

*Nineteenth-Century  
Literature Criticism*

**NCLC**

**153**

Volume 153

# Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

*Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other  
Creative Writers Who Died between 1800  
and 1899, from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations*



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## Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism, Vol. 153

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## Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC) has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an “Outstanding Reference Source” by the American Library Association with the publication of its first volume, NCLC has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 450 authors representing 33 nationalities and over 17,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as NCLC.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting



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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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# Honoré de Balzac

## 1799-1850

(Born Honoré Balssa; also wrote under pseudonyms Lord R'hoone and Horace de Saint-Aubin) French novelist, short story and novella writer, essayist, playwright, and editor. The following entry provides critical commentary on Balzac's works from 1976 through 2003. For further information on Balzac's complete career, see *NCLC*, Volume 5; for discussion of Balzac's novel *Le père Goriot* (1835), see *NCLC*, Volume 35; for discussion of Balzac's novel *Eugénie Grandet* (1834), see *NCLC*, Volume 53.

### INTRODUCTION

Balzac is considered to be the most prolific fiction writer of nineteenth-century France and ranks as one of the great masters of the novel. His huge production of novels, novellas, and short stories, collected under the name *La Comédie humaine* (1842-55), depict, in realistic detail, life in modern bourgeois France. Although his work was written largely in the tradition of French romanticism, with its emphasis on exceptional events, the idealization of love, and use of contrasting characters (the beautiful and the grotesque, the lofty and the popular, the tragic and the comic), Balzac is now considered one of the creators of realism in literature. A keen observer of human life and behavior, Balzac wrote about the everyday events in the lives of individuals in every sector of French society, from noblemen to peasants, artists to businessmen, churchmen to prostitutes. Some of his major themes include the family, economics, the theatre, modern scientific knowledge, and history. Balzac's work habits are legendary, and although he is said to have loved physical indulgences, when he wrote—sometimes for eighteen hours a day—he consumed copious amounts of strong black coffee. Balzac's writing is sometimes criticized for its sloppiness and melodrama, but critics agree that his best novels offer original and vivid depictions of nineteenth-century French life that are interesting for their historical accuracy as well as their social and philosophical commentary. Modern scholars have also found Balzac's works of interest due to his use of varying narrative techniques and voice, the attention paid to the reader, the interest in alternate sexualities, and the way he pushes the limits of the novel form.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Balzac was born Honoré Balssa in Tours on March 20, 1799 to a middle-class family. His parents are said to



have been distant and paid little attention to their son; Balzac claimed that his mother hated him before his birth. Until the age of four, Balzac was raised by a wet nurse and at eight he was sent to boarding school at Vendôme, where he was visited by his mother only twice in six years. He was not a good student, by all accounts, but he read voraciously. In 1814 his family moved to Paris, and Balzac completed his schooling there before enrolling as a law student in 1816. He received a law degree in three years and began clerking in a law office, but soon decided he wanted to be a writer. He asked his parents to indulge his ambition for a year, but his early attempts were deemed awful by a literature professor. Balzac continued to write, experimenting with different forms and publishing sensational novels and stories under pseudonyms. From the beginning of his career, he worked feverishly, and even though his first efforts were ignored by the literary establishment, he managed to support himself with his meager earnings.

During the 1820s Balzac was involved with Madame de Berny, a woman more than twenty years his senior. During this decade he also abandoned writing briefly and bought a publishing company and printing house, both of which failed and left him heavily in debt. His first success as a writer came in 1829 with the historical novel *Le dernier Chouan* (*The Chouans*; published as *Les Chouans* in 1834) and the humorous novella *Physiologie du mariage* (1830; *Physiology of Marriage*), a revision of an earlier work. That same year his father died, and after his mother miraculously recovered from a severe illness he began to study the works of the mystical thinkers Jacob Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg. Between the years 1830 and 1832 Balzac published six novellas under the title *Scènes de la vie privée* (1830), and thereafter he began contributing to France's most important literary journals. It was around this time that he added aristocratic "de" to his name. He was received by Parisian salon society and into the circle of writers who defined French romanticism, the *cénacle*, or symposium, that included Charles Nodier and Victor Hugo.

In 1832, as Balzac's reputation was rising, he received a letter from a female admirer who identified herself only as "l'étrangère"—"the stranger." The following year in Geneva he met the woman, Madame Hanska, the wife of a wealthy Polish count. The two of them engaged in a love affair that spanned eighteen years, most of it carried out in correspondence. In 1833 Balzac signed a contract for his novel cycle, which was named *La Comédie humaine* in 1841. For twenty years he worked tirelessly at this project, writing fourteen to eighteen hours a day, drinking large amounts of specially blended Parisian coffee as he wrote. It is said that he slept only in the evenings and wrote from midnight until the next afternoon. He was almost always in financial trouble, and there is speculation that he produced as much work as he did to settle his debts. Balzac spent most of his time in Paris, but also often stayed in Saché, near Tours. In his later years he lived for much of the time in his villa in Sèvres. Despite his devotion to writing, Balzac had time for other interests: he enjoyed painting, loved to eat and drink, was an avid collector of bric-a-brac, had a taste for luxuries, and had numerous affairs. In 1841 Madame Haska's husband died, but she refused to remarry for nine years, perhaps because she knew of Balzac's financial situation and his constant attempt to relieve himself of his debts. Then on 14 March 1850 she and Balzac married. Balzac was seriously ill at the time, but he and Hanska undertook the arduous two-month-long journey from the Ukraine to Paris. When they arrived at the Paris house Balzac had meticulously furnished for his bride, the door was locked, the servant had gone mad, and the house was in complete disarray. Balzac died three months later, on August 18, 1850.

## MAJOR WORKS

From 1822 until his death in 1850, Balzac produced a vast body of work, including ninety-two novels and novellas, numerous short stories, essays, journalistic pieces, and a few plays. He also revised earlier works and republished them, so many of his novels appeared under several titles. Balzac's great achievement is his novel series, *La Comédie humaine*, a collection of around one hundred linked stories and novels that reflect the French society of the time, portraying in precise detail more than two thousand characters from every class and profession. The tales take place in a variety of settings, and characters reappear in multiple stories. Balzac wrote the works that were eventually to be included in the collection as early as 1829, but it was not until 1833 that he conceived of the idea of linking together his novels, and the first edition of the multivolume work was released in 1841. The works in the collection are divided under five headings: *Scènes de la vie privée* (*Scenes from Private Life*), *Scènes de la vie de campagne* (*Scenes from Country Life*), *Scènes de la vie parisienne* (*Scenes from Parisian Life*), *Scènes de la vie militaire* (*Scenes from Military Life*), *Scènes de la vie politique* (*Scenes from Political Life*), *Scènes de la vie de province* (*Scenes from Provincial Life*), and *Études philosophiques* (*Philosophical Studies*). Each of these divisions contains three or more novels and sometimes include shorter pieces. Some of the divisions also include trilogies or multipart novels, making the entire series an intricate web of stories that are interconnected on various levels.

Because so many of them were composed in haste, many of the novels in *La Comédie humaine* display minor imperfections and careless writing. However, despite the faults of the works, which also include a tendency toward moralizing and melodrama, they showcase the author's originality, great powers of observation, and vivid imagination. Perhaps the best known work in *La Comédie humaine* is *Le père Goriot* (1833), about law student Eugène Rastignac from the provinces who tries to claw his way to success in nineteenth-century Paris. The novel includes elements of love, money, adventure, and intrigue, but while it has romantic themes and concerns, the portrait it paints of Parisian society and human nature mark it as an early work of historical realism. Another early and important work that shows Balzac marrying the elements of romanticism and realism is the novella *La peau de chagrin* (1831; *The Magic Skin* or *The Wild Ass's Skin*), about a depressed young man who acquires a talisman that will grant him his wishes—at a price. The trilogy *Illusions perdues* (1837; *Lost Illusions*), about a young poet who tries desperately to make a name for himself in Paris, is a brilliantly realistic and boldly satirical portrait of provincial manners and aristocratic life and shows how Balzac disregarded the formal limitations of the novel by producing novels within novels within novels. Other im-

portant works in *La Comédie humaine* include *La cousine Bette* (1847-48; *Cousin Bette*) about a noble family that is destroyed by sexuality, and *Eugénie Grandet* (1834), about a young woman's emotional awakening against a backdrop of provincial oppression. In these and many other works, Balzac represents women as no French writer had done before—realistically and with sympathy. Balzac uses tragedy, social history, black humor, and satire to uncover the complex dynamics of family life. Other thematic concerns that have been examined are Balzac's exploration of alternate sexualities—dealing with homosexuality and homoeroticism in a thoughtful manner, without sensationalism or scandal—his interest in historical narrative and accuracy, his emphasis on the value of material objects, his use of language and writing as material presence in his texts, and his interest in theatre as a metaphor for life. In most of Balzac's novels the landscape is Paris, with its old aristocracy, new financial wealth, middle-class trade, professionals, servants, young intellectuals, clerks, prostitutes, criminals, and others. But the author also sets some of his stories in the country and provinces so that he offers in his stories a realistic and penetrating portrait of all segments of French life in the first half of the nineteenth century.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Balzac enjoyed renown and critical acclaim during his lifetime, and his reputation has not diminished since his death. In the nineteenth century the author was praised by such literary figures as George Saintsbury and Charles Baudelaire, who stressed his profound powers of imagination in addition to his acute powers of observation. Nineteenth-century literary historians concerned themselves with the relation between the life of the author and his fiction. In the early twentieth century, critics were interested in the question of Balzac's status as the father of the modern realism, his themes of death and family, the workings of the novelist's imagination, and his place in European literature. Those scholars noted how Balzac influenced later generations of novelists, including Marcel Proust, Gustave Flaubert, and Emile Zola. Balzac scholars in the latter part of the twentieth century and onwards have taken up a number of new issues, and Balzac has proved to be a useful exemplar for Marxist criticism as well as for semiotics and narrative analysis. Because of the close attention Balzac paid to his craft as well as to his readers, critics have found the relationship between author, text, reader, and meaning in his novels a rich area of study. Scholars have explored his various narrative techniques and voices and his use of recurring narrators in multiple stories. They have also examined the use of interconnected plots, characters, and themes in the works that make up *La Comédie humaine*.

Balzac's reputation today rests on *La Comédie humaine*. His other works, including essays, philosophical medi-

tations, and plays, are infrequently read or studied. Balzac's voluminous correspondence has been published and offers insight into his personal life and philosophical views. Balzac's plays, which he wrote solely for money, are dismissed as being of inferior quality.

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Le dernier Chouan; ou, La Bretagne en 1800* [*The Chouans*] (novel) 1829; also published as *Les Chouans: ou, La Bretagne en 1799*, 1834
- Physiologie du mariage; ou, Meditations de philosophie éclectique sur le bonheur et le malheur conjugal* [*Physiology of Marriage*] (novel) 1830
- Scènes de la vie privée* (short stories) 1830; enlarged edition published as *Scènes de la vie privée*, 1832
- La peau de chagrin* [*The Magic Skin*; also translated as *The Wild Ass's Skin*] (novel) 1831
- Romans et contes philosophiques* (novel and short stories) 1831
- \**Les célibataires* (novella) 1832; published in *Scènes de la vie privée* [enlarged edition]; also published as *Le curé de Tours* in *Les célibataires*, 1858 [*The Abbé; Biroteau* (*Le Curé de Tours*), 1895-98]
- Les cent contes drôlatiques: Colligez-ès abbayes de Touraine et mis en lumière par le sieur de Balzac, pour l'esbattement des Pantagruelistes et non aultres, premier dixain* (short stories) 1832; *deuxième dixain*, 1833; *troisième dixain*, 1837
- Notice biographique sur Louis Lambert* [*Louis Lambert*] (novel) 1832; published in *Les nouveaux contes philosophiques*; also published in revised form as *Histoire intellectuelle de Louis Lambert* in *Le livre mystique*, 1835
- Les nouveaux contes philosophiques* (novel and short stories) 1832
- Le médecin de campagne* [*The Country Doctor*] (novel) 1833
- Études de mœurs au XIXe siècle*. 12 vols. (novels, novellas, and short stories) 1834-37
- Eugénie Grandet* [*Eugenia Grandet*; or, *The Miser's Daughter: A Tale of Everyday Life in the Nineteenth Century*] (novel) 1834; published in *Études de mœurs au XIXe siècle*
- Histoire des treize* [*The Thirteen*] (novellas) 1834-35; published in *Études de mœurs au XIXe siècle*
- La recherche de l'absolu* [*Balthazar*; or, *Science and Love*; also translated as *The Quest of the Absolute*] (novel) 1834; published in *Études de mœurs au XIXe siècle*; also published as *Balthazar Claës*; or, *La recherche de l'absolu*, 1839
- Le livre mystique* (novels and short stories) 1835
- Le père Goriot: Histoire parisienne* [*Daddy Goriot*; or, *Unrequited Affection*; also translated as *Old Goriot*] (novel) 1835
- Séraphita* [*Séraphita*] (novel) 1835; published in *Le livre mystique*



*Le lys dans la vallée* [*The Lily of the Valley*] (novel) 1836

†*Les deux poètes* (novella) 1837; published in *Études de moeurs au XIXe siècle*

*La vieille fille* (novel) 1837; published in *Études de moeurs au XIXe siècle*

*Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau, parfumeur* [*History of the Grandeur and Downfall of César Birotteau*; also translated as *The Rise and Fall of César Birotteau*] (novel) 1838

*Béatrix; ou, Les amours insert 1 space forcés* [*Béatrix*] (novel) 1839

†*Un grand homme de province à Paris* [*A Great Man of the Provinces in Paris*] (novella) 1839

*La Comédie humaine*. 16 vols. [*La Comédie humaine*] (novels, novellas, and short stories) 1842-46; vol. 17, 1848; vols. 18-20, 1855

*La femme de trente ans* [*A Woman of Thirty*] (novel) 1842; published in *La Comédie humaine*

*Illusions perdues* [*Lost Illusions*] (novel) 1842-48; published in *La Comédie humaine*

*Ursule Mirouët* [*Ursula*] (novel) 1842

†*Ève et David* (novella) 1843; published in *La Comédie humaine*; also published as *Les souffrances de l'inventeur* in *Oeuvres complètes de H. de Balzac: Édition définitive*, 1879

*Honorine* [*Honorine*] (novella) 1844

*Les trois amoureux* [*Modeste Mignon*] (novel) 1844; also published as *Modeste Mignon; ou, Les trois amoureux*, 1844

‡*Les parents pauvres*. 12 vols. (novels) 1847-48

*Théâtre* [first publication] (plays) 1853

*Oeuvres complètes de H. de Balzac*. 20 vols. (novels, novellas, short stories, and plays) 1855-63

*Les célibataires* (novellas) 1858

*Pierrette* [*Pierrette*] (novella) 1858; published in *Les célibataires*

*La Rabouilleuse* [*A Bachelor's Establishment*] (novella) 1858; published in *Les célibataires*

*Les paysans* [completed by Madame Hanska; *The Peasantry*] (novel) 1863; published in *Oeuvres complètes de H. de Balzac*

*Oeuvres complètes de H. de Balzac: Édition définitive*. 26 vols. (novels, novellas, short stories, plays, letters, and essays) 1869-1906

*Balzac's Contes Drôlatiques: Droll Stories Collected from the Abbays of Touraine* (short stories) 1874

*Correspondance de H. de Balzac, 1819-1850* [*The Correspondence of Honoré de Balzac*] (letters) 1876

*Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* [*A Harlot's Progress*; also translated as *Splendors and Miseries of a Courtesan*] (novel) 1879; published in *Oeuvres complètes de H. de Balzac: Édition définitive*

*Comédie humaine*. 40 vols. (novels, novellas, and short stories) 1895-98

*Honoré de Balzac: Letters to Madame Hanska, Born Countess Rzewuska, Afterwards Madame Honoré de Balzac, 1833-1846* (letters) 1900

*The Dramatic Works of Honoré de Balzac* (plays) 1901

*The Love Letters of Honoré de Balzac: 1833-1842* (letters) 1901

*Oeuvres complètes de Honoré de Balzac*. 40 vols. (novels, novellas, short stories, plays, letters, and essays) 1912-40

\**Les célibataires*, the title of Balzac's 1832 novella, is also the title of his collection of novellas published in 1858. The novella appeared in the collection under the title *Le curé de Tours*.

†These works were collectively published as *Illusion perdues* in *La Comédie humaine*, 1842-55.

‡This collection includes the novels *La cousine Bette: Où la passion va-t-elle se nicher?* (also published as *La causine Bette: Le Père prodigue*), translated as *Cousin Bette*, 1888; and *Le cousin Pons* (also published as *Le cousin Pons: Les Deux Musiciens*), translated as *Cousin Pons*, 1880.

## CRITICISM

Lucienne Frappier-Mazur (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: Frappier-Mazur, Lucienne. "Balzac's Metaphors." In *Critical Essays on Honoré de Balzac*, edited by Martin Kanes, pp. 187-91. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall and Co., 1990.

[In the following excerpt from an essay originally published in 1976, Frappier-Mazur argues that Balzac's use of metaphor elaborates on human identity and character and attempts to create an eternal human image in a specific historical moment.]

Every day sees the publication of a new study of metaphor.<sup>1</sup> Any theoretical conclusion can represent only a step in present-day research.<sup>2</sup>

At least we now know more about the possible relationships between image and fictional form. We also see more clearly the various mental mechanisms that underpin metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, and that determine their appearance, their superposition, and their connections, whether they refer to the cultural code, to their context, or to an extralinguistic referent.

An important theoretical consequence results from this. Thanks to the explanatory function of the image, its all-encompassing development, and the recurrence of the same categories in the novel, our study confirms the fact that many metaphors of our discourse belong to the language of psychoanalysis; more generally, it confirms the identical nature of associative mechanisms that come into play in these two modes of expression. We have seen that associations of similarity, contiguity, and inclusion, and the processes of displacement and of condensation that they entail, are common to the internal structure of the image in texts as well as dreams. Meta-

phors of money and of food, which refer to a physiological domain, illustrate this phenomenon to the point of self-evidence, by bringing together the very categories that the unconscious associates and identifies: money-phallus, food-sexuality, and others. The sado-masochistic pairing is continued in the complementarity of the weapon and the wound. These associations are not unique to Balzac, nor indeed to literature. They can be found in other systems of representation such as mythology or the visual arts.

Another omnipresent factor, exceptionally developed in Balzac even outside the physiological domain, contributes to tightening the links between the metaphoric text and the psychoanalytical point of view: this is the theory of unitary energy that is expressed throughout the *Comédie humaine*. Most of the categories of images that we have studied end up by representing that centralizing energy and its ramifications in Thought. The monetary metaphor analyzes in detail the quantitative character of that energy, but the same economic point of view also pervades the other categories. Balzac did not invent this theory. It has ancient and composite sources, as Moïse Le Yaouanc has shown, and it was defended by the greatest names in contemporary medicine.<sup>3</sup> But the *Comédie humaine* provides an interpretation and demonstration that gives Balzac a place among the precursors of the Freudian conception of psychic energy. The conjunction with psychoanalysis corresponds to an internal principle of Balzac's work that goes beyond the domain of the image.

The expression of the quantitative point of view endows the problem of metaphor in the *Comédie humaine* with certain particularities. First of all, we wonder if the image can contribute to the elaboration of character as a definite identity. The response varies according to the categories. The multiple images for which the name of a character serves as a point of encounter carry semantic features that, drawn together, do not constitute a truly integrated totality. To this it is now possible to add that character is seen, at least through the image, as the locus of a conflict or of an exchange of energy. Is this always the case? Among the categories studied in this book, only the theatrical metaphor approaches the question of self-consciousness—without resolving it—since it shows the subject to be uncertain of his own identity and of the nature of truth. The metaphor of gambling, which presupposes the identification between character and real individual, is deflected towards an “energetical” interpretation. And yet, the situation is different in categories we have not studied here. The larger part of the religious metaphor, that of mystical and erotic experience, is devoted to the birth of awareness and to the establishment (or loss) of the self. Other categories gravitate, entirely or in part, around the question of the identity of the subject.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the ensemble of the metaphorical text assigns equal importance to the quan-

titative and qualitative aspects of personality. But the economic point of view almost entirely monopolizes the domain of social and physiological metaphors, because the latter lends itself to such a monopoly, and because that corresponds to Balzac's overall undertaking.

In the second place, the unitary principle that governs Balzac's world also crystallizes a tension inherent in the implementation of metaphor in the *Comédie humaine*. On the one hand, the metaphorical procedure is atemporal, at least traditionally so, and its fundamental categories use language as a means of creating an image of eternal man: from this point of view, the conception of a quantifiable and centralizing energy, whose operations are described by the metaphor, refers us to the idea of an immutable human nature. On the other hand, many of the metaphors describe a society determined by the historical moment to which it belongs: certain critics establish an absolute interdependency between the theme of the depletion of strength implied by the unitary theory and the type of society that Balzac undertook to describe. Pierre Barbéris agrees with the remark of one of Balzac's contemporaries, according to whom “the electrical and galvanic qualities in the author of *La Peau de chagrin* can be explained by society, by its absurd and crazy pace.” And he finds the explanation of the “self-destructive life force” in the then-current state of society.<sup>5</sup>

To a certain extent, the study of social and physiological metaphors confirms this point of view, without allowing us to consider the universe of the *Comédie humaine* as a simple replica of contemporary reality, which, in fact, Barbéris does not claim. It is difficult to assert, moreover, that under the July Monarchy the acquisitive bourgeois property owner and the lazy or ambitious aristocrat really burned more energy than the serf attached to the soil (as Balzac would say) in the medieval system of production. The same remark must be made apropos of a Rastignac or of a Mme Camusot straining toward success, as compared to their literary ancestors who are victims of passion, and this in spite of Balzac's affirmations to the contrary. Further-more, Balzac himself does not always limit to the new society the broader opposition that, coming back to “eternal” mankind, he establishes between the social relations that consume and the withdrawn life that preserves. In both cases, his work explains this contrast by the thesis of the destructive superiority of desire over the act.

That being said, it is correct to see a correlation between contemporary upheavals and the “self-destructive life force” of the Balzacian creature—which doesn't mean that Racine's heroes or those of *La Princesse de Clèves* are not also consumed with passion. There is no need to postulate a perfect referential correspondence between the universe of the *Comédie humaine* and the society of 1830. But the analysis in terms of energy co-

incides with a conception of man inscribed in History, in its encounter with the cannibalistically desirous Balzac. It is true that the theory of the harmful consequences of intellectual and affective expenditure—of the idea that kills—was adopted by contemporary medicine. Its widespread acceptance at the time had several causes. One of them was certainly the progress of materialistic thought during the preceding two centuries. But the metaphorical Balzacian text offers us a second one, in the connection it establishes between the emergence of money—the generalized equivalent that enormously extends the range of desire—and the supremacy of desire over the act as a consumer of energy. In this way, the metaphor presents that *type* of economy in which notions of quantification and autodestructive desire dominate as the product of the *types* of forces that characterize that period. That does not imply that the “energetical” hypothesis is less appropriate in other periods: even if it is ultimately impossible to define the nature of energy, it represents an irreducible substratum. But it undergoes a unique development in the *Comédie humaine*, because its action, which is creative as well as destructive, can reflect the functioning of money and speculation.

But this only partially clarifies the ambiguous position of the metaphor between eternal man and historical man. It is possible to make it somewhat more precise by examining more closely the meaning of the image, according to the domains that are compared. In the description of social struggle, the image establishes an obvious correlation between the power relationships and the period in which they are exercised. This point can be verified even in the group of cannibalistic metaphors devoted to money, and in spite of its strongly physiological character. We have studied in detail, in connection with the stereotypes of social situations, the process of “temporalization” that affects the relationship of the vehicle to the tenor. This process is the same in the other categories, but it has a less-critical function to the extent that other categories escape more easily from the rigidity of the stereotype. This correlation, however, expressed by the image, between the “energetical” point of view and the historical moment, does not automatically assign to the society the responsibility for the depletion of strength. We have seen, on the contrary, that the metaphor tends sometimes to make “human nature” the primary cause of the social situation, and that this point of view does not contradict certain political views expressed by Balzac. In the same way, his historical vision and his mythology are extensions of each other.

In addition, there is no contradiction between generalizing metaphorical strategy and the tenor of the metaphor, when the metaphor shows the mechanism of exchange and of combustion directly at work in inter- and intra-subjective relationships. On the contrary, both come to-

gether to trace the picture of a human nature in which the only determinations are biological, in which the passions move in a closed space outside of time: “Passion is humanity,” said Balzac. “Without it religion, history, the novel, and art would be useless.”<sup>6</sup>

To sum up, we find on the one hand whole groups of metaphors that do not distinguish the economy from the existence of the historical moment, but that at the same time depend on an infrastructure that refers us to an eternal conception of man; on the other hand, we find no less important groups that refer directly to this archetypal vision of humanity. One might say that the theater, play, and the patriarchy illustrate the first case, and that physiological metaphors distribute themselves more or less evenly between the two.

As for the very important categories that are not considered in this study, and that endlessly reopen the question of self-consciousness, these introduce a different perspective. Placing themselves outside of historical contingencies, they contribute also to the definition of an atemporal being. But by expressing a qualitative point of view, they also show that this being carries within itself its own principle of development.

The ability to evolve thus conferred upon the subject at the very center of atemporal strategy has its equivalent, in all categories, in the semantic distance that Balzac cultivates between vehicle and tenor, the new meanings that he introduces revealing the same attempt to move beyond familiar references. There is no subversion in this undertaking, merely a desire for progress. Balzac does not anticipate Lautréamont.<sup>7</sup> In his case, every new relationship, once verbalized, becomes eternal.

For the modern reader, the metaphorical Balzacian text outlines with astonishing force the myths of a historical period, certain of which are still our own; it sheds light on truths that seem fundamental; it sometimes sketches out new relationships. If it reflects the tension between historical man and eternal man, it can also, as we have just indicated, sketch a synthesis between the two. There is nothing surprising in that, since Balzac dreamed of this synthesis in other contexts, not in the case of social man. In 1842, while asserting that society improves mankind, he still claims not to believe in social progress. But, as in 1832, he asserts his belief “in the progress of mankind over itself,” and he hopes for the emergence of “the total being.” He believes that man is “a finite creature, but one endowed with perfectible faculties,” thanks to the action of his *interior self*, which expresses itself through prodigious expenditures of *Will-power*—always a question of energy. The present is sombre, but Balzac does not abandon the hope that the evolutionist hypothesis implies. If thought kills, it also gives life. In other words, the development of man is not social, it is biological.

In Balzac's work, Being must eternally create itself. The metaphor defines human nature, deepens our understanding of it, and participates in its progress.

### Notes

- [Ed. note: The author analyzes a large number of metaphors in the *Comédie humaine*, which she classifies as those of Games (Theater and Gambling), Patriarchy (Primitive Man, Criminal-Victim-Executioner, Courtesan, King-Master-Slave, Army, Church, Law, Money), and The Human Body (Cannibalism and Nutrition, Internal and Organic Sensations, Illness, Weapons and Wounds). Her terms *comparé* and *comparant* correspond roughly to the English terms "tenor" and "vehicle."]
- I must cite the book by Paul Ricoeur, *La Métaphore vive* (The living metaphor) (Paris: Seuil, 1975), which appeared too late for consultation.
- By Cabanis and Broussais among others. The influence of the latter on Balzac has been noted in my discussion of metaphors of illness. See M. Le Yaouanc, *Nosographie de l'humanité balzacienne* (The nosography of Balzac's characters) (Paris: Maloine, 1959), 35-61, 153-75.
- One group of plant and aquatic metaphors, according to our preliminary analyses, evokes, as do certain religious metaphors, the pantheistic fusion of the self. On the other hand, the metaphor of light closely identifies light and energy. See our article "Balzac et les images reparaissantes: Lumière et flamme dans *La Comédie humaine*," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, January-March 1966, 45-80.
- Pierre Barbéris, *Balzac. Une Mythologie réaliste* (Balzac, a realistic mythology) (Paris: Larousse, 1971), 279-80.
- Avant-Propos* of 1842, 1, 16.
- [Ed. note: The reference is to a later nineteenth-century poet, precursor of the surrealists.]

### James Mileham (essay date 1979)

SOURCE: Mileham, James. "A Web of Conspiracy: Structure and Metaphor in Balzac's Novels." *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1979): 523-32.

[In the following essay, Mileham analyzes the complex, weblike structures of the motif of conspiracy as it is developed in Balzac's novels, discussing how the author uses the metaphor of fabric to articulate this theme.]

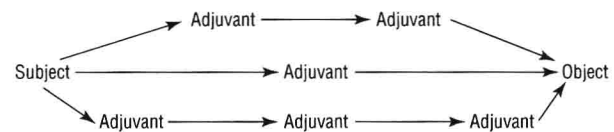
One of Balzac's most powerful and ubiquitous myths is that of the conspiracy.<sup>1</sup> Here, a malevolent leader motivates a group of individuals who attack a victim, de-

stroying him. As in contemporary organized crime, the kingpin of these conspiracies only rarely comes in contact with his victim. A middleman, therefore, is necessary to transform malevolence into malfeasance. Jacques Collin sends Asie, Europe, and Esther to divest Nucingen of a million francs. Corentin sends Marie de Verneuil to ensnare Montauran, and thereby kills him. Cérizet sends Théodose de La Peyrade to marry Céleste Colleville in order to despoil her of part of her dowry.<sup>2</sup> Useful in describing this indirect relationship of persecutor to persecuted is the taxonomy proposed by A.-J. Greimas in his *Sémantique Structurale*.<sup>3</sup>

In Greimas' system, a *Subject* may be said to influence an *Adjuvant* (by definition, one who acts in the interest of the Subject) to act upon an *Object*, the conspiracy's victim. The arrows below represent direction of influence<sup>4</sup>:

Subject → Adjuvant → Object

This three-part configuration is the building block of the Balzacian conspiracy, but it never occurs in its simple form. The conspiracy is plural as well as indirect. While Subject and Object remain singular, Adjuvants are invariably multiplied, both horizontally and vertically. As an example:



By horizontal proliferation of Adjuvants (Adjuvants influencing *other* Adjuvants who act upon the Object), the Subject is able to maintain an even greater separation between himself and his Object.<sup>5</sup> Vertical proliferation (the Subject sets more than one Adjuvant into action) multiplies the conspiracy's force.<sup>6</sup> As the resulting complexity of interconnecting lines of influence resembles a web, it is not surprising that Balzac often employs the time-honored fabric metaphor to represent his conspiracies.<sup>7</sup>

The individual arrows on the above schema are likewise often represented by filament metaphors. A Subject thus enlaces an Adjuvant, and an Adjuvant entwines either another Adjuvant or the Object. In *César Birotteau*, for example, du Tillet obtains control over Roguin (whom he will employ to precipitate César's ruin). He creates this Subject-Adjuvant relationship with Roguin by reestablishing him financially. Their relationship is represented as a rope: "C'était une corde à portée de main pour un homme qui se noyait, et Roguin ne s'aperçut pas que [du Tillet] la lui passait autour du cou" (CB., 373). In *Les Petits Bourgeois*, Cérizet has