
without a single one of the thousand signs by which the most hypocritical
natures are revealed to the observer, one would be able to discern a woman's
character by attentively watching the movements of the head and the
bendings of the neck, so varied, and so expressive." There is no more
finished portrait of a woman in the ** Human Comedy " than

ASPECTS OF BALZAC that of the Princesse de Cadignan. As Duchesse de Maufrigneuse she has flitted about the novels, but it is only when we spend our time with her during her successful courtship of Daniel d'Arthez, one of the most high-principled men invented by Balzac, that we have the whole character of this accomplished woman displayed before us. She is a creature after the author's (literary) heart. He was never more vigorous than in depicting men or women in whom selfishness and dissimulation are so closely interwoven with admiration and fondness for others, usually of the other sex, that they themselves do not know when they cease to be genuine. This admixture, of course, is a common characteristic of men and women, but few have illustrated it, even here and there, so finely as Balzac over and over again. The Princess is not far off forty, and has never been more beautiful. She has spent all her fortune ; her husband, for whom she cares nothing at all, is in exile with his Bourbon master, her past is so populous SI

ASPECTS OF BALZAC that, in order to reassure the parents of the rich heiress whom she seeks for her son of nineteen, she is compelled to affect the seclusion of a nun, depending for her income on allowances from her family, and for the very flowers in her little garden in Paris on her dear friend of the same age, Madame d'Espard. Why Naïs d'Espard is so devoted to Diane de Cadignan no one can make out, though every one knows simple affection cannot be the reason, that exalted lady having never yet been known to do anything from unselfish motives. Both women are sighing for the ideal love which they have not yet found. Each wants to be adored by some ardent genius who will throw his intellect and his heart at her elegantly covered feet. The Princess has, it seems, been adored by an enthusiast to whom she has never spoken» and who is now dead. Discovering that he was the bosom friend of d'Arthez (the two men were members of that cénacU which tried to save Lucien from perdition) she makes love to that genius under pretence that she 52

ASPECTS OF BALZAC regards him as the twin-soul of her lost adorer. The manner in which she leads Daniel on, Works up his passion, repulses him at critical moments, and makes him regard her as a very goddess of beauty and love, as in fact she deserves to be called, since Venus was a goddess, is described by the novelist with a verve and effect never equalled, so far as I know, save in his own account of the love-making of the Duchesse de Langeais. But the Duchess wore out her lover by her refusal to accept him or reject him definitely, while the Princess, like Madame de Beauséant in ** *La Femme abandonnée*,* carries off her lover to Switzerland and lives happily for a good bit of "ever after." AU the little tricks of coquetry, the subtle allurements of hair and toilette, the movements of the head and hands, the raising or lowering of the eyes, are touched in with admirable effect, while the conversation of this gifted amateur in the art of the stage which she never trod, whose mise en scène 53

ASPECTS OF BALZAC is in her own boudoir, is imagined and set down with an intuition and vivacity not surpassed even in *** La Cousine Bette,*" where woman's wiles are so wonderfully depicted. When she is telling the brilliant tissue of lies by which she persuades Daniel that she is a much-injured woman of virgin soul, she artistically breaks off, as if for shame, at the point where the deepest secrets of her sufferings are reached. No extract torn from the context can ever give the full force of a scene ; but a passage from the description of the interview wherein Diane plays her best cards and wins all the tricks as honestly as Bret Harte's *Chinée*, may at least suggest to those who have not read the story the desirability of reading it. Of course it loses much of its spirit in translation, but that is another reason for going to the book itself. Diane has reached the vital point in her mendacious narrative, and having stopped, has fallen, or pretended to fall, into a rêverie. S4

ASPECTS OF BALZAC * ** Well ? " said Daniel in a soft and calm voice. Diane looked up at him ; then she lowered her eyes slowly, closing her eyelids by a movement which revealed the finest modesty. Only a monster could have been capable of suspecting hypocrisy in the graceful undulation by which the cunning Princess lifted her pretty little head to plunge yet another regard in the hungry eyes of that great man. ** Can I tell you ? Ought I ? " she said. in allowiriga gesture of hésitation to escape whilst she looked at d'Arthez with a sublime expression of dreamy tenderness. * Men have such little faith in this sort of confidence ! They believe themselves so little bound to discrétion ! " * Ah ! " cried d'Arthez, * if you mistrust me, why am I here ? " ** Eh ! my friend," she replied, giving to her exclamation the appearance of an involuntary avowal, ** when a woman attaches herself to any one for life, does she calculate? It is not a question of my refusai (what can I refuse to you?), but of the 55

ASPECTS OF BALZAC opinion you will have of me if I tell you
all. I will indeed confide to you the strange position in which, at my age, I
am placed ; but what would you think of a woman who could reveal the
hidden sorrows of her married life, who could betray the secrets of another
? Turenne kept his word to the robbers ; do I not owe to my torturers the
loyalty of Turenne ? " '* Have you given your word to some one ? " asked
Daniel '* M. de Cadignan has not thought it necessary to bind me to
secrecy. You ask then more than my soul? Tyrant! You wish me to bury my
probity in you?" she said, throwing upon d'Arthez a look by which she gave
a higher price to that false confidence than to all her person/ And so the
scene progresses, till, " the hour having arrived," Diane binds the poor *
agrèât man" '*in the inextricable meshes of a carefully prepared romance,
to which he listened as a néophyte of the early days of 56

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Christianity listened to the words of an apostle." For the end of this remarkable scène, as the reviewers say when they feel they have told us as much of the story as is fair to the author, ** we must refer the reader to the book itself." Leaving the particular instance of the fascinating Diane de Cadignan for the general question of Balzac's womankind, it must be noted that several of the most spiritual of his men proffer their own analyses of women of various types. What Philippe Bridau professed to think of woman in the abstract we have already heard. Of the women à la mode Horace Bianchon declares that he holds them in horror, for the negative reason that " no woman whose soul is elevated, whose taste is pure, whose intelligence is bright, whose heart is full of feeling, and who leads a simple life, has the slightest chance of being à la mode."* From a Bixiou or a Rastignac such an opinion would have covered a bitter irony. From the doctor 57

ASPECTS OF BALZAC who knows so much of human suffering it comes — ^through Balzac's imagination — as a genuine expression of opinion concerning the Parisian women of his time. Then there is Emile Blondet, who analyses the woman *comme il faut* ^ a creature whose difference from the woman *à la mode* is not necessarily small, the *comme il faut* type being on the whole a finer one than the merely *à la mode*. " You cannot talk for half an hour with ^, *bourgeoises*^' says M. Blondet, "without her bringing her husband into the conversation ; but as for a woman *comme il faut* if you know that she is married, she has the delicacy to conceal the fact from you so well that it has been a work of Christopher Columbus to discover her husband. The wit of the woman *comme il faut*, when she has any, consists in leaving everything in doubt, as that of the *bourgeoise* urges her to tell everything. There lies the great difference between these two women ; the *bourgeoise* certainly possesses virtue, the S8

ASPECTS OF BALZAC woman comme il faut does not know if she has got it still, or if she will always have it ; she hesitates and resists where the other refuses point-blank pour tomber à plat. That hesitation in everything is one of the last grâces left to her by our horrible epoch." No more horrible act is perpetrated by any woman in the ** Human Comedy " than that of the young girl Rosalie de Watteville, who wrecks the happiness of Albert Savarus and the Duchesse d'Argaïolo by forging letters which convince the Italian lady that her Belgian lover is false, and this at the very time when the death of the old Duke d'Argaïolo, so patiently awaited, gives Savarus the right to demand the reward of his long fidelity. This ** little Rosalie *' (who is terribly punished by Fate) offers in the earlier pages of the novel a piquant illustration of the hopelessness of the attempt to bring up 21 jeune fille in complète ignorance of everything that her teachers do not impart to her. She is so artful that she persuades 59

ASPECTS OF BALZAC her parents to build a kiosk in the garden, they being quite unconscious that their dear child knows that, from the upper storey of this summer-house, she will be able to see into Albert's rooms ; and she encourages clandestine meetings in this same kiosk between her mother's maid and Albert's valet, in order that the valet may show his gratitude by bringîng his master's letters to her before they are despatched or deli vered, as the case may be. This is the sweet little girl of eighteen who has read nothing but the "Lettres édifiantes" and some Works upon the science of heraldry. Even in the study of heraldry there are dangers lurking, and Rosalie's remark on the escutcheon of Savarus, made at a small dinner-party in her own house, ** No doubt the bar is a sign of bastardy, but the bastard of a Comte de Savarus is noble," while it disconcerts her mother, loads her henpecked father to remark, ** You wished her to learn heraldry, and she knows it well ! " Another of Balzac's marked féminine

ASPECTS OF BALZAC her marriage to Diard, when she was
**struggling at every moment against her nature, half Spanish and half
Italian, having dried up the fountain of her tears by secret weeping, was one
of those typical creations destined to represent feminine unhappiness in its
largest expression; sorrow incessantly active, and the depicting of which
would require observations so minute that, for people avid of dramatic
émotions, they would become insipid. Such an analysis, where every wife
could find some of her own sufferings described, would, if it were to
comprise them all, fill an entire book/ One of the two provincial précieuses
of the **Human Comedy" is Madame de Bargeton, for whom "marriage
and the world were a nunnery. She lived on poetry, as a nun lives on
religion." The other is Dinah de la Baudraye, who makes such a fool of
herself with Lousteau, the unprincipled journalist In the days before she met
that most unromantic of lovers her provincial salon was very "sélect" 61

ASPECTS OF BALZAC indeed, and very "cultured." " Desîrous of maintaining her intelligence at the level of the mouvement parisien. Madame de la Baudraye would not suffer from any one empty remarks, nor worn-out compliments, nor phrases without point; she declined to listen to that babbling of gossip, that back-stairs tittle-tattle which is the chief component of provincial conversation." ** By the best company," says Hazlitt of some commonplace critic, " of which he is perpetually talking, he means persons who live on their own estâtes and other people's ideas." That was not Dinah's reading of the term. The bavardage to which she refused a hearing was just that *' endless chatter and blast " of which Emerson writes as one of the g^avest calamities that can come upon a house. Mademoiselle des Touches, more, perhaps, than any other woman of Balzac, was accustomed to entertain what was really **the best " company, so far as conversation is concerned. When, on a notable occasion, the ** Paron " de Nucin62

ASPECTS OF BALZAC gen and his wife were présent at one of her most sélect '* second parties," it was, we may fancy, merely in order to allow the Alsatian financier to make his remark, containing more of esprit than he realised — ** Gomme on ouplie*" The hostess of that occasion no doubt had some affinities with George Sand Félicité, déclare the curé to the anxious mother of Calyste, the handsome young man who spends ail his evenings in the Society of the celebrated woman-writer, is ** an amphibious being who is neither man nor woman, who smokes like a hussar, and writes like a journalist." Among the comparatively few notable women of Balzac's novels who are neither wives nor lovers. Mademoiselle Zéphirine de Guénic stands out very clearly against the light. This proud and devoted old lady, so careful of the property of her brother — which she has safeguarded through ail the years of his exile under the Révolution and the First Empire — that she will not spend twenty pounds for 63

ASPECTS OF BALZAC the removal of the cataract which has blinded her, watches over the little Household ^almost as careful without eyes as with them. ** Her attention not being distracted, she knew, without mounting there, the size of the heap of walnuts in the granary, and how much corn there was in the box in the stable, without plunging there her vigorous arm. She had, at the end of a cord attached to her waistband, a boatswain's whistle, with which she called the cook by blowing once, and the manservant by blowing twice." The most romantic of all Balzac's heroines, and in some respects the most heroic, is Marie de Verneuil in "Les Chouans." She was, in fact, the first of his heroines to receive any warm welcome from the reading public, and she deserved her success. This beautiful spy of the Republican Government, who falls passionately in love with the Royalist chief whom she is sent to betray, and marries him with the almost certain knowledge that both will die within twenty-four hours of the

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC wedding, is as finely-imagined a character as any in the whole séries of novels. In her case the working of the féminin brain, so subtly analysed in almost every work of Balzac's — as in the instances of Madame de Beauseant en retraite^ of Madame Claes in despair, of Madame Hulot in desperation, of Béatrix in breaking hearts, and of Lisbeth Fischer in devilish jealousy — is for the first time studied and illustrated with the assurance and cleanness of an entomologist describing the functions of the ganglia in a wasp or a beetle, combined with the sympathy of the true artist for the subject that he strives to présent ^ If these réminiscences of some typical women' of Balzac's novels seem to touch more on frailty than fidelity, the excuse has already been offered» One's justification, in any case, could be suggested by the single fact that he would not allow his own nièces to read the majority of his books, and that he wrote ** Ursule Mirouët," wherein no woman "goes wrong," expressly for them and for other jeunes filles 6s E

ASPECTS OF BALZAC to enjoy. That it is one of the most
delightful of the whole séries of novels proves conclusively, if any proof
were required, that it was not because his strength was in the depicting of
"easy virtue" that the virtue of most of his heroines is so easy on occasion. 1
66 I

MEN OF "THE HUMAN COMEDY." It has been held by some highly competent judges that Balzac realised women better than men. It is» at any rate, true that there is no man in the novels so exhaustively studied as Diane de Cadignan, Julie d'Aiglemont, Valérie Marneffe. The men are, in most instances, just as much alive as their wives or mistresses, but we do not see so much of the working of their inner consciences. We see them in action more frequently than the women, but their "mental processes " are not dissected and explained with the same élaboration. This différence may be accounted for, in some degree, by the fact that Balzac had studied the féminine character more closely than the masculine, even if his studies were

ASPECTS OF BALZAC carried out for the most part within the confines of his own brain. But another^ reason undoubtedly lies in the novelist's theory of love, He shared the opinion expressed in some burning lines placed by his favourite poet, Byron, in the mouth of the Spanish cousin of Balzac's own Julie d'Aiglemont, that Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, 'Tis woman's whole existence ; man may range The court, camp, church, the vessel and the mart ; Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange Pride, fame, ambition, to fling his heart. And few there are whom these cannot estrange ; Men have all these resources, we but one, To love again, and be again undone. In those days there was, at any rate, more truth in this view of amorous affection than there would be in the France of to-day, save in the case of the convent-bred jeunes filles^ who are still guarded until marriage with a care that would be intolerable to the majority of girls of the corresponding classes in this country. In England, of 68

ASPECTS OF BALZAC course» with its ladies' clubs (where Félicité ' des Touches, who shocked the Curé of Guérande by her **mannish" behaviour, could smoke her hookah without reproof), and its swarm of " authoresses/" women are no longer driven by the absence of alternatives to find ** their whole existence " in love. They have as many outlets for their intellectual énergies as they can want, barring politics. Some few of the women of Balzac's novels were hard workers, with little time to bother their heads or their hearts about men; but the leading ladies of the " Comédie " are mostly under no necessity to work, and are chiefly devoted to their affaires du cœur. Passion being the prime factor in Balzac's novels, and women being more deeply affected by passion than men, it is the women's minds that are chiefly « analysed. There is no man in the whole ** Human Comedy," not even the abnormal Louis Lambert^ with his imbécile exterior and angelic intelligence, of whose thoughts we know as much as we do of the thoughts 69

ASPECTS OF BALZAC of the Princesse de Cadignan or of Madame Graslin. So far as frequency of appearance may decide the point, the principal men of the *' Human Comedy " are Eugène Rastignac, Henri de Marsay, Jean-Jacques Bixiou, and Horace Bianchon. We are always meeting one or another of the quartette at parties, or at the théâtre, in a squalid garret or a silk-hung drawing-room. Rastignac, the son of a provincial nobleman who is far too poor to provide for him in a becoming manner, starts his Paris life in a fourth-rate boarding-house, but speedily climbs into comparative affluence by making successful love to the neglectful daughter of his fellow-boarder Père Goriot, and indifferent wife of the wealthy Alsatian Jew, peer of France, Company promoter and financier, Frédéric de Nucingen. Originally a rather kindly and conscientious young man, Rastignac, though he never becomes a wholly unprincipled scoundrel like Maxime de Trailles, the lover of Goriot's other daughter (who, as old 70

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Gobseck says, "has nothing but mud in his veins"), is so hardened by his early experiences of the heartlessness of men and women in Paris that he deliberately sets out to conquer the world with its own weapons, and succeeds so well that he becomes a prominent statesman, and a millionaire d la mode de France. He is the type of man, not at all unfamiliar in history, who, having succeeded in making the path of love run smoothly, uses it as an easy road to fortune. His intellect is strong, but his conversation is not usually brilliant. His aims are clearly defined, and nothing is allowed to stand in his way. He is the "pushful" man, who means to be rich and powerful, and achieves his object while still in the prime of life. The poor youth whom we first meet, cursing his lot, and tending his dying neighbour in Madame Vauquer's nauseous pension, comes out from the Chamber of Deputies — ^he is now a Minister — into the garden to talk to us, looking young still, in spite of his fortyeight years, "dressed in black, without any 71

ASPECTS OF BALZAC décoration," laughing consumedly at the things that are going on in the ** House." Léon de Lora asks him what he is so tickled by. " My dear fellow," replies Rastignac, "in order to prove the sincerity of the Constitutional Government, we are obliged to tell the most awful lies with an incredible assurance. As for me, I am variable. If there are some days when I can lie like a programme, there are others when I cannot be serious. To-day is one of my laughing days. Well, at this moment, the Prime Minister, called upon by the opposition to reveal some of the secrets of diplomacy, though it would refuse to disclose them if it was in office itself, is about to do his exercises in the tribune ; and, being an honest man who does not lie for his own pleasure, he whispered in my ear before mounting to the assault: 'I don't know what to tell them! ' In seeing him in the tribune, I have been unable to control my laughter, and have 72

ASPECTS OF BALZAC come out, for one cannot laugh on the Ministerial bench, where my youth sometimes returns to me unseasonably/' The Comte de Marsay is a bigger success in the world even than the Comte de Rastignac, coming to be the Prime Minister of Louis Philippe, after having been the Adonis of half the grandes dames of the ** Comédie Humaine." He is one of the " finest gentlemen " and most utter cads in fiction, and we have no doubt that Balzac knew him through and through. The son of a great English nobleman by an unprincipled French girl, Henri de Marsay was educated by a worldly abbé, who taught him so well that when this worldly man died a bishop, in 1812, he had " the satisfaction of leaving on earth a youth of sixteen, whose heart and soul were so well fashioned that he could get over a man of forty. Who would expect to encounter a heart of bronze, an alcoholised brain, under the most seductive exterior that the old painters, those naïve 73

ASPECTS OF BALZAC artists, gave to the serpent in the Garden of Eden? That is yet nothing. The good devil in violet had provided for his favourite some acquaintances in the high Society of Paris who were worth many thousands a year to the young man." He was so handsome at twenty-two that no woman could see him without émotion ; he was "as brave as a lion," he was an accomplished musician, with an exquisite voice. " But, alas ! all his fine qualities, his élégant faults were stained by a terrible vice : he believed neither in men nor in women, neither in God nor the devil." As we learn a little later in his history, he had another dreadful characteristic, he was incapable of forgiving. " The ferocity of the Northmen, with which the English blood is rather strongly coloured, had been transmitted to him by his father. He was résolu to be alike in his good feelings and his bad," which were certainly in the majority. Henri de Marsay's nature and principes 74

ASPECTS OF BALZAC are clearly shown in the horrible story of his adventure with Paquita of the golden eyes, He is perfectly selfish then, as at ail stages of his prospérons existence. Jean-Jacques Bixiou, who combines his work îin the Civil Service with the practice of caricature, is the leading fumiste^ or hoaxer, of the Comedy. He cannot be wholiy serions, and whether he is fooling some thick-headed clerk in his office, some rîch manufacturer from the provinces, or some confiding tradesman, his mouth is always half-full of cynical remarks which must find an outlet. He is not altogether heartless, and if he makes others sufifer he knows how to bear misfortune for himself. He, by the way, is responsible for one of the two drawings which appear in the unillustrated éditions of Balzac's novels. This caricature of Rabourdin killing the incompetént officiais in his bureau did a great deal of harm to the object of its wit, but Bixiou claimed too much for his powers when he asserted, years afterwards, that it ****killed*** Rabourdin, whose officiai fate 75

ASPECTS OF BALZAC was sealed before the drawing was in circulation. The last of the four prominent men ^named together is Horace Bianchon. When we look round over the crowd of characters in the "Comédie Humaine" — there are said to be over two thousand, and, without counting them, one can easily accept the statement — none stands out in a finer light than this gênerai practitioner. He appears as often as anybody ; indeed, few are encountered half so frequently in Balzac society. Now we meet hîm at a very "select" evenîng party, now at a supper of journalists and actresses. We ,see him one day at the deathbed of the dying Goriot in a dirty garret of the Latin quarter, and on another day at the deathbed of a duchess in a splendid hôtel of the Faubourg St. Germain. He is at home in ail classes. He has friends who are dustmen and friends who are peers of France, struggling tradesmen and members of " the hîgh finance." He has no more or less religion, in the ecclesiastical sensé, 76

ASPECTS OF BALZAC than his master Despleix, who attends a mass once a year for a reason so excellent that one dare not call him a hypocrite; but of that religion which consists in visiting the fatherless and the widow — ^and charging them nothing for his services — he has far more than most of his acquaintances who live "dans les bras de l'Eglise." In many of his works of true charity he is the partner of his uncle, Judge Popinot The uncle finds out the poor sufferers and the money for their assistance as to food and clothing, while the nephew gives up to the relief of their sickness hours when he might be freely pocketing whatever was the Parisian équivalent in those times for the doctor's guineas in Mayfair of to-day. Position and tide are nothing to him ; he takes men as he sees them, and is rarely imposed upon, but he does not expect to find perfection in any class, and looks with indulgence upon the errors of a rich marchioness or of a poor fleuriste^ though possibly he might be less severe on the fleuriste on account of the hardness of her 77

ASPECTS OF BALZAC lot. Horace Bianchon himself makes no pretence to moral impeccability. His most serious fault is his conduct towards Rosalie, the maid of the inn at Vendôme. It is true that if he had not trifled with her affections we should never, as it seems, have known the truth about the " Grande Bretèche/* and thus have missed the most thrilling tragedy in the whole " comedy," more thrilling even than the deaths of Marie de Verneuil or Paquita ; more terrible than the deaths of Adeline Hulot or her abominable rival Valérie, Yet, though he made love to satisfy his curiosity, it does not appear that he made any false promises of constancy to the pretty girl, who, indeed, was only waiting for her bricklayer fiancé to return from abroad to be married and enjoy the fortune that was the price of silence. Horace did, however, promise to keep her secret "with the probity of a thief, the most loyal that exists " ; and yet, many years after, he told the whole story to the favoured Company at the table of Camille Maupin. 78

ASPECTS OF BALZAC No figure stands out more prominently in the " Comédie Humaine" than Jacques*^ Collin, though he does not appear in many of the novels. He is the great criminal — great alike in resource, in courage, in audacity, and in achievement. Most readers of Balzac make Collin's acquaintance in the Maison Vauquer, where, under the name of Vautrin, he dominâtes the place, awakens thoughts of re-marriage in the ample bosom of the landlady, and is sold to the police who " want " him very particularly, by the soured Mademoiselle Michonneau. His arrest is the subject of one of the most*-^ powerful passages in Balzac. No extract can give a fair idea of it We see the wild beast at bay, a beast that does not merely roar and snap. The higher qualities of a strong mind, as well as the lower qualities wherein such crimes as Collin's germinate, are laid bare to our sight. When he turns to the mean, trembling woman who has been the instrument of his betrayal, and says, probably quite truly, "In uttering two words I could hâve your throat eut 79

ASPECTS OF BALZAC within a week, but I pardon you ; I am Christian;" and when he turns to the staring boarders and asks, " Hâve you never seen a convict before? A convict such as I am is a man less cowardly than the rest, who protests against the hypocrisy of the social contract, as says Rousseau, whose disciple I am proud to call mysdf»" the man has such an air of force in reserve that we sympathise with the cook, Sylvie, who, looking round on the astonished boarders, says, ** Eh bien, c'était un homme tout de même," just as the courtesan Josépha had declared to Baron Hulot, "On est une canaille, mais on a du cœur," We meet Jacques CoUin next when Lucien de Rubempré, after the failure of his attempt to capture Paris with his pen, and the cruel, though unintentional, irony of his réception at Angoulême as a "great poet," is walking along the high road, thinking of suicide. A Spanish ecclesiastic, who has dismounted from his travelling-carriage and is walking up a hill, gets into conversation with the

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or ASPECTS OF BALZAC wretched poet, and, being as astute as any criminal lawyer, soon finds out ail about the beautiful young man, and presently persuades him to become hîs secretary and make anothe^f start îⁿ life. Thîs philosophical priest is the terrifi^e criminal Collin, alias Vautrin, in one of his great " incarnations." Lucien is persuaded, and we see neither man again until we find them, in another novel, living together, Lucien as the tool of the genius — an evil genius, but still a genius— -who finds in the poet's passion for the lovely Esther Gobseck a means of obtaining money in abundance. AU goes well in crime, if very ill in morality, until the assaults of CoUin on the fortune of Nucingen, the Alsatian Jew, end in disaster, and both the workman and his tool are consigned to the care of the police. The disgrâce of Lucien is complète for a young man with some sensibility left, and he hangs himself in prison. CoUin saves himself by placing his immense knowledge of crime and crimina[^]ls at the service of the police, and 81 F

ASPECTS OF BALZAC enters upon his last 'incarnation/' He is one of Balzac's strongest créations, largely made up, no doubt, from the historical records of the French convict system but endowed by the author with a mental vigour equalled by few of the heroes of the ** Human Comedy." Much less prominently presented than " Trompe-la-Mort," as Collin's fellows in crime called him, is the Breton rebel» *' Marche-à-Terre/* whose sinister influence and animal ferocity count for so much in the romance of the beautiful spy, Marie de Verneuil, as related in ** Les Chouans." This sullen peasant, whose very love is half brutality, is as distinctly a type as any man drawn by Balzac, and suppléments the studies of Breton characters given in the earlier portion of " Béatrix." Avarice plays a large part in the " Comédie Humaine " — how otherwise could the pictured hâve been so largely true? Grandet, of Saumur, Hochon, of Issoudun, Graslin, of Limoges, and Gobseck, of Paris, are the most notable misers 32

ASPECTS OF BALZAC of the novels, and their natures are finely differentiated. Grandet is the successful wine-grower and landed proprietor, who puts his money by in sums of fifty thousand francs at a time. Hochon is less wealthy, somewhat less devoid of humanity, and far less interesting. The Saumur miser is fully developed by Balzac, and is admirably presented in the opening pages of the novel in which he lives. Having been Mayor of Saumur under the Directory, he had, "in the interests of the town," made excellent roads which reached to his several estates in the neighbourhood, and the rateable value of his possessions had been "very advantageously fixed." When Napoléon, who had no love for Republicans, came into power, Grandet left his municipal honours without regret, having got all he wanted out of them. "Providence desired, no doubt, to console him for the loss of his official position," for, in the very year of his dismissal, he inherited fortunes from his wife's mother and grandfather, and his own maternal 83

ASPECTS OF BALZAC grandmother, three old people whose avarice was so intense that they had kept their money at home, so that they might contemplate it secretly, '* receiving higher interest from the sight of their gold than from the profits of investment. • . . There was no one in Saumur who did not believe that Grandet himself had a private hoard» and gave himself nightly the ineffable delights that the sight of a great heap of gold procures. The avaricious people were almost certain of it, merely from seeing Grandet's eyes, to which the yellow metal seemed to have lent its tints. . . . Financially speaking, Monsieur Grandet was a mixture of the tiger and the boa-constrictor. He knew how to lie in wait, hidden from sight, to watch his prey, to leap upon it ; then he opened the mouth of his purse, filled it with money, and lay down quietly, like the [snake which digests its food, impassive, cold, methodical. No one could see him pass without feeling a sentiment of admiration, of mingled terror and respect." 84

ASPECTS OF BALZAC The avarice of Grasiin is mixed with an appreciation of luxury, rarely indulged, but strongly exhibited on occasion. In this he stands apart from the Grandet and Hochon types. His parsimony and heartlessness may be summed up together in the single statement that he left the birds in his aviary to starve, in order to save the expense of feeding them. Gobseck is much the most picturesque and least unpleasing of Balzac's misers. A cabin-boy, sailor, and even pirate in his earlier days, this astute philosopher has arrived at a knowledge of men equal to that of any detective in fiction — or probably in fact. He sometimes charges two hundred per cent, for a loan, but he is strictly correct in his financial dealings. His pleasures are studying human characters and playing dominoes with other usurers at a favourite café. Among the minor works of Balzac the portrait of Gobseck is one of the most finished. Maître Cornélius, the fifteenth-century miser, who sends his apprentices to the 8S

ASPECTS OF BALZAC gallows for taking money which he himself has buried in his sleep, hardly comes within the " Comedy " proper. It may be noted that his nocturnal walks are discovered by Louis XL, who sprinkles flour on the floor, and sees the marks of the miser's shoes the next morning. If there are not many "good" women in Balzac's novels, neither are there many " good " men. Doctor Benassis is a very Providence during his later life, thereby atoning for his abominable treatment of a loving and trusting woman in his earlier years. The Curé of Montégnac is an admirable example of the devoted village priest The Marquis d'Espard is of stainless honour, and performs a noble act of renunciation, but we do not see much of him, nor of Bourgeat the water-carrier, who is one of the most beautiful characters of all. This poor man from Auvergne, who by hard work and privation has saved enough money to buy a horse and dray, his life's ambition, finding that his fellow-lodger, a 86

ASPECTS OF BALZAC médical student of higher social origin, cannot afford the *fées* for his examinations, spends the money in helping the lad, and does not cease helping him, in money and Personal service, until the médical student has become a doctor. His *dévotion* costs him his life, To gain the money for the student's needs, Bourgeat has exceeded his physical powers. The young doctor watches over him, and provides for ail his wants, but it is too late. The water-carrier dies in the arms of the man who owes his success to him. As told by Balzac, it is the most beautiful story in the whole " Human Comedy." Among other characters in whom the better side of our nature is strikingly exhibited is the elder Hulot, the ill-educated but distinguished soldier, the fearless officer of stainless honour, who dies of shame on the discovery of his brother s frauds. The scène between this noble *vétéran* and his old friend and comrade, the Prince de Wissembourg, when the certainty of Baron Hulot d'Ervy's guilt is demonstrated by the 87

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Prince, is as impressive as any drawn by Balzac. Joseph Bridau, the artist who cares more for his art than for making money, and is so long in recognising the utter villany of his brother's nature, is a fine character of a lighter type. Thèse two pairs of brothers, the Hulots and the Bridaus, are most effectively contrasted in the novels in which they are respectively displayed together, " La Cousine Bette " and " Un Ménage de Garçon." The elder Hulot appears without the younger, as a principal figure in ** Les Chouans," where he distinguishes himself as the commanding officer of the ** Blues," or infantry of the Republican army, in 1799. Philippe Bridau, as already said, is the worst scoundrel of the " Comédie Humaine." No doubt Jacques Collin is a worse offender against the laws, and the thirteen confederates of the " Histoire de Treize" may be guilty of more crimes. But in meanness and selfishness there is none so perfect as this vile créature, spoilt no doubt by his 88

ASPECTS OF BALZAC doting mother, to whom he is ready to refuse bread in her hour of need, who breaks her heart at last when he disowns her, as an obstacle to his social advancement. Maxence Gilet, the unprincipled lover of "La Rabouilleuse," is bad enough, with no moral principles that are discoverable, but when he is killed in the duel by Colonel Philippe Bridau, there can be few readers who do not reflect that the better man is the one who has lost his life. One of the most distinctly realised of Balzac's men is Raoul Nathan, the erratic man of letters and journalist, for whose dishevelled hair and caustic humour the pretty wife of Félix de Vandenesse so nearly loses her reputation. "This Byron badly combed, badly made," whose hands "are unacquainted with the cares of the nail-brush," deliberately aims at untidiness. "He habitually holds one of his hands in his open waistcoat, in a pose rendered famous by Girodet's portrait of Chateaubriand; but he takes it less to be like 89

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Chateaubriand (he does not want to be like any one) than to rumple the folds of his shirt-front" Nathan, who "bears some resemblance to a genius," is a perfect egoist, who allows a woman to whom he is faithless to sell her property in order to find money for his schemes. ** Superlatively idle, he has never done anything unless pricked by the halberds of necessity. . . • The banality of his heart, the shamelessness of his handshake, which grasps every vice, every unhappiness, every treason, every opinion, have rendered him as inviolable as a constitutional monarch." This contemptible creature is the idol of the gently nurtured Marie de Vandenesse, who is saved from her impending performance in a version of "Beauty and the Beast" wherein the Beast will not turn into a Prince, by the affection and prudence of her husband. The Félix who annoys us by his vapouring in ** Le Lys dans la Vallée " has become a very sensible husband, after his rather severe lessons in 90

ASPECTS OF BALZAC self-respect and conduct from Lady Dudley and the Comtesse Natalie de Manerville. One could call up figure after figure that stands out in the * ' Human Comedy ' until there was no space to consider any other subject Such men as Crevel, the ridiculous perfumer-captain, who is always posing in Byronic attitudes ; Minoret, the dabbler in psychology, whose ** reconciliation " with the Church causes such consternation to his relations ; Paz, who, to prevent the woman he loves from loving him, declares that he is the lover of a circusgirl, and then goes off to buy the acquiescence of the circus-girl in the lie; du Tillet, the shopman, become a wealthy financier, having ability and unscrupulousness ; Gaudissart, the commercial-traveller, whose insinuating blarney is so ludicrously beaten by the babble of a lunatic ; the Abbé Birotteau, whose saintly nature is no match for the selfishness of his fellow-priest at Tours — these men, and scores of others, are drawn for us by 91

ASPECTS OF BALZAC an artist who, whatever his defects —
his want of delicacy or of sensé of proportion, his superstitions or his
affectations — has never been excelled as an exponent of character. 92

BALZAC'S "COMEDIE ANGLAISE." Voltaire wrote from Ferney, in 1769, to the Duc de Richelieu : ** I begin to think that we are becoming too English, and that it would be better for us to be French." The words may remind English readers of what is often forgotten, that there have been several periods in French history when English ways were much more affected in France than they are in these days of ** l'Entente Cordiale." Without going back to the centuries when a large part of France was under the same sovereign as England, with the natural result of a similarity in most things wherein the fashions are set by Courts, we may remember that in the years before the French Revolution, of which Voltaire is speaking, and again 93

ASPECTS OF BALZAC under the Restoration which followed the downfall of Napoléon, not only were English visitors abundant in Paris, but many English people resided there. There has probably never been since the Révolution so large an admixture of Englishmen in the social life of Paris as in the days of which Voltaire speaks, unless it was in the period of which Balzac writes, which preceded the gênerai introduction into France of railways— things very rarely mentioned, and still more rarely used, by the people of the " Human Comedy." It is that very introduction of railways that is responsible for the décline of the relative number of English people who really know Paris and influence the Parisians. Now that cheap Saturday to Monday tickets are available, a thousand English visitors might go to Paris for every one who went in the days when the sea passage was three times as long, or more, and the land journeys were done by coach. But the one, in the days of Sterne, or of Walpole, or of Young, stayed in the 94

ASPECTS OF BALZAC town and learned something of its people ; whereas the typical *"trîpper" of to-day comes back with an impression that the boundaries of Paris are marked on the north by the Palais Royal, on the south by the Luxembourg, on the east by the Hôtel de Ville, and on the west by the Eiffel Tower and the Captive Balloon, and that the inhabitants are mainly waiters, policemen, cab-drivers, and painted ladies. Balzac, perhaps, was not in a position to write a history of English manners, but he saw enough of the English to add many touches of actuality to the knowledge he had gained from Richardson's novels and Byron's poetry, and his références to England and its people are fréquent If he knew only from the accounts of others, and from his meetings with English visitors to the Continent, of what went on across the Channel in the land of fogs, wife markets, and sirloins of beef, no one can read many of his novels without discovering that he was greatly interested by the English and their idiosyncrasies* The 95

ASPECTS OF BALZAC first play that he wrote, in his early days, was on a subject chosen from English history. It was the defunct *"Cromwell,"* wherein the experiences of Charles I. and Henrietta Maria, after the triumph of the Parliamentary forces, were treated with very great freedom, among the characters being the sons of Strafford and of Cromwell. Of one scene Balzac wrote to his sister : ' * The magnanimity of Charles restoring his sons to Cromwell is finer than that of Augustus pardoning Cinna." The play was received by the author's family and friends with extreme coldness, and speedily relegated to well-merited oblivion. At any rate, the fact that he chose such a subject shows that even then he had read and thought a good deal of the people who lived on the northern side of the Channel. French writers on England, as a rule, make ludicrous mistakes, and no doubt the error is mutual. English novelists make French characters do strange things — stranger than anything that Balzac supposes English men and women to perpetrate.

ASPECTS OF BALZAC trate, at home or abroad. Lapse of time and increased facilities for travel seem to have little effect in making the two nations understand each other's peculiarities ; and it is unlikely that many English who have not long resided in France, and outside their own colonies in French towns, know our exuberant neighbours much better than they were known by Arthur Young or Lawrence Sterne. That Balzac never lived in England is no reason why he should not be better acquainted with English ideas than are a large proportion of English settlers in France with the ideas of the French. Our retired colonels in Normandy frequently seem to regard the natives very much as most Anglo-Indians regard the people of Hindostan. Yet one can hardly admit that the English character was clearly appreciated in the " Comédie Humaine." Pride, reserve, aloofness, love of ease, good taste in material surroundings, are, in Balzac's novels, prominent features of that English character. '*The English," he 97 o

ASPECTS OF BALZAC himself declares, "make it a matter of pride not to open their mouths in public conveyances," a charge still frequently made against us, not without foundation, much as might be said in defence of this reserve in strange company. " You know the peculiar personality of the English," says Félix, in ** *Le Lys dans la Vallée* " : " humanity seems to be a nest of ants upon which they tread ; they are acquainted with none of their species outside their own social circle ; they do not so much as understand the language of the rest, who, for them, are as if they had no existence." And he goes on to regard the manners of the English as presenting '* an image of their own island, where law governs all things, all is uniform in every class, and where the practice of virtue resembles the movements of machinery which is started at regular times. That people has put every thing in the form." That this was an idea of English ways very^ commonly held in the days of the French Restoration is clear from other sources. It was not denied that oUr 98

ASPECTS OF BALZAC grandfathers and grandmothers came of like passions with their Parisian or Tourangean contemporaries ; but it was believed that the English were trained, from childhood upwards, to bottle up every feeling that possessed them, save that of indifference to the existence of any person outside their own sphere. The English lady was surrounded, in Balzac's eyes, by ** fortifications of polished steel/' and was encaged in her home by golden wires. But this very worship of formality and restriction of liberty were the causes, as he held, of the special charm of English women, of *' that exaltation of a sensibility wherein, for them, life is necessarily summed up, of the exaggeration of their carefulness of themselves, of the delicacy of their love, so charmingly depicted in those famous scenes of Romeo and Juliet, wherein the genius of Shakespeare has, with one touch, expressed the English feminine type." If, however, the great French painter of human life looked upon cold reserve as characteristic of our race, he also fancied 99

ASPECTS OF BALZAC that it was veiy easy to see through us, or, at any rate, through our grandmothers. "Thèse faîr sirens," he writes, "apparently impénétrable, yet so soon understood, think that they can live upon love, and spoil their enjoyments by never varying them." How could they vary them, if they were not allowed enough liberty to choose their own amusements ? " The seclusion which used to be compulsory for the women of Greece, a seclusion now becoming the mode in England," we are told in " la Femme de Trente Ans," " is the only safeguard of domestic morality ; but, under the empire of that System, the courtesies of life disappear, society, politeness, and élégant manners being no longer possible. The nations must make their choice." Without insisting that such remarks necessarily reflect Balzac's personal opinion, it must be tolerably clear to his readers that Englishwomen, in his mind, were divided into two great classes, those of cloistral purity, and those whose conduct was only ordered, if ordered at ail, by fear 100

ASPECTS OF BALZAC of social punishments, ** Thèse girls, made of milk, with golden hair, whose curls are twisted by the fingers of angels," girls "who are only born in the British Isles/" developed into such innocent, simple-minded créatures as Fanny O'Brien — ^who was an Irishwoman by the way — or such dare-devil scorners of the seventh and some other commandments as Arabelle, Lady Dudley. To the crédit of the English Balzac places those milk-and-rose and goldenhaired beauties, that cleanliness which distinguishes " ail the English, even those of the lowest classes," and the secret of being comfortable. Bixiou thinks comfort îs **thē only good thing they hâve in England." We can accept the pretty blondes and the " confort Anglais '* as facts ; but is it possible that» three-quarters of a century ago, '* the lowest classes "' in this country were remarkable for their cleanliness? Perhaps they were, cleanliness, like most other qualities, being relative, and Balzac having had msuiy lOI

ASPECTS OF BALZAC opportunities of observing the lower strata of Parisian life during his years of impecuniosity. Washing is more gênerai on both sides of the Channel than in Balzac's days. His worldly old Chevalier de Valois, in "La Vieille Fille," was remarkable in Alençon society for the cleanness of his linen, due to the fact that he lodged over a laundry, and was a great favourite with the blanchisseuses. Balzac credits our manners also with such a powerful influence on the French professional classes of his own time that he describes Baron Hulot's son, who is a barrister, as one of those "walking coffins containing what was once a Frenchman ; the Frenchman stirs at times, and knocks against his English case, but ambition restrains him, and he consents to be stifled therein." We may hold it also for a compliment, even if we take second rank, when Balzac asserts that "long before English customs had made a woman's bedroom sacred, that of a Flemish woman was impénétrable." 102

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Some of the most complimentary remarks about England are placed in the mouth of Gérard, the highly intelligent engineer who comes from Paris to superintend Madame GrasHn's expiatory plans for the improvement of her property. During a discussion on the evil results of the French law of succession, Gérard remarks. **With the breaking up of its landed estates England would no longer exist. The great landowners there control the social machine. Their fleet, under the nose of Europe, seizes whole plots of the globe to satisfy the needs of their commerce, to send there the unfortunate and discontented. Instead of making war against capable men, crushing them, misunderstanding them, the English ruling class seeks them, rewards them, and assimilates them constantly. With the English ail is prompt in what concerns the action of the Government, in the choice of men and of things." On the whole, however, English influences are not considered from a kindly point of view, or with much evidence of respect, in the 103

ASPECTS OF BALZAC " Human Comedy '* ; and apart from the general agreement of the many persons therein who mention the English, it is pretty évident that Balzac himself did not regard us as having a generally good influence on the world. Desroches justly describes Maxime de Trailles as being "without faith or law/" but adds that '*his private policy has been directed by the principles which govern that of the English Cabinet" Our Government might be "prompt/" but it was unprincipled. Lousteau declares that " blackmailing is an invention of the English press, recently imported into France," though he forgets this statement a moment later, and asserts that "the inventor of blackmailing is Aretin." De Marsay déplores the fact that his countrymen — on the mother's side, and he derived little, save arrogance, from his English father — were copying so many things from the English that the French " might become hypocrites and prudes like 104

ASPECTS OF BALZAC them." If a hypocrite or prude, the Englishwoman> according to the clever shopkeeper in "Gaudissart the Second," is so keen at bargaining that she is his ** battle of Waterloo," victory being, however, usually on the side of the shopkeeper, whose guile and wiles are so divertingly described. Bixiou, whose opinion of English comfort has been noted above, explains at considerable length, and with his usual liveliness of illustration, "the great law of the improper" which reigns in England, declaring that through the action of this "law, London and its inhabitants will one day be turned to stone." Cruellest of ail, perhaps, is a remark made about a certain type of Frenchwoman: "She mistrusts her servants as if she were an Englishwoman, who has always a process for criminal conversation in perspective." Perhaps the most striking specimen of the unsecluded and unshackled variety of Englishwoman actually introduced into the ** Comédie Humaine " is Arabella, a great los

ASPECTS OF BALZAC lady of loose morals, whose position is so well established, her prestige so immense, and her impudence so unassailable, that she is able to behave with an effrontery that would have meant social ruin to one of less influence or less indifférence to the opinion of others. She is the unplatonic mistress of Félix de Vandenesse, whose conquest of that passionate young man broke the heart of his platonic mistress, the tantalising and unhappy "Lys dans la Vallée/" Henriette de Mortsauf. Arabella is a very dashing young woman, who rides frisky horses, and has a superabundance of health and animal spirits. She is also about the âge — ^thirty to thirty-three— that Balzac regarded as the time of perfection for woman. It is no wonder that Félix, sickening under the constant refusais of Henriette to allow him more than an occasional kiss upon her hand when he had been particularly nice and good, should have fallen before the direct onslaught of the brilliant foreigner who offered so marked an exception to the usual reserve of her io6

ASPECTS OF BALZAC countrywomen, throwing down steel fortifications and bursting wires of gold with suprême disregard for conventionalities. Even in her case, exceptional as he feels her to be, Balzac finds occasion for another touch on his picture of Albion. *' She wanted," says Félix, "hot spices for her heart to feed on, just as the English désire fiery pickles to sharpen their appetites." She assuredly managed to find the condiments she needed. Arabella was, for the most part, an exception in Balzac's imaginings of her countrywomen. On one young English woman, at any rate, Balzac himself made a strong — if may be a temporary— impre*ion, according to his friend Gozlan, as recorded in the entertaining " Balzac en Pantoufles." Gozlan met the novelist one afternoon on the boulevards, hungry for déjeuner. Balzac took him into an English confectioner's in the Rue Royale. Having ordered some macaroni pâtés^ he laid down on the table some volumes he was carrying. ** Do you know what that book is ? " he asked Gozlan. 107

ASPECTS OF BALZAC " No, my dear Balzac ! '* Hearing Balzac's name, the English girl behind the counter started as if fascinated by it Balzac did not notice her, but said : ** It is the ' Pathfinder ' of Fenimore Cooper/' And he poured out an enthusiastic appréciation of the American novelist, forgetting his hunger, forgetting where he was, and everything but his subject. ** But you are not eating/' said Gozlan. '* True," replied Balzac ; and in three or four gargantuan mouthfuls, eating, laughing, and praising Cooper at the same time, while he walked up and down the shop, he gobbled up four macaroni pdf es, to the immense astonishment of the girl, who was amazed that a man who, as she had thought, would feed upon flowers, air, and perfumes, should eat so greedily. "What do I owe you, mademoiselle?" said Balzac, at length satisfied. " Nothing, Monsieur de Balzac ! " answered the girl, in a tone which admitted no contradiction. io8

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Balzac looked at his friend, hardly knowing how to reply to this *délicate* attention. And then, after a moment's pause, he presented her with Coopères romance, saying : " I have never so much regretted, mademoiselle, that I am not the author of it" We do not know whether Balzac ever saw the girl again. He was not of the nature of Sterne. This incident reminds one of the buffet scene in the first act of ***Cyrano de Bergerac*," with this one immense difference, that Cyrano refused to accept more than a grape and a macaroon, while Balzac — intending to pay, however — ^had eaten his fill. Balzac had an immense admiration for Cooper, whom, in an article of the *Revue Parisienne*^ he compared with Scott. He greatly admired Scott ; but he criticised " *Quentin Durward* " rather severely, because he held — and others were, and are, of the same opinion — that the portrait of Louis XL was far from faithful. He

ASPECTS OF BALZAC afterwards drew his own picture of Louis in " Maître Cornélius. " Balzac gathered many of his ideas of England, perhaps most of them, from Richardson's novel, "Clarissa Harlowe," which undoubtedly had considérable influence on the ** Human Comedy." "True passion/" says Raphaël (the hero, if one may call him so, of " La Peau de Chagrin "), " expresses itself by cries, by sighs that would weary a man of a cold nature. It is necessary to love sincerely oneself to appreciate the raptures of Lovelace, when one reads 'Clarissa Harlowe/ " I may note in passing that in one of his références to Richardson's voluminous book, Balzac shows a certain obtuseness, possibly conscious, to some of his own peculiarities as a novelist "If one wished, " he says of the ** Salon Rogron" in " Pierrette," "to describe the circumlocutions, the oratorical devices, the long conversations wherein the wit purposely obscured the meaning, and the honeyed words no

ASPECTS OF BALZAC diluted the venom of certain intentions, that would be to attempt a book as long as the magnificent poem that is called 'Clarissa Harlowe.*" I do not wish to suggest that Balzac indulged overmuch in circumlocutions or "précautions oratoires," that his wit was ever allowed to shut out the light, or that he mingled honey and gall in his intentions. But assuredly some of the interminable descriptions of the external appearance of the principal characters in many of his novels have more than a distant relationship with the languors of the author of the "magnificent poem" referred to above. Balzac, indeed, comes back again and again to this matter of the length of Richardson's work. In the wonderful picture of the wheels within wheels of bankruptcy presented in "César Birotteau," he says, concerning the intrigues, tricks, inventions, and déceptions of fraudulent bankrupts and their allies, "there is no failure where enough of such things is not engendered to furnish material for the fourteen volumes of 'Clarissa Harlowe' III

ASPECTS OF BALZAC to any author who cared to undertake the work." We have seen something of Balzac's conception of English women. In his description of the mysterious and diabolically invested Melmoth — ^suggested by Maturin's once well-known novel, wherein, by the way» the satanic personage was an Irishman — he gives us the means of knowing what he imagined an Englishman to be like : *' The oblong shape of the stranger's face^ the bulging contours of his forehead, the livid hue of his complexion, announced, as did also the cut of his clothes, an Englishman. The man simply smelt of England. At the sight of his top-coat with its cape, his puffed-out neck* cloth upon his frilled shirt-front, the whiteness of which made his impassive face more livid by contrast, a face whose red, cold lips seemed like those of a vampire» one divined the black gaiters buttoned above the knees, and the half-puritan costume of a rich Englishman who goes out for a walk." It is not a pleasing 112

ASPECTS OF BALZAC picture, nor does it strike one as particularly true. The tjrpic^{al} Englishman, rich or poor» surely does not suggest the vampire ; while, as for the frilled shirt, the cravate bouffante^ and the overcoat, they were common enough in Paris in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, if pictures and prints are to be believed. Rich Englishmen were sometimes présent in Balzac's mind in quite another connection. In his days of struggle, when every penny he eamed was owed in advance for the necessaries of life, he used to dream of a millionaire who would be his patron, and ofFer to finance him. *' Humanity," he was convinced, '^has hère and there its good impulses ; and there are people who» without being English, are capable of such eccentricities." This was one of the highest compliments, perhaps» that he ever paid to oui* nationality. Balzac was at one time a millionaire (in francs) himself—according to the gossip of tout Paris. ** Every one says y ou hâve "3 H

ASPECTS OF BALZAC got a million francs, and ai-e hiding them/" said a friend one day. "Oh!" replied Balzac» turning his piercing eyes on his visitor, ** I've got a million, have I ? And where do I hide that million ? " And then he added, "In a butter jar/" pointing at the particular jar wherein he declared he had placed his savings. As to English greed for money to put in the "butter-jars" of this country, the romancing lawyer's clerk in "Un Début dans la Vie" not only charges English traders with selling munitions of war to ail the world without discrimination, but adds, " They would sell them to the devil, if he had any money.* The " Peau de Chagrin " offers several effective illustrations of Balzac's notions of English ideas and peculiarities. When Raphaël left the gaming table in the Palais Royal, for instance, " he affected the air of an Englshman for whom life has no more mysteries," It was very likely the same hell where Rastignac, as described 114

ASPECTS OF BALZAC in **Père Goriot," staked the money of Fifi de Nucingen with such success that her obligations to her former lover were discharged with the winnings. At any rate» it was none other than Rastignac who» when Raphaël had spent almost his last franc, advised him boldly to adopt the "système anglais," and thereby obtain riches. This System was mainly based on the notion that if you can once, by the use of borrowed money for want of other means, establish a crédit with your tradesmen, they will supply you for a long period without pressing for the settlement of their accounts. Rastignac declared that the more one borrows, the better his crédit becomes. But Raphaël, ** not being accustomed, as Rastignac was, to the English System, soon found himself mth" out a sou." The naming of the particular device in question "système anglais," is only another instance of the reluctance of any people to admit that anything vicious is indigenous among them. That the method by which, as we see every day in 115 f/ OF THE \ UNIVERSIT/

ASPECTS OF BALZAC London or Brighton, undischarged bankrupts are able to drive the best horses and most costly motor cars, to dine at the most expensive restaurants, and occupy the choicest boxes at théâtres, is no more "English" than "French," is as certain as that much French coffee is roasted and ground in England, that very many "confections de Paris" are made in London, and that more; than half the "chapeaux anglais" are manufactured near the banks of the Seine. If a foreign name is an attraction, it is adopted; if a native name is a detraction, we adopt a foreign one in its place. However that may be, the "système anglais" was no good to Raphaël, and it was only when the ownership of the wild ass's hide placed him in the way of material wealth and moral destruction, that he knew for a brief period the convenience of having a regular income. In some material affairs, so far as Balzac is a trustworthy guide, the English taste is — or was — excellent. Cæz Fœdora, for instance, the "femme li6

ASPECTS OF BALZAC sans cœur" of Raphaël, "the salons were furnished with exquisite taste— every room, as in the houses of the wealthiest English people, had its ^)ecial character ; and the silk hangings, the oraaments, the design of the furniture, every décorative effect, was in harmony with a ruiing idea." In the same house, apart from the beauty of the furniture and décorations, ail the characteristics of the "confort anglais" were to be discovered. Balzac, in common with most novelists of untrammelled imagination and great powers, was accused of immorality by contemporary critics. " It is," he would say to his friends, "their one resource when they hâve nothing to say as to the literary value of a man's work. Molière was attacked by them for his Tartuffe, Richardson for his création of Lovelace, that mah so vicious and so brilliant. What could one not say upon the house to which Lovelace took Clarissa ? " From thèse illustrations, an idea of the 117

ASPECTS OF BALZAC point of view from which an amazingly fertile and Imaginative writer regarded our grandfathers and grandmothers» and the enduring characteristics of our race, may be obtained. Outwardly calm, inwardly passionate, indiffèrent to the joys or sorrows of any class but their own, leisurely, of good taste in material things, conventional in their ideas of morality, slaves to outward appearance, yet indiffèrent to morals where discovery was impossible, or where — in the rarest cases — ^position placed the individual above the reach of calumny — such were the educated classes of England as they showed themselves, illuminated by the glowing pages of ** Clarissa Harlowe " and •* Pamela," to the author of " Eugénie Grandet " and " Pierrette." It was rather a hard, mechanical picture of England that Balzac saw before him, and essayed to reproduce in occasional sketches, a picture wanting in harmonious composition, and with the Rembrandt effects overdone. Yet, in essentials, it is very much in the manner of the représentations of English ii8

ASPECTS OF BALZAC ways that are presented in the French novels of our own time. We are still shown as an unsympathetic race, caring much more for outward and visible form than for "inward and spiritual grace." 119

BALZAC AND DICKENS. There is a danger from which many writers on literary questions cannot escape, if, indeed, they do not run to meet it. It is the temptation to sum up their views of one author by giving him the name of another, with a geographical adjective as prefix. M. Maeterlinck, whose *Pelléas et Mélisande*, one is asked to believe, is really very like *Romeo and Juliet* and whose *Monna Vanna* has a remarkable resemblance, perhaps, to *Measure for Measure* has been called *'The Belgian Shakespeare'* times without number ; Voltaire has been ticked off as *" The French Swift "* ; Sterne as *** The English Rabelais "* ; Alfred de Musset as *" The French Byron "* ; and Balzac as *" The French Dickens."* 131

ASPECTS OF BALZAC It may be doubted whether any trick of easy criticism is more abused than this method of conveying an idea of the characteristics of an unknown author by representing him as a foreign imitation of one who is known. I say unknown, in the first case, for what would be the use of describing Maeterlinck as a 'Shakespeare' to a reader who was acquainted with the work of both the Belgian and the Englishman, or of telling another reader who was familiar with Balzac as well as with Dickens that the two bore the same relation to each other that the Greek Zeus bore to the Roman Jupiter? It is strange that the author of 'Brutus' and 'Artémire' and 'Zaïre' has not often been labelled 'The French Shakespeare.' Perhaps he has, but, in any case, the title would not be much more incongruous than the bracketing of the authors of 'Modeste Mignon' and 'Little Dorrit.' There are, for all that, certain points — apart from questions of style, with which we are not here concerned — on which

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC panson's, as well as contrasts may be drawn between the novels of these immortals. We may, as an opening, throw a glance over some of the subjects which either novelist selected. Certain examples may be cleared out of our way at the outset. Balzac wrote nothing at all akin to "Pickwick/" or "Great Expectations," nor did Dickens produce any novels that remotely invite comparison with "Séraphita/" or "La Peau de Chagrin." In saying this, I do not suggest that there are not characters or even incidents in any two of those books that may afford points for comparison. On the positive side we have the sorrows of maidenhood in humble life presented in "Pierrette" and "The Old Curiosity Shop " ; the " grandeur and decadence " of a prosperous man of business — ^shopkeeper in one case, merchant in the other — in "César Birotteau" and " Dombey and Son " ; the miseries of an uncongenial school in " Louis Lambert " and *^ David Copperfield " ; and something of the tragedy of the French revolutionary 123

ASPECTS OF BALZAC period in ** Une Ténébreuse Affaire " and ••ATaleofTwoCities.** It is not in complete books, however, that comparisons or contrasts can best be drawn between "the French Dickens" and *' the English Balzac/' It is rather in pictures of life and character, individual or domestic. In nothing, perhaps, does the difference of the nationality and temperament of these novelists show more clearly than in their presentation of the early struggles of young men. Read again the pages which tell of the coming of David Copperfield to town, the adventures on the road of life of Nicholas Nickleby and young Martin, and then turn to Balzac's pictures of Rastignac, Lucien de Rubempré, or Raphaël de Valentin. The good young man of the Copperfield or Nickleby type is hardly to be found, at any rate as a leading character, in the novels of Balzac, while it is only in some of the plainly-labelled " villains " of Dickens— such creations as Carker, Sir John Chester, or Sir Mulberry Hawk — 124

ASPECTS OF BALZAC that the moral freedom of a Rastignac, a Félix de Vandenesse, or a Lucien de Rubempré is even faintly suggested. It is at this point, of course, that any attempt to draw a parallel between Balzac and Dickens must inevitably collapse.* The relations of the daughters of Goriot with Maxime de Trailles and Rastignac respectively, or even of Félix de Vandenesse with Henriette, would place both women and men outside the pale as "heroes" or "heroines" in a novel by Dickens. The relations of Lady Dedlock with the poor law-writer, and of Edith Dombey with Carker — whatever they were — are of immense and sinister import in "Bleak House" and "Dombey and Son," while the relations of Dinah de la Baudraye with the journalist Lousteau, and of Fifi de Nucingen with Rastignac, are but the natural incidents of life in "La Muse du Département" and "Le Père Goriot." One can as easily imagine the effervescent Dinah the "heroine" of a story by Dickens, as one can imagine David Copperfield the

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X' ASPECTS OF BALZAC ** hero " of a novel by Balzac Even the most unselfish woman of Balzac, Madame Hulot, whose dévotion to her husband and children is sublime in its utter renunciation, could have no possible counterpart in the Works of Dickens ; while, as presented by his pen, the much-abused affection of old Goriot would have softened the reminiscence of the excessively " business-like " methods which had procured him the means of spoiling his daughters, and providing them with husbands with whom they could not be happy, and thus preparing the way for the Maximes and Eugènes to enter upon the scène. It is, therefore, among the characters of Dickens that are plainly unheroic, in the novelreader's sense of the term, that we must seek for parallels, if any such there be, with the creations of his French contemporary. Lisbeth Fischer, who is assuredly far more than the titular " heroine " of " La Cousine Bette/" has no adequate counterpart in English fiction. Yet there is at least something of her unforgetting sense 126

ASPECTS OF BALZAC of injury, her undying spite, in Rosa Dartle. The wonderful romances of personal adventures, amatory and otherwise, told by the two impostors on the carrier's cart in "Un Début dans la Vie" have a real affinity with those told by Mr. Jingle on the Rochester coach, and are no less diverting if more elaborated. I doubt, however, if the most determined seeker for a parallel between Balzac and Dickens could find a much closer one than is afforded by the characters of Uriah Heep and Jean Goupil» the notary's clerk in "Ursule Mirouët" The red-haired hypocrite of Canterbury, with his splayfeet, shrinking shoulders and grimaces of humility, and the scandal-mongering russet-haired creature of Nemours, with his crooked nose, short and cranky legs, and look which "seemed to belong to a hunchback whose hump was inside/" have indeed many things in common. The one dare³ to cast glances of disgusting love from his red-brown eyes upon the beautiful and 127

-V ASPECTS OF BALZAC virginal Agnes, and endeavours to force himself upon her by threats of evil to those she loves. When David Copperfield discovers Uriah's aspirations, he gives the wretch a blow on his lank cheek with such force that " my fingers tingle as if I had bumed them ; " and when justice bas at length overtaken Uriah, that cold-blooded villain appears as a repentant sinner, " conscious of his past foUies/" to Mn Creakle, a Middlesex justice of the peace. Jean Goupil, on the other hand, casts his yellow goat's eyes upon the lovely and innocent Ursule, nearly causes her death by his horrible machinations ; and when, by selfinterest, he confesses his evil deeds to her lover Savinien, he receives from that honest and devoted naval officer a blow on the cheek which nearly knocks him down. He also déclare afterwards to a jug^e de paix that he is "another man"* altogether. It is true that while in Uriah's case Copperfield's remark that "there never were greed and cunning in the woçld yet laS

ASPECTS OF BALZAC that did not do too much and overreach themselves," proves to be partly well founded, Goupil, when we leave him at the end of the novel, is very far from the fate that he merited, and is, in fact, regarded with high respect in the town, though finding a punishment in his rickety, hydrocephalous progeny. Uriah was in high esteem with Mr. Creakle and Mr. Creakle's supporters among the visiting justices, no doubt, but he was locked up in a cell for a while that, while Goupil was a flourishing country lawyer. Yet here, it will be seen, the lover of parallel instances might make out some kind of a case. It would, however, be a case made out by the suppression of much more than was set forth. One reason why I have dealt with it at some length is that it illustrates rather forcibly what is, of course, a fundamental difference between Balzac and Dickens. Dickens never, or "hardly ever," made his good people come to an ill end, though they occasionally die young, like Paul Dombey or Little 129 I

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Nell ; and his bad people^ unless they do really repent, ne ver, or "hardly ever," come to prosperity. His literary optimism, so far as the fate of worthy people is concerned, was as strong as that which, with less reserve, Rousseau had made fashionable, and which is so beautifuly reduced to absurdity in "Candide." When Dickens allowed Steerforth to die in the storm instead of "making an honest woman" of Little Em'ly, he showed an unusual préférence for the dramatic to the sentimental rounding off of the épisode. The name "Little Em'ly," by the way, seems to illustrate a fixed idea of Dickens on the subject of titles for his characters. "Il faut souffrir pour être petite" appears to have been his reading of the proverbe "Little Nell," "Little Dorrit," "Little Emly," what hard times they ail had, poor girls ! If Balzac did not share the optimism of Dickens, he at any rate did not work on the lines laid down by some of the later "realists," whose plan is to regard an 130

ASPECTS OF BALZAC unhappy ending as "inévitabile." If the 'Mily in the valley' withers and dies, if Sylvain Pons, Pierrette Lorrain, and other good people, old and young, have to die at the end of the books that tell their stories, such novels as * 'Une Ténébreuse Affaire,' •* Cousine Bette " and " Ursule Mirouët," end with that mixing of the happy and the sad, in varying proportions, which is near to the experiences of life. It is a true observation that the note of absolute joy or sorrow is almost always a false one to strike at the end of a tale. Balzac does not greatly believe in "poetic justice," while it is a cardinal article of the Dickens System. Baron Hulot is "falsely than all fancy fathoms" to his devoted wife, and marries again at eighty-five or so after she has died of grief for his last infidelity. The daughters of Goriot exhaust his resources by their extravagances (or those of their lovers), and he expires in a dirty garret while they dwell in palaces; But the young people in ** Cousine Bette," in spite of the foUies of Wenceslas, the husband 131

ASPECTS OF BALZAC of Hortense Hulot, are left comfortably settled together, and the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Portenduère, in "Ursule Mirouët," enjoy the most perfect bliss to be found in Balzac — the novel was written, I may repeat, with a spécial eye to the jeunes filles — while their enemies, always excepting Goupil, are overwhelmed by disaster. One of the strongest of the few Connecting links between Dickens and Balzac is that both were accused by their contemporaries of bad taste, the English writer being described as vulgar and "unable to draw a gentleman," and the French writer as "immoral" and not knowing a gentleman when he saw — one^ Perhaps the cruellest things said of Balzac by Sainte-Beuve — of whose style Balzac had said some rather nasty things in his novels — are contained in the passage wherein Mérimée and Balzac are compared. Mérimée, we are there assured, "is a man of taste, of tact, of exact and rigorous sensé, who, even when at the height of his 132

ASPECTS OF BALZAC imagination, preserves a modération and discrétion of manner ; who has as much of the Personal sensé of the ridiculous as Balzac has little of it, and in whom, amid his clearness, vigour of touch, and précision ôf burin we only feel the want of a little of that animation of which Balzac had too much. It might be said of Mérimée that the accomplished man of the world, the honnête hommey as it used to be said, held the artist in check at the right moment." It is, at any rate, clear to the reader of Balzac that some of the finest ** gentlemen " and "ladies" of the " Human Comedy" frequently act in a way that is contrary to the elementary axioms of good behavioun Many things are tolerated nowadays that would hâve been considered ill-bred in the early years of the last century, and many things are bad manners in one country and not in another. With ail allowances for temporal and geographical différences, ît is hard to believe that în any âge or clime since the idea of courtesy was evolved, 133

ASPECTS OF BALZAC whispering in company was not regarded as an offence against the decencies of social life. Yet in the **Human Comedy" the men and women of the " faubourg " think less of whispering about people who are sitting within a few yards of them than a 'bus driver thinks of loudly remarking on the size and colour of a cabman's nose. **À Toreille " is as common an expression with Balzac as "s'il est permis/" and not less tiresome. We do not find David Copperfield or Nicholas Nickleby, who are among the *'no gentlemen" of Dickens, whispering about their companions of the hour as de Marsay or Rastignac whisper ; and whispering is but a détail in the bad behaviour of Balzac's fine people. One little picture will serve to illustrate those manners and customs of the pick of Restoration society that Sainte- Beuve's comparison of Balzac with Mérimée, and the " no gentleman " contrast drawn between Dickens and Balzac, naturally bring to mind. When the lovers from Angoulême^ Naïs 134

ASPECTS OF BALZAC de Bargeton and Lucien " de Rubcmpré

* first appeared in Madame d'Espard's box at the opéra, Henri de Marsay, the future Minister, a man courted in the most exclusive circles, the finest flower of social exquisiteness, the successful lover of duchesses, countesses, and baronesses, was there also. As the provincial poet entered the box, and was presented by the Marquise d'Espard to her friends, "although only two steps from the newcomer, de Marsay took his eye-glass to look at him ; his gaze passed from Lucien to Madame de Bargeton, and from Madame de Bargeton to Lucien, derisively comparing them in a way cruelly mortifying to both; he examined them as if they were two strange animals, and he smiled." Presently, when the Baron du Châtelet, Lucien's rival in Madame de Bargeton's esteem, had been presented to Madame d'Espard by the General de Montriveau, and had looked at Lucien with an air that seemed to say, " What the devil is he doing here ? " de Marsay leant towards

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC Montriveau " to say to him, à l'oreille de manière à se faire entendre du baron : * Ask him who is that singular young man who has the air of a wax-figure in a tailor's shop ? ' ' " On the other side of the house Rastignac, another aristocrat and friend of many ladies, was diverting the company in Madame de Listomère's box with witticisms which Madame d'Espard could easily see were aimed at her companions, and when de Marsay had been across and brought back some of these jests to Madame d'Espard, that great lady asked Madame de Bargeton, of course * ' sous l'éventail," to tell her more about Lucien. Surely in all this the naturally uncomfortable Lucien, whatever the effect of his clothes and the lack of finish in his manners, was at least no more contemptible than these **cultured " and "exclusive" persons who stared at him and talked about him "à l'oreille*" and "sous l'éventail" It is, I think, sufficiently evident that Balzac regarded these whisperings as in execrable taste, and that it is because he believed them proper to the scenes and the

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC characters présentée! that he introduced them into his descriptions. In any case, the behaviour of many of the "perfect gentlemen" of Balzac may strike some old-fashioned minds as being not much better than that of a "puffick lydy " exemplified by some of the inhabitants of the "Faubourg de sept Cadrans." To take but one other instance of many. The young Baron de Guénic having been "thrown over" by Béatrix Marquise de Rochefide — whom he, by the way, had literally thrown over a précipice in order that if he could not possess her no other man should — is persuaded to marry the charming Sabine de Grandlieu, and manages to live happily with her until the Marquise appears and enthrals him again, consenting, now that he himself is married, to accept his proposais. He causes much scandai in his world and misery in his family by his infidelity to his wife, and when at last Béatrix décide that her éducation will not be complète until she has tried vice as well as **love," Balzac tells us that **Le 137

ASPECTS OF BALZAC l'endemain^ Calyste parut à Béatrix ce qu'il était, un loyal et parfait gentilhomme, mais sans verve ni esprit." There is also the Colonel or General Montcornet — Balzac does not make up his mind which to call him at the time — who, curious to know the name and position of a woman whom he sees at a bail, says to her, ** d'une voix mal assurée," as well it might be : ^' Madame is without doubt married ? " and when " Tinconnue " replies, " Oui, monsieur," asks if her husband is présent. Then, after another ** Oui, monsieur," this charming officer of the Cuirassiers of the Guard goes on : " and why then, madame, do you stay in this spot ? Is it by coquetry ? " Montcornet and other fine gentlemen, civil and military, point at people in drawing-rooms, if not always with the forefinger, at least with a movement of the head, in a way that would be held in bad taste in the log-<:abins of="" the="" backwoods.="" one="" most="" honest="" gentlemen="" comedy="" meaning="" merely="" men="" who="" h="" consid="" for="" rights="" and="" feelings="" other="" people="" is="" />

ASPECTS OF BALZAC the Marquis d'Espard, who endures the contempt of the world, the anger and coldness of his wife, and even the legal accusation of insanity, rather than possess money which he believes to be, in honour, though not in law, the property of others — money, moreover, which he had inherited and not acquired. How far a similar discussion might be carried in the case of Dickens, this is not the opportunity to consider. He has not needed defenders from the charge of not knowing how to describe a gentleman. The confusion of authors with their characters is one of the commonest of critical defects, and one of the most unjust in its consequences. After this digression — which is not indeed a digression, being a progression along another part of the main road — we must get back into the centre of the highway, and to the treatment of virtue and vice by the English and the French novelists respectively. M. Emile Boutmy, whose unflattering 139

ASPECTS OF BALZAC accounts of English manners and customs of action and thought lately, and not unnaturally, attracted a good deal of attention, describes the maie natives of the southern portion of this island — ***gallant little Wales"* excepted, for he specially disallows the possession of gallantry to the Anglo-Norman section of the islanders — as bestial, hypocritical, and coarsely animal in their loves, yet he admits that the women are remarkable for their chastity. This admission by an unfriendly critic might suggest that there is some justification for the comparative absence of marital infidelity in English fiction, and that the rarity of heroines who misconduct themselves is not wholly due to the hypocrisy of authors, but partly also to a *désire* to be true to life. Whatever may be the truth about French morality it is certain that a *séries* of short stories, or a succession of novels wherein any English author made the majority of his incidents turn on the infidelity of married women, would be justly resented here as an exhi140

ASPECTS OF BALZAC bition of outrageous exaggeration. Yet in France such fiction, as in the case of Maupassant, is not regarded as anything out of the common, so far as its leading subject is in question. If, therefore, Dickens — we are now concerned with him among English authors, but he is fairly typical in this respect — has no Dinah de la Baudrayes or Valérie Marneffes among the people who **bulk largely " — the expression suggests Old Weller or Old Wardle rather than these spirittuelles beauties, but let it pass as the ** absolutely right* one — in his novels, the fact need not be regarded as due to a mere détermination to respect the préjudices of the English reader. ' The limitations, whether due to personal disinclination or considération for Mrs. Grundy, of the English novelist in dealing with questions of morals, in the narrow usage of the word, do undoubtedly exclude him from a rich field of imagination. Surely a critic would need to be blinded by his delicacy of taste who did not regard

** La Cousine 141

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Bette " as among the greatest of novels»
in spite of the fact that it mainly depends for its qualities on the life-
histories of one of the most unprincipled and faithless young women, and
one of the most disgraceful old men in the whole range of fiction.
Thackeray's Steyne is an incidental, and his Becky a paragon of virtue, in
comparison. A Rosa Dartle and a Ralph Nickleby were no good to Balzac,
their delinquencies were too circumscribed. Profound virtue and vice, as
Dickens paints them, mark their possessors so that one might know them
across the street It is often so with Balzac also. Le sieur Marneffe must have
appeared almost for what he was to every man he met, and the sweetness of
Ursule Mirouët was no less obvious to strangers. But one would not
necessarily have guessed that even Jacques CoUin was " a bad k>t/" or that
Arabelle was "no better than she should be." CoUin, the convict, escaped
from many prisons, the desperado and swindler who was for ever " wanted
" by the police Z43

ASPECTS OF BALZAC when he was not in their hands, was for a man that one of those of whom the people say, "Voilà un fameux gaillard." It was only the specially observant who noticed that his character was deep, yet even they did but suppose that his life held some carefully hidden mystery. To turn from this man, the criminal-in-chief of the "Comédie Humaine," to the "leads" among the intelligent bad characters of Dickens — Quilp, Jonas Chuzzlewit, and the rest, excluding Jingle, who might be called a "fameux gaillard," perhaps, but is not a criminal of the "double-dyed" type — is to see again the difference between the artist who paints his characters after the life, and the artist who paints his villains as black as a Dutch negro, and gilds his best people till they shine afar like the freshly-gilt ball on the dome of St. Paul's. Quilp and Chuzzlewit, and Fagin, alas, as Balzac would have said, give out the very stench of villainy, and no prudent person could have trusted them with a half

ASPECTS OF BALZAC sovereign. " Phîz " and some other artists may be partly responsible for the exaggerated pictures of scoundrelism that we see in the bad people of Dickens, but the author gave the lead to the illustrators. Another meeting-place of Balzac and Dickens is in the region of boardinghouses. Cheap boarding-houses are, of choice or necessity, the homes of many in most countries where the natives have white complexions. Could one ever visit "Todgers's" without thinking of the *' Maison Vauquer," or enter the ^^ pension bourgeoise " situated " dans le bas de la rue Neuve- Sainte-Geneviève " without seeing also the "Commercial Boarding-House" in '^a kind of paved yard near the Monument " ? It is the odour of the place in either case that first strikes the senses as one enters. At the Maison Vauquer, the very first room *' exhales an odour that is without a name in the language, and must be called * r odeur de pension' The place smells of stuffiness, mildew, sourness ; it makes one 144

ASPECTS OF BALZAC shiver and feel damp, it pénètrâtes one's clothes ; it tastes of a room where one has dined " ; and so on, the rest of the description being too réalistic to look nice in a translation. We Ait across to *' Todgers's," and find our nostrils assailed with hardly less force by the atmosphère of that highly respectable establishment. "There was an odd smell in the passage, as if the concentrated essence of ail the dinners that had been cooked in the kitchen since the house was built, lingered at the top of the kitchen stairs to that hour, and, like the Black Friar in * Don Juan,' * wouldn't be driven away/ In partîcular, there was a sensation of cabbage; as if ail the greens that had ever been boiled there were evergreens, and flourished in immortal. strength." That **evergreen" touch is characteristic of "the English Balzac," but such playfulness is only indulged in on spécial occasions by "the French Dickens," whose verbal quips and cranks will provide material for some pages ail to themselves. I4S ^

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Private houses are very different places in France and England, and were so in the great Dickens- Balzac period (about 1830-1850). The cheap boarding-house has its common characteristics all the world over, and that odour is one of them. Even the ways of the landladies and their boarders form a social curiosity which merited the close attention given to it in " Père Goriot " and in " Martin Chuzzlewit," in which English novel, we may remember, more than one American boarding-establishment also is described. Madame Vauquer was plump, since, according to Balzac's observation, " embonpoint " was a natural result of keeping a boarding-house, while " M. Todgers " was rather a bony and hardfeatured lady." There is no Vautrin at Todgers's, only a Pecksniff, but he is hardly less repellent, and certainly less " convincing" than the impressible victim of the perfidy of " Fil-de-Soie," On the other hand, the garçon, Christophe, is but a shadow beside Bailey, a fact which leads us at once to a région of the novelist's art 146

ASPECTS OF BALZAC wherein Dickens is assuredly superior to Balzac. The boys of the English novelist may or may not always be *'human " boys. The pathos of Jo and Oliver Twist is possibly false in part, as false as the exaggerated somnolence of the Joe of Dingley Dell. Whatever their proportion of humanity the fat boy and the boy Pip are **real." Dickens was never afraid of boy-making, but Balzac, whether afraid or not, very rarely attempted the work. His schoolboys in ** Louis Lambert " are but phantoms of boys, such solidity as they hâve being, as one may most illogically say, of a psychological kind. Louis himself, as described towards the end of the book, when a patient woman had devoted her life to him, was physically more léthargie than the Joe of Dingley Dell when sleepest and most replète, and even a prod in the calf with a fork could not hâve aroused this Swedenborgian youth. The characters hâve nothing else in common. Henriette's boy, again, in the " Lys dans la Vallée," is 147

ASPECTS OF BALZAC but an unfinished sketch. We never really know him intimately. The Marneffes' neglected boy (in '* La Cousine Bette '), whose unhappy childhood might seem to offer a better chance to an Imaginative writer even than the childhood of the boy who fled from the horrors of life under the Murdstone rule, remains unknown. Regarded by his parents as an encumbrance, and left entirely to the care of a servant, the child of such a ménage suggests a dramatic figure. Balzac, however, leaves him outside the wings of his stage. He had to do with scènes wherein the purity of infancy had no chance of success. For ail that, another child whom nobody ever sees is the subject of perhaps the most wonderful bit of caustic comedy in a book that is fuU of it. Dickens, being a respectable English author, wrote no ** Cousine Bette," and still less did he write any ** Contes Drolatiques." The nearest approach to such diversions as the ** Contes " is to be seen in *' Pickwick " in the incidental humours 148

ASPECTS OF BALZAC related by Sam Weller or Tom Smart ; the ménage à trois — two dissenters and one dissenting — at the " Marquis of Granby," Dorking ; the innocent affair — ^happily settled out of court — of Pott v. Pott and Winkle : and the unfortunate " wrong bedroom business " in which Miss Witherfield, Mr. Pickwick, and Mr. Peter Magnus were the leading characters. It is, of course, no " approach " at all. These remarks are not intended to suggest a close comparison between two novelists who are among the greatest glories of their respective countries. Rather has the intention been to offer some few bits of evidence of the futility of any such comparison. Balzac was French of the French, and Dickens English of the English, and, in spite of the very real sympathy which may exist between the men of letters, of art, and above all of science, on the two shores of the Channel, the literary ideals of the two nations are not the same, the very terms used to express sentiments and ideas are often

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC unconvertible from one language into another, and France has never been nearer to the crédit of producing a Dickens than England to the crédit of producing a Balzac '* English Balzacs " and '* French Dickens " are chimeras of fiction in themselves. 150

LITERARY REFERENCES IN BALZAC French critics of the présent day are inclined to be disrespectful to Balzac's literary réputation, mainly because, as they déclare with perfect accuracy, hîs style îs somewhat wanting in verbal élégance and finesse* There is certainly little of rhythmical preciousity in his "Comédie Humaine " ; many ôf the descriptive passages are tediously elaborated, and the metaphors, as his enemies had no difficulty in showing, are frequently forced and occasionally ridiculous. Indeed, one may freely admit that, if " Illusions Perdues," " Le Père Goriot," and the rest were to be judged from the same standpoint as "Marius the Epicurean," or even as " Madame Bovary," it would be easy to

ASPECTS OF BALZAC find many excuses for doubting whether Balzac was a master of letters. With the question of his literary style we are not at this moment concerned, save for the negative reason that if we disregard his literary form altogether we still have in his novels an amount of history, social, commercial, political, literary, artistic, and general, which alone would render them of enormous value and attractiveness to those who are addicted to "the proper study of mankind." If we form our opinions of Balzac's literary taste from his novels — as we may do without fear of mistake, seeing how entirely his letters and the statements of his friends bear out the evidence thus obtained — we find that the authors whose names and Works come most frequently into Balzac's mind when he pauses for an illustration are all writers of English ; they are Richardson, Scott, Fenimore Cooper, Sterne, and Byron. No book ever made a greater impression on Balzac than "Clarissa Harlowe." It crops up here, 152

ASPECTS OF BALZAC there, and everywhere in the **
Comédie Humaine." That ** magnificent poem," as he calls Richardson's
novel, was, indeed, far more than an object of admiration to the French
author; it was in several respects the model from which he worked. The
vastness of his plan, the exhaustive détail of his descriptions, the formai
élaboration of the letters which fill so large a space in the ** Comédie," are,
one nâay well believe, as much the result of an enthusiastic study of the
French translations of Richardson's works as of the unbiassed prédilections
or conclusions of Balzac himself. The same qualities hâve prevented
thousands of readers from appreciating either author. Just as the pages upon
pages of most solid description of incidents or states of mind in
Richardsons work hâve *'choked off" ail that enormous class of novel-
lovers — at least nine-tenths of the whole body — whose motto, if they
know it not, is *' eut the cackle, and come to the 'osses," so hâve the
interminable descriptions of 153

ASPECTS OF BALZAC places and persons in the "Human Comedy." If the Frenchman was the conscious follower of the Englishman in this respect, the disciple surpassed his master. How many well-intentioned readers have given up in despair the attempt to "get on" with "Sur Catherine de Médicis" for example, wherein fifty solid pages of historical explanation form as strong a defence for the body of the novel as the massive fortifications described in the book itself formed for that famous Château of Blois, every turret and balustrade of which is so well described by the novelist! How many have quailed before the account of a Sylvain Pons, or a Madame de Bargeton, wherein every garment, from shirt or chemise to overcoat or mantle, every stud and brooch is enumerated and described ; while the cheeks, eyelashes, nostrils, lips, shoulders, hips, chest, knees, fingers and / toes are shown and explained with all the unruffled patience of a lecturer on zoology describing a new species of mammal from

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC the Philippines — so rich in novelties of that kind To say this is not to sneer at the author. I believe that such elaborations were, as a rule, entirely in place, and that, for the general purpose, a truly great one, that he had in view, the majority of the frequently condemned longueurs of Balzac are essential to the artistic perfecting of his life work. The moral, the " admirable " moral, of ** l'épopée domestique intitulée 'Clarisse Harlowe,' " Balzac tells us in " Modeste Mignon," is that "Tamour légitime et honnête de la victime la mène à sa perte, parce qu'il se conçoit, se développe et se poursuit malgré la famille." If the French novelist followed the methods of Richardson's work, he did not follow its " admirable moral," for I cannot recall one of his novels in which " Tamour légitime " leads its "victim" to ruin for the reason given. Indeed, in the very story from which the above passage is quoted, the audacious and impudent heroine, whose love at any rate is lawful and honest, however fatu

ASPECTS OF BALZAC ously commenced, is "conceived, developed, and pursued in spite of the family/" and ends in "happiness ever after" for the victim, though not precisely with the poet she had supposed herself in love with. The charming man whom Modeste does marry is himself inclined to be literary. "Oh! parlez, dites un mot" (he writes to Modeste), " et je vous aimerai jusqu'à ce que mes yeux se ferment, comme le Marquis de Pescaire aima sa femme, comme Roméo sa Juliette, et fidèlement. Notre vie, pour moi du moins, sera cette félicité sans trouble - dont parle Dante comme étant l'élément de son Paradis^ poème bien supérieur à son Enfer ^ Thèse last half-dozen words might be considered ominous of future misery, since no man 'Mawfully and honestly" in love could make such a criticism in the midst of a letter of imploring passion. Balzac is, indeed, rather addicted to forgetting the distinction between the author's narrative and the words placed in the mouths or in 156

ASPECTS OF BALZAC the letters of his characters ; and many of his Personal expressions of literary opinion are introduced in such an indirect way. We cannot doubt that for him the ** Paradiso " was superior to the " Infemo." The novel already referred to, that original and fantastic story of the "bold little minx " who was inappropriately named Modeste, is specially literary in many of its references and descriptions, the central episode being that of the young girl whose mind is stuffed with romances and with her own inventions, who has been in imagination every kind of woman, from a princess to a grisette, and who offers her beauty and fortune to a poet whom she has never seen except in a mezzotint engraving at three or four francs. At the opening of the novel, she has suffered a terrible loss. " Overwhelmed with grief by the death of her sister. Modeste had sought distraction in reading so continuously that her mind became quite dazed at times. She 157

ASPECTS OF BALZAC had been brought up to speak German and French equally well, and she and her sister had learnt English from (the American) Madame Dumay. Little regarded in her reading by those around her, who were without any literary knowledge, Modeste gave for food to her soul the modern masterpieces of English, German and French literature — Lord Byron, Goethe, Schiller, Walter Scott, Hugo, Lamartine, Crabbe, Moore — ^the great books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the histories and essays and plays and fiction, from Rabelais to Manon Lescaut, from Montaigne to Diderot, from the * Fabliaux' to the 'Nouvelle Héloïse.'" The thoughts of three countries filled with confused images "cette tête sublime de naïveté froide, de virginité contenue, d'où s'élança brillante, armée, sincère et forte, une admiration absolue pour le génie." For Modeste a new book was a great event; *'she was made extra vaguely happy by a chef --d œuvre ; she was miserable when a book did not ravage her heart"

ASPECTS OF BALZAC The perturbation of the loving souls around this book-ridden girl, they being ignorant of any language but French, and of the very names of most of the authors, native and foreign, whose works Modeste devoured, is most amusingly described. For instance, the worthy Madame Latournelle, the notary's wife — one of the ladies ** without literary knowledge " — is specially T ^ distressed by the girl's incessant reading < and its effects. " Modesjte, she says, is a young person très-exaltée, elle se passionne for the poems of this writer, and the prose of that You have no idea of the effect that * Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné ' has produced upon her, but she seemed to me wild with her admiration for that M, Hugo. I don't know where these people (Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Byron, and the rest) get their ideas from. The little one has spoken to me of * Childe Harold/ I have not wished to be contradicted ; I have had the simplicity to read it, to be able to reason with IS9

ASPECTS OF BALZAC her. I don't know if it is necessary to attribute that effect to the translation, but my heart palpitated, my eyes were dazed, and I could not go on reading. There are there comparisons which howl, rocks which faint away, lavas of war. Of course, as it is an Englishman who travels, one ought to expect some eccentricities, but that exceeds all licence. One believes oneself in Spain, and he puts you in the clouds above the Alps ; he makes the torrents and the stars talk ; and then there are too many maidens ! . . . it is past all patience. And then, after the campaigns of Napoléon, we have enough of the sounding brass, of the fiery cannon-balls, which roll from page to page. Modeste declares that all this bombast comes of the translator, and that one must read the original. But I shall not learn English for Lord Byron. . . . I am too much a daughter of Normandy to be captivated by everything that comes from abroad, and above all from England." As for Scott, the Waverley novels are 160

ASPECTS OF BALZAC never mentioned without respect in the
** Human Comedy." " ' Les Aventures de Nigel ' du grand romancier Walter
Scott," ** Le grand écrivain Walter Scott, dans son admirable roman, * La
Jolie Fille de Perth" — such références abound in the • *' Comedy," with
hère and there touches of critical appréciation, as when Balzac sagely
observés that "In the magnificent works of Walter Scott, the character most
outside of the action comes, at a given moment, by threads woven in the
tissue of the intrigue, to take its place in the dénouement.^' One Waverley
novel, however, did not give satisfaction to Balzac. The portrait of Louis
XL drawn in " Quentin Durward " was not in accord with the opinion of
that astute monarch formed by the author of *' Sur Catherine de Médicis,"
whose studies of the history of France in the fifteenth and sixteenth
centuries had been considérable, as we may see from that voluminous
historical introduction to the lastnamed book, already referred to. *' Maître
Cornélius," in which '* Louis le Onzième " 161 L

ASPECTS OF BALZAC is introduced, was written, Madame Surville has told us, to place the character of the king in the light in which her brother Honoré regarded it. The plethora of romances in the nineteenth century was due, in Balzac's opinion, to the absence of romance, for he calls it (in " L'Enfant Maudit") " un siècle où les romans s'écrivent précisément parce qu'ils n'arrivent plus." It seems at first thought a curious view for an author to take who knew his period so well. Romance of the sort with which he was chiefly concerned — not the axe and torture, poison and intrigue romance of " Catherine de Médicis," or the plot and counterplot romance of "Une Ténébreuse Affaire " and " Les Chouans," but the romance of passion and pathos, as represented so admirably in "Le Lys dans la Vallée," the diamond-cut-diamond romance of " Un Ménage de Garçon," and the romance of abandonment and of dévotion of "Le Cousin Pons," " Pierrette," and " Le Curé de Tours" — was as plentiful on every side as it is to-day, and as 162

ASPECTS OF BALZAC it always will be till the curtain is rung down on the last performance of the ** Human Comedy." What Balzac meant by ** romance," however, was most likely ** costume " romance, though by no means in the slightly sarcastic sense in which we generally use the term to-day. " Ivanhoe," " Kenilworth," and his own " L'Enfant Maudît," are types of the kind of writings that he had in his mind when he penned that phrase. Probably it was the absence of romance of the old sword and dagger and deadly intrigue kind, in the rather leaden-hued period of Louis Philippe, which made Balzac so keen an admirer of Fenimore Coopères tales of trappers and pathfinders. Insatiable reader as he was in his Vendôme days and afterwards, Balzac had little time to read other men's writings when he had settled down to his struggle for life as a novelist. Yet he did not, it is certain, share the opinions of his own création, the adorable Massimilla Doni, on the subject of books in gênerai and French books in

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC particular *' Most of my compatriots/' says that tantalising Duchess to the French doctor who is introduced to her in her box at the opéra in Venice, ^' read your useless French productions/' " Useless ?" cries the doctor, with patriotic astonishment **Yes, monsieur, useless, for what can one find in a book that is better than the things we have at heart ? " And then, when the doctor remarks upon her évident admiration for the despotism under which Venice **groaned" in those days, the Duchess asks : '* And why should I not love a System of government which, in depriving us of books and of those sickening politics, nous laisse les hommes tout entiers ? " Balzac's views concerning the standard authors of his country creep out now and again. He had clearly rather a poor opinion of the eighteenth-century philosophers, as was natural in one who, whatever his religious convictions, was a firm believer in the necessity of Catholicism to 164

UNIVERSITY OF ASPECTS OF BALZAC France, and a strong objecter to Protestantism and ** hérésies " of any shape. Indeed, we have little doubt that at least half the authors whose works were contained in the package of books which the only daughter of César Birotteau gave to her papa, on a certain famous occasion, were held in less esteem by Balzac himself than by those whose révérence for the monarchical and ecclesiastical Systems of France was more strongly tempered by révérence for "les droits de l'homme." However that may be, we know that *' Césarine, the dear child, had spent all her little savings, a hundred louis, to buy books as a surprise for her father; Bossuet, Racine, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu^ Molière, Buffon, Fénelon, Delille, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, La Fontaine, Corneille, Pascal, La Harpe, in fine, that régulation library which is seen everywhere, and which her father was never likely to read," It was on seeing this charmingly-meaning, if— for the récipient— unprofitable, présent that the pursy M. 165

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Matifat, who never said " Corneille," but "the sublime Corneille," or " Racine," but "the sweet Racine," was moved, according to his habit, to exclaim : " Voltaire is the second in every field ; he has more of wit than of genius, but is a genius for ail that" It has been declared by some of Balzac's critics, anxious for the réputation of the French press and publishing trade, that the vitriolic picture of " literary circles" in " Illusions Perdues " was an exception to the author's consistent and persistent practice of drawing from the life, as he observed it, without malice or favouritism, and that he deliberately sat down to " make it hot " for the people who had abused his books or hindered his success. Yet from contemporary sources who were unconnected with Balzac's affairs it is clear that, whether or not Dauriat, and Lousteau, and Fînot, and Nathan are typical of the general run of publishers, authors and journalists, they are not uncommon types of their period. The account of Lucien Chardon's (or 166

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Lucien de Rubempré, as he chose to call himself) first interview with the prosperous publisher Dauriat is obviously drawn from Personal knowledge, and probably little exaggerated. **A new affair? But you know I have already eleven hundred manuscripts. Yes, gentlemen, eleven hundred. I shall soon be obliged to engage a staff of clerks to register the manuscripts as they arrive, a staff of readers to examine them. There will be committee meetings to vote upon the merits of the works, and a permanent secretary to present the reports to me. It will be a branch of the Academy, and the academicians will be better paid here than at the Institute." Some one says : " It is an idea." "A bad one," replies the publisher, and he proceeds to put the purely commercial view of literature as it has been put, with much less force as a rule, by a thousand sorrowful writers since Balzac wrote his wondrous novel. Dauriat did not want, he scornfully declared, the attempts of those who took up literature because they could not be 167

ASPECTS OF BALZAC capitalists, or boot-makers, or soldiers, or servants, or office-holders, or sheriffs of officers. No one need come to him without an established reputation. Become celebrated, and you would find bucketsful of gold. ** But, monsieur," interjects Lucien, " if every publisher talked as you talk, how could anybody bring out his first book ?" ** That is no concern of mine," continues the publisher. It was not his idea of amusement to risk his money on doubtful enterprises. He was not there to be a stepping-stone to future glories, but to make money and divide it with the celebrated writers for whom he published. As to the poets, he would have none of them. " Les vers dévoreront la librairie," he cries, in one of Balzac's best puns. Why, his hearers probably had no idea of the harm that the success of Byron, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Casimir Delavigne, and Béranger had caused. Their triumph was as bad as an invasion of barbarians. He had at that moment in his office a thousand manuscripts of verse commencing with x68

ASPECTS OF BALZAC interrupted narratives, without head or tail, in imitation of "Lara" and "The Corsair." Lousteau, after he and Lucien have left Dauriat's shop, continues to discuss the same topic, so intensely personal for the "Byron of Angoulême," as Lucien found some few to regard him. "The publishers," says the too experienced journalist, "will sell or will not sell a book, that is for them the sole question. A book, for them, represents capital to risk. The more the book is admirable the less chance it has of being sold." As a comment on all the talk he has drawn from memory and imagination combined Balzac remarks, with characteristic vehémençe, that "outside of the literary world there exists not a single person who knows the horrible Odyssey by which one arrives at what one must call, according to his talents, vogue, mode, reputation, renown, celebrity, public favour, those different ladders which lead to glory, but which can never take its place." Dauriat's contemptuous references to the

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC poets who besiege him are perhaps justified» from the business point of view, by the expérience of publishers even in our own day, and they are not more galling for the would-be climber of Parnassus than the treatment of Lucien's " Marguerites " by that other and older publisher who is the first to promise at least a reading for Lucien's ill-fated romance " L'Archer de Charles IX." He has taken that cherished M S. from its author, but hands it back when Lucien has ** the fatal idea " of showing him his verses. ** Ah ! " he cries, "vous êtes poète! Je ne veux plus de votre roman. Les rimailleurs échouent quand ils veulent faire de la prose. En prose, il n'y a pas de chevilles, il faut absolument dire quelque chose." The old man was not in accordance with some of the most admired modern stylists in his opinion, but it held good in those days, when the grandchildren of the précieuses were mostly defunct and the mothers of the " precious " novelists were mostly unborn. Balzac, at any rate, if he sometimes repeated himself, 170

ASPECTS OF BALZAC very rarely wrote without having something to say, and almost invariably succeeded in saying it. Ossian (or rather Macpherson, who made Ossian for us more surely than Fitzgerald made Omar) is ready in Balzac's mind when he wants an illustration. The Duchesse de Langeais, according to the shop assistant who sold the marabout feathers to Madame Jules Desmarets on an eventful day, had said that marabouts gave to a woman " quelque chose de vague, d'ossianique et de très comme il faut," while the author himself describes the émotions of the unknown person who. revealed the secrets of " The Thirteen " as analogous to those "which agitated Mac* pherson when the name of Ossian, hîs création, inscribed itself in every lang^age." Indeed, Balzac becomes quîte excited on the subject of Macpherson's famé. ** That was assuredly, for the Scottish advocate, one of the most vîvid, or at any rate the rarest sensations that man can give himself. Is it not the incognito of 171

ASPECTS OF BALZAC genius? To write the * Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem/ that is to take part in the glory of a century ; but to endow his country with a Homer, is not that to usurp upon God ? " Scott and Macpherson, the one in innumerable references and allusions, the other in few, chiefly represent North Britain in the "Comédie Humaine." For England, after Richardson, who fills by far the largest place, the prose writer most frequently introduced by Balzac is Sterne, "Tristram Shandy" supplying many illustrations, especially in the persons of " Mon Oncle Tobie " and Corporal Trim. It is évident that the humour and pathos of Toby Shandy's character and adventures, amatory and otherwise, made a strong impression on the novelist, whose own old soldiers, Marshal Hulot and Colonel Chabert, to name but two, are presented with so much feeling, and whose faithful retainers, men and women, are amongst the most admirable of his minor characters. Michu, indeed in "Une Ténébreuse Affaire," who

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ASPECTS OF BALZAC dies on the scaffold rather than betray his masters, is more than worthy to rank with Trim as a picture of fidelity, though Trîm would not hâve quailed if ît had been necessary to mount the ladder at Tyburn for Unde Toby's sake. Sterne, of course, was better known to the French than most of his contemporaries in English literature. His "Sentimental Journey" itself, more than once alluded to by Balzac, appealed perhaps more strongly to Parisians than to Londoners. Among English novelists, in the strict sensé of the term, Richardson is foUowed by Anne Radcliffe in Balzac's fancy, and ** Monk " Lewis is not overlooked. When he looks about for something to suggest what we call weirdness — a word which seems to hâve no exact équivalent in French — Balzac often brings in " Mistress Radcliffe " to show the kind of thing he means, and Lewis is occasionally called upon to serve the turn, There is one English pœt who, though not frequently brought in, as Byron is, for 173

ASPECTS OF BALZAC use as a personal example of a physical type, as well as for purposes of literary référence, is now and again introduced as an illustration of defects of character. Of Lucien Chardon (de Rubempré), before his fall into vice, it is said : " Poor and modest, the boy was a Chatterton without self-seeking baseness, without the ferocious hatred of the rich and successful, which led the English poet to write libels on his benefactors/' Byron, as has been said, is brought in not only as a poet, but as a type of humanity . His curly hair is cited again and again, his attitudes as seen in his portraits are reproduced with exaggeration by such poseurs as the absurd Crevel. He is regarded very much as the embodiment of the theatricalromantic ideals of the inexperienced young men and young women of his period, France in this, as in her jockeys, and neckties, and a hundred other matters, following English fashions with a greater zeal in the first half of the nineteenth century than she has ever done since. It is more the other way now, 174

ASPECTS OF BALZAC at any rate in literature, and on the whole the Anglomania of the thirties was a stronger force than that of recent years, though then, as of late, fondness for English horses and frockcoats and collars was often compatible with no great respect for English characteristics. In any case, the poetry of Byron was among the chief objects of Balzac's literary admiration. The most astonishing episode in ** *La Femme de Trente Ans* " was almost certainly suggested by ** *The Corsair*" and "*Lara*." The private assassin and pirate chieftain with whose adventurous and murderous lot the hardly-used Hélène d'Aiglemont links her own life in such improbable circumstances, and with whom she abides so happily and luxuriously on that rakish clipper the *Othello*^ is Conrad come again, again to leave, in Balzac's ruthless study of fickleness and fidelity, a name — Link'd with one virtue and a thousand crimes. Before ending these notes on some of i7S

ASPECTS OF BALZAC the literary références of the **

Comédie Humaine/' I may recall the fact that PuncKs long-haired poet who, on taking up a copy of his verses from the table of a professedly enthusiastic admirer, sadly remarked, ** You might at least hâve eut the pages," was anticipated, more or less, by the young German in ** Le Cousin Pons." When, in her efforts to attract his admiration, Cécile sees Fritz Brunner take up the German grammar that she has carefuUy "hidden," and the prettyhumbug exclaims, ** I wish to read Goethe in the original ; I hâve been learning German for two years," Brunner replies, *' The grammar is then very difficult to understand, for there are not ten leaves eut." The last quotation I will give is Balzac's expression, through the mouth of one of his most vivid characters, of the belief of the unsuccessful author that the inferiority of his sales is due to the superiority of his brains. **Every man of superior mind raises himself above the masses, his success is then in a direct ratio with the time 176

ASPECTS OF BALZAC necessary for his work to be appreciated." The consolation of every unappreciated author, in prose or in verse, since the art of writing was invented or evolved, is crystallised in that one sentence. 177

/ THE HUMOUR OF BALZAC. Few of Balzac's critics have devoted any considerable share of their attention to his wit and humour ; and most of the amusing anecdotes that have been told concerning his private life derive their entertaining qualities rather from the ludicrous aspects of some of his serious performances than from any intention on his part to divert his friends. We laugh over his ring, "once worn by Mahomet," which the Grand Mogul was to purchase for " tons of gold," or his scheme for making a fortune by keeping a grocer's shop to which his presence behind the counter would attract innumerable customers. But these things were seriously regarded by Balzac, while they were regarded by his best friends as the toquades of a man 179

ASPECTS OF BALZAC in whom the **artistic tempérament" abounded. In common with most people in whom the humour-sense is strongly developed, he was often curiously obtuse to the humour — ^generally rather costly — of his own performances. His schemes for obtaining the vast fortune of which he was so often dreaming were as wild as anything in the ** Arabian Nights," yet he seems to have been perfectly serious about them, and spent thousands of ill-spaced francs on their prosecution. He jumped from scheme to scheme. If he had told a friend on Monday that he was going to make a huge income by growing pineapples in his back garden, on the principle of the Englishman who having sold a pig at a profit of a pound, was about to make a thousand a year by fattening a thousand pigs, he would have forgotten it on Tuesday, and would inform the same friends that at last riches were coming to him by the importation of timber, overland, from Russia or Poland. Yet in spite of this failure to see the cruel irony

ASPECTS OF BALZAC humour of his own eccentricities — b, word, as he tells us, invented by the English — Balzac's power of seeing the humours of life in général must have aided him to keep up his courage in circumstances which would have broken many a man of stout heart even before they broke him. With his load of debts accumulating as fast as they were discharged, the necessity of hiding in out-of-the-way places whilst he toiled at his novels, the pressure of engagements with publishers and editors which sometimes he could not carry out, and which, when carried out, necessitated many days and nights almost without sleep, Balzac is one of the most complete examples in the story of human endeavour of the strong man struggling with adversity. Even when his humour is entirely conscious, it is not usually of the kind that appeals to that now famous personage "the man in the street." That man requires a certain effrontery on the part of witticisms, they must stare him in the face, or he will pass them by without notice. To be accepted i8i

ASPECTS OF BALZAC as a humourist by the world in gênerai
an author must make jokes ; the majority of readers will be satisfied with
bad jokes, but the mînority will require jokes of a superîor quality. Now ît îs
just because Balzac ** jocked wi* deefeeeculty " that he îs not generally
regarded as a humourist. Most of the jokes in hîs novels are of poor quality,
and as for the puns, Charles Lamb, who desired that his last breath should
be inhaled through a pipe, and exhaled in a pun, would hâve died with a pun
still unblown rather than hâve allowed his réputation to be damaged at the
last moment by such spécimens as Balzac was accustomed to manufacture.
It is true that Balzac's puns are usually placed in the mouths of his
characters, and that their inferiority may be attributed to his striving after
consistency of characterisation. In that case, of course, the very badness of
the puns may often be regarded as their spécial merit. Yet he so frequently
draws our attention to them, almost in the very words ** This is a pun," and
offers so many comi8a

ASPECTS OF BALZAC ments on their qualities, that we cannot entirely acquit him of a personal fondness for some of these things, even when he knew that they were poor. Let us recall one or two examples from the scores that might be collected. Madame Crémère of Nemours, who says that the composer of the Moonlight Sonata was rightly named ** Bête à Vent," and turns "affaire à vous" into "un fer à vous," is a sort of Mrs. Malaprop, if partly conscious of her offences ; Joseph Bridau intends to be funny when he says of his soldier brother, who recoils from the notion of serving under a foreign government : '* He is right, a Frenchman is too proud of his Colonne s'encolonner elsewhere ; " while it is an acknowledged joker who declares in the same novel that life is ** un qu'on bat " {un combat). One of the happiest puns of Balzac, because it is at once so simple and so fine in its point, is that of the excellent Abbé Chaperon, who, when the apparition of Dr. Minoret is reported to the ** héritiers" in "Ursule Mirouët," and one of those unworthy 183

ASPECTS OF BALZAC'S CREATURES asks : ** Croyez- vous aux revenants ? " sagely replies : ** Croyez- vous aux revenus ? " That Balzac knew a bad pun from a good is partly shown in his account of a social evening at Angoulême, when» after Lucien's recitations, some one who has seen the card tables set out says : " That was very well recited, but I prefer whist," a remark, writes the author, "which was regarded as a witticism because of the English meaning of the word." Some of the better puns of the " Comédie Humaine " are to be found in " La Cousine Bette." When Hortense is uncertain how far her aunt is speaking the truth about the romantic Polish sculptor Wenceslas, she says : " Prouve-moi que Wenceslas n'est pas un conte, et je te donne mon châle de cachemire jaune," and Lisbeth replies, quite seriously and truthfully : " Mais il est comte ! " Mameffe, complaining, as usual» of his unhappy lot, says to the oftensively prosperous Crevel, who is maire of his quarter : ** Si j'avais été comme vous, je 184

ASPECTS OF BALZAC serais pair et maire." Another kind of wordplay not unfrequent with Balzac is brightly illustrated when Lousteau, the unprincipled and lively journalist, who sells the books given him to review and buys his gloves with the proceeds» says to those authors who publish at their own expense : ** J'ai toujours votre livre dans les mains." So much for the verbal witticisms. What of the jokes that are not dépendent on such playing upon words ? A whole séries of practical jokes is perpetrated on the citizens of Issoudun by the désœuvrance of that town, rowdy youths whose parents allow them latchkeys, and who are captained by the dashing and immoral Maxence Gilet, the less evil of the two scoundrels who divide the part of **hero" in that amazingly original and fascinating study of the effects of maternai spoiling, " Un Ménage de Garçon." The sous-préfet who, as Balzac quaintly says, " united to the mania for having fresh eggs for breakfast, that of liking to cook them himself," is harassed by the nightly substi185

ASPECTS OF BALZAC tution of hard-boiled eggs for fresh in his hen-house, without ever suspecting that there has been any trîckery in the matter, and is compelled to change his diet; a farmer loses his cart, which he has left in the market-place, and finds it on the top of the castle mound ; the watch-dogs in the town are poîsoned, and so on. Thèse "jokes" were not regarded by Balzac as humourous, being entirely appropriate to the place and people with whom they are associated, and especially to the odious type of youth represented by the practical jokers. I hâve touched on the puns and practical jokes at the outset, in order to leave the way open for a brief examination of the qualities in which Balzac most clearly reveals himself as a humourist H is humour, if we try to analyse it, shows much that is kindly and sympathetic, as in the account of the passion of poor old Madame Descoings for the lottery, and her ruînous pursuit of a lucky teme^ or group of three numbers, during years of confident hope constantly deferred. " She never gave up z86

ASPECTS OF BALZAC trying for the teme^ which had not been drawn for over twenty years. Towards this period she began to mistrust the administration. She accused the Government, and believed it quite capable of suppressing the three numbers in the ballotbox in order to provoke the fury of the actionnaires'^ / Regarded as a whole, however, the humour of the " Comédie Humaine " is bitter in its nature, being concerned for the most part with the vices rather than with the amiable weaknesses of men and women. In the attacks on humanity made by Voltaire or by Swift there is nothing more vitriolic than the account of the events and conversations of the day on which L'Alcade dans rembaras was produced at the Panorama Dramatique (** Illusions Perdues "), an account wherein the literature, the drama, the press, publishers, booksellers, managers, actors, editors, journalists of the Restoration are represented as a seething mass of corruption, existing on blackmail, chicanery, and ** log-rolling" of 187

ASPECTS OF BALZAC the most degrading kind, every man an unprincipled Ishmael, every woman — save perhaps Madame Vernou, who has soured her husband's life, but is a comparatively honest créature — being beneath the contempt of the three or four noble spirits of the *cénacule* of honest men from whom Lucien de Rubempré is inevitably detached by the interplay of his character and opportunities. One of the mildest of the crimes charged against the Paris journalists of that time is the utter disregard of fairness in the reviewing of books. Lousteau, when he first takes Lucien to his room, describes how he reviews books without reading more than a few of their pages. Having sold a "Voyage en Egypte" which had just been sent to him, he replies to his innocent acquaintance, who asks how on earth he will be able to write an article about the book : " Bah ! you don't know how that is done ! I have glanced at the book here and there i88

ASPECTS OF BALZAC without cutting it, and have discovered eleven mistakes in French. I shall fill a column in saying that, if the author has learnt the language of the ducks engraved upon the Egyptian obelisks, he does not know his own, and I shall prove it I shall say that instead of talking about natural history and antiquities he should have discussed the future of Egypt, the progress of civilisation, the means of binding that country to France, which, having conquered and lost it, can at least gain a moral ascendancy over it. I shall do the patriotic trick, in fact, and fill up with tirades upon Marseilles, the Levant, and our commercial interests." "But," asks his companion, "supposing the author had done all you suggest, what would you say then ?" "Oh, then I should say that instead of wearying us with politics, he should have dealt with art, and painted the country under its picturesque aspects," It is no wonder that Lucien, whose ideals 189

ASPECTS OF BALZAC are as yet little damaged, should cry out in so many words, " Good heavens, and that 18 criticism I " Balzac gathered the subjects of his humour frpm social types, but he went so little into the world — ^workîng so hard that, as M. Bourget has said, he scarcely hàd " le temps de vivre " — that his imagination supplied as much material, or more, than his observation. The resuit is perhaps seen in his habit of généralisation. His financiers, his joumalists, his politicians are almost invariably corrupt, his aristocrats wanting in the most ordinary évidences of good manners, as has already been illustrated from the scène in Madame d'Espard's box at the opéra, where the choicest spirits among the men of her exclusive set come to examine the provincial cousin and the cousin's tame poet, and the superfine de Marsay and his associâtes whisper and stare and sneer with a want of considération for the feelings of the new arrivais or of their hostess which would be astonishing in the occupants of a coster's donkey-cart on a Bank Holiday^ 190

ASPECTS OF BALZAC The wit and humour of Balzac lie so much in the whole scheme of a book or of a scène — ^there are usually no chapters, the publishers having done away with such divisions in the author's lifetime, "to save space" — that, for the most part, to offer spécimens is to rank oneself with the man who sent a brick as a sample of his house to a possible purchâser. As an instance of the difficulty of extracting the humour of Balzac without losing most of its flavour, I may refer to the account of Madame de Bargeton's **evening" (in the first volume of "Illusions Perdues "), of which, as a picture of life and character, it would not be easy to find many parallels in fiction. The various types of the provincial aristocracy are introduced to us as they arrive in the salon of the queen of Angoulême society, introduced with a description of their peculiarities which might have led to their speedy retirement if they had been able to hear it. But first the host, who is nobody in the world but the husband of the 191 /

ASPECTS OF BALZAC wife whom he adores and obeys without hesitation, even to the risk of his life, is presented to us. ** A tête-d'-tête caused him the only embarrassment which disturbed his végétative life ; he was then obliged to seek in the immensity of his internal void for something to say. Usually, he saved himself such trouble in following the naïve habits of his childhood : he thought out loud ; he initiated you into the smallest details of his life; he described to you his wants, his little sensations, which, for him, took the place of ideas. He did not talk of the weather, nor take refuge in those commonplaces of conversation by which stupid people generally save themselves ; he spoke of the most intimate interests of his existence. 'To please Madame de Bargeton/ he would say, * I have eaten some veal, of which she is very fond, and it has upset my stomach. I knew it would, for it always does ; what can be the reason ? ' " 193

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Among the guests was the musical amateur, M. de Bartas, with whom "music had become a monomania ; he only brightened up when one talked of music ; he suffered during a whole evening until he was asked to sing. As soon as he had bellowed one of his ballads his life commenced ; he strutted about the room, raised himself on his toes when he was complimented ; he affected to be modest, and, when ail had been said, came back to music in starting a discussion on the difficulties of the song he had sung, or in praising the composer." Another guest in the drawing-room of " Nais " de Bargeton on this mémorable occasion was M, Alexandre de Brebian, " the hero of sepia, who covered the walls of his friends' houses with ridiculous drawings, and spoiled ail the albums in the neighbourhood." M. de Bartas and M. de Brebian were great allies, and allowed themselves, in their quality of artists, a provincial kind of carelessness which made them rather curious to see. ** Their rumpled clothes gave them the air 193 N

ASPECTS OF BALZAC of the 'supers' who in the smaller théâtres represent the people of high society invited to weddings," a description which reminds us of the famous "Adelphi guests" of aforetime. We also have the pleasure of meeting M. de Sévérac, a middle-aged maire, whose mind is so possessed by the composition of a monograph on silkworms that he cannot help talking of it. He seems to a matchmaking mother who is present to be a likely parti for her gawky and stupid daughter of twenty-seven, whom she represents as sharing the tastes of all the eligible men in turn. She says to M. de Sévérac, when he has given an account of his silkworms : " My daughter has always loved animals. So, as the silk that these little creatures make is interesting to women, I will ask your permission to bring my Camille to Sévérac, to show her how it is obtained. Camille is so intelligent that she will understand directly everything you tell 194

ASPECTS OF BALZAC her. Has she not understood, one day, the inverse ratio of the square of distances ? " Balzac, if in the humour that bubbles like that of Mark Twain, or that squeaks like that of Mark Twain's imitators, he is not of much account, is strong in the humour V which depends on the discovery of affectation and the appréciation of motives. He also was **the lord of irony." Recall, for example, the extract from the local newspaper concerning the marriage of '* La Rabouilleuse." That lovely peasant, after being the mistress of a weak-minded elderly man for years, becomes his wife, in order that she may inherit his money. As soon as the old man can be killed through the over-indulgence into which he is to be tempted, the abominable Colonel Bridau, who has arranged the whole business of the wedding, will himself marry the widow and get rid of her in turn with the aid of strong drink. It is the wedding of the old victim and his unprincipled Ï9S

ASPECTS OF BALZAC mistress, under the compelling force of his still more unprincipled nephew, that moves the local newspaper to produce an article whereîn the world is informed that : " The religious movement is making progress in BerrL AU the friends of the Church and the right-thînkîng people of Issoudun were witnesses yesterday of a ceremony by which one of the principal landed proprietors of the neighbourhood has put an end to a scandalous situation." One must read the whole novel to appreciate the caustic humour of this incident, but its Ironical point, not intentional on the newspaper's part, must be évident even with the sketch of the context hère supplied. What bitter irony, again, is expressed in the last Unes in "Le Père Goriot," where Rastigaac, caught by the démon of social ambition,¹nd disillusionised by contact with the world, leaves the grave of the poor father of the neglectful and ungrateful Delphine de Nucingen and Anastasie de Restaud, and gazes over the 196

ASPECTS OF BALZAC fashionable quarter of Paris from the high ground of Père- Lachaise. "He threw upon that buzzing hive a regard which seemed to drain its honey by anticipation and uttered these grandiose words : ' A nous deux maintenant!' And then, for the first act of the challenge that he offered to Society, Rastignac went to dine with Madame de Nucingen." The finest humour of Balzac cannot even be suggested in quotations, unless pages together are quoted. " Les Comédiens sans le savoir," for instance, contains some intensely diverting things, especially the account of the visit to Marius, the superfine hairdresser ; but there is no one '* bit " in that account which can be cut out without losing more than half its force. This sketch of the provincial Gazonal " taken round " by Bixiou the caricaturist, and Léon de Lora, the " Mistigris " of past years, who has never outgrown his high spirits and love of joking, is a highly delightful work of art which can only be enjoyed as a whole. 197

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Balzac, with all his fondness for allusions to the England of which he knew so little at first hand, had probably never heard the word "spoof," which was not familiar in the days of Richardson or Byron. But the process, if not the word, was very familiar to him, and is abundantly illustrated in his novels. In its perfection it is seen in "Un Début dans la Vie," the journey in the carrier's conveyance to Presle being chiefly occupied with a game of "spoof," very amusing for the time being to most of the players, but disastrous in its termination. "Les Employés" is rich in finer humour, the foibles of the place-hunting officials and their families, the jealousies of the clerks, the denseness of people who can never understand irony being displayed under the strong light of one of the most searching and most caustic of humourists. Both the leading characters of the "Comédie," Dinah de la Baudraye and Anaïs de Bargeton, are admirable examples of the author's humour in character.

ASPECTS OF BALZAC terisation. Of Anaïs, the brightest, perhaps, of the two women, though she does not court fame as a writer, Balzac tells us that " she was prodigal beyond measure of ^ superlatives in her conversation, where the least thing assumed gigantic proportions. She began typiser^ individualiser y synthétiser^ dramatiser^ supérioriser^ analyser^ poétiser^ prosaïser, colossifiery angéHser^ néologisery et tragiquer^ for one must do violence for a moment to the French language if one wants to suggest the whimsical novelties of speech in which some women indulge." A few of the more détachable instances of Balzac*s humour — ^however partially represented in such extracts — may be recalled in no particular order. Agathe Bréau, bewailing to her aunt Madame Descoings that her boy Joseph has been drawing in a studio, cries : '* You don't know what goes on in these studios ! The artists have naked women to paint from." And the old woman replies, quite ^/ simply, ** I hope there is a fire there." 199

ASPECTS OF BALZAC Pierquin, the notary of Douai (in **La Recherche de TAbsolu"), became celebrated for his answer to the Commandant of the Camp at Saint-Omer, who invited him to a military fête : " Monsieur Pierquin-Claes de Molina-Nourho, Maire de la ville de Douai, Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, aura celui de se rendre," etc. That celui, surely, is a charming touch. At Hochon's, when that miserly old man "entertains" his relations from Paris at Issoudun, dessert is wanted after dinner. " Allons donc, Gritte, du fruit ! " calls out Madame Hochon, and the old servant replies : " Mais, madame, n'y en a plus de pourri." It is no wonder that ** Joseph burst out laughing as if he was among his friends in the studio," and cried *' Bah ! We will eat them ail the same." M. Hochon, ** much scandalised," fetched some peaches, pears and plums. Hochon's fellow-citizen, the Président of the Judicial Bench of Issoudun, before reachîng that position of dignity, had rendered himself celebrated by one of those 300

ASPECTS OF BALZAC sayings which, in the country, coiffent pour toute sa vie un homme dun bonnet dâne. After having finished the preliminary inquiry into a criminal charge for which the punishment was death, he said to the accused : " My poor Pierre, your case is clear, you will be guillotined Let that be a lesson to you ! " Of the jokes in the " Contes Drolatiques" I need not say much. I have heard an accomplished critic describe those stories as the cleverest things Balzac ever wrote. To me it appears that their effect depends ver}' largely on the imitation of the language and form of the " Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles." Had they been related in the French that Balzac ordinarily employed, it is doubtful, I think, whether the majority of them would be thought very humorous. They do, unquestionably, include some very witty ideas. Perhaps there is no livelier touch of its kind than is given in the cry of the silk-dyer's wife to her husband when she finds herself in the presence of an 20Z

ASPECTS OF BALZAC imminent tragedy: "Arrête, malheureux, tu vas tuer le père de tes enfans !" If the humour of the "Contes Drolatiques" depends a good deal on the quaint old French — ^some hostile critics held that it was more quaint than old — ^the comicality of the Germans and Alsatians of the "Comédie" owes much to their queer pronunciation. We are mildly amused when the "Paron" de Nucingen says to Baron Hulot, who is begging for a loan, "Rassurez-vous, cheu ne fus ai vait l'objection que bir fus vair abercevoir que ch'ai quelque méride à fus tonner la somme ;" or when Schmucke, whose embrace has been misunderstood by Madame Cibot, tells that French connection of Mrs. Gamp that she is "eine pède." We know from his sister that Balzac himself laughed consumedly over these confusions of tongues. Some of the most unexpected sallies in the ** "Comédie Humaine" are those directed against the parvenus who assume a particle if they have it not. Madame de Bargeton, wishing to humiliate her would-be lover, 202

ASPECTS OF BALZAC the " directeur des contributions indirectes " at Angoulême, calls him ** Monsieur Châtelet," and petrifies him by making him understand that she knows he has no right to the particle, for "M. du Châtelet, venu au monde Sixte Châtelet tout court, avait eu le bon esprit de se qualifier." Since M. de Balzac himself was once Honoré Balzac tout court y and " avait eu le bon esprit de se qualifier," there is a candour about his références to the " illégale superfétation de sa particule " by the director of indirect taxes which is quite refreshing. A boomerang of like kind is aimed, in " Le Bal de Sceaux," at Maximilien de Longueville, of whom M. de Fontaine remarks, wagging his head from side to side, that "His father was an attorney before the Révolution; and the * de ' that he has assumed since the Restoration belongs to him just as much or as little as the half of his fortune." I will close these few illustrations of Balzac's intentionally humorous sallies with one or two specimens addressed directly to his friends, and not gathered from his books. 203

ASPECTS OF BALZAC The garden wall of his villa near Villiers'Avray, the ramshackle "Les Jardies," fell down and was rebuilt over and over again, and always fell in the adjoining field. At length Balzac, having bought the field, said to a friend, with a sigh of contentment, "The price was high, but no matter for that ; one is always happy to be able to end one's days at home. My poor wall will at least be able to die in its bed." To a lady whose house was so draughty that even in summer it was cold, Balzac replied, when his hostess said, "Must you go so soon ? " : " Yes, Madame, I am going into the street to warm myself a little." y Of unconscious humour there is truly^ no lack in the novels of Balzac, such humour as that over which the- Revue de Paris^ in its bitterness at having lost the action in which it claimed the right to publish the conclusion of "Le Lys dans la Vallée," made itself merry in its " Fin d une Histoire qui ne devait pas finir," in June 1836, when the novel had appeared in book form, The writer of that very 204

ASPECTS OF BALZAC spiteful attack on Balzac's style
declared that in the book which Balzac regarded as a masterpiece, he had found more nonsense, more fatuity, more dulness, more pretentious extravagance and bad French than he had come across in all his previous experience; and undoubtedly some of his examples are absurd enough, such for example as the passage wherein the narrator says of Arabelle that she possesses that science of existence which, among other peculiarities, " verse à l'heure dite un thé suave, savamment déplié," and "fait de la matière une pulpe nourrissante et cotonneuse, brillante et propre au sein de laquelle l'âme expire sous la jouissance, qui produit l'affreuse monotonie du bien-être ? " There is no doubt much of this kind of word-spinning in some of Balzac's novels, but it nowhere else abounds as in "Le Lys dans la Vallée." If these examples of some aspects of Balzac's humour cannot — save perhaps in the last instance of the unconscious — afford sufficient material for arriving at a judgment

ASPECTS OF BALZAC ment on its quality, they will at least, I hope, serve to convey to some who may not yet hâve gone far along the highways and byways of Balzac's domain, a distrust of the old and paradoxical accusation of want of humour against the proprietor. The conclusions hère suggested are simply thèse, chat for the most part Balzac was not notably spirituel in his jesting, that his finest wit was that of characterîsation and ^ suggestion rather than of phraseology, and that humour of a high quality is inhérent in his pictures of social and individual types and expériences, humour which, if sometimes forced in order to produce the effect desired, and often bitter in its taste, is the elixir of life in the gigantic body of that mass of tragédies, the "Comédie Humaine."

Printed by Ballantynk, Hanson & Co. LondoD 6* Edinburgh

