Honore Balzac

AN EXHIBIT OF SELECTIONS FROM THE
WILLIAM HOBART ROYCE BALZAC COLLECTION
OF THElena R. Arents Rare Book Room

Syracuse University Libraries
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Honoré Balzac

A COMMENTARY BY

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"I am unexplainable to everybody," Honoré Balzac once wrote, "nobody has the secret of my life and I do not wish to give it to anyone." Doubtless he did not understand himself so well as he believed, but certainly no one else has grasped the essence of his genius or managed to embrace the enormity of his talent and the complexity of his personality. A force of nature, he has been called, a Titan. These he was, the man who hoped to accomplish as much with a pen as Napoleon had with a sword.

The bibliography of works on Balzac fills a great many pages but the riddle of the man still remains unsolved. Short, squat, and swarthy, by no means an Apollo, he enjoyed an impressive success with the ladies. He pretended to aristocracy, though born into the middle class, even inventing an extensive genealogy which convinced nobody but himself. All his life he dreamed of amassing a fortune and, to this end, he concocted such various schemes as refining the slag of old Roman mines in Sardinia, carting Polish oaks to France, even raising tropical fruit in Paris hot houses. His paper schemes all dropped him into greater debt and, although he made large sums from his books, he died in debt. For years he assiduously wooed a wealthy Polish countess, only to find when he finally married her that she came without the dowry on
which he counted. During his life he tried his hand at
rivalling with the great poets, produced terror novels, and
reams of pot-boilers, then deluded himself into thinking
he could get rich as a publisher, then a printer. Loans
from his family and a generous lady friend rescued him
from bankruptcy. He next tried founding a magazine,
dreamed of conquering the stage, but failure always
dashed his ever-optimistic plans and his extravagant tastes
added to the enormous debt he could never escape. Hated
by some of his contemporaries, envied by most of his fel-
low writers, he became an irresistible subject for carica-
ture, particularly because of his penchant for dressing as
a dandy, and wearing a monk’s robe when he wrote.

Yet this strange man knew that his work promised the
success of immortality, his Human Comedy, as he named
it. The idea formed slowly, and he had actually written
some of the series before he grasped its organizing prin-
ciple. He would compete with the civil register, portraying
in a series of novels the panorama of his own age. “French
Society was going to be the historian, I was to be but its
secretary.” Borrowing an idea from the scientist Geoffroy
Saint-Hilaire, Balzac identified sociology with biology.
Just as the scientist studied animal species, he would in-
vestigate the human variety. His novels would expose the
vices and virtues of his age, paint all the social types that
inhabited France, and fix forever the portrait of an age
that was reacting violently to the powerful social and
economic pressures generated in France after the Revo-
lution.

As he grappled with the artistic problem of how to ex-
press the vision that possessed him, he shaped his percep-
tions into the form of the modern novel. When he un-
derstood that his work formed a whole, he realized that he
had been using recurring characters who inhabited a fic-
tional world of gigantic magnitude. Though his volumes
did not appear in chronological order, so real to him was
this world that he aged his characters as circumstances
required, reintroduced them appropriately, and kept
track of their peregrinations.

In the process of painting the portrait of his time, he laid
the groundwork for the literary technique called realism.
What he saw, he recorded with the accuracy of a historian.
The restaurants, the homes, the mannerisms, the dress,
customs, contemporary slang, all furnished the highly
detailed background for the social types he set in motion.
Since the Human Comedy was organized in scenes of
Paris, of country life, politics, and the military, he cov-
ered most aspects of his age. Actually he had dreamed of
discovering the guiding principles behind society, of con-
structing a philosophy that would explain the behavior
of his creations, but, ironically, posterity remembers him
best for those novels built around such major portraits as
those of Goriot, the devoted father, Eugénie Grandet, the
miser’s daughter, Vautrin, the master thief, and Ras-
tignac, the opportunist and social climber. So real did his
characters seem to him that in 1850, when he lay dying,
he muttered that only Bianchon, the great doctor he had
invented, could have saved him.

Popular during his life, Balzac became increasingly so
after his death. His work fascinated the critics and, later,
the scholars, who recognized in him not only a major
talent but also the object of many imitations and a pio-
nee in the novel. From him they hoped to wrest the
answer to one of literature’s greatest puzzles: the secret
of artistic creation, why and how it occurs. Balzac had
been so vocal, had written so much, and theorized at such
length that his work seemed to promise fruitful answers.
Consequently, Balzac has been studied from every con-
ceiveable angle. Considerable patience and intelligence has gone into establishing his antecedents, the minute details of his life, his manner of working, and the fortunes of his novels; periodicals are devoted to articles on any matter pertaining to his life and works. Given such a strong personality, who led a highly interesting life, scholars have produced monographs on topics as varied as Balzac’s business career, his love life, his dress, and his taste in architecture.

The bibliography grew so immense that there seemed no way to control it for use in serious investigation. Books and articles in many languages contained insights and knowledge that threatened to become lost because no one dared face the gigantic task of assembling the bibliographical information available. Only a true devotee, a man unfailing convinced of Balzac’s genius, who was willing to spend years at painstaking and onerous work, would ever consider such a proposition. Fortunately for Balzac and for scholarship, such a man appeared when William Hobart Royce accidentally discovered the author who was to become one of the passions of his life.

William Hobart Royce dedicated himself to collecting, collating, and codifying all the Balzac references in any literature. When, as a young man, he had stumbled upon his hero, he learned French in order to read the original texts. A rare book dealer by trade, he had the necessary bibliographical skill when he finally decided to record every written mention of his hero which he and his many friends could find. The results of his patient search were finally published by the University of Chicago Press in 1929. The monumental Balzac Bibliography, containing 4,010 items, proved a boon to scholars and brought its author the gratitude of his fellow Balzacinians, the respect of scholars, and the decorations of governments.

No bibliography is ever complete, and since Mr. Royce knew that every year brought a flood of new publications, he kept at his labors. As a personal monument to Balzac, he also carefully collected as many first editions, monographs, and articles on Balzac as he could find. These he kept in a study which attained world-wide fame both for its contents and its occupant. William Hobart Royce became so imbued with the spirit of Balzac that he even absorbed some of his mannerisms and habits: the monk’s robe, the beard. For him literature had unquestionably reached its zenith in the Human Comedy.

But time proved the implacable conqueror of even this fierce determination. By 1955, Mr. Royce no longer felt it possible to continue his task. Regretfully he terminated the continuation of the Balzac Bibliography, having by then accumulated thousands of additional items. In order to insure some permanence for his work, he sold his collection of printed materials to Syracuse University and relinquished the manuscript of the new edition of his bibliography to the Syracuse University Press. By coincidence, that press was now under the direction of the same man, Mr. Donald P. Bean, who had published the original bibliography.

The purchase of Royce’s collection produced interesting results. For one thing, the University Library undertook to house the collection properly, and this consideration led ultimately to the establishment of the Lena R. Arents Rare Book Room. Continuing the spirit of the Royce Collection the University continued to add to the collection until now it can boast of one of the best Balzac collections in the world. Some of these items have been drawn from its holdings for the present exhibition to give visitors an idea of the treasures now housed in the Lena R. Arents Rare Book Room.
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AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY LISTING OF THE ITEMS IN THE EXHIBIT PREPARED BY

LESTER G. WELLS
Rare Books Librarian

CASE I

L'Art de mettre sa cravate de toutes les manières connues et usitées, enseigné et démontré en seize leçons, précédé de l'histoire complète de la cravate, depuis son origine jusqu'à ce jour; de considérations sur l'usage des cols, de la cravate noire et l'emploi des foulards. Par Le Blâton Émile de L'Empézé. Ouvrage indispensable à tous nos fashionables. Orné de trente-deux figures explicatives du texte, et du portrait de l'auteur... Paris, À la Librairie Universelle, Rue Vivienne, 2 bis, au coin du Passage Colbert, et chez tous les marchands de cravates, de cols et de foulards les plus en vogue de la Capitale, 1827. (Imprimerie de H. Balzac, Rue des Marais S'[ain]t G[ermain]. N.17)

First edition. (Books by Balzac; a checklist of books by Honoré de Balzac, compiled from the papers of William Hobart Royce, presently in the Syracuse University Collection, by Albert J. George. Syracuse University Press, 1966. Page 3. Subsequent references to this checklist are indicated by author and page, e.g. "George, p. 1.")

Generally attributed to Balzac, but some scholars attribute to Lefebvre-Durandé, to Émile Marco de Saint-Hilaire, or to Horace Raisson.

The art of tying the cravat: demonstrated in sixteen lessons, including thirty-two different styles; forming a pocket manual; and exemplifying the advantages arising from an elegant arrangement of this important part of the costume; preceded by
a history of the cravat, from its origin to the present time; and remarks on its influence on society in general. By H. Le Blanc, Esq., with explanatory plates, and a portrait of the author. London, Effingham Wilson and Ingrey & Madeley, 1828.

First English edition.

The art of tying the cravat demonstrated in sixteen lessons with thirty-two plates, being a reprint of the edition of 1829. Embellished with six portraits after D. Macise, R.A. New York, Brooks Brothers, 1921.

First American edition.


First printing (Issues of December 14 and 25, 1834; January 28 and February 11, 1835). The first edition in book form was published by Werlet et Spachmann, Paris, 1835 (2 volumes) (George, p. 69).

This is one of the Scènes de la vie privée and one of the "key novels" of the extended series—La Comédie Humaine.


A play based on Balzac's novel and presented for the first time in Paris the same year as publication of the novel in book form.

Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau, parfumeur, Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, adjoint au maire du 2e arrondissement de la Ville de Paris; nouvelle scène de la vie Parisienne. Paris, chez l'Éditeur, 3 Rue Coq-Héron, 1838. 2 volumes.

First edition. Though dated 1838, actually published December of the previous year (George, p. 42).

One of the Scènes de la vie privée of his La Comédie Humaine.


An early work of Balzac published under one of his various pseudonyms.


First book edition; appeared in the columns of Le Messager, August-September, 1841. (George, p. 89).

Dedicated to his niece, Sophie Survile: "... c'est un vrai plaisir ... que de te dédier un livre ... Ton Oncle, Honord, août 1841 ..."

"Une des œuvres capitales de Balzac"—Carteret.

Ursule Mirouët. Bruxelles, Société Belge de Librairie, Hauman et C., 1842. 2 volumes.

An unauthorized Belgian piracy, "contrefaçon," lacking the dedication to Sophie Survile.
CASE 2


Inscribed presentation copy from Balzac to M. Pain (?)

Printed dedication: “Et nunc et semper dilectae, dictatum” [to MM. de Berny].

The first edition of Louis Lambert was published in 1832; it was augmented and revised in several subsequent editions.


The two titles were first paired in the 1842 edition being exhibited. (Georges, p. 51). This edition contains an interesting bibliographical note about the various appearances in print of these two stories; a reading of it will indicate why Balzac is a difficult subject for librarian-bibliographers.

Medallion portraits of Balzac by the eminent French sculptor, Pierre Jean David d'Angers (1788-1856).

These are plaster casts of the originals in bronze. Balzac thanked the sculptor in his dedication of Le Curé de Tours, saying:

“To David, sculptor. The life of this work in which I am inscribing your name—twice illustrious during this century—is anything but certain; whilst you are engraving mine on a bronze medallion which outlives nations, even if wrought by the coiner’s vulgar hammer. Will not the numismatist be puzzled at so many laurel-wreathed heads in your Studio when, amongst the ashes of Paris, they find these beings which you have perpetuated beyond the life of races and in which they will be wanting to discover dynasties? To you, therefore, is this inviolable privilege, to me the acknowledgment. De Balzac.”

Manuscript in Balzac’s handwriting. A contract with his publisher, Hyppolite Souverain, March 23, 1812, for publication of his “pièce de théâtre”—Les Ressources de Quinola.

“...With the passion of one of his characters, Balzac pursued the dream of an income large enough to repay his [financial] obligations and permit a life of ease... Since he knew his books sold well, he drove hard bargains...”—Alcide J. George

(For the full text and a commentary on this commercial document, refer to Prof. George’s article, “Balzac, Businessman,” in the April 1958 issue of the Syracuse University Library Associates’ Courier.)

The manuscript was presented to the William H. Ohlone Royce Balzac Collection, Syracuse University Library, by Mr. George Arenst, donor of the Lena R. Arenst Rare Book Room.

Portion of corrected proof sheet of Balzac’s Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées in the author’s holograph.

Pages 150-57 of a 1931 edition of Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées showing the text portion covered by the proof sheet.

This title first appeared in book form in 1842 bearing the author’s dedication to George Sand. In serial form it had appeared in La Presse, November 26, 1841-January 15, 1842. Note that the proof sheet bears the date 4 September, 1841. This may, possibly, be in the handwriting of the printer.

Fragment of Balzac’s original holograph manuscript of Scènes de la vie privée.

The first edition under this title was published in Paris, 1830. (George, p. 80)
CASE 3


Illustration by Grandville (Jean Ignace Isidore Gérard, 1803-1847), French illustrator and caricaturist.


Illustrated by Paul Gustave Doré (1833-1883), French illustrator and painter.

The girl with the golden eyes. Translated by Ernest Dowson. Chicago, The Peacock Press, 1928.

Illustrated by Donald Dowson.

A translation of La Fille aux yeux d'or.


Illustrated by Jean de Bosschère

A translation of Contes drolatiques.


Limited edition of 150 copies.

Illustrated by S. Olesiewicz.


Limited edition of 200 copies.

Illustrated by René Vigny.


Illustrated by René Ben Susan.

A translation of Père Goriot.

CASE 4

Portrait sketch of Balzac by Delacroix, French painter and art critic.

Photograph of oil portrait of Balzac by Gerard Sequin.

Photograph of oil portrait of Balzac by Louis Boulanger.

Photograph of head of Rodin’s famous full-length statue of Balzac.


Plaster cast of David d'Angers' granite bust of Balzac.

The original bears the inscription, cut in stone: "A son ami Balzac—David."

See Case 2 for another portrait of Balzac by d'Angers.

Two photographs: Balzac's dwelling: Musée de Balzac.

CASE 5

Caricature of Balzac by Roubaud which appeared in *Le Charivari*, 1888.

Portrait of Balzac by Barthall. Fragment of a manuscript in Balzac's holograph.

List of titles of *La Comédie Humaine* in the handwriting of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

CASES 6 AND 7

Royce, William Hobart, comp. *A Balzac bibliography... Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, 1929

Royce, William Hobart. *Indexes to a Balzac bibliography... Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, 1930.


Published articles and books by William Hobart Royce.

Photographs of Mr. Royce.

Memorabilia relating to Mr. Royce's life as a Balzac enthusiast.