The Genius of Balzac.*

The fame of Balzac has grown enormously in the last half-century. Of his own generation, he alone fully recognized his supremacy as a novelist. His contemporaries preferred the lurid fiction of Sue and Soulié to the *Comédie humaine*, and even Sainte-Beuve compared his genius to these masters of ultra-Romantic barbarity. Sixty years have passed, however, since the publication of that famous *causerie*, and the enemies of Balzac have long since joined him in the grave. Death has brought forgetfulness, and time a truer perspective. The personal idiosyncrasies of the author — his vulgarity and his egotism — have dwindled into matters of literary history; and what survives for us is the creator of the modern novel.

It would seem that the time were ripe for an adequate biography. Antiquarians have raked over all the old anecdotes. Students have spent days comparing and verifying the data of Balzac's life. Even his note-book is soon to be published, and we shall lack nothing of importance except the last letters to Mme. Hanska. In spite of this, however, we have no adequate French biography. Brunétière and Monsieur Le Breton have kept to literary criticism, and the Vicomte de Lovenjoul to antiquarian research and bibliography.

The result of this is a second English Life of Balzac, reflecting this recent scholarship on its antiquarian side. It makes a very interesting volume, and Mr. Lawton deserves the thanks of all Anglo-Saxon readers. He has brought together all the important facts and anecdotes, briefly analyzed the novels, and enriched his narrative by an admirable selection of illustrations. An excellent introductory chapter fixes the subject in its historical background, and upon this canvas the figure of Balzac is depicted with no glossing of realistic detail. The great novelist was not a literary Galahad, and perhaps this fact has contributed somewhat to the coldness of the picture. The vivid portraits accent this lack of warmth. "Exceedingly sane," however, the book certainly is; for the first time we have a study of Balzac in which the adjective "vertiginous" is not employed!

But such excellence is not without its defects. Admirable as a corrective to partizan enthusiasm, interesting enough as a collection of anecdotes, Mr. Lawton's delineation will fail to inspire the general reader. We could have wished for a portrait less purely external. The ideal biography will have its reservations, surely; but after all its criticism, it will present the personal force of the man. It will justify to us the conception of Rodin. Mr. Lawton's Balzac, one must confess, could hardly have written the *Comédie humaine*. He is less the genius of the letters than the vulgar little man of the anecdotes, and many of the anecdotes present a figure which seems to be almost wholly clay. Honoré de Balzac was, undoubtedly, a tremendous egotist; and if we can forgive that quality in a living person, we cannot forgive the egotism of those whom we have never known. We know that Balzac's egotism was balanced by all those qualities which go to make up personal charm. His contemporaries loved him — or hated him; the warmth of his genius vitalized them all. But two generations later we can only recapture that vital heat in his novels or his letters, a task of greater difficulty than the interpretation of the anecdotes. And so the biographer is led to forget the genius in the bourgeois gentilhomme.

We must remodel our conception of genius. All the genius of Shakespeare did not give him the moral repulsion of his age toward the actor's life, or turn his exuberant manhood from the petty crime of deer-poaching. All the genius of Balzac did not prevent him from engaging to write an article, and then dickering with a nameless author to furnish him with the product for him to sign and sell. But this does not militate against the genius. It only complicates the task of the biographer. He must give us a synthetic picture, a picture with its light and shade, but with the force of unity throughout. He must interpret the man by the genius or the genius by the man; the only escape from this dilemma means the reduction of biography to pure antiquarianism. But we need not go so far. It is his art which reveals most clearly the subconscious part of the artist's mind, and the qualities by which the artist lives for us are, after all, the qualities by which *he* really lived. The true biographer will find the genius more important than the man.

This is the task which confronts the would-be biographer of Balzac. It explains the lack of a French biography, and it may serve to excuse the defects of this one. The story of Balzac's life might be made more wonderful than any of his novels; it seems more wonderful in the letters to Mme. Hanska. For these letters are a veritable journal. Egotistic but vital with

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energy, crude, uncorrected, spontaneous, they give us Balzac's very self; his personality rises from their pages as the genie from the jar in the Eastern tale. One feels at last the personal force of his genius. We can almost see him at his writing table — its solid mahogany worn by the constant friction of his arm, as for eighteen hours a day he composed or corrected his novels, scribbling "between two proofs" the letters to his Russian *Princesse lointaine*. We feel the fire of his inspiration, "work, always work, nights of flame succeeding nights of flame, days of meditation to days of meditation, execution to conception, conception to execution." We hear his exultant cry as he recounts his accomplishment, see the reaction and note the cost:

"To-day I have finished 'La Recherche de l'Absolu.' Heaven grant that the work be good and beautiful. I cannot judge of it; I am too weary with toil."

"This morning I rebelled against my solitude. I wanted to roam the world, to see what the Landstrasse was, to put my fingers into the Danube . . . in short, to do anything but write pages; to be *living* instead of turning pale over phrases!"

This is the real Balzac, the vividness of whose personality Mr. Lawton has missed. Nor are such passages unique in these letters:

"Between this dolour and the distant light of love, what are men, the world, society! There is nothing possible but the incessant work into which I throw myself — work, my saviour, which will give me liberty and return to me my wings. I quivered on reading your reasoning: 'No letters, he is coming.' . . . I am seized by periodic furies to leave all behind me, to escape, to spring into a carriage! Then the chains clank down; I see the thickness of my dungeon. If I come to you it will be a surprise, for I can no longer make decisions on that subject."

These are details, perhaps, that Mr. Lawton would better have left in the words of Honoré de Balzac, instead of questioning the depth of the novelist's love. And against the vulgarities of Balzac's egotism he might have set another paragraph, equally egotistic, but overlooked in his biography:

"My life is varied only by ideas; physically, it is monotonous. I speak confidentially with no one but Mme. de Berny or with you. I find that one should communicate but little with petty minds. . . . I am vowed to great feelings — and it *is* an odd contrast with my apparent levity. . . . What sentiments, feelings, I have made visible in my work is but the faint shadow of the light that is in me . . . In twelve years I have had neither anger nor impatience; the heaven of my heart has always been blue. Any other attitude is, to my thinking, impotence. Strength should be a unit, — and after having for seven years measured myself with misfortune and vanquished it, and risen, to gain literary royalty, every night with a will more determined than that of the night before, I have, I think, the right to call myself strong."

This is the Balzac of Rodin. Everything about him is colossal, even his faults. The very virtues assume in him a monstrous quality; his industry, like his extravagance, has all the excess of a debauch. "At this moment I am a little drunk with work," he cries; and, in another place, "I have no time to live . . . my life is a torrent." In the Romantic generation, so full of curious types and exotic temperaments, he seems almost like a man of to-day. And it is the life of to-day that he interprets, the materialism of which one critic claims that Balzac was the creator. He was not the creator but the diviner of that nascent materialism, now grown like a cancer into our modern life, just as Musset was the interpreter of the Romantic malady of his own age. Absolute opposites, Musset and Balzac sum up the nineteenth century. Musset's moral suicide typifies the shattering of Romantic theories. Balzac's herculean energy foreshadows our modern strenuosity, affording us a spectacle probably unique in art, the incarnation of a Napoleonic will.

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