Balzac Among the Moderns

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ABSTRACT

The Balzac Revival in the United States began in the 1880s and continued into the following century. American readers found in the works of Balzac kindred spirits, and saw themselves in the *Comédie Humaine* in terms of the ambition, desire, energy, and acquisitiveness they shared with some of Balzac's most memorable characters. Furthermore, the nature of Balzac's work—a series of long, closely interconnected novels—ideally suited the format of the multi-volume collected edition, which was emerging as a signifier of taste and class. Once Balzac became virtually institutionalised as part of the culture of the American middle class, the *Comédie Humaine* became something for the younger generation to repudiate, and many Modernists who read Balzac in their youth distanced themselves from him as adults.

KEY WORDS

Henry Adams
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John Wanamaker

The Balzac Revival in the United States, which had begun during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, reached its peak during the early years of the twentieth, a time when several major American industrialists and entrepreneurs, and even more minor ones made their fortunes. Would-be Birotteaus and want-to-be Rastignacs became commonplace throughout America, and a burgeoning commodity culture accompanied the rise of the middle and upper middle classes. With their new-found desire for material possessions, well-to-do Americans began taking great pleasure in Balzac's detailed descriptions of material culture—furniture, clothing, equipage. One turn-of-the-century contributor to the monthly magazine *Ideal House*, for example, found interior decorating ideas while reading Balzac's description of Anastasie de Restaud's bedroom in the short story "Gobseck." The *Comédie Humaine* not only provided turn-of-the-century readers with numerous descriptions of fine homes and their decor, it entered the American commodity culture itself. A nicely-bound set of Balzac became an essential part of the well-furnished, modern home. Once the *Comédie Humaine* became virtually institutionalised as an essential part of the American middle-to-upper class home, it came under attack from the nation's intellectual avant garde. As the twentieth century began to define itself, a new generation of writers emerged who questioned, among many other things, the relevance of the *Comédie Humaine* to the modern world.

The story of Balzac, modernity and modernism may begin with the start of the twentieth century. Imagine being in Philadelphia at Christmas time, 1901. No visit to the city would be complete without a trip to Wanamaker's, the largest and finest department store in the nation. A quarter century before, John Wanamaker had converted the

old railway freight depot into the store, which he originally called Wanamaker's Grand Depot. It had lost that name by 1901, the silver anniversary of its opening and the year before Wanamaker would break ground for his great new store on the same premises. Though Wanamaker's had yet to gain the classical elegance it has held to the present day, certain parts of the old store did possess a baroque splendour not uncharacteristic of the Gilded Age. The transept was particularly impressive and would have been even more so in the weeks before Christmas. Four stories tall and topped with a huge skylight, the transept was adorned with intricate ironwork. Rows of sculpted angels with wings outstretched stood within the arches of three walls. A large pipe organ took up a good part of the fourth wall (though it was far smaller than the one Wanamaker would import from the St. Louis Exposition and place in the Grand Court of his new store). During the holiday season, of course, the transept would be decorated with wreathes, holly and variegated gonfalon. The organist would be playing Christmas carols, likely accompanied by a brass ensemble as he often was. Though the transept was an impressive space, it provided inadequate passage for the tens of thousands of daily shoppers entering the store's cavernous interior, and the crowds could become intense. At Christmas time, naturally, the crowds were thicker than any other time of the year, and the organist would have had to work hard to make his carols sound above the din.

Once within the interior, the crowds dispersed somewhat, and customers gained slightly more breathing room. This modest decrease in the tension level allowed them to cope with the next barrage to their senses, a vast array of colourful material goods, announced with garish placards and extending across the huge interior literally as far as the eye could see. In each department, most goods were displayed within the customer's reach and marked with clearly legible price tags. These new opportunities for "hands-on" shopping helped to change the shopping experience significantly. Previously, shopping had involved much verbal interaction; customers had to ask salesclerks for assistance, first to see and handle the goods and then to determine the prices. With the development of the modern department store, however, customers

could say to the salesclerk, as we continue to do now, "Just looking." The interior of Wanamaker's reinforced the link between visual stimulation and commodity culture. After seeing something they wanted, customers could handle the item and then look at its tag to learn the price. Customers at Wanamaker's had the opportunity to see and handle an almost endless number of commodities, including one most important for our purposes here: books.

Wanamaker began selling books in the Grand Depot with a modest shelf of children's books. With the success of these children's books, he expanded the book department and began publishing books under his own imprint to retail in the store. From the 1880s, Wanamaker began publishing multi-volume sets of established American and British authors and Continental authors in English translation, including, in 1901, an eighteen-volume edition of Balzac's *Works*, a two-volumes-in-one reprint of the previously published thirty-six-volume set with introductions by Professor William P. Trent. In the store, these multi-volume sets were not tucked away on some shelf behind a counter and beyond the customer's reach. Instead, they were placed on waist-high tables with spines facing up, making it easy for customers to see, touch, read and, most importantly for the store, to covet. Finely-bound sets of classic authors had long been an indication of wealth and class; their widespread availability in the department stores brought them to a broader range of consumers. With Wanamaker's multi-volume editions of collected works, the middle class could afford to embellish their homes with well-bound sets of classic authors.

The American Catalog, a comprehensive contemporary listing of books published in the United States, provides further information regarding the collected editions of Balzac available the first decade of the twentieth century. Anyone uninterested in the Balzac edition published by Wanamaker had numerous others from which to choose. Collier published a twenty-five volume, clothbound set, retailing for seventeen dollars. In 1900, Crowell published the Trent edition in thirty-two volumes at several price levels. Clothbound and containing two volumes in each one, a sixteen-volume set sold for twenty dollars. The thirty-two volume set in half-calf, at the other end of the price scale,

sold for eighty dollars, which, in other terms, approximately equalled one-sixth of a factory worker's annual salary at the time. An advertisement for the Trent edition in the *New York Times* puffed: "Not to know Balzac is the loss of one of life's greatest pleasures," implying, of course, that owning a complete set of Balzac provided the best way of getting to know him. Reading Balzac, it seems, was a pleasure that could be obtained, like so many others, by spending money.

John Cowper Powys may have had the Trent edition in mind when he sardonically described these fine-quality translated editions: "Translations of Balzac, especially in those 'editions de luxe' with dreadful interpretative prefaces by English professors, are odious to me. They seem the sort of thing one expects to find under glass-cases in the houses of cultured financiers. They are admirably adapted for wedding presents" (112). As Powys viewed them, these finely-bound editions of the *Comédie Humaine* functioned more as cultural status symbols and pieces of furniture. To be sure, the *Comédie Humaine* was often granted a place of prominence in turn-of-the-century homes. In Oxford, Mississippi, the Stone family, for example, kept theirs on the mantel above the fireplace (Snell 75). Over the next few years, many more collected editions of Balzac appeared, and, more than ever before, books became part of the consumer culture and Balzac became a commodity.

Shoppers unable to reach Philadelphia in 1901 could have had an analogous experience in New York. Five years before, Wanamaker had purchased the "Iron Palace" that is, the old A. T. Stewart department store on Broadway. Wanamaker refurbished the building and reopened it before the end of 1896. It, too, had a large and profitable book department. Whether in Philadelphia or New York, then, anyone who went to Wanamaker's to buy a set of Balzac in 1901 encountered many aspects of the modern experience. Getting to the store meant negotiating the hazards of the urban environment, the cable cars in Philadelphia and the el-trains in New York, both imposing and powerful reminders of the speed, technological advancement, and noise indicative of modern existence. Inside the store, especially in the transept of the Philadelphia store, customers experienced the large crowds representative

of modern, urban existence. Within the store's interior, shoppers faced an almost overwhelming barrage of visual stimuli.

The presence of finely-bound, multi-volume sets of books within the department store emphasised the role of books as part of the modern commodity culture. At the time Balzac's works became recognised as classics, the Balzac-buyer, paradoxically, participated in a thoroughly modern experience. The presence of multi-volume sets of novels in Wanamaker's signalled the disparity between old and new ways of life. The idea of reading a long series of leisurely-paced novels clashed with the fast-paced existence characteristic of modernity, and the act of concentrating on a book for many hours of uninterrupted reading was becoming increasingly difficult in the face of a variety of other visual and aural stimuli that were shaping the modern world.

Attempting to understand Balzac's enormous American popularity, a contributor to *Harper's Weekly* in 1902 interpreted Balzac's literary reception in modern terms. Though Balzac was largely neglected in France after his death, the *Harper's* contributor explained, French readers rediscovered him after the Franco-German War, for, upon suffering defeat, they were drawn toward "anything in the nature of force" ("Balzac's Vogue," 1427). Perceiving Balzac's literary greatness, they championed his work. Furthermore, concurrent interests in matters of "will power and energy" reinforced Balzac's French reputation in the waning decades of the nineteenth century. Using the words "force" and "energy" as critical terms, The *Harper's* contributor anticipated "The Dynamo and the Virgin," Henry Adams's well-known and frequently reprinted chapter from *The Education of Henry Adams*. In this chapter, which is generally understood as one of the most important early efforts to define the concept of modernity, Adams examined his two subjects in terms of the forces they represent and, in so doing, observed that the historian's business was "to follow the track of the energy; to find where it came from and where it went to; its complex source and shifting channels; its values, equivalents, conversions" (1075). Thus the *Harper's* article looked forward to "The Dynamo and the Virgin" as it linked the history of literary reception with the interplay of force and energy.

The Balzac Revival in the United States, the *Harper's* contributor argued, followed the pattern established by the French rediscovery of Balzac. For Americans, Balzac's characters represented the kind of personal energy that found favour in turn-of-the-century America: "There is no other country in the world where so many giants, industrial, commercial, financial, political, and intellectual, so many prodigies of will and energy, are produced as in America, and in no other country is the cult of the Leviathan more observed." For "the young American, as for the young Frenchman, Balzac is a sort of professor of energy." Furthermore, Balzac "depicted the incipient plutocracy of his own time as something enormous, gigantic, colossal, formidable. He heaped millions upon millions, and represented the mysterious beings upon whom he heaped them as invincible and fearful forces, as monsters and leviathans" ("Balzac's Vogue" 1427-1428). Put simply, Balzac's vogue in the modern world largely came from his anticipation of the modern social and economic environment. Balzac's characters, fascinated with wealth and material culture, found their real-life counterparts among the well-to-do in turn-of-the-century America.

The *Harper's* article had begun with the assertion that the influence Balzac exerted on American readers was "not temporary or to any degree the result of mere fadism or snobbery, but persistent and genuine" ("Balzac's Vogue," 1427). There is no question that Balzac's vogue during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth fully established his literary reputation among American readers, but the general enthusiasm for Balzac among American readers waned considerably as the first decade of the twentieth century gave way to the second. Having achieved the status of a classic author, Balzac became something for students to read in school, for young men and women with literary inclinations to read on their own, and for ambitious college professors to write philological and critical articles and books about; in large part, Balzac stopped being an author for general public consumption. The thousands of sets of collected works continued to look well on the bookshelves a middle-to upper-class homes—provided they were dusted occasionally.

Lawrence Abbott, noting similarities between Balzac and Sinclair Lewis in a 1927 article, recalled the turn-of-the-century enthusiasm and compared it to Balzac's reputation in the mid to late twenties:

> The assertion may be ventured without too much temerity that few men or women of mature tastes and judgement read Balzac in middle age from any motive but a sense of duty. One who was captivated in youth by *La Peau de Chagrin*, or *Eugénie Grandet*, or *Le Père Goriot*, or *Le Médicin de Campagne*, and picks them up after a lapse of twenty or twenty-five years finds them, to be perfectly frank about it—except for brilliant passages here and there—boresome. There are, for example, in *Le Médicin de Campagne* long soliloquies on politics and the Church, about which nobody wants Balzac's opinion, relieved, it is true, by such perfect folk tales as that of the hunchback woman, *La Bossue Courageuse*, or Goguelat's rhapsody on Napoleon. But as novels—at least for the English reader—Balzac's innumerable volumes are dustier on the library shelves than Scott's. (307-308)

Abbott attributes the taste for Balzac to youthful enthusiasm; for those who have reached middle age, the *Comédie Humaine* can no longer sustain its appeal. Abbott's theory merits consideration, yet it is important to realise that he was a much younger man when the Balzac Revival had begun. When Katharine Wormeley published *Père Goriot*, the first volume in her extensive translation of Balzac, Abbott was in his mid-twenties. Is the enthusiasm for Balzac he recalls from his youth simply a recollection of the general enthusiasm that accompanied the start of the Balzac Revival? Or does his theory apply more universally? To what extent has Balzac become a writer we read as young adults and distance ourselves from as we approach middle age? Modernist writers had their own answers to such questions.

Born in the waning decades of the nineteenth century and educated around the turn of the century, most modernist American writers

participated in the Balzac Revival as well as Balzac gradual decline in popularity following the Revival. The individual experiences of several American authors, their published essays and private correspondence show, repeated in microcosm, the general experience of the American reading public. In his *Guide to Kulchur* Ezra Pound, following Abbott, called Balzac an adolescent enthusiasm (39). Since Pound designed the *Guide to Kulchur* as a sort of elitist adult self-help book, his curt dismissal of Balzac essentially says, "If you have not read Balzac by now, don't bother." After the adulation of Balzac which Henry James, among numerous others of the preceding literary generation, had expressed, Pound's characterisation of Balzac's work is somewhat unsettling. Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* first appeared in 1938. How could Balzac's reputation disappear so quickly during the three decades since Henry James delivered "The Lesson of Balzac"? Had the modernists no lessons to learn from the master?

Actually, such modernists attitudes antedate the *Guide to Kulchur* by two decades. The ideas Pound expressed in his 1918 essay on James are consistent with his later comment in the *Guide to Kulchur*. James, Pound argued, "had most assuredly a greater awareness than was granted to Balzac" (*Literary Essays* 301). Overall, Pound minimised Balzac's influence on James and came close to saying that Balzac was only important to literary history insofar as he anticipated James. Discussing Ford Madox Hueffer's critical study of James, Pound commented:

> Hueffer says that James belauds Balzac. I cannot see it. I can but perceive Henry James wiping the floor with the author of *Eugénie Grandet*, pointing out all his qualities, but almightily wiping the floor with him. He complains that Gautier is lacking in a concern about supernatural hocus-pocus and that Flaubert is lacking. If Balzac takes him to any great extent in, James with his inherited Swedenborgianism is perhaps thereby laid open to Balzac.
>
> It was natural that James should write more about the bulky author of *La Comédie Humaine* than about the others;

> here was his richest quarry, here was there most to note and to emend and to apply so emended to processes of his own. From Maupassant, Goncourt or Baudelaire there was nothing for him to acquire.
>
> His dam'd fuss about furniture is foreshadowed in Balzac, and all the paragraphs on Balzac's house-furnishing propensities are of interest in proportion to our interest in, or our boredom with, this part of Henry James's work. (*Literary Essays* 308-9)

Though Balzac's fascination with the material culture had greatly contributed to the interest American readers took in him at the turn of the century, Pound clearly found such detailed descriptions of home furnishings tedious.

While James and his contemporaries in the age of literary realism acknowledged Balzac as the father of realism, Pound saw Balzac's realistic aspects less alluring than his affinity to Swedenborgian mystical philosophy. Pound's association of Balzac and Swedenborg indicates one important way in which modernist writers reconceived Balzac to suit their tastes. Instead of appreciating him for his realist descriptions, they often preferred his mystical aspects. Henry Miller, to cite another prominent example, listed the hundred books that most influenced him as part of *The Books in My Life*. Miller listed two Balzac works: *Séraphita* and *Louis Lambert* (317). Miller's preferences are not atypical. Modernist writers, generally speaking, sought to accomplish a paradoxical task, that is, to acknowledge their literary forebears while simultaneously distancing themselves from them. To acknowledge Balzac's importance to literary history while simultaneously distancing themselves from the literary realism he pioneered, modernists looked to his least realist works. *Séraphita* and *Louis Lambert* allowed the modernists to include Balzac within their literary pantheon without accepting his realism.

Scattered comments in Pound's correspondence as well as in the reminiscences of a friend help to define his relationship to Balzac more precisely. In a 1917 letter to John Quinn, who had argued that James

Joyce was deeply indebted to Balzac, Pound responded, "I wonder if he *has* read Balzac many times. I read about a dozen books of Balzac's ten years ago, but I can't read him now." Let's take Pound at his word for the moment. Ten years before his letter to Quinn would make it 1907, the year Pound turned twenty-two. The fact that he read a dozen Balzac novels shows that Pound's early attention to Balzac was extensive. Actually, Pound's enthusiasm for Balzac persisted longer than he was willing to admit to Quinn, for only a few years earlier, Pound had recommended Balzac to friend and fellow poet H. D. In *End to Torment: A Memoir of Ezra Pound,* H. D. recalled him lending her one of Balzac's books in particular:

> *Séraphita.* A story by Balzac. The Being, he-her, disappears or dies in the snow. Séraphitus. Ezra brought me the story.
>
> The perfection of the fiery moment can not be sustained—or can it? (11)

H. D. went on to explain that along with *Séraphita*, Pound had also brought her a copy of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell.* The books he loaned her, therefore, reinforce Pound's association of Balzac with Swedenborg and indicate that his interest in Balzac came from Balzac's mysticism, not his realism.

In *The Books in My Life*, Henry Miller recalled the time someone loaned him a copy of *Séraphita*. Miller's experience closely paralleled H. D.'s:

> *Séraphita* I first read in French, at a period when my French was none too good. The man who put the book in my hands . . . said almost nothing about the book except that it was a book *for me*. Coming from him, this was incentive enough. It was indeed a book "for me." It came exactly at the right moment in my life and it had precisely the desired effect. I have since, if I may put it thus, "experimented" with

> it by handing it to people who were not ready to read it. I learned a great deal from these experiments. *Séraphita* is one of those books, and they are rare indeed, which make their way unaided. Either it "converts" a man or it bores and disgusts him. (53)

After Pound put a copy of *Séraphita* in H. D.'s hands, she read it and was converted. The book had a profound effect on her. As Zara Bruzzi observed, *Séraphita* significantly influenced H. D.'s early collections of poetry, *Sea Gardens* (1916) and *The God* (1913-1917). H. D. found appealing Balzac's integration of matter and spirit, appreciated his elevation of spiritual over physical union, and took much of her early imagery from Balzac's novel. *Séraphita* contains vivid descriptions of the coastline of a Norwegian fjord, for example, and the coastal imagery in H. D.'s early poetry echoes Balzac's. H. D.'s flower symbolism, which appears in her early work and recurs in much of her subsequent verse, recalls the flower symbolism of nineteenth-century French occultism, which Balzac had incorporated in *Séraphita*.

The surviving evidence, though incomplete, indicates that Hart Crane's experience with Balzac paralleled Ezra Pound's. Among Crane's surviving books are more titles by Balzac than any other author. He acquired a copy of the Everyman's edition of *About Catherine de Medici* in 1914, that is, soon after he had started high school. Though Crane dropped out of school shortly after Christmas 1916, he continued to pay attention to Balzac. In 1917 he obtained a copy of the Little, Brown edition of *Cousin Bette*. He also acquired a copy of *The Magic Skin*—Katharine Wormeley's translation of *La Peau de Chagrin*—and the French text of *Le Curé de Tours* in the schoolbook edition published by D. C. Heath. In Crane's copy of *Le Curé de Tours*, many words are underlined, and the glossary contains several others he checkmarked. The fifth known Balzac volume among his surviving books was the volume from the Calmann-Lévy Paris edition that included *Pierrette* and *Le Curé de Tours*, which Crane likely acquired later than the other volumes. The annotations in the surviving volume imply that Crane did not read too far into the text. Some words on pages

3 and 5 have English translations inscribed above them, yet the remainder of the volume contains no annotations. Compare this volume with Crane's surviving copy of a Paris edition of Victor Hugo's *Odes et Ballades*, which contains numerous translated words and passages in his hand throughout the volume (Lohf 300, 314). Though Crane celebrated his literary and cultural progenitors in his writings, neither his poetry nor his published correspondence make any mention of Balzac.

Each of these three prominent modernist American poets were exposed to Balzac as young adults—or four if we consider T. S. Eliot's teenage reading of Balzac's short stories[1]—yet only H. D.'s poetry reflects Balzac's lasting impact. Eliot's essay "On Henry James" provides a further indication that his experience with Balzac paralleled Pound's. Unwittingly projecting his own attitude onto Henry James, Eliot insisted that after *Roderick Hudson*, James outgrew his admiration for Balzac (114). Seeking Balzacian influences among modernist American poets may be expecting too much, however. As James had explained in "The Lesson of Balzac," no writer was more purely a novelist than Balzac. According to the modernist aesthetic that Pound, Crane, and Eliot espoused, however, any and all works from literary history, including such unlikely works as *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren* in Pound's case, were fair game for modernist poets to incorporate, modify, or makeover however they saw fit. Snippets from numerous prose works and references to many others made their way into modernist American verse texts. Balzac, however, did not.

The enthusiasm for the works of Balzac that flourished in middle- to upper-class America during the early years of the twentieth century had several causes. Balzac created many memorable characters with which ambitious, enterprising American readers could identity, whom they could emulate. Furthermore, Balzac's fascination with the material culture of his day anticipated the fascination with the material culture that emerged in the United States in a time that has become known as the Gilded Age. In addition, Balzac's prolific output ideally suited a format—the multi-volume collected edition--that, when prominently displayed on the shelves of a residential library, came to symbolise wealth, class, and prestige. Once the collected edition of Balzac's

Comédie Humaine became a part of the established bourgeois culture, it became something for the younger generation to rebel against. Though the modernists read Balzac in their youth, they—with the obvious exception of William Faulkner—repudiated Balzac as they began their own literary careers. They did not completely reject Balzac, however, for they found alluring what had least attracted the leaders of literary realism. Whereas Henry James and his contemporaries championed Balzac's realism Pound and his contemporaries appreciated Balzac's mysticism. They found most enjoyable not the tangible but the intangible. The modernists, in other words, could only appreciate Balzac by recasting him in their own image.

Note

[1] Listing the titles of books and names of authors he had read in French at Smith Academy, Eliot mentioned "*Five Tales* of Balzac" (*Letters* 8). Eliot's editor did not identify the work, but he refers to *Cinq Scènes de la Comédie Humaine*, an anthology edited by Benjamin W. Wells and published by D. C. Heath. The collection included "Adieu," "L'Auberge Rouge," "La Bourse," "Un Épisode sous la Terreur," and "Jésus-Christ en Flandre."

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