

= Z. Marcas =

Z. Marcas is a novelette by French author Honoré de Balzac first published in 1840 . Set in contemporary Paris , it describes the rise and fall of a brilliant political strategist who is abandoned by the politicians he helps into power . Destitute and forgotten , he befriends a pair of students who live next door to him in a boarding @-@ house . The story follows their many discussions about the political situation in France .

Balzac was inspired to write the story after he spotted the name " Z. Marcas " on a sign for a tailor 's shop in Paris . It was published in July 1840 , in the Revue Parisienne , a magazine he had founded that year . One year later it appeared in a collection from various authors under the title La Mort d 'un ambitieux ( " The Death of an Ambitious Man " ) . Balzac later placed it in the Scènes de la vie politique section of his vast novel sequence La Comédie humaine .

Although Z. Marcas features characters from other Balzac stories and elements of literary realism ? both hallmarks of Balzac 's style ? it is remembered primarily for its political themes . Balzac , a legitimist , believed that France 's lack of bold leadership had led to mediocrity and ruin , and that men of quality were being ignored or worse . He maintained that the youth of France were in danger of being abandoned by the government , and predicted unrest in the years to come .

The story also explores Balzac 's conviction that a person 's name is a powerful indicator of his or her destiny , an idea he drew from the work of Laurence Sterne . The title character , with his keen intellect , is based on Balzac 's conception of himself : a visionary genius who fails to achieve his true potential because of less talented individuals with more social power .

= = Background = =

Honoré de Balzac was drawn to a diversity of interests throughout his life , from business to politics . After studying the law for three years , he wrote a number of potboiler novels under various pseudonyms . He also lost large sums of borrowed money in the publishing trade , attempting to capitalize on cheap editions of classical works . By 1828 he owed his mother 50 @,@ 000 francs .

Although his views on politics were always changing , Balzac was primarily a legitimist who supported the House of Bourbon and believed that the July Revolution of 1830 had left France without strong leadership . In 1832 he declared his intent to run for the Chamber of Deputies in the French Parliament . A variety of problems prevented his actual candidacy , but he mounted a serious campaign which was met mostly with ridicule by the press . Referring to Balzac 's breakthrough 1831 novel La Peau de chagrin ( " The Wild Ass 's Skin " ) , the newspaper Le Figaro mused : " This is the first time anyone has been seen caressing the voters with an ass 's skin . " Although he later showed renewed interest in public office , he mostly expressed his political views through writing .

In July 1840 he attempted to fuse his desire to make money with his politics by founding a magazine called the Revue Parisienne , funded by his friend Armand Dutacq . Having already worked in the publishing industry , Balzac believed he had learned all there was to know about the trade . " [ T ] hat gigantic machine known as journalism " , he wrote , " is as simple as a roasting spit turned by a poodle . " Balzac planned to publish his own fiction in the Revue Parisienne , in part to challenge the popularity of the roman @-@ feuilleton serial format . Dutacq , however , stopped funding the project in September , after only three issues , and Balzac 's final foray into the world of publishing came to an end .

= = Writing and publication = =

In the summer of 1840 , Balzac had a discussion with his friend Léon Gozlan about the power of a person 's name . In his comic essay Balzac en pantoufles , Gozlan recounted his associate 's insistence : " On est nommé là @-@ haut avant de l'être ici @-@ bas . C 'est un mystère auquel il ne convient pas d'appliquer , pour le comprendre , les petites règles de nos petits raisonnements . " ( " We are named up there [ in heaven ] before being named down here . It 's a mystery to which it 's

not suitable to apply , for the sake of understanding , the little rules of our slight reasoning . " )

Balzac insisted to Gozlan that by searching through the streets of Paris , they would find a name suitable for a character he had imagined , a political genius thwarted by the mediocrity of the time . They finally came upon a tailor 's sign that enraptured Balzac , bearing the name Z. Marcas . He believed that the name suggested " l'esprit je ne sais quoi de fatal " ( " some mysterious fatality " ) , and chose it for his story 's protagonist . He wrote the 30 @-@ page story soon afterwards .

Balzac published Z. Marcas in the first issue of the Revue Parisienne , 25 July 1840 . It was republished a year later under the title La Mort d'un ambitieux ( " The Death of an Ambitious Man " ) , in a collection from various authors called Le Fruit défendu ( " Forbidden Fruit " ) . Shortly before his death , Balzac placed the story in the Scènes de la vie politique section of his collection La Comédie humaine .

= = Synopsis = =

The story is told from the point of view of a first @-@ person narrator , about whom little is revealed before the final pages . Before the story itself , an extended meditation appears on the nature of human names , and that of Z. Marcas specifically :

MARCAS ! Répétez @-@ vous à vous @-@ même ce nom composé de deux syllabes , n 'y trouvez @-@ vous pas une sinistre signification ? Ne vous semble @-@ t @-@ il pas que l 'homme qui le porte doit être martyrisé ? Quoique étrange et sauvage , ce nom a pourtant le droit d 'aller à la postérité ; il est bien composé , il se prononce facilement , il a cette brièveté voulue pour les noms célèbres ... Ne voyez @-@ vous pas dans la construction du Z une allure contrariée ? ne figure @-@ t @-@ elle pas le zigzag aléatoire et fantasque d 'une vie tourmentée ?

MARCAS ! say this two @-@ syllabled name again and again ; do you not feel as if it had some sinister meaning ? Does it not seem to you that its owner must be doomed to martyrdom ? Though foreign , savage , the name has a right to be handed down to posterity ; it is well constructed , easily pronounced , and has the brevity that befits a famous name ... Do you not discern in that letter Z an adverse influence ? Does it not prefigure the wayward and fantastic progress of a storm @-@ tossed life ?

The narrator , Charles , lives with his friend Juste in a large boarding @-@ house populated almost entirely with students like themselves ( Charles is studying law and Juste medicine ) . The sole exception is their middle @-@ aged neighbor , Z. Marcas , of whom they see only momentary glimpses in the hall . They learn that he is a copyist , and living on an extremely small salary . When the students find themselves lacking the funds for tobacco , Marcas offers them some of his own . They become friends , and he tells them the story of his political career .

Recognizing at an early age that he had an incisive mind for politics , Marcas had allied himself with an unnamed man of some fame who lacked wisdom and insight . They became a team , with the other man serving as the public face and Marcas as the advisor . Once his associate had ascended into office , however , he abandoned Marcas , then hired and abandoned him again . Marcas was left poor and unknown , resigned to duplicate the writing of others for very little pay .

Eventually his politician friend seeks his help for a third time . Marcas is dismissive , but the students convince him to give the process one last chance . After three months , Marcas appears at the boarding house again , sick and exhausted . The politician never visits Marcas , who soon dies . The students are the only mourners at his funeral , and ? disheartened by the tragedy ? leave France .

= = Characters = =

In addition to his distinctive name , Z. Marcas has a remarkable appearance which his neighbors notice immediately . The story 's first line refers to his " saisissant " ( " striking " ) appearance . As usual in his later work , Balzac describes Marcas by relating him to an animal : " L 'animal de Marcas était le lion . Ses cheveux ressemblaient à une crinière , son nez était court , écrasé , large et fendu au bout comme celui d 'un lion , il avait le front partagé comme celui d 'un lion par un sillon

puissant , divisé en deux lobes vigoureux . " ( " The animal for Marcas was the lion . His hair was like a mane , his nose was short and flat ; broad and dented at the tip like a lion 's ; his brow , like a lion 's , was strongly marked with a deep median furrow , dividing two powerful bosses . " )

Marcas appears to be destined for greatness ; he is described as having tremendous spirit , sound but speedy judgment , and comprehensive knowledge of public manners . His gaze has " une puissance " ( " a power " ) , which he tries not to use , since it has brought him nothing but misery in the past . Despite these innate proficiencies , however , the political genius living in the students ' midst requires their aid to dress himself when official company comes to call .

The character of Z. Marcas nonetheless represents a fiery drive to succeed in the world of politics , an acute mind seeking to do good in the public sphere . One critic calls him " ambition in its pure state " . Like other persons of genius in *La Comédie humaine* , Marcas is seen as a reflection of Balzac 's own ego and desire . Like Marcas , the author dreamed of fame and positive influence ; as Balzac believed himself to be , the character is dismissed and manipulated by mediocre minds . Even their work habits ? toiling at their desks throughout the night ? are similar .

= = = Recurring characters = = =

Balzac began using characters from earlier works in his 1835 novel *Le Père Goriot* , and made the technique a hallmark of his fiction . In the case of Z. Marcas , the narrator ? Charles Rabourdin , whose identity is only revealed at the end of the story ? is in fact the son of a central character from Balzac 's 1837 tale *La Femme supérieure* . The title character of that story is married to Xavier Rabourdin , who is unjustly ignored for a promotion to the head of his civil service department . At the end of the *La Femme supérieure* , Rabourdin pledges to his wife that they will enjoy success in the world of business . His son 's poverty in Z. Marcas is evidence of his failure .

Charles Rabourdin 's interactions with Marcas echo the difficulties he saw in his father 's government career . As critic Herbert J. Hunt notes , Marcas " represents in the political sphere what Rabourdin represents in the administrative sphere " . Allan H. Pasco echoes this point : " Charles has had the lesson of futility from two tutors : his father and Marcas . Outstanding men have no future in politics , in the administration , or in business ? at least not in France . "

Balzac 's use of recurring characters provides unparalleled depth and characterization for his readers . " This technique " , insists critic Mary Susan McCarthy , " not only furnished him with a unifying principle but also offers the reader a network of relationships through which to unite the many separate stories and novels in which the characters appear , forming the fictional universe that is *La Comédie humaine* . " Some readers , however , are intimidated by the depth created by these interdependent stories , and feel deprived of important context for the characters . Detective novelist Arthur Conan Doyle said that he never tried to read Balzac , because he " did not know where to begin " .

Z. Marcas himself appears in one other Balzac story , *Un prince de la bohème* , which the author revised twice before it appeared in its final form . In the 1846 edition , the character of Marcel has been changed to Marcas ; but this may have been a printer 's error . As Anthony Pugh explains : " This detail is inexplicable ; the principal character of Z. Marcas , who does not otherwise appear outside his own story , seems a very unlikely candidate for the role . Could it be a misprint ? "

= = Style = =

Balzac was known for his use of realism , including exquisite detail when describing people and locations . His fanaticism about the name Z. Marcas is cited as an example of the author 's " zeal " for " close local color " . Balzac 's belief in the connection between one 's name and one 's destiny is brought to the fore ; the pattern demonstrated in Z. Marcas reflects many in the larger collection of Balzac 's work . As critic Charles Affron puts it : " The creator of a universe so tied up with inner rhythms and resounding with so many echoes does not hesitate to imply that the germs of a character 's failure can be found in the physical qualities of his name . " This idea came to Balzac from Laurence Sterne , as he acknowledged in his 1841 story *Ursule Mirouët* : " [ N ] e doit @-@ on

pas reconnaître avec Sterne l'occulte puissance des noms , qui tantôt raillent et tantôt prédisent les caractères ? " ( " Should we not agree with Sterne in recognizing the occult power in names , which sometimes mock and sometimes define the characters of their possessors ? " )

Z. Marcas includes many other examples of realist detail as well . The students live in shabby environs , furnished by " qu 'un maigre tapis en lisière " ( " only a scrap of thin carpet " ) . They share " une blonde perruque de tabac turc " ( " a tawny twig of Turkish tobacco " ) with their neighbor , and the three discuss political personalities drawn directly from recent history , including William Pitt the Elder and the Voltigeurs . Still , realist detail is not commonly in the foreground of commentary about Z. Marcas . As Hunt explains , it is mostly remembered " as a vehicle for a characteristic Balzacian whimsy " .

= = Politics and society = =

Z. Marcas is best known for its reflection of Balzac 's political views , specifically the neglect of talent and ability in a sea of republican mediocrity ; and the abandonment of young people by older generations . Pasco suggests : " ' Z. Marcas ' has then become , not the story of one particular , political failure , not the story of a young man of potential who abandons France for Malasia , but the story of France herself , wasting away and thus losing her greatest resource ? her youth . "

Balzac believed that the July Monarchy had brought a wave of poor leadership , and that people of quality and integrity were scorned in the name of cronyism . Marcas , a prime example of such a man , is doomed to fail in the government of Louis @-@ Philippe . Those in power were blind to the valuable minds being lost in their midst , as the students discover early in the story : " nous étions étonnés de la brutale indifférence du pouvoir pour tout ce qui tient à l'intelligence , à la pensée , à la poésie " ( " we were amazed at the brutal indifference of the authorities to everything connected with intellect , thought , and poetry " ) . Marcas ' personal woes ? and his tales of life within the corridors of power ? strongly reinforce this view .

Through Marcas , Balzac claimed that young people in France were being ignored by government officials , and predicted an uprising :

La jeunesse éclatera comme la chaudière d'une machine à vapeur . La jeunesse n'a pas d'issue en France , elle y amasse une avalanche de capacités méconnues , d'ambitions légitimes et inquiètes , elle se marie peu , les familles ne savent que faire de leurs enfants ; quel sera le bruit qui ébranlera ces masses , je ne sais ; mais elles se précipiteront dans l'état de choses actuel et le bouleverseront .

Youth will explode like the boiler of a steam @-@ engine . Youth has no outlet in France ; it is gathering an avalanche of underrated capabilities , of legitimate and restless ambitions ; young men are not marrying now ; families cannot tell what to do with their children . What will the thunderclap be that will shake down these masses ? I know not , but they will crash down into the midst of things , and overthrow everything .

As Graham Robb indicates in his 1994 biography , Balzac 's words were an accurate prediction of the 1848 Revolution . Public opposition to the monarchy exploded in February of that year , Louis @-@ Philippe was forced to abdicate , and the Second Republic was founded .

= = Legacy = =

Although Balzac 's Revue Parisienne lasted only three issues , Z. Marcas has remained a moderately popular story . Hunt notes that it has " only subsidiary value " , but biographer André Maurois calls it " an admirable tale " . Robb notes that Z. Marcas was an important herald of political realities to come , and provided a warning to the political class of the time .

As critic Félicien Marceau points out , however , the greatest value of Z Marcas may have been for the author himself .

[ T ] he story has somewhat the appearance of those drawings by Leonardo da Vinci consisting of twenty or thirty feet or hands , perfectly drawn in themselves , but whose raison d'être lies rather in the fact that they will enable the artist to address himself later on to much vaster compositions , in

which such hands and feet will assume their true placement and importance . We shall find the traits gathered together in the character of Marcas ? though more scattered , mingled with others , scaled down to less overwhelming proportions ? in [ Eugène de ] Rastignac or [ Henri de ] Marsay , whose characters are less of a piece but more true to life . Marcas , on the other hand , is less a character than a moral example .