HONORÉ DE BALZAC

BY

ALBERT KEIM AND LOUIS LUMET

WEB-BOOKS.COM

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

The Treatise on the Human Will

At Balzac's funeral, the glorious yet bitter seal upon his destiny, Victor Hugo delivered a magnificent address, and in his capacity as poet and seer proclaimed with assurance the judgment of posterity:

"His life has been brief yet full, and richer in works than in days.

"Alas! This powerful and indefatigable worker, this philosopher, this thinker, this poet, this genius has lived amongst us that life of storms, of struggles, of quarrels, of combats, which has always been the common lot of all great men. Today we see him at peace. He has escaped from controversies and enmities. He has entered, on the selfsame day, into glory and into the tomb. Henceforward he will shine far above all those clouds which float over our heads, among the brightest stars of his native land."

This discourse was admirable for its truth, its justice and its far-sightedness, a golden palm branch laid upon the author's tomb, around which there still arose clamours and bitter arguments, denying the greatness of his works, and rumours which veiled the features of the man behind a haze of absurd legends. A star of his country he certainly was, as Victor Hugo proclaimed him, one of those enduring stars which time--so cruel to others--fails to change, except to purify their light and augment their brilliance, to the greater pride of the nation. His life was indeed short, but it was one which set a salutary example, because, stripped of idle gossip, it teaches us the inner discipline, the commanding will and the courage of this hero who, in the midst of joy and sorrow alike, succeeded in creating an entire world.

Honore de Balzac was born at Tours on the 20th of March, 1799, on the ground floor of a building belonging to a tailor named Damourette, in the Rue de l'Armee d'Italie, No. 25,--now No. 35, Rue Nationale. The majority of his biographers have confused it with the dwelling which his father bought later on, No. 29 in the same street according to the old numbering, and the acacia which is there pointed out as having been planted at the date of his birth really celebrated that of his brother Henri, who was several years the younger.

Although born in Touraine, Balzac was not of Tourainian stock, for his birthplace was due merely to chance. His father, Bernard Francois Balssa or Balsa, came originally from the little village of Nougaire, in the commune of Montirat and district of Albi. He descended from a peasant family, small land-owners or often simple day labourers. It was he who first added a "c" to his patronymic and who later prefixed the particle for which the great novelist was afterwards so often reproached. Bernard Balssa, born July 22, 1746, left his native village at the age of fourteen years, never to return. What was his career, and what functions did he fulfil? Honore de Balzac says that his father was secretary to the Grand Council under Louis XV, and Laure Surville, his sister, wrote that under Louis XVI he was attorney to the Council. He himself, in an invitation to the marriage of his second daughter, Laurence, described himself as former secretary to the

King's Council. During the revolution he was secretary to the minister of the navy, Bertrant de Molleville, and later was director of the commissary department in the first division of the Armee du Nord, stationed at Lille.

It is impossible to follow him through all the different wanderings necessitated by his functions, but it is known that upon returning to Paris he there married the daughter of one of his superior officers, Sallambier, attached to the Ministry of War and at the same time director of the Paris hospitals. At the time of the marriage, January 30, 1797, he was fifty-one years of age; his bride, Laure, was only eighteen, a young girl possessed of culture, beauty and distinction of manner. The first fruit of this union was a son, who, although nursed by the mother, died at an early age. Through the influence of his father-in-law, the elder Balzac obtained in 1799 the direction of the commissary department of the twenty-second military division, and installed himself at Tours, where the division was stationed, in the early months of the same year.

Francois soon had a reputation throughout the province. He was a sort of philosopher and reformer, a man with ideas. He despised the currently accepted opinions, and proclaimed his own boldly, indifferent to the consternation of his fellow townsmen. A large head emerging from the high, thick collar of his blue, white-braided coat, which opened to disclose an ample cravat, a smooth-shaven face and florid complexion, a powerful chin and full cheeks, framed in short, brown "mutton-chop" whiskers, a small mouth with thick lips, a long straight, slightly bulbous nose, an energetic face lit up by black eyes, brilliant and slightly dreamy, beneath a broad, determined forehead overhung with stray locks of hair, gathered back in the fashion of the Republic,--all these features proclaimed a rugged personality, a dominant character, conspicuously at variance with the placid bourgeoisie of Touraine. Francois Balzac had furthermore an agreeable presence and a self-satisfied manner, and it pleased him to boast of his southern origin.

The citizens of Tours spoke of him as "an eccentric," but he was greatly annoyed when the term reached his ears, for, good Gascon that he was, and proud of himself, body and mind, he felt that it was singularly humiliating to be treated with so little respect. In point of fact, he was quite justified in refusing to accept an appellation which, however well it might fit his manners as a well-intentioned fault-finder, caustic and whimsical in speech, in no way applied to his unusually broad and penetrating intelligence, teeming with new and strictly original ideas.

He was a disciple of Rousseau; he held certain social theories, and he was unsparing in his criticisms of existing governments. He had his own views as to how society at large should be governed and improved. The first of these views consisted in cultivating mankind, by applying the method of eugenic selection to marriage, in such a manner that after a few years there would be no human beings left save those who were strong, robust and healthy. He could not find sufficient sarcasm to express his scorn of governments which, in civilised countries, allowed the development of weaklings, cripples and invalids. Perhaps he based his theory upon his own example. Francois Balzac had the constitution of an athlete and believed himself destined to live to the age of a hundred years and upward. According to his calculations, a man did not reach his perfect

development until after completing his first century; and, in order to do this, he took the most minute care of himself. He studied the Chinese people, celebrated for their longevity, and he sought for the best methods of maintaining what he called the equilibrium of vital forces. When any event contradicted his theories, he found no trouble in turning it to his own advantage.

"He was never," related his daughter, Mme. Laure Surville, in her article upon Balzac, "under any circumstances at a loss for a retort. One day, when a newspaper article relating to a centenarian was being read aloud (an article not likely to escape notice in our family, as may well be imagined) he interrupted the reader, contrary to his habit, in order to say enthusiastically, 'There is a man who has lived wisely and has never squandered his strength in all sorts of excesses, as so many imprudent young people do!' It turned out, on the contrary, that this wise old man frequently became drunk, and that he took a late supper every evening, which, according to my father, was one of the greatest enormities that one could perpetrate against one's health. 'Well,' resumed my father imperturbably, 'the man has shortened his life, no doubt about it.'"

Francois Balzac was not to be shaken in his opinions. Furthermore, he was not satisfied with asserting them in the course of conversation, but in spite of his lack of confidence in the influence of books upon prejudiced readers (for he considered that the sole exception was the reaction against chivalry brought about by Cervantes's Don Quixote), he wrote a number of pamphlets in which the vigour and originality of his mind are revealed. He published successively: An Essay regarding Two Great Obligations to be fulfilled by the French (1804), An Essay on the Methods of preventing Thefts and Assassinations (1807), A Pamphlet regarding the Equestrian Statue which the French People ought to raise to perpetuate the Memory of Henry IV (1815), The History of Hydrophobia (1819), etc. In the first of these works Francois Balzac proposed that a monument should be raised to commemorate the glory of Napoleon and the French army. Might that not be almost called the origin of the Arc-de-Triomphe?

The singularities of Francois Balzac in no wise hurt him in the estimation of the inhabitants of Touraine. He served as administrator of the General Hospice from 1804 to 1812, and introduced there a practical reform in providing remunerative work for the old men. As an attache of the Mayor's office, he had the mayoralty offered him in 1808, but he refused it in order to consecrate himself entirely to the sick and convalescent.

At Tours the Balzac household led the life of prosperous bourgeois folk. The father had acquired a house with grounds and farm lands. The Balzacs entertained and were received in society. People enjoyed-- perhaps with some secret smiles--the unexpected outbursts of the husband, and they liked him for his kindly ironies which had no touch of malice. As for the subtle and witty Madame Laure Balzac, who had preserved all the graces of the eighteenth century, she was found delightful by all those whom she admitted to the honour of entering her circle of acquaintances.

She was a young woman of distinguished manner, with a somewhat oval face and small, delicate features, overcast at times with a shade of melancholy. She had a somewhat

distant manner which she redeemed by a gesture of charming welcome, or a gracious phrase. She was pious, but without bigotry, a mystic whose religion was that of St. John, all gentleness and impulse. She read Swedenborg, St. Martin, and Jacob Boehm. She had an ardent and untrammelled imagination, but her character was firm. Her decisions were promptly taken and she knew how to enforce their execution. She was a woman of principle; she respected social rules and customs and demanded that the members of her family should observe them.

Four more children were born to this marriage, two sons and two daughters: Honore, Laure, Laurence, and Henri, all of whom had widely different destinies. Laure became the wife of an engineer of bridges and highways, M. Midy de la Greneraye Surville, and was intimately associated with the life of her older brother, whom she survived down to 1854; Laurence died a few years after her marriage in 1821 to M. de Montzaigle; Henri, the youngest, went through divers ups and downs; but finding himself unable to achieve a position of independence, he finally went into exile in the Colonies.

Madame de Balzac's first son having died, as was thought, in consequence of the mother's attempt to nurse him herself, Honore was placed with a nurse in the country district outside of Tours. He remained there until four years of age, together with his sister Laure, and it is there, no doubt, that they formed that tender and trusting friendship which never wavered. When he returned to the paternal roof, Honore was a plump, chubby-cheeked little boy with brown hair falling in masses of curls, a contented disposition and laughing eyes. People noticed him when out walking in his short vest of brown silk and blue belt, and mothers would turn around to say, "What a pretty child!"

Honore was impulsive, with a heart overflowing with affection, but the training he received at home was rigorous and severe. Entrusted to the hands of servants, under the high and mighty surveillance of his governess, Mlle. Delahaye, he received from his father, who was already an old man, nothing more than an indulgent and often absent-minded affection, while, as for his mother, she carried out with great firmness her theories regarding the relation between children and parents. She received hers each evening in her large drawing room with cold dignity. Before kissing them she recapitulated all the faults they had committed during the day, which she had learned from the governess, and her reproofs were reinforced with punishments. Honore never approached her without fear, repressing all his feelings and his need of affection. He suffered in secret. Then he would take refuge with his sister Laure, his only friend and comforter.

Before he was five years old he was sent to a day-school in Tours known as the Leguay Institution. He had a taste for reading, indeed it was more than a taste, it was a sort of mental starvation which made him throw himself hungrily upon every book he encountered. Otherwise, Honore was frankly a mediocre and negligent. But concentrated in himself and deprived of the caresses which would have meant so much to him, he created a whole world out of his readings and sometimes gave glimpses of it to Laure by acting out before her dramas and comedies of his own manufacture and of which he was the hero. His exuberance made him a good comrade; yet he also loved solitude. When

alone, he could give himself up to the fantasies born of his own imagination, and he invented his own games and used to play upon a cheap toy violin made of red wood airs which he enjoyed to the point of ecstasy and of which no one else could bear the sound.

At the age of eight years and some months, on the 22d of June, 1807, Honore entered a college school at Vendome. It was an institution celebrated throughout the districts of central France and directed by the Oratorian Fathers. Prior to the Revolution, cadets used to be trained there for the army, and it had preserved the military severity of its discipline. After their admission, the pupils were never allowed outside vacations and never left its walls until their course of study was terminated. Honore lived there until April 22, 1813,--and in Louis Lambert he has described his sufferings, his hopes and the tumultuous and confused awakening of his genius, throughout those long years of convent-like imprisonment. He had passed from the cold discipline of the family circle, which had nevertheless been tempered by an atmosphere of kindliness, to the hard and impersonal discipline of the college school. The warm-hearted and melancholy child must needs undergo this second severe test, and he was destined to come out from it in a state of self-intoxication, a bewilderment of dreams and ideas.

The college buildings, surrounded by walls, contained everything that would seem calculated to render existence laborious and gloomy for the students. The latter were divided into four sections, the Minions, the Smalls, the Mediums, and the Greats, to which they were assigned according to the grade of their studies. For diversion, they had a narrow garden which they could cultivate and a cabin; they had permission to raise pigeons and to eat them, in addition to the ordinary fare. The classrooms were dirty, being either muddy or covered with dust, according to the season, and evil-smelling as a result of crowding together within narrow spaces too many young folks who were none too clean and to whom the laws of hygiene were unknown. The masters were either overbearing or neglectful, incapable of distinguishing the individual from the crowd and concerned only with seeing that the rules were obeyed and discipline maintained. The pupils themselves were often cruel to each other.

It was here that Honore de Balzac formed his own character, alone, and suffered alone, sensitive and repressed child that he was. From the very first months of the sojourn in the College of Vendome, he was classed among the apathetic and lazy pupils, among those of whom nothing could be made, who would never be an honour to the school that trained them and could be ignored excepting for the purposes of punishment. Honore had an insurmountable aversion for all the required tasks, he was indifferent to the charms of Greek themes or Latin translations, and history alone had the power of stirring him and awakening his appetite for knowledge. He was habitually sluggish and stupid in the eyes of his masters, but what a formidable, unknown work was going on in the brain of this child!

We may picture him in the classroom, during study hour, leaning on his left elbow and holding an open book with his right hand, while he rubs his shoes one against the other, with a mechanical movement. What is he reading? Morality in Action and in Example. His obscure desires are taking definite form. To become a great man, a hero, one of those

whose names are transmitted from age to age, such from choice will be his own destiny. He seizes his pen and rapidly writes "Balzac, Balzac, Balzac" over all the white margins of the book on morality. (This book passed into the possession of M. Jules Claretie.) Then once more he leans upon his elbow, gazing out of the window at a corner of verdure which he can just glimpse, and forthwith he is off again in one of his interminable reveries.

The harsh voice of his teacher interrupts him:

"You are doing nothing, M. Balzac."

The boy falls back from his dreams into the classroom. The reproof has hurt him keenly. He fixes his magnetic black eyes upon the teacher. Is it bitterness, disdain or anger towards him for having destroyed those fruitful meditations? At all events, the teacher feels something like a shock. He says:

"If you look at me like that, M. Balzac, you will receive the ferrule."

The ferrule! The thong of leather that cut so painfully when it fell with dreaded rhythm, one, two, three, on the tips of the fingers or the palm of the hand.

Punishments rained heavily on Balzac, the bad pupil, who seems to have been perpetually in disgrace over his tasks and lessons. These punishments included the extra copying of lines in such numbers that he has been declared the inventor of the three-pointed pen; and then there was imprisonment in the dormitory, "the wooden breeches," as it was called in the college, and where he remained for weeks at a time. Whether he suffered from these punishments and from the contempt of his teachers, Honore at least never complained; for whatever left his mind free to follow its own self-cultivation was a welcome opportunity.

He had a tutor, the librarian of the rich Oratorian library, who during those rare recreation hours, when he had no extra lines to copy, was supposed to give him special lessons in mathematics. But by a tacit agreement the teacher paid no attention to the pupil, and the latter was permitted to read and carry away any books which took his fancy. In point of fact, no book seemed to him too austere or too repellent or too obscure for his youthful understanding. He absorbed pell-mell works upon religion, treatises of chemistry and physics, and historical and philosophical works. He even developed a special taste for dictionaries, dreaming over the exact sense of words, the adventures that befall them in the course of time and their final destinies.

"The absorption of ideas through reading had become in his case a curious phenomenon," so Honore de Balzac has recorded in Louis Lambert, in which he has painted in the person of his hero his own formative years in the college school of Vendome. "His eye would take in seven or eight lines at once, and his mind would grasp the meaning with a velocity equal to that of his glance; sometimes even a single word in a phrase was enough to give him the essence of it. His memory was prodigious. He retained thoughts acquired

through reading with the same fidelity as those suggested to him in the course of reflection or conversation. In short, he possessed every kind of memory: that of places, of names, of things, and of faces. Not only could he recall objects at will, but he could see them again within himself under the same conditions of position and light and colour as they had been at the moment when he first perceived them. This same power applied equally to the most intangible processes of the understanding. He could remember, according to his own expression, not merely the exact spot from which he had gleaned a thought in any given book, but also the conditions of his own mind at far-off periods. By an undreamed-of privilege, his memory could thus retrace the progress and entire life history of his mind from the earliest acquired ideas down to the latest ones to unfold, from the most confused down to the most lucid. His brain, which while still young was habituated to the difficult mechanism of the concentration of human forces, drew from this rich storehouse a multitude of images admirable for their reality and freshness, and which supplied him with mental nutriment through all his periods of clear-sighted contemplation."

Such was the mental condition of Honore at the time when he was regarded by his masters as a dullard, a mediocre pupil who might as well be left to reap the consequences of his own laziness. Clad in his grey uniform, ill shod and with hands red and swollen from chilblains, he held aloof from his comrades, indifferent alike to their games and their taunts. The ruddy colour of well-rounded cheeks, due to long walks in the open air of the countryside around Tours, had disappeared and his face was now as white and delicate as a young girl's, while his eyes had become blacker and more mysterious than ever.

Honore de Balzac received visits from his parents at Easter and at the time of the distribution of prizes. It was a joyous occasion, long awaited by the boy, who retained the warmest affection for his family. But his joy was short-lived. The pupil Balzac had won no prizes, he had received black marks, he had done no work; consequently, instead of the loving greeting that he expected, he was met only with words of disappointment and censure; he was told that he did not appreciate the sacrifices that were being made to educate him, he was idle and lazy; they hoped that next year he would do better and at last give them some little satisfaction.

Honore listened to these reproofs with bowed head, and probably he made promises, in his desire to bring a smile to their faces and to receive some of those endearments that he had hungered for, through long days of solitude. But each year he again took up his interrupted dream, more laboriously and more fiercely than before.

The college school at Vendome possesses a literary society whose membership is confined to the Greats, and which gives performances of scenes from tragedies and comedies, poetic recitations, etc. Honore conceived the ambition to have some writing of his own produced by this society. He practised rhyming, composed poems, and undertook an epic, one line of which has remained famous,

"O Inca! luckless and unhappy king,"

for it made him the butt and by-word of the entire school. He was nicknamed "The Poet," and laughed at for his formless efforts. The director of the school, M. Mareschal, told him a fable, with the charitable intent of turning him aside from his ambitions. There was once upon a time a young linnet in a soft and downy nest; but the young linnet longed for the free and open air and the blue sky. Its wings had not yet grown, and yet the imprudent bird made up its mind to fly. What happened? Why, simply that the young linnet fell from the tree in which the nest was built, and hurt itself pitifully. Warning to poets who presume too far upon their powers. Honore disregarded the fable, just as he had disregarded reproofs, mockery and punishment, and burrowed deeper than ever into the Oratorian library, in a sort of somber phrensy. He neglected his studies and assigned tasks for the sake of the secret and forbidden work that constituted what he called later on, in Louis Lambert, his contraband studies. Although he continued to write poetry, his mind as it ripened and gathered strength in its singular solitude aspired to still loftier works, based upon metaphysics and pure reason.

While his comrades translated Virgil and Demosthenes, he had begun to write a Treatise upon the Will, a symbolic work which contained the germs of his entire destiny. His fellow students, rendered curious by his sustained application, continuing month after month, tried in vain to steal glimpses over his shoulder, but Honore de Balzac would permit no profane eye to fall upon his manuscript. He eluded their persistence and entrusted the precious pages to a box which he could secure under lock and key. A conspiracy was formed. They wanted to know what he had been writing all this time with such serious intent that nothing could take his attention from it. During a recreation period Honore was copying, as usual, some extra lines as a punishment. A turbulent troupe invaded the classroom and flung themselves upon the box which concealed the manuscript. They wanted to know and they were going to know! Honore defended the box energetically, for it was his heart and brain which they wanted to know, it was all his knowledge and beautiful dreams that they wished to lay bare to the light of day. There followed a veritable battle around that little wooden casket. Attracted by the outcries of the assailants, one of the masters, Father Haugoult, arrived in the midst of the tumult. Balzac's crime was proclaimed, he was hiding papers in his box and refused to show them. The master straightway ordered this bad pupil to surrender these secret and forbidden writings. Honore could not do otherwise than obey, for the box would be broken open if he did not unlock it of his own accord; so, with trembling hands, he despoiled himself of his treasures.

With careless fingers the master fumbled over the manuscript and with an air of disdain and a voice of severity summed up the case against this bad pupil:

"And it was for the sake of such nonsense that you have been neglecting your duties!"

Honore held back his tears, profoundly hurt at this blow to his dreams and his creative pride; but he retained a confused sense of injustice and a conviction of the superior quality of his work.