

# A BAFFLING, SUPERHUMAN FIGURE

## Stefan Zweig's Biography Illumines Balzac and His Protean Achievement

BALZAC. By Stefan Zweig. Translated by William and Dorothy Rose. 404 pp. New York. The Viking Press. \$3.75.

By HENRI PEYRE

OTHER novelists have probably written greater works of fiction than Balzac. "War and Peace" stands unequalled as masterful creation of character; Dostoevsky is more profound; Proust is a subtler analyst of human passion; Stendhal has a sharper gift of psychological probing; Flaubert wrote in "Madame Bovary" a more nearly perfect novel than any in "La Comédie Humaine." But while all other novelists seem to "abide our question" and can be grasped by analytical interpretation, Balzac remains the most baffling and probably the most superhuman among writers of fiction. He has been called the most inexhaustible creator of human beings after God, and after Shakespeare.

His greatness is of the kind that overpowers criticism. It is easy to point at his faults, which are legion. His philosophy, isolated from the living pages of his novels, is often crude; his political thought is obstinately reactionary, although his influence has regularly been on the side of revolutionaries; his taste is seldom that conventional and complacently refined discrimination called "good taste"; his style is hasty; his vulgarity is inescapable. Fastidious academic critics, who believe that the greatest work is that which contains the fewest faults, have, ever since Sainte-Beuve, balked at Balzac's excesses. Frenchmen nurtured in polished salons and in overintellectual colleges, have been repelled by his coarse vitality; like Anatole France, Léon Blum and André Gide, they have preferred Stendhal, Mérimée, or Flaubert to the romantic giant.

Yet Balzac is French of the French, from Touraine, the garden of moderation and pure clarity. From Rabelais and Diderot to Mirabeau and Danton, then through Courbet, Hugo, Rodin, Zola to debatable personalities like Céline and Thorez, there has been a long series of robust, thick-set, vulgar, unruly Frenchmen who have irrupted into their well-ordered land like forces of nature. Balzac frightened biographers; André Maurois, Philip Guedalla, Emil Ludwig kept shy of him. This life of Balzac, by Stefan Zweig, will now fill the gap. It is sure to entertain, instruct and charm many a reader. It is a work of art, as a biography must be; it is alive with the teeming life of its model; it eschews irrelevant details, conceals its solid array of documents. It is true both to facts and to the more elusive psychological and spiritual truth of a man who, in spite of many contemporary scandals and revelations, has remained one of the most mysterious of great creators.

It has been the fate of this prophetic novelist to meet his most ardent admirers outside of his native land. Zola, Proust, and more recently Mauriac have, it is true, proclaimed their admiration for his power and universality. Flaubert's finished technique exercised a more pervasive but on

the whole a sterilizing influence on English and French fiction. Americans, Russians and Germans have been more sympathetic to Balzac's visionary imagination and to his Faustian ambition. Dreiser and Faulkner stand high in Balzac's progeny, as do the many sagas of modern life undertaken by the imaginative realists of America. Goethe, almost on his deathbed, rejoiced in the promising talent of the then unknown Frenchman who had published "La Peau de Chagrin." Marx admired Balzac and contemplated writing a

book on him. The most penetrating critical study of Balzac is by the German E. R. Curtius. In Austria at the dawn of the present century Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Stefan Zweig became fascinated by Balzac's genius.

Stefan Zweig long aspired to crown his literary career by writing a book on Balzac. He was fully prepared for the task by his broad culture, his own creative talent and his reverence for genius. "Fighters with the Daemon," as he called them, such as Hoelderlin, Nietzsche, Bal-



Balzac. A Drawing by Gavarni.

zac, appealed to him more than Olympian personalities. He had already analyzed some of the features of Balzac's work in his "Three Masters," published in translation by the Viking Press in 1930 (Dickens and Dostoevsky were to him the other two pre-eminent novelists). In the late Thirties, while Europe was on the brink of catastrophe, he settled in England, in Bath, and accumulated notes and reflections on Balzac.

The year 1940 came and this great European left Europe on the voyage to America, from which he was never to return. He was harrowed by doubts about his ability, or that of any biographer, to comprehend a giant like Balzac. His notes had been left behind, in bombed England. Before the Allied invasion liberated Europe, Zweig, despondent over the future of civilization, put an end to his life.

HIS friend, Richard Friedenthal, piously edited the manuscript left behind. Some finishing touches would probably have been added by the author, had he lived; the critical portion of the book deserved more development; conclusions on the creative genius of Balzac might have been appended. As it is, this is one of the most important biographies to have been published in any country in the last few years.

Will-power and energy lie at the core of Balzac's personality. He came into the world in 1799, along with the richest crop of talents France has ever known. From the first, he was the literary counterpart of Napoleon, and determined to conquer "love and glory" as another man of small stature and vast imagination had conquered thrones and capitals. "What he began with the sword, I shall consummate with the pen," he wrote on the statue of the Emperor which constituted the sole ornament of his young man's garret.

The second formative influence on Balzac was his tragically unhappy youth, powerfully depicted in "Louis Lambert," which Zweig considers as Balzac's "Faust." He was deprived of maternal affection, harshly treated, doomed to solitude. A psychoanalyst must some day attempt to explain how the misunderstood and humiliated child was to dream of vanquishing the world through his fiction. He was haunted by money, as only a French boy raised in austere thrift can be; he spent lavishly not only the gold but the vital energy stored up by generations of healthy peasants. In woman, he looked for the motherly tenderness which had been refused to his childhood.

WOMEN play a conspicuous role in any biography of Balzac. He was short and stodgy, sensual and bad-mannered, greedy and an incurable snob. Yet his dynamic personality and his interest in their romantic reveries invariably attracted women. Balzac never had any men friends, never discussed literature in cafés; to his mistresses alone would he confess. He needed love in all its forms. His life long, he was in love with being in love.

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# Balzac's Protean World

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a woman of 45 who had given birth to nine children, was his first passion, when he was half her age. Many liaisons, few of them Platonic, followed. The last one was the most enduring and in many ways the most pathetic. With all his power of self-delusion, Balzac knew it, and exclaimed: "People always talk of the first love. I know nothing more terrible than the last one: it is like strangulation." The Polish aristocrat who first wrote him anonymously as "L'Etrangère" in 1832, had him running over Europe in stagecoaches for a few fleeting rendezvous. In 1841 her aged husband died; but she still hesitated—and finally married the most widely read man in Europe in 1850, five months before he died.

**B**ALZAC'S life is a tragedy, like that of many great artists. He accepted it as such. "Duty alone keeps me alive," he sighed once. Like Nietzsche, he might have added: "Do I seek happiness? I seek my work." Throughout his amorous life, through the grandiose financial speculations into which he plunged, regularly to end in bankruptcy, through his ever-piling debts which mortgaged his future, Balzac was secretly aspiring after the most precious gift that may be bestowed upon a writer: experience of life.

He created life as he went, even more than he lived it. It is amusing to reflect that Balzac long passed for a realist: he himself claimed he was portraying the society of his time. Baudelaire, who admired him hugely, knew better and said it: Balzac is a visionary. How papery and ludicrously laborious most naturalistic novels seem beside his, even when signed by Goncourt, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Jules Romains! A gift of second sight enabled Balzac to pierce the mysteries of things, of brains, and occasionally of souls. The word "mystery" best defines his leading preoccupation. His huge series of ninety-seven novels (he had titles for fifty-one more when he died) is a titanic attempt at unraveling the secrets of man. His supreme ambition was to establish the laws of psychological and spiritual activity, as Cuvier had determined those of the animal kingdom.

**H**E failed in that superhuman attempt. But his indomitable energy had not been spent in vain. The society which his visionary's eye had conjured up came to be true. The coup d'état of 1851, the Second Empire that followed, were Balzac's world made real.

Napoleon III, Norny, Lesseps were Balzacian characters; Rimbaud was a second Louis Lambert. Life, as Oscar Wilde contended, does imitate literature. The reader of French history, the visitor to Paris, Tours, Angoulême, the observer of French life, the sociologist are still today dominated by Balzac's portrayals.

The vogue of naturalistic fiction and of positivistic philosophy had to spend itself before Balzac's fame could come into its own. He was in truth a prophet of our modern age of speculation, speed and bustle. In the tragic years through which Europe has lived, readers were thrown back, away from the contemporary novel, to Balzac and Dostoevski; they alone seemed to have depicted an age of apocalypse, of conquest, of destruction and of fierce inhumanity of man to man.

Even the "discoveries" of modern psychology seemed to have been forestalled in "La Comédie humaine." Proust was well aware that Balzac, in "La Fille aux yeux d'or" and some other novels had treated sexual inversion with mastery. The gloomy pictures of hateful families, of vicious monsters, of those devouring passions of

which the modern world has boasted, were already to be found in little-known masterpieces like "La Rabouilleuse" (A Bachelor's Establishment) and "La Vielle Fille." Yet a light of spirituality illumines the abysses plumbed by Balzac. Man rises ennobled from the Inferno which "La Comédie humaine" has explored.

**D**ANTE and Shakespeare have over Balzac the advantage of a splendid and condensed poetical form. The novel is probably condemned never to reach perfection; it cannot, without peril, aim at too careful a style, inherit traditions placidly, divorce itself from the jerky shocks of life. Every practitioner of the art must create his own form anew. But it is the most faithful mirror to our disturbed age. And Balzac, who was endowed with imaginative energy more than any other man of his age, who assimilated life, art and books at a glance, transmuted knowledge and experience into ardent creatures of flesh and blood, is a truly phenomenal master of the novel. His prodigious example, as described by Stefan Zweig, is timely at the dawn of a new post-war era which must portray itself in great fiction if it is to leave its impress upon the sands of time.

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