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Introduction

Honoré de Balzac stands as a true giant of world literature. One of the founding fathers of realism, Balzac was a prolific writer who produced more than a hundred novels, plays and short stories during his career, together with numerous essays, pamphlets, reviews and thousands of letters. At the heart of this vast corpus is *La Comédie humaine*, a collection of ninety-four novels and shorter fictions set principally against the backdrop of nineteenth-century French society. A towering literary edifice in which Balzac sought to document every aspect of the period in which he lived, *La Comédie humaine* has enthralled successive generations of readers with its dramatic plots and memorable characters. Moreover, the scale and richness of this project have inspired – and sometimes intimidated – writers since the nineteenth century. Among Balzac's compatriots, Flaubert, Zola and Proust all cited him as a key influence on their own artistic endeavours. Outside of France, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Benito Pérez Galdós, Oscar Wilde and Italo Calvino have also featured among his most enthusiastic literary admirers. In addition to its enduring impact on writers, Balzac's work has been theorised extensively, garnering the attention of Marxists, structuralists, psychoanalysts and gender theorists, to name but a few. His writings have appeared in countless translations and re-editions, and continue to provoke scholarly debate, with new books and articles constantly being added to the already-extensive body of critical material devoted to his work. Finally, his stories have spawned numerous adaptations across film, television, radio and, less obviously, *bande dessinée*. From the earliest stage adaptations of the author's work during his own lifetime to the Bolshoi Ballet's recreation of *Illusions perdues* in 2014, Balzac has never ceased to fascinate the cultural imagination.

Balzac's achievements as a writer were certainly hard-won. He was born in Tours in 1799 to middle-class parents who were well respected in the city. His father, Bernard-François, had risen from the peasantry of southern France to become Secretary to the King's Council before the Revolution,

while his mother, Laure, was the daughter of Parisian haberdashers. Balzac did not enjoy a particularly happy childhood, and after spending the first four years of his life in the care of a wet nurse, he was sent to boarding school in Vendôme. This monastic institution discouraged parental visits, and during his six years as a pupil there, the young Honoré saw his mother only twice. When Bernard-François relocated the family to Paris in 1814, Balzac moved with them, completing his secondary education in the capital before registering to study law and embarking on an apprenticeship with the lawyer Jean-Baptiste Guillonnet de Merville.

Balzac's real ambition, however, was to write for the theatre. After persuading his parents to allow him three years to succeed in his chosen path, he set to work on a five-act tragedy in verse, *Cromwell*. Upon reviewing the finished manuscript, Andrieux, a professor at the Collège de France, advised Madame Balzac that her son should pursue a career in any field other than literature. Undeterred, Balzac turned instead to writing novels under the pseudonyms Lord R'Hoone (an anagram of Honoré) and Horace de Saint-Aubin. When these, too, failed to bring the success he craved, he attempted to establish himself as a printer and publisher, a venture that ended in financial disaster in 1828, leaving him with debts that would plague him for the rest of his life. The collapse of his printing firm nevertheless prompted him to return to writing with renewed determination. Inspired by the works of the historical novelists James Fenimore Cooper and Walter Scott, in 1829 Balzac published *Le Dernier Chouan ou la Bretagne en 1800* (later retitled *Les Chouans*). The story of a peasant insurrection in Brittany, it was the first novel that he signed with his own name, and marked his definitive arrival on the literary stage.

In *Le Dernier Chouan*, Balzac inaugurated a new approach to novel-writing that would shape the rest of his career. Drawing on the example of Walter Scott, who had set some of his works as far back as the Middle Ages, Balzac decided to situate his own fiction against the backdrop of recent historical events through which many of his readers had lived: the Terror, the rise and fall of Napoleon, and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. As his career developed during the July Monarchy of the 1830s and 1840s, he combined this emphasis on contemporary history with his predilection for recounting stories of domestic life. Among readers in the early nineteenth century, Balzac quickly established his reputation as an author who specialised in tales of private tragedy that but for his intervention would have remained hidden from view.

Balzac's importance as a writer nevertheless extends well beyond his ability to relate what he described in the 1833 preface to *Eugénie Grandet* as 'silent dramas' ['drames dans le silence'] (CH III 1025). With the

publication of *Le Dernier Chouan*, followed in 1830 by his first series of *Scènes de la vie privée*, Balzac began to lay the foundations of the mammoth portrait of French society that would eventually give rise to *La Comédie humaine*. Drawing inspiration from the natural historians Buffon and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, he explained the underlying principles of his literary enterprise in the 1842 'Avant-propos' to *La Comédie humaine*, stating his ambition to classify human types like species in the animal kingdom. Famed for his acute powers of observation, Balzac aspired to construct a total vision of the society in which he lived, one in which every person and place would be catalogued, and from which no detail would be omitted. His obsession with exhaustiveness, reflected in the many passages of dense description for which his work is so often remembered, have caused him to be identified as one of the great social historians of the nineteenth century. As Friedrich Engels proclaimed in 1888, in what has since become one of the most well-known appraisals of *La Comédie humaine*, 'I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together.'[1]

If Balzac's ambition to document society identifies him as a key precursor of realism, he was also deeply influenced by the Romantic movement. His career was contemporaneous with the second wave of French Romanticism, whose most celebrated exponents included Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, Charles Nodier and Alexandre Dumas *père*. In 1830, Balzac was also present at the Comédie-Française to witness the first performance of Hugo's *Hernani*, a play which broke with the time-honoured conventions of classical drama and heralded the triumph of Romanticism in French theatre. Not surprisingly, then, Balzac's fiction engages with many of the defining themes of Romanticism, most notably the idealisation of love, and the *mal du siècle* or sense of disillusionment that the Romantics saw as having engulfed French society in the wake of the 1789 Revolution. Moreover, Balzac shared the Romantic fascination with earlier writers such as Shakespeare and Rabelais, and with literary genres as diverse as the historical novel, medieval romance and Gothic literature. Traces of these elements can be found throughout his work, and feature strongly in the pseudonymous novels that he produced during the 1820s, when the Romantic movement in France was gaining in strength and momentum.

To attempt to categorise Balzac as realist or romantic – as many early critics of his work did – is nevertheless to underestimate the ways in which he transcended such labels. Although he disliked the term 'novelist', which he associated with frivolous entertainment, Balzac possessed a vibrant creative imagination, and was well aware of the need to captivate readers with engaging stories. Accordingly, his fiction abounds in moments of intense

drama featuring characters who in many instances have become cultural landmarks in their own right. From the ambitious student Rastignac to the master-criminal Vautrin, from the budding poet Lucien de Rubempré to the vengeful spinster Bette, Balzac created a cast of characters with which readers could identify, and whose individual stories have continued to resonate across time and space. Just as importantly, his fictional universe heralded the introduction of narrative techniques that would have a profound impact on prose fiction, and subsequently other media as well. Balzac was a pioneer of the use of flashback, a technique readily appropriated by film and television in the twentieth century. More famously, starting with *Le Père Goriot* in 1835, he linked his works by having characters reappear in different stories in *La Comédie humaine*, thus giving readers the impression of catching up with old friends as they might in the real world.

Alongside these artistic developments, the vision of nineteenth-century France that Balzac presents in *La Comédie humaine* reveals that he was not simply the dispassionate, scientific observer he so often purported to be. 'French society was to be the historian,' he declared in the 'Avant-propos', 'I had only to be the secretary' ['La Société française allait être l'historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire.' (CH I 11)] Yet Balzac's representation of this society was also underpinned by his own ideological principles. Disillusioned by the failure of the 1830 Revolution to bring about meaningful reform, he abandoned the liberalism of his youth soon afterwards, embracing instead what he termed the 'two eternal Truths' ['deux Vérités éternelles'] (CH I 13) of Throne and Altar. In the sometimes pessimistic vision advanced by *La Comédie humaine*, France had never recovered fully from the upheavals of Revolution and Empire, and could be saved only by a return to the core values of monarchy, religion and the family. Despite his political conservatism, when Balzac died in 1850 he was lauded by Hugo as a revolutionary, a writer who had transformed the art of prose fiction, and who had not been afraid to oppose what he perceived as the decline and disintegration of French society.

However, Balzac did not instantly become the canonical author we recognise today. While his works were undoubtedly popular during his lifetime, critics were often quick to condemn his supposedly poor style, tendency towards melodrama and apparent obsession with the sordid underbelly of society. Balzac also scandalised many of his first readers in Britain. In 1844, the literary critic George Henry Lewes described him as a 'very dangerous writer',[2] while Charlotte Brontë told her friend Elizabeth Gaskell that Balzac's novels 'leave such a bad taste in my mouth'.[3] The prevailing attitude of condescension towards Balzac softened only in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, when a number of developments combined to bring

about a reappraisal of his literary legacy. First, the publication of his general correspondence in 1876, followed in 1894 by his letters to the Polish countess Eveline Hanska, revealed a more human, and indeed romantic, Balzac than readers had encountered before. Second, some of the most prominent members of a new generation of writers began to champion *La Comédie humaine* as an artistic achievement to be admired and emulated. While eager to stress his own originality, Zola proclaimed Balzac a forerunner of Naturalism, and a key inspiration behind his own twenty-novel *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. As his reputation was gradually rehabilitated by these developments, Balzac also became an object of academic study. Between 1895 and 1900, the eminent British scholar George Saintsbury edited and introduced a forty-volume translation of *La Comédie humaine*, as finally Balzac's work began to be judged on its artistic qualities rather than by strictly conventional moral criteria.

Balzac's status as a canonical author also owes much to the numerous theorists who have engaged with his work from a panoply of different perspectives. One of the earliest political thinkers to find support for his own theories in Balzac was Karl Marx. Marx saw in Balzac a writer who had documented the decline of the old nobility and the struggles of the individual in an increasingly capitalist society. In *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx returned repeatedly to Balzac, and cited the latter's unfinished novel *Les Paysans* as a compelling illustration of the dangers of exploitative money-lending in a rural economy. Such was Marx's admiration for the French novelist that he planned to write a study of *La Comédie humaine* once *Das Kapital* was complete.

Marx and his disciples also recognised some of the fundamental contradictions in Balzac's own political thought, not least the fact that he was an ardent royalist who simultaneously exposed the failings of the aristocracy. As Engels remarked of Balzac to the radical British writer Margaret Harkness in 1888, 'his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathises most deeply – the nobles'.[4] The Marxist view of Balzac as a contradictory figure continued to resonate well into the twentieth century, reaching an apogee in the 1950s and 1960s in the works of Georg Lukács, Pierre Barbéris and André Wurmser. For this later generation of Marxist critics, *La Comédie humaine* presented a society riven by class inequalities and monetary greed, and thus championed the cause of a new proletariat whose rise Balzac had actually feared.

Alongside Marxist interpretations of Balzac, the late 1950s saw the emergence in France of the New Novelists, who contemplated *La Comédie humaine* with a mixture of fascination and disdain. For the *nouveaux*

romanciers, foremost among them Alain Robbe-Grillet, Balzac represented an outmoded tradition of nineteenth-century storytelling based on perfectly linear plots and third-person narration. As Robbe-Grillet complained of the Balzacian mode of novel-writing in his 1963 essay *Pour un nouveau roman*, 'everything aimed to impose the image of a stable, coherent, seamless, unequivocal, totally decipherable universe' ['tout visait à imposer l'image d'un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable'].[5] However, like Marx and Engels before them, the New Novelists also recognised that Balzac was by no means a one-dimensional writer. While deriding *La Comédie humaine* for the supposed artificiality of its narrative techniques, Robbe-Grillet conceded that Balzac's realism was still capable of enthralling twentieth-century readers, many of whom, he claimed, looked upon his work as 'a lost paradise of the novel' ['un paradis perdu du roman'].[6]

During the 1960s and 1970s, the question of how Balzac's texts created such a powerful illusion of reality was taken up by structuralist and post-structuralist critics, most notably Roland Barthes. In *S/Z* (1970), his reading of the short story *Sarrasine*, Barthes argued that Balzac's work conformed to a 'simple representative model' ['simple modèle représentatif'][7] in which linguistic codes and signifiers were used to convey meaning. However, the somewhat ironic effect of *S/Z*, as Scott Lee explains in this volume, was that it brought Barthes into contradiction with himself. By dividing *Sarrasine* into 561 distinct fragments or 'lexies', *S/Z* demonstrated that Balzac's story was not merely 'modestly plural' ['modestement pluriel'],[8] as Barthes had claimed initially, but that it was founded on a much richer interplay of allusions and discourses. Having identified *Sarrasine* at the outset of his study as a 'readerly' text in which meanings are fixed and pre-determined, Barthes unconsciously revealed it as a 'writerly' text which lends itself to multiple possible interpretations.

By exposing the fundamental plurality of Balzac's writing, Barthes helped to lay the foundations of key theoretical approaches that have shaped Balzac studies since the 1980s. Over the past forty-five years, *La Comédie humaine* has garnered the attention of countless theorists, including Bourdieu, Derrida, Genette, Foucault and many others whose contributions to the field are reflected in this volume. Among the critical movements that stands out as retaining a particularly vibrant interest in *La Comédie humaine*, however, is gender theory. Echoing Marxist and Barthesian readings of Balzac, gender theorists have helped to reveal some of the complexities and paradoxes that underpin the novelist's work and, more specifically, his portrayal of sexual difference. As Dorothy Kelly, Michael Lucey and Lawrence R. Schehr among others have argued, Balzac appears to perpetuate

stereotypes of male dominance and female vulnerability while at the same time demonstrating that the boundaries between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, are uncertain and constantly shifting. Similarly, narratological approaches to Balzac have shown that *La Comédie humaine* is far from a textual monolith, and that its representation of the world is rarely uniform or consistent. During the 1990s, Éric Bordas, Nicole Mozet and Franc Schuerewegen all showed – more deliberately than Barthes – that the Balzacian text incorporates multiple voices and discourses which often compete with each other, a concept reflected in the title of Schuerewegen's 1990 volume, *Balzac contre Balzac*.

The present volume bears the imprint of the many theories and critical developments that have advanced understanding of Balzac since the nineteenth century. However, far from offering a purely theoretical reappraisal of his work, our principal aim here is to provide an introduction to Balzac, focusing on the key narrative and thematic features of his writing, and on aspects of his literary output that are typically neglected or under-discussed. The volume comprises twelve chapters by acknowledged Balzac specialists, and ranges over an extensive corpus of his works from both inside and outside *La Comédie humaine*. In the first chapter, Elisabeth Gerwin re-evaluates the notion of Balzac as a historian of nineteenth-century society, emphasising in particular his ability to synthesise the discourses of history, science, philosophy and religion. In chapter two, Michael Tilby reflects on Balzac's early works and their key role in the subsequent evolution of his writing. Tilby's reading of the *œuvres de jeunesse* is followed by Ewa Szypula's discussion of Balzac's correspondence, in which she explains how the author used letters – particularly those to Madame Hanska – to experiment with themes and narrative situations that he developed subsequently in his fiction.

Following Szypula's discussion of Balzac's correspondence, the volume presents readings of five key novels from *La Comédie humaine*, with each approached from a different thematic perspective. From David F. Bell's chapter on the relationship between fantasy and reality in *La Peau de chagrin*, we proceed to Allan Pasco's study of money and power in *La Comédie humaine*, as reflected principally in *Eugénie Grandet*. In her chapter on *Le Père Goriot*, Armine Kotin Mortimer turns to the question of morality and the corrosive influence of Paris on the novel's young protagonist Eugène de Rastignac. To complete our reassessment of this selection of Balzac's major novels, Sotirios Paraschas contemplates the representation of writers, artists and the creative process itself in *Illusions perdues*, while Dorothy Kelly examines the themes of gender and sexuality in *La Cousine Bette*.

The closing chapters of the volume focus on the broader dimensions of *La Comédie humaine*, and the evolution of Balzac's literary reputation since his death in 1850. In his chapter on the *Scènes de la vie de campagne*, Owen Heathcote explores the interaction between space, religion and politics, and the sometimes unexpected ways in which Balzac's faith in the twin pillars of Throne and Altar is undercut in his work. Tim Farrant, in turn, reveals the importance of shorter fiction to Balzac's creative aesthetic, focusing especially on the tension between length and brevity that underpins the shape and internal structure of *La Comédie humaine*. Turning then to a discussion of Balzac's artistic afterlife, my own chapter deals with adaptations of his work in film, television and radio before Scott Lee elucidates the profound influence that Balzac has exerted on subsequent generations of writers and theorists. The volume concludes with a two-part epilogue by contemporary French novelists Chantal Chawaf and Éric Jourdan, who reflect on what Balzac means to writers today.

In covering so many different aspects of Balzac's work, this volume engages actively with the vastness of his literary production. One of our key aims here is to present Balzac as a polyphonic writer who sought to harness the myriad discourses – artistic, historical, social, political, scientific, religious and philosophical – that surrounded him during the first half of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the volume encompasses an array of topics that are integral to Balzac's work and our understanding of him as a writer. These topics include the representation of history; the relationship between Paris and the provinces; money and power; gender and sexuality; monomania and obsessive behaviour; ambition and the figure of the *arriviste*; philosophy and religion; politics and sociology; the system of reappearing characters; art and the plight of the struggling artist; writing and reflexivity; science and the literary applications of natural history; and, as any comprehensive study of Balzac demands, realism and romanticism. While some of these themes are addressed in individual chapters, others recur throughout the volume, offering points of debate and dialogue between contributors.

Not surprisingly, the scale of Balzac's literary output makes it impossible to cover every aspect of his work in detail. We have necessarily found creative ways of broaching this problem. Although we have not included a chapter devoted exclusively to Balzac's theatrical works, for example, discussions of his dramatic texts feature at key junctures in the volume. In analysing the representation of money in *La Comédie humaine*, Allan Pasco draws on the example of *Le Faiseur*, a play that revolves around questions of financial malpractice. Similarly, in his chapter on *Illusions perdues*, Sotirios Paraschas underscores the highly theatrical nature of the novel, which at the level of plot features both literal and figurative performers. Other avenues of

exploration – including the Rabelaisian series of *Contes drolatiques* and *Le Livre mystique* containing the philosophical novels *Louis Lambert* and *Séraphîta* – have intentionally been left open for readers who may wish to engage in their own further study. In accordance with the conventions of the *Companion* series, we have included a chronology of Balzac's life, and at the end of the volume a guide to further reading. In order to give readers a clear sense of the dimensions of Balzac's work, we have also provided an overview of the content and structure of *La Comédie humaine*, in which many of his most well-known works are found.

This *Companion* certainly does not purport to offer the final word on Balzac. On the contrary, in presenting a reappraisal of his work, it reflects the vibrant scholarly interest that Balzac continues to generate in France and beyond. In Paris, the Groupe international de recherches balzaciennes (GIRB) and the Groupe d'études balzaciennes (GEB), publisher of the key strategic journal *L'Année balzacienne*, remain highly active in promoting research on Balzac. The Maison de Balzac in Passy, where the novelist lived between 1840 and 1847, serves as a museum, research centre and home to the Société des Amis de Balzac, which publishes its own journal and newsletter, *Le Courrier balzacien*. The Château de Saché, Balzac's beloved retreat in Touraine, provides a similar focal point for research activity. Moreover, scholars continue to extend and redefine the

Figure 1: The Château de Saché in Touraine, where Balzac wrote some of his most celebrated works.

boundaries of Balzac studies. Among recent key developments in the field, Dominique Massonnaud's *Faire vrai: Balzac et l'invention de l'œuvre-monde* (2014) has reignited the debate over the author's realist techniques which so preoccupied the *nouveaux romanciers* in the 1950s. A new edition of Balzac's correspondence began to appear in the Pléiade series in 2006, with a third volume forthcoming. A further new edition of Balzac's theatrical works by Éric Bordas is currently in preparation, as is the third volume of the novelist's *œuvres diverses*. In a major project, a *Dictionnaire Balzac* is nearing completion. Not to be left behind in the digital age, Balzac has also begun to move online with the vocabulary database compiled by Kazuo Kiriu, and the series of electronic editions of key works from *La Comédie humaine* prepared by Andrew Oliver. Finally, in a different academic context, *La Cousine Bette* was included as a set text for the 2015–16 Prépa S, the competitive examination that precedes entry to France's prestigious *Grandes écoles*.

Perhaps the most compelling illustration of this ongoing enthusiasm for Balzac, however, is the influence that he continues to exert on writers today. As Chantal Chawaf and Éric Jourdan emphasise in the epilogue to this volume, Balzac remains an inescapable presence for contemporary novelists, who like their predecessors in the nineteenth century, must contend with his gargantuan legacy. Often this challenge generates an unspoken anxiety of influence in writers as they strive to assert their own originality in the face of Balzac's monumental achievements. As Chawaf and Jourdan both demonstrate, however, there is also pleasure in writing in the aftermath of Balzac that stems from the impossibility of ever getting entirely to grips with him. For novelists today, as for countless readers since the nineteenth century, Balzac's appeal lies precisely in his range, subtlety and infinite complexity.

NOTES

1. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004), vol. 48, p. 168.
2. G. H. Lewes, 'Balzac and George Sand', *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, 33 (July 1844), 265–298 (p. 273).
3. E. Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. A. Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975 [1857]), p. 428.
4. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, p. 168.
5. A. Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 31. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quoted material in French in this introduction are my own.
6. *Ibid.*
7. R. Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 19.
8. *Ibid.*