



Balzac and His Double, Henry Miller

## Balzac and His Double

IN HIS book on St. Francis of Assisi, Chesterton endeavors to put his finger on the weakness of that sect whose members styled themselves “the true sons of St. Francis”—the Fraticelli—and whose goal it was to carry out the complete program of St. Francis.

“What was the matter with these people,” writes Chesterton, “was that they were mystics; mystics and nothing else but mystics; mystics and not Christians; mystics and not men. They rotted away because, in the most exact sense, they would not listen to reason.

And St. Francis, however wild and romantic his gyrations, always hung on to reason by one invisible and indestructible hair.”

In the History of Magic by Eliphas Levi we have a similar indictment of the mystics; they are condemned and vituperated because they are extremists.

In his autobiographical study called Louis Lambert, Balzac, who was a believer in the esoteric doctrine—too catholic a spirit to be a Catholic—gives us a picture of the conflict between the angel in man and the flesh which throws a different light upon the dangers which are supposed to attend the mystic in his unbridled desire for union with the infinite all.

Who was Louis Lambert? He was not only, as the story relates, le copain, the chum, the alter ego, he was Balzac’s own real self, the angelic self which was killed in the struggle with the world.

At that moment in Louis Lambert’s life when, as Balzac says, he perceived in him “the struggle of the mind reacting on itself,” he adds—“at this stage of weakness and strength, of childish grace and superhuman powers, Louis Lambert is the creature who, more than any other, gave me a poetical and truthful image of the being we call an angel.”

When in his fifteenth year he parts from his double at the College of Vendôme, he says: "You will live, but I shall die. If I can, I will come back to you." In the story he does come back, to find Louis mad, but in life he never came back.

In taking leave of himself in this strangely prophetic manner it is interesting to note that Balzac immediately proceeds to give a physical description of his double, an exact description, including Louis' height, adding significantly: "he grew no more!"

In the midst of his narrative, in an interlude of two short paragraphs wherein he makes a transition from the known life of his double to the subsequent and imagined life of the mystic who rotted away in the flesh, Balzac remarks that in describing Louis' boyhood he is depicting "the unknown life to which I owe the only happy hours, the only pleasant memories, of my early days. Excepting these two years I have had nothing but annoyances and weariness."

The book is an attempt on Balzac's part to justify himself not only to the world, but to himself. It is a study of the ordeal and crucifixion of a genius, a defense of the real Balzac whom the world refused to acknowledge.

It is an outcry against the critics for failing to discern in the novelist the more important attribute; of thinker, visionary, prophet. (Referring to Louis Lambert he says, "I think we may deplore in him a genius equal to Pascal, Lavoisier or Laplace.")

And elsewhere in the book: "his philosophical speculations ought undoubtedly to gain him recognition as one of the great thinkers who have appeared at wide intervals among men to reveal to them the bare skeleton of some science to come. . . .") But it was above all the failure to detect "the angel" which reduced Balzac to despair and moved him to write this harrowing study of frustration.

In the story it is the angel, which, at the price of reason and sanity, is finally liberated; but in life it is the angel which is destroyed in order

that the artist may triumph. What Chesterton said of St. Francis was also true of Balzac—he too had the ability to hang on to reason by that one invisible and indestructible hair. But was it worth it?

If Louis Lambert may be said to succumb to madness—and even this admission is questionable, if one reads Balzac's judgment carefully—he, Balzac, the man of indomitable courage and will, certainly succumbed to a worse fate.

He succumbed to fame and glory. The soaring ambitions of genius brought him nothing but trials and tribulations, brought him to the grave prematurely, at the very moment when he had hoped to sit back and reap the harvest of his tremendous labors.

Even the great love, to which he struggled for seventeen years to give a solid, secure pediment, was snatched from him. He had given her in marriage the living cadaver of himself.

Just as Seraphita was written for Madame Hanska, his ideal love, so Louis Lambert was written for his "Dilecta," Madame de Bemy, who had been to him not only a devoted mistress, but a mother as well, for Balzac had never known a mother's love.

Da Vinci had two mothers; Goethe had the best mother a genius could possibly have; but Balzac was deprived of an affection and tenderness which he needed possibly more than either Goethe or da Vinci.

His life at the College of Vendôme was a nightmare. Reserved, secretive, oversensitive, precocious, misunderstood by masters and pupils alike, he became indifferent to the world about and was forced to retire into himself—to commune with the angels. This sense of loneliness developed with the years, despite the fame and renown which he tasted early in his career.

In his letters he refers frequently to a secret which no one, not even Madame Hanska, to whom he confesses this on occasion, will ever penetrate.

At the very threshold of his career, in the year 1828, he writes that there are people who die without the doctor's ever being able to say what it was that carried them off. The lack of maternal tenderness, the estrangement, the hatred which was shown him by his mother, left an indelible mark upon him.

His incarceration in the College of Vendôme only served to stimulate the already premature development of his spiritual nature; the man lagged behind. In fact, the man in him was never fully realized.

Balzac, throughout his life, not only felt himself to be an exile and a prisoner, but deliberately made his life a prison, in order to punish himself for a crime which he had never committed.

His dismal failure as a writer, throughout the years of apprenticeship when he signed false names to his work, testifies not only to the slow development common to great geniuses but points also to the powers of frustration born of his crippled affections.

In Louis Lambert Balzac gives us the genesis of a giant moth doomed to perish in a flame of light. To grasp the true significance of this study it should be borne in mind not only that the poet was murdered at school (where all the poets are murdered!) but that the date, June-July, 1832, given for this story, represents his thirty-third year! Long before the great financial disaster, which served him as an excuse to make himself a Martyr of Work, Balzac realized that he was destined for a Purgatorial existence.

In that harrowing letter which Louis Lambert writes from his miserable garret in Paris, Balzac gives the clue to his own secret hopes and disillusionment. "Compelled to live in himself alone," he writes, "having no one to share his subtle raptures, he may have hoped to solve the problem of his destiny by a life of ecstasy, adopting an almost vegetative attitude, like an anchorite of the early church, and abdicating the empire of the intellectual world."

This vegetative life which he was forbidden to enjoy Balzac had tasted as a boy; it was this normal desire for natural growth, for a growth which would have altered the whole tenor of his life, which might have permitted him to become a seer rather than a novelist, it was this hunger for the opportunity to permit his real self to flower, that militated against his early development as a writer. The real Balzac is absent from the first forty volumes; it is a ghost writing.

The real Balzac is still enwrapped in the chrysalis which he had spun about himself in the College of Vendôme. What a tragic, fateful moment it was when, as a boy of fourteen, Balzac was returned to his parents by the masters of the College as a walking somnambulist, an embryonic monster of thought suffering from a “congestion de lumière.”

Even when he throws himself into life, when outwardly he seems to be fulfilling the role of a young man who is in love, who is acquiring a vocation, who is studying life, the spell in which he had wrapped himself is so strong that he has no sense of his gifts, still less of his destiny, but struggles like a worm in its cocoon in order to liberate himself from his self-imposed prison.

The young man who makes his appearance in the world, who conquers by a single glance of his magnetic eye, is simply the ghost which, by sheer force of will, succeeds in bursting the wrappings of a dormant soul. In Louis Lambert Balzac depicts himself as the dreamer who succeeds in detaching himself from his body.

In seeking to violate the laws of nature his triumph is nullified, because, as he is later to know from experience, in order to overcome the world it is first necessary to accept it. As an artist he does overcome the world, by making it “transparent,” but to become the artist he had first to understand the submission of the will.

The submission or surrender of the artist is only the first step in the path of renunciation. That Balzac realized the nature of the conflict in

himself is evident from the work which follows shortly after Louis Lambert—Seraphita.

Between the themes of these two books there is a void which can be likened to a desert in which psychologically, or spiritually, the whole of Balzac's life is passed. Unlike the saints and mystics whom he revered, Balzac never returned from the desert. His immense production is simply a monologue, a wilderness of the soul's anguish in which the wanderer is lost.

It was only when the artist in him awakened, when he had accepted his duality, understood his role, that Balzac, by a prodigious metamorphosis, succeeded in making the world itself into a chrysalis and, from the depths of his imagination, gathers the wings which will permit him to fly beyond the world while remaining ever securely imprisoned in it.

When he says of Louis Lambert that "the point to which most thinkers reach at last was to him the starting point whence his brain was to set out one day in search of new worlds of knowledge," did he not mean that in his stupendous vegetative slumber he had exhausted the whole world of the intellect, that though still a boy, he nevertheless stood on the frontier of a new way of life?

And that as a man he was condemned to be a prisoner of the age in which he was born? What is the meaning of the words which follow on the above? "Though as yet he [Louis Lambert] knew it not, he had made for himself the most exacting life possible, and the most insatiably greedy.

Merely to live, was he not compelled to be perpetually casting nutriment into the gulf he had opened in himself?" What gulf? Had he already franchised the barriers of his living tomb?

All his life Balzac was promising to bring forth an essay on "les forces humaines." All his life he struggles to deliver the secret of that imaginary document which Louis Lambert wrote at college—*Traité sur*

la Volonté—and which was destroyed by the ignorant and insensitive headmaster.

In *La Peau de Chagrin* (wherein we also have glimpses of his boyhood) he again gives expression to his obsession when he writes that he believed he had a great thought to express, a system to establish, a science to elucidate.

Of the visions which he had at school he says that they gave to his eyes the faculty of seeing the intimate, the quintessential nature of things. Through them his heart was prepared “pour les magies.”

And then he adds, as a final tribute to the effect of these sublime visions: “they inscribed in my brain a book wherein I could read what I had to express; they gave to my lips the power of spontaneous utterance.” “From the very beginning,” says Ernst-Robert Curtius, “Balzac’s life is dominated by a mystic star, by a ray of light emanating from the higher worlds.”

It is with this vision of greater things, this vision of a life as yet unknown to us, that Balzac progresses through the world, devouring everything in sight, creating a vast panorama peopled with his own figures, and yet eternally dissatisfied, because nothing the earth had to offer could compensate for that life which he was denied.

The *Treatise on the Will*, which is symbolically destroyed by the ignorant headmaster, never materializes into the promised essay “sur les forces humaines,” unless, as one well might, we consider *La Comédie Humaine* itself as an elaborate elucidation of the subject.

The embryonic Balzac, who eventually became a Colossus, was a living travesty of the Will. In *Seraphita* he reveals the true function of the Will: it is the desire to rise, to go beyond the limits of the self, to expand in the Infinite Self.

Balzac, the writer, deflected his great will in order to subjugate the world. Both the Poet and the Pythagoras in him were doomed: the



Colossus was engulfed in the sands of his own creation. The whole vast edifice of his work appears, ultimately, like a Gargantuan effort to bury the secret which gnawed at his vitals.

At the age of twenty-three, still inchoate, still paralyzed, though aware of the possession of a tremendous force, he writes to his “Dilecta” concerning the doctrines of Leibnitz, arrested by the thought that everything in the world, organic and inorganic, is possessed with life. He avers that even marble may be said to have ideas—“extraordinarily confused, however.” He confides that he too would like to obtain “solidity, durability, immobility.”

It was from this crude block of marble, Curtius writes, that the gigantic edifice of *La Comédie Humaine* had to be hewn. This is tantamount to saying that it was created out of the will rather than the flame. For Balzac the Will was supreme—“le roi des fluides,” as he put it. It was the Will which enabled him to bridge the gulf which had opened in himself and into which he flung his great work.

His whole life was a contradiction of his philosophy: it was the most stupid, aborted life that any intelligent man ever lived. What a strange tribute it is that he makes to his double in Louis Lambert!

After making a cryptic acknowledgment of his indebtedness to his alter ego, he says: “and this is not all I have borrowed from him . . . this present volume is intended as a modest monument, a broken column, to commemorate the life of the man who bequeathed to me all he had to leave—his thoughts.” In *Seraphita* he gives us his opinion of the grand edifice which he created. “Books are human actions in death,” he says.

From this solid, durable, unshakeable edifice, from the crude block of marble out of which his great work was fashioned, the real Balzac never emerged. Of the three great stages on the mystic path he knew only the first two, and these in reverse order—*la vie purgative* et *la vie illuminative*. *La vie unitive*, which is the grand theme pervading his works, he never knew.

Like Pythagoras he knew the secret of number: like Virgil he foresaw a world to come; like Dante he proclaimed the inner doctrine, and in the book which is least known of all his work, *Seraphita*, he gave us this doctrine, and there it lies buried.

His intuition was cosmic, his will was titan-like, his energy inexhaustible, his nature truly protean, and yet he was unable to emancipate himself. The study of society and the psychology of the individual, which form the material of the novel in European literature, served to create the illusory world of facts and things which dominate the neurotic life that began with the 19th century and is now reaching its end in the drama of schizophrenia.

At the back of it is the Will, reducing through the powers of analysis all life to ashes. Balzac was himself aware of the disease which is killing us. It is the mind which is poisoning us, he says somewhere. "La vie est un feu qu'il faut couvrir de cendres; penser, c'est ajouter la flamme au feu." Dostoievski gave expression to the conflict even more forcibly.

Indeed, it is with him that the novel comes to an end, for after him there are no longer any individuals to write about, nor is there any longer a society which may be said to possess a body.

Proust and Joyce epitomize the dissolution of our world in their great epics. With Lawrence the novel becomes a vehicle for the Apocalyptic visions which will occupy us for the next few hundred years, as our world fades out in blood and tears.

"Werther," says Balzac, "is a slave of desire; Louis Lambert was an enslaved soul." A tremendous admission, shattering, if Balzac is to be identified, as he intended, with his double. Despite the most gigantic efforts ever man made, the real Balzac did not grow an inch from the time he left his prison at Vendôme to enter the world. Adopting the Purgatorial life, after having experienced the joys and splendors of illumination, taking up his cross and nailing himself to it, he

nevertheless was refused the reward of blossoming into a miraculous rose.

He knew—he gave expression to it several times in his work—that the real miracle happens within, yet he persisted in looking for it without. His life was devoid of joy or hope; he is the symbol of the convict condemned to a life of hard labor.

At that stage of division wherein he detects the angel in Louis Lambert he erects the tombstone over his own grave. As Louis Lambert he sinks deeper and deeper into the world of Maya; as Balzac he sinks into the morass of the world of things, the world of desire which is inappeasable. Louis Lambert gives up the struggle with the world in order to commune with the angels, but unlike Swedenborg, he forgets to leave the door open. Balzac struggles with the world in order to down the angel in himself.

He rails and fumes against the world for its inability or unwillingness to understand and appreciate him, but the confusion he precipitated was of his own making. His life was as disordered, confused and chaotic as the bedeviled proofs of his manuscripts, the like of which the world has never seen, except in the work of the insane. He beclouded the real issue with a smoke screen of words; he fought like a madman to blind his own eyes to the path which he was ordained to follow.

The world has been kind and at the same time cruel to him, in the very measure of duality and antagonism which he created. It has accepted him as one of the greatest of human geniuses; it has remained ignorant of the real goal which he set himself. He wanted fame, glory, recognition: he received them. He wanted riches, possessions, power over men: he obtained all of these.

He wanted to create a world of his own: he did. But the true life which he secretly desired to live was denied him—because one cannot have one foot in one world and the other in another. He had not learned the lesson of Renunciation: he had renounced the world, not to abdicate, but to conquer.

In his moments of illumination he perceived the truth, but he was never able to live according to his vision. For him, as he permits Seraphita to say with blinding clarity, it is true that it was a Light such as kills the man who is not prepared to receive it.

Towards the end of the book he “comes back” to Louis and as he watches him with uncanny tenseness, waiting eagerly for a word to fall from his lips after the unbearable suspense of prolonged silence, what is it he puts in Louis’ mouth as the first utterance?

THE ANGELS ARE WHITE! The effect of this utterance, when the reader comes upon it in the natural course of the narrative, is indescribable. Even the illusion of being himself affected by these words is dissipated by the stark reality which Balzac gives them. It is like saying truth is truth!

THE ANGELS ARE WHITE—this is the utmost Balzac can think to say in his assumed madness, after days, weeks and months of standing at the mantelpiece rubbing one leg against the other and piercing with dead eyes the veils of the Infinite. The angels are white! It is madder than anything Nijinsky wrote in his diary.

It is pure madness, white as the light itself, and yet so thoroughly sane that it seems like a Euclidean statement of identity. It is the reduction of all his Pythagorean wisdom to an image which is hallucinating. Number, substance, weight, measure, motion—all are consumed here to give an image which is more meaningful than meaning itself.

In the limited illustrated edition of the book published by Dent, London, there is, in addition to the asinine preface by George Saintsbury, an etching of Louis inspired by this phrase. I mention it because I was astonished, after having read the story several times, to find on flipping the pages that the artist had portrayed Louis in a manner absolutely different from that which I had imagined from memory.

In my own mind I always saw Louis standing at the mantelpiece in a trance, but—looking like a horse! On re-reading Balzac's description of him, as he appeared at this moment, I find that my image is fairly correct.

But what strikes me now is that the person I really had in mind, Louis' double, as it were, is Nijinsky. And this is not really so strange as it may at first seem. For if ever there was a flesh and blood image of Balzac's extraordinary lunatic it is the dancer Nijinsky. He too left the earth while still alive, never to return again. He too became a horse equipped with chimerical wings.

The horse, let us not forget, even when he has no wings, flies. So too, every genius, when he is truly inspired, mounts the winged steed to write his name in the heavens. How often, in reading Nijinsky's Diary, have I thought of Mademoiselle de Villenoix's words! "Louis," says this guardian angel who never deserted her lover, "must no doubt appear to be mad, but he is not, if the term mad ought only to be used in speaking of those whose brain is for some unknown cause diseased, and who can show no reason in their actions.

Everything in my husband is perfectly balanced. He has succeeded in detaching himself from his body and discerns us under some other aspect—what it is, I know not. . . . To other men he seems insane; to me, living as I do in his mind, his ideas are quite lucid.

I follow the road his spirit travels; and though I do not know every turning, I can reach the goal with him." Wholly aside from the question of whether Louis Lambert was mad or not, aside from the question of what constitutes madness, which will always remain a mystery, the attitude preserved throughout by this guardian angel is in itself worthy of the deepest attention.

Perhaps, in depicting the devotion of this extraordinary woman, Balzac was stressing the great need for affection, understanding, sympathy and recognition which every artist demands and which Balzac more than most men stood in want of all his life.

In one of his letters, I believe it is, he says that he has known neither a spring nor a summer, but that he looked forward to enjoying a ripe autumn. He looked forward above all to a consummation of his labors through love.

Over and over again, in his writings, we have this announcement of a tremendous hope. Immediately he saw Mademoiselle de Villenoix Louis “discerned the angel within.” “His passion,” says Balzac, “became a gulf into which he threw everything.”

In his first letter to her, a letter doubtless very similar to the early ones which Balzac wrote Madame Hanska, Louis expressed himself thus: “. . . my life will be in your hands, for I love you; and to me, the hope of being loved is life!” And then, as Balzac must himself have felt when he was wooing Madame Hanska, Louis adds: “If you had rejected me, all was over for me.”

Here let me give a rapid summary of the narrative, as it is given in the book. . . .

Louis Lambert is the son of a poor tanner, an only child who is adored by his parents.\* The parents, being of modest means, are unable to pay the sum required to obtain a substitute for their son, as substitutes for the army at that time (the early nineteenth century) were scarce. The only means of evading conscription was to have Louis become a priest.

And so, at ten years of age, Louis is sent to his maternal uncle, a parish priest in a small town on the Loire, not far from Blois. In the second paragraph of his story Balzac launches into an account of Louis’ passion for books. He began, it would seem, at the age of five by reading the Old and the New Testaments. . . “and these two books, including so many books, had sealed his fate.”

During the school holidays Louis devours everything in sight, “feeding indiscriminately on religious works, history, philosophy and physics.” For lack of other material he often turns to the dictionaries. “The

analysis of a word, its physiognomy and history, would be to Lambert matter for long dreaming . . . What a fine book might be written of the life and adventures of a word!" Of the two words which Balzac singles out for mention, curiously, one is "true" and the other "flight."

In three years Louis Lambert had assimilated the contents of all that was worth reading in his uncle's library. His memory was prodigious. "He remembered with equal exactitude the ideas he had derived from reading, and those which had occurred to him in the course of meditation or conversation.

Indeed, he had every form of memory—for places, for names, for words, things and faces. He not only recalled any object at will, but he saw them in his mind, situated, lighted and colored as he had originally seen them . . .

He could remember, as he said, not merely the position of a sentence in the book where he had met with it, but the frame of mind he had been in at remote dates. . . ." Louis is depicted as one who "had transferred all his activities to thinking," as one who was drawn towards the mysteries, one fascinated by the abyss. He had a "taste for the things of heaven," a predilection, Balzac remarks, which was disastrous, if Louis' life is to be measured by ordinary standards.

After the Bible came the reading of Saint Theresa and Madame Guyon. "This line of study, this peculiar taste, elevated his heart, purified, ennobled it, gave him an appetite for the divine nature, and suggested to him the almost womanly refinement of feeling which is instinctive in great men. . . ."

At fourteen Louis leaves his uncle to enter the College of the Oratorians at Vendôme, where he was maintained at the expense of Madame de Staël who, forbidden to come within forty leagues of Paris, was in the habit of spending several months of her banishment on an estate near Vendôme.

Impressed by the boy's unusual powers of mind Madame de Staël hoped to save Louis from the necessity of serving either the Emperor or the Church. During the three years he spent at the College, however, Louis never heard a word from his benefactress. Madame de Staël, in fact, dies on the very day that Louis, who had set out on foot from Blois to see her, arrived in Paris.

The life at the College is like a miniature description of Hell. "The punishments originally invented by the Society of Jesus," says Balzac, "as alarming to the moral as to the physical man, were still in force in all the integrity of the original code." Visits by the parents were extremely infrequent, holidays away from the school were forbidden; once a pupil entered his prison he never left it until his studies were terminated.

The lack of physical comforts, the bad sanitation, the meager prison diet, the frequent beatings, the refined tortures inflicted by masters and pupils alike, the stupidity and bigotry of the life, the isolation, all tended to demoralize and devitalize any one with promise, and particularly a sensitive being, such as Louis Lambert.

Balzac describes himself as then being twelve years of age. What the effect of such a life must have been, for his sensitive soul, can best be understood by the description of his emotions upon hearing the announcement of Louis' arrival at the College.

"I can compare it with nothing but my first reading of Robinson Crusoe," he says. From the first he felt sympathy (sic!) with the boy whose temperament had some points of likeness to his own. "At last I was to have a companion in daydreams and meditations!" In this naked description of the split in his psyche Balzac reveals to us the true nature of his liberation. At last! Like a cry of desperation.\*

The physical description of Louis Lambert which Balzac gives at this point is remarkable for the resemblance to his own self. He speaks glowingly of "the prophetic brow," of the extraordinary eyes which bespoke the existence of a soul. Though he had not the ordinary



strength which permitted him to rival the others in sports, Louis was possessed of a mysterious power of will which he could summon on occasion and which was capable of defying the united strength of his comrades.

He speaks of the wealth of ideas, the poetry, that lay hidden in Louis' brain and heart, commenting on it in strangely revelatory fashion. "It was not till I was thirty years of age, till my experience was matured and condensed, till the flash of an intense illumination had thrown a fresh light upon it, that I was capable of understanding all the bearings of the phenomena which I witnessed at that early time."

The description of Louis' struggle to preserve a semblance of order, to respond to the petty routine of the institution, to show interest in his studies, or even fear or respect when threatened with punishment, is a remarkable transcription of Balzac's own struggle with chaos, discipline and convention. It is a description of the innate maladaptation of the man of genius, of his blindness and deafness to everything except what he intuitively knows will nourish him.

It is a picture of the anarchist who is later to become a martyr, or a tyrant, a portrait of the Will pure and naked. Even that irritating reproach which he puts in the mouth of the headmaster, the phrase which is forever startling Louis from his reveries, is significant since it is the tacit reproach which the world in its hatred and envy of the man of genius always makes: "You are doing nothing!"

Balzac takes pains to make it clear that whenever Louis was accused of doing nothing he was probably most active in his own right way. It was from these seeming spells of inertia that Balzac's brilliant and devastating ideas were born. Subsequently, in expanding on Louis' philosophical speculations, he elucidates this cogently.

There are two beings in us, he says—the Inner one, the Being of Action, and the External one, the Being of Reaction. The whole philosophy of duality enunciated through Louis Lambert is an effort on the part of Balzac, the artist, to establish a totality or acceptance of life. It is

Balzac's own dynamic, positive interpretation of what we know as Tao. It runs counter to the whole European trend of metaphysics, which is purely intellectual and idealistic, and ends in a cul de sac.

At any rate, it was the "Poet-and-Pythagoras," as he styles his twin self, who was crushed by the educational routine, "as gold is crushed into round coin under the press." They were an idle and incorrigible pair who could neither play ball, nor run races, nor walk on stilts.

"Aliens from the pleasures enjoyed by the others, we were outcasts, sitting forlorn under a tree in the playing-ground." "The eagle that needed the world to feed him," he adds, "was shut up between four narrow dirty walls. And thus Louis Lambert's life became 'an ideal life' in the strictest meaning of the words."

At eighteen, having lost his parents, Louis leaves college. He makes his home with his uncle who, having been turned out of his benefice, had come to settle at Blois. There Louis lives for some time, but consumed by a desire to complete his studies, he goes to Paris "to drink of science at its highest fount." The few thousand francs which he had inherited vanish during his three years in Paris.

At the age of twenty-three he returns to Blois, driven out "by sufferings to which the impecunious are exposed there." In a long letter to his uncle, written at intervals during his sojourn in Paris, Louis pours out his impressions and experiences. It is no doubt a transcript of Balzac's own experiences upon first coming to Paris.

Back in Blois, at the first house to which he is introduced by his uncle, Louis meets a Mademoiselle Pauline de Villenoix, a young and beautiful Jewess, the richest heiress in Blois. Louis falls madly in love with her at first sight.

Three years after Louis' return to Blois Balzac encounters the aged uncle in the diligence, while on his way to that town, and through him learns that Louis, on the eve of his announced wedding to Mademoiselle de Villenoix, had gone mad. The uncle, who had taken

Louis to Paris to be examined by the eminent physicians of that city, was informed that the malady was incurable.

The physicians had advised that Louis “be left in perfect solitude, and that he should always live in a cool room with a subdued light.” His fiancée insists on devoting herself to him nevertheless.

She removes him to her chateau at Villenoix, where Balzac, two years later, arrives to visit them. Louis does not recognize his old chum, and after a prolonged effort to get him to break the silence, the only words he utters are—“the angels are white.” Before leaving, Balzac obtains from Louis’ devoted companion a few fragments of his thoughts (given as an appendix) which she had written down. Louis Lambert dies at the age of twenty-eight in his true love’s arms.

The cornerstone of Louis Lambert’s philosophy, by which he explained everything, was his theory of the angels. This theory, which Balzac borrowed from Swedenborg, is worth giving in its entirety, for it is this view of man which Balzac later raises to apotheosis in *Seraphita*. It is the highest expression of the duality which he sensed in his own nature and which he transmuted through art. . . .

“In each of us there are two distinct beings. According to Swedenborg, the angel is an individual in whom the inner being conquers the external being. If a man desires to earn his call to be an angel, as soon as his mind reveals to him his twofold existence, he must strive to foster the delicate angelic essence that exists within him.

If, for lack of a lucid apprehension of his destiny, he allows bodily action to predominate, instead of confirming his intellectual being, all his powers will be absorbed in the use of his external senses, and the angel will slowly perish by the materialization of both natures. [Which is precisely what happened to Balzac!] In the contrary case, if he nourishes his inner being with the aliment needful to it, the soul triumphs over matter and strives to get free. [In this Louis Lambert failed, but *Seraphita* succeeded!]

“When they separate by the act of what we call death, the angel, strong enough then to cast off its wrappings, survives and begins its real life. The infinite variety which differentiates individual men can only be explained by this twofold existence which, again, is proved and made intelligible by that variety.

“In point of fact, the wide distance between a man whose torpid intelligence condemns him to evident stupidity, and one who, by the exercise of his inner life, has acquired the gift of some power, allows us to suppose that there is as great a difference between men of genius and other beings as there is between the blind and those who see. This hypothesis, since it extends creation beyond all limits, gives us, as it were, the clue to heaven.

The beings who, here on earth, are apparently mingled without distinction, are there distributed, according to their inner perfection, in distinct spheres whose speech and manners have nothing in common. In the invisible world, as in the real world, if some native of the lower spheres comes, all unworthy, into a higher sphere, not only can he never understand the customs and language there, but his mere presence paralyzes the voice and hearts of those who dwell therein.”

Here, embedded in the midst of a work which was only too obviously destined to be neglected by the great majority of his admirers, Balzac, like one of those medieval masons at work on a cathedral, leaves the visible evidence of his secret initiation into the mysteries.

In the very next breath, as though to give the clue to the high importance of this passage, he mentions Dante’s Divine Comedy, which is the mystic cathedral of words that enshrines the great Rosicrucian mystery of the Middle Ages.

But why he should have said that “Dante had perhaps some slight intuition of those spheres which begin in the world of torment and rise, circle on circle, to the highest heaven,” baffles me. Why “slight” intuition? Was he appalled by Dante’s audacity? Had he too recently

fallen under the dominion of the “Buddha of the North,” as he styles Swedenborg? He was no doubt highly familiar with Dante’s work.

In *The Exiles*, the last of the three studies which make up *Le Livre Mystique*, he records an episode in Dante’s life which occurred during his stay in Paris whilst attending the lectures given at the old School of the Four Nations by the celebrated Sigier, “the most noted doctor of Mystical Theology of the University of Paris.”

But possibly the real due to this apparent “slight” is given in what follows upon the theory of the angels, viz., the role of love. To Lambert, says Balzac, “pure love—love as we dream of it in youth—was the coalescence of two angelic natures.

Nothing could exceed the fervency with which he longed to meet a woman angel. And who better than he could inspire or feel love?” Strangely enough, though Louis Lambert is destined to meet and to be loved by precisely the angelic creature he sought in his dreams, the union is tragically aborted and Louis is robbed of the fruits of his yearning.

The interval which marks the short separation in time between the appearance of Louis Lambert and Seraphita is not the merely natural one attributed to artistic ripening, but rather it seems to me, a time difference (of infinite duration or brevity) as between one incarnation and another.

As a human being, Louis Lambert had not earned the right to be wedded to an angel in the flesh. His madness, which breaks out on the eve of the wedding, seems at first more like the voluntary assumption of a Purgatorial role, in preparation for the higher union which is to take place when Louis, reincarnated as Seraphita-Seraphitus, elects to espouse Heaven.

“The fortuitous separation of our two natures,” which is one of the phrases Balzac employs in describing Louis’ pathologic condition, is an occurrence familiar to Hindus and Tibetans, and the causes ascribed by

them differ considerably from the scientific explanations offered us by the psychopathologist.

The cataleptic states which signalled Louis' sudden swerve from "pure idealism to the most intense sensualism" were as familiar to Balzac as the epileptic attacks described by Dostoievski.

"The excitement to which he had been wound up by the anticipation of acute physical enjoyment, enhanced by a chaste life and a highly-strung soul, had no doubt led to these attacks, of which the results are as little known as the cause," says Balzac.

"What was really extraordinary," he comments significantly, "is that Louis should not have had several previous attacks, since his habits of rapt thought and the character of his mind would predispose him to them." This, of course, Balzac is able to say without fear of refutation because he is speaking from intimate experience.

The walking somnambulist who was returned to his parents at the age of fourteen was well qualified to speak on the relation between ecstasy and catalepsy. Says Louis Lambert: "Deep meditation and rapt ecstasy are perhaps the undeveloped germs of catalepsy." This in the course of a discussion of their favorite subject, for as Balzac writes, the two of them "went crazy over catalepsy."

However, what is truly extraordinary, in my opinion, is that Balzac himself did not succumb to madness. The study of Louis Lambert's morbid degeneration is really the story of Balzac's own narrow escape. Endowed with extraordinary vitality, he succeeded somehow in holding on to reason by that one invisible, indestructible hair.

But by all the logic of fate and circumstance he should have perished like his double. It is the classic fate of the genius in modern times. Deprived of the maternal affection which a sensitive, precocious child demands, incarcerated like a leper in the educational penitentiary of the College of Vendôme, his unusual gifts unrecognized by his educators, condemned to the tower for long periods, like a convict,

having no one to commune with but his imaginary double, experiencing all the terrors of schizophrenia, the miracle is that Balzac survived the ordeal even as well as he did.

The story has a triple significance. In the ordinary child the result would be insanity, or psychosis; in the budding genius the result is a transmutation of suffering permitting us a work of art (I refer to his complete works) which is typical only of the art of the Western world, that is to say, an art which is at once a tribute to the imperishable angel in man and a prophecy of the fate which lies in store for a people whose culture is founded on the persecution and suppression of the highest types.

With Louis Lambert there perished a seer; only the artist survived, in the person of Balzac. But the loss is irreparable. Not even the discovery of a companion, another angelic creature like himself, could preserve the better half of Balzac from dying.

Towards the end of the book, when he is discussing Louis' case with the aged uncle, he chooses his words most carefully. Was not Louis' malady, he asks, perhaps the result of possessing a too highly organized nature?

"If," he says, "he is really a victim of the malady as yet unstudied in all its aspects, which is known simply as madness, I am inclined to attribute it to his passion. His studies and his mode of life had strung his powers and faculties to a degree of energy beyond which the least further strain was too much for nature; Love was enough to crack them, or to raise them to a new form of expression which we are maligning perhaps, by ticketing it without due knowledge.

In fact, he may perhaps have regarded the joys of marriage as an obstacle to the perfection of his inner man and his flight towards spiritual spheres."

Knowing Balzac's life as we do, are we not to infer that this desire for perfection, coupled with an uncontrollable passion, prevented him

from realizing the joys of marriage? The truth is that it was desire at war with itself which frustrated Balzac.

Louis, though chaste, succumbs to his sensual nature. Balzac, also capable of great chastity, succumbs to his inordinate passion for power and recognition. Whereas Louis Lambert succumbs to the devil, as it were, by ignoring the physical part of his being, Seraphita, who, as I hinted before, might be regarded as the subsequent incarnation of this strange being, triumphs over the demons in every Shape and Species! Seraphita knows evil; Louis is ignorant of it.

Louis Lambert evinces neither lust nor hatred—at the most, an indignant, silent scorn for his persecutors. With Dante, to take a familiar example, we traverse every region of Hell, are confronted with every form of evil. It is the audacious and sane solution later propounded through the poetic genius of Blake.

It is acceptance, total acceptance, of every phase of life. Only thus is there, or can there be, any spiral evolution, involution, or devolution possible. The path is the same for God as for man, the same for the vegetable as for the star. Balzac never fully accepted life; he struggled, as we know from the endless stories about him, first against sleep, the restorative agency, second against death, the mystery which he longed to embrace.

Crucified by passion and desire, he represents, like Beethoven, the very incarnation of a restless, tortured spirit. In his living he denied his own philosophy: he split and foundered on the antagonism of his own being.

Of Louis Lambert he says that the latter had even reached the point of “preparing to perform on himself the operation to which Origen believed he owed his talents.” It is only when Balzac perceives the deep meaning of castration, when he realizes the real nature of his conflict, that he is able to conceive of a creature more evolved, a being burned by the fires of temptation, the one he calls Seraphita, in whom the male and female halves of our being are truly wedded, one in whom good



and evil are so balanced that the real transition into a higher state of being is made possible.

In this lofty conception of the essential nature of man Balzac leaps forward to a realization which it may yet require thousands of years to justify but which is undeniably true and inevitable. Like Dostoievski, Balzac discerned the coming of a dawn in which the very essence of man's nature would be profoundly altered; Lawrence had a similar vision when he proclaimed the advent of the era of the Holy Ghost.

It is an idea which astrologers associate with the Aquarian Age which, according to some, we entered about the time of Balzac's birth, which again is coincident with the time in which the story of Seraphita is laid. "Outside," he says, at the conclusion of that book, "the first summer of the new century was in all its glory."

But inside the seed was blossoming into life—the seed of that future which now seems so black, but wherein man will find salvation through his own efforts. The whole emphasis, with Lawrence, Dostoievski and Balzac, is on the creative powers of man. In them, in their vision of the world to come, the Christ spirit is seen to be triumphant. The Saviour is dead, they seem to cry, long live the Saviours! And the saviour of man, as every creative spirit knows, is man.

It is worth noting here the comparison which Spengler makes between Dostoievski and Tolstoi. "Dostoievski is a saint," says he, "Tolstoi only a revolutionary. To Dostoievski's Christianity the next thousand years will belong. . . . Tolstoi is the former Russia, Dostoievski the coming Russia.

He [Dostoievski] has passed beyond both Petrinism and revolution, and from his future he looks back over them as from afar. His soul is apocalyptic, yearning, desperate, but of his future certain. . . .

'Conservative' and 'revolutionary' were terms of the West that left him indifferent. Such a soul as his can look beyond everything that we call social, for the things of this world seem to it so unimportant as not to be worth improving.

No genuine religion aims at improving the world of facts, and Dostoievski, like every primitive Russian, is fundamentally unaware of that world and lives in a second, metaphysical world beyond.”

What is the final expression of humanity, according to Balzac? In *Seraphita* he expresses it thus: “The union of a spirit of love with a spirit of wisdom lifts the creature into the divine state in which the soul is woman and the body man.” This is the final expression of humanity, “in which the spirit is supreme over the form.”

In the case of Louis Lambert the spring of passion is muddied at the source. The conflict in his nature, repressed for so long, bursts out at the most unexpected moment, when, as I have said, he is about to ally himself to the angelic creature of his choice. Did we not know the events of Balzac’s own life the tragedy would seem less convincing.

When I express the opinion that Balzac was miraculously spared the fate of his double, I am only saying what Balzac himself implies throughout and what he seems to attest in dedicating his *Seraphita* to Madame Hanska.

At the very threshold of maturity he had found a mother and a mistress in the person of Madame de Berny; he had other loves too, but in none, as he admits, could he find the companionship, the sympathy and the understanding which he demanded of a woman.

He was not to find it in Madame Hanska either, for that matter, but because of his great passion for her he was given to find the solution within himself, a solution, be it said, sufficient to carry on, to plunge himself in work, to adapt himself to the world by creating his own world.

The partial solution of the artist! Balzac was aware that it was only a partial solution, and reconciled himself to it. Never able to reach the center of his being, he at any rate succeeded in situating himself at a point whence he glimpsed the angel of creation.

In Louis Lambert this parallax, or angle of displacement, becomes enormous, because Louis is moved nearer to the point of fixation. Louis' whole desire is fixed on the beyond—obstinately fixed, one might almost say.

Louis' desire to commune with the angels, perhaps just because it is inflexible and unswerving, entrains a dénouement which is in perfect accord with the law of consequence: Louis remains fixed and his wings are burned in the blinding light that invades him. Louis' madness is, like Nijinsky's, of an exceptional character. If he be a lunatic, he is an extraordinary lunatic!

Balzac, be it noted, took pains to portray him as a higher type of man whose motives are pure, whose intelligence is vast. But it is wisdom which Louis lacks, the wisdom of life, which comes from experience.

In the Book of the Golden Precepts it is written: "Learn above all to separate Head-learning from Soul-wisdom, the Eye from the Heart doctrine. Yea, ignorance is like unto a closed airless vessel; the soul a bird shut up within.

It warbles not, nor can it stir a feather; but the songster mute and torpid sits, and of exhaustion dies." Louis' malady was diagnosed and minutely described thousands of years ago; today it is the universal malady. Despite the frenzied activity of the nations of the earth, the songster mute and torpid sits and of exhaustion dies!

Nobody knew better than Balzac that it is the wisdom of the heart which must prevail. He says it over and over again, in brilliant fashion. It is the heart of man which will rule in the ages to come, of that he is certain. But the heart must first be purified! and Louis Lambert, who had never lived, was inevitably destroyed by the very anticipation of a passionate release. "The selfish devotee lives to no purpose.

The man who does not go through his appointed work in life has lived in vain. . . . In separation thou becomest the playground of Samvritti, origin of all the world's delusions."\* The condition which Balzac is loath

to call “madness” is really the demonic state of the world, which now horrifies us, and which is really the product of idealism.

No century in history can boast of so many madmen, among its superior types, as the one following upon Balzac’s time. The virulence of this widespread disease, which we now recognize as schizophrenia, or to use a vulgar, literal expression—“soul-splitting”—is by no means a new phenomenon in the evolution of man’s psychic being. It was known to the ancients also; it has been described again and again in occult lore; it is familiar to the saint and to the mystic.

It might even be regarded as a beneficent punishment, inflicted upon the highest types among us, in order to encourage a wider and deeper exploration of reality. Nothing more vividly resembles what we call “death” than the condition of neurosis. “He who isolates himself,” says Eliphas Levi, “is given over to death thereby, and an eternity of isolation would be eternal death.” No man, however, can give himself over to eternal death! But there is a living death, of which all occultists speak and of which even the most ordinary man has an understanding.

In the highest sense, this is not a state to fear or avoid; it is a transitional state, containing promise or doom, according to the way we regard it. It is the moment, brief as a lightning flash or prolonged for a lifetime, in which, confronted by the necessity of a break with the past, we are paralyzed.

It is the moment of arrest at the frontier of a new and greater realm of being. The majority of men, unable to seize the import of this new state or condition of mind, relapse, sink, founder and are carried off by the time current. The forward spirits accept the challenge and, even though they perish, remain with us in spirit to fecundate the new form of life.

In the person of Louis Lambert Balzac gives expression to the great paralyzing fear which beset him when confronted with the sublime duty which his nature had prepared him to obey. His vision, temporarily deflected, shed a fantastic brilliance on the dream world in which he

was imprisoned. Louis is made to gaze steadfastly upon the beyond, but with dead orbs.

His sight is turned inward. He remains fixed in the hallucinatory state of dream. As the writer, Balzac liberated himself to swim in the ocean of the universal imagination. Only by a miracle was he saved. But he lost his soul! In this realm of the universal imagination, to quote again from Eliphas Levi, we have “the source of all apparitions, all extraordinary visions, and all the intuitive phenomena peculiar to madness or ecstasy. . . .

Our brain is a book printed within and without, and with the smallest degree of excitement, the writing becomes blurred, as occurs continually in cases of intoxication and madness. Dream then triumphs over real life and plunges reason in a sleep which knows no waking. . . .”

In the esoteric doctrine there is no “place” which corresponds to our conception of Hell; “Avitchi,” the Buddhist equivalent to our Hell, is a state or condition, not a locality. And, according to this doctrine, the greatest of all Hells is Myalba, our earth.

It is from a firsthand knowledge of this Hell that Balzac wrote his books. When he parts company with Louis at school he is parting company with the angel he had endeavored to nourish.

He sees nothing more of Louis, nor does he hear of him again, until the accidental meeting with Louis’ uncle on his way to Blois. The account of his struggles, his deceptions and disillusionment, as he gives it to us in the long letter from Paris, is a description of the torments of Hell. From this ordeal of fire Balzac emerged only partially purified; he never fully accepted the wisdom of the supreme test.

His colossal activity as a man of letters is only the reverse of the mute torpor in which his double sits, or stands, without stirring a feather. Torpor and activity are the two faces of the same malady: action proceeds only from a being whose center is at rest.

For Balzac, as for the whole modern world, dream triumphed over reason; the dreamer dies of exhaustion in his feverish sleep of meaningless activity. He wrote in a world of the imagination, but he lived in a world of things, amidst a nightmare of bric-a-brac.

When, in *Seraphita*, rhapsodizing on Swedenborg's theory of the angels, Balzac appears to be struck by the expression "there are solitary angels," one feels that he has given this phrase his own special emphasis. This is further enhanced when, shortly afterwards, he remarks: "According to Swedenborg, God did not create angels independently; there are none but those who have been human beings on earth. Thus the earth is the nursery ground for heaven.

The angels are not angels by original nature; they are transformed into angels by an intimate union with God which God never refuses, the very essence of God being never negative, but always active." One knows, that towards his thirtieth year Balzac finally caught a glimpse of the meaning of suffering, that as a writer he chose a path of renunciation which, though partial, enabled him to accept that Hell which a life on earth is for a man of genius.

The ways of the earth had not changed, but Balzac himself had changed since that period of youth which he describes in *Louis Lambert*. By accepting the role of writer, bitter as it was, he was able to work out a partial solution of his lot. When, in the narrative, he comes back to Louis, as he promised he would one day, he finds the angelic being lost to the world. The single self which he had molded into an artist looks back upon the divided self which he formerly was.

The angelic youth is swallowed up in dream and illusion; the warrior who battled the world and triumphed, after his fashion, discerns in his counterpart only the husk of his adolescent self. The man who would remain pure and undefiled is turned to day; he is returned to the earth, to Hell, as it were, robbed of the light and splendor of the living soul.

Rodin, in wrestling with the problem of immortalizing this conflict in stone, has given eloquent form and expression to the antagonism which lodged in Balzac with sphinx-like tenacity. In that rough-hewn mold of heavy earth, in which Balzac's soul was imprisoned, the Buddhist drama of Desire was played out in a manner such as we have never witnessed in another European.

The man to whom Balzac was tremendously indebted for an understanding of the World of Desire was Louis Claude Saint-Martin, "le philosophe inconnu" whose ideas, according to Curtius, he took over bodily.

Balzac was this "Homme de Désir" of whom Saint-Martin wrote. Saint-Martin's system of philosophy, derived from Martinez Pasquales' law of numbers, the revelations of Swedenborg and the visions of Jacob Boehme, is based essentially on the idea that man can always find his unity in himself. The following brief commentaries on his doctrine may serve to give an idea of the relation of Balzac's theories to Saint-Martin's philosophy. . . .

"For Saint-Martin man turned to another light than that for which he was destined to be the supreme manifestation, and matter was born out of the Fall; for God created matter to arrest man's precipitation into the abyss, and to give him a world where he would have a chance to redeem himself.

In the actual state of things, man holds deep within him the vestiges of his first destiny and the obscure reminiscence of the Golden Age, the primitive paradise. If he comes to listen to the interior signs which are given him, and to descend within himself until he is able, by a spiritual magic, to grasp the germs which brood in his soul, he will achieve his own reintegration in God; but, at the same time, he will restore the entire Creation to its primordial Unity.

Man alone, artisan of the Fall, can be the workman for reconciliation, the saviour of Nature. He is a 'being charged to continue God, there where God no longer is known by Himself alone. . . . He continues it in

the series of manifestations and emanations, because there God is to be known by images and representatives.’

If the man of desire craves for harmony and unity, it is because he holds in himself the vestiges, for one cannot crave what one has not first previously known. ‘Everything tends to the unity from which it issued.’

The principal agent for this reintegration is the word, which holds the analogy with the Word which created the world; and that is why the act of the poet is sacred and literally creative. Music, in her turn, can contribute to this redeeming magic, since its principle, number, is the reflection of the numbers which rule the courses of the stars, the centuries and the whole of Nature.”\*

“The human soul, says Saint-Martin, is an extract of the ‘universal divine.’” However, he makes it consist of one sole faculty, the will, which in turn he confounds in his mind with desire. But desire, for him, is the basis, the root of our being.

It is through desire that “God first entered into us, and it is through desire that we have the power of returning to Him; for desire, being the result of the separation of the two existences which, because of the similarity of their natures, experience the need to be united, is necessarily in God as in man.

The desire of man, as long as he is not corrupted, is the development of the divine properties that are in us, and the desire of God is the communication of his properties, is the infiltration of this marvellous sap without which man falls back on himself dry and withered. . . . This is why Saint-Martin defines man as the desire of God, and shows us, as the highest dignity to which we may aspire, that of l’homme de désir.”\*

Before proceeding to the “letter” which Louis Lambert pens to his uncle, and which is dated 1819, it may be worth while to observe that in a letter to Madame Hanska (1846) Balzac explains that he had never had a mother, that by the time he was eighteen his mother had rendered his life so miserable that he was obliged to leave home and



install himself in a garret, in Paris (Rue Lesdiguières), where he led the life described in *La Peau de Chagrin*.

It should also be borne in mind that when he announced his intention to abandon the law for literature his parents accorded him just one year in which to prove his ability as a writer.

In this letter to Madame Hanska, wherein he speaks of his mother's hatred for himself and his sister, he says: "Laurence she killed, but I, I am alive." It is this period in Paris which, as he says in *Louis Lambert*, was to "close this portentous childhood and unappreciated youth."

This letter, he says, "betrays the struggle of Louis' soul at the time when youth was ending and the terrible power of production was coming into being." And, as though to close the poignant cry of distress which is still fresh in his memory, he concludes: "Are there not some lofty souls who endeavor to concentrate their powers by long silence, so as to emerge fully capable of governing the world by word or by deed?"

The spectacle of "Parisian civilization" which presented itself to Louis Lambert's eyes is the picture of a world in decay. The death and disintegration which Balzac sensed over a century ago has now seemingly reached its maximum. Today every great world-city stinks to high heaven, and it is from this death of the world that the artist is obliged to draw his inspiration. I give the gist of Louis' lamentation in telegraphic style. . . .

"I find no one here who likes what I like . . . or is amazed at what amazes me. Thrown back on myself, I eat my heart out in misery. . . . Here, money is the mainspring of everything, even for going without money. . . . I am not frightened at poverty. If it were not that beggars are imprisoned, branded, scorned, I would beg, to enable me to solve at my leisure the problems that haunt me. . . .

Everything here checks the flight of a spirit that strives towards the future. I should not be afraid of myself in a desert cave; I am afraid of

myself here. . . . Here man has a thousand wants which drag him down. You go out walking, absorbed in dreams; the voice of the beggar asking an alms brings you back to this world of hunger and thirst. You need money only to take a walk. . . . Your organs of sense, perpetually wearied by trifles, never get any rest.

The poet's sensitive nerves are perpetually shocked, and what ought to be his glory becomes his torment; his imagination is his cruellest enemy . . . Even vice and crime here find a refuge and charity, but the world is merciless to the inventor, to the man who thinks. Here everything must show an immediate and practical result. . . . The State might pay talent as it pays the bayonet; but it is afraid of being taken in by mere cleverness, as if genius could be counterfeited for any length of time. . . .

At the Museum a professor argues to prove that another in the Rue St. Jacques talks nonsense. . . . A professor of philosophy may make a name by explaining how Plato is Platonic. . . . Professors are appointed to produce simpletons—how else can we account for a scheme devoid of method or any notion of the future? . . .

This vagueness and uncertainty prevails in politics as well as in science. . . . Politics, at the present time, place human forces in antagonism to neutralize each other, instead of combining them to promote their action to some definite end. . . .

I see no fixed purpose in politics; its constant agitation has led to no progress. . . . The arts, which are the direct outcome of the individual, the products of genius or of handicraft, have not advanced much. . . . Man is still the same: might is still his only law, and success his only wisdom. . . .

No political theory has ever lasted. Governments pass away, as men do, without handing down any lesson, and no system gives birth to a system better than that which preceded it. . . .

Means are lacking both for attack and for resistance. If we should be invaded, the people must be crushed; it has lost its mainspring—its leaders. The man who should foresee two centuries ahead would die on the place of execution. . . .”

And now let us contrast these bitter reflections on the state of France in the early 19th century with another picture of decay and corruption such as it presented itself to the eyes of a man in the so-called New World. The citation is from Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* (1870), written shortly after the victory of the North in the Civil War. . . .

“Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the United States are not honestly believed in . . . nor is humanity itself believed in. . . . The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. . . .

The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. . . .

The magician’s serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and moneymaking is our magician’s serpent, remaining today sole master of the field. . . . I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary and aesthetic results. . . .

In vain have we annexed Texas, California, Alaska, and reach north for Canada and south for Cuba. It is as if we were somehow being endowed with a vast and more and more thoroughly appointed body, and then

left with little or no soul. . . . Coming down to what is of the only real importance, Personalities, and examining minutely, we question, we ask.

Are there, indeed, men here worthy the name? . . . Are there arts worthy of freedom and a rich people? Is there a grand moral and religious civilization—the only justification of a great material one? Confess that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics.

Confess that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, bar room, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity—everywhere the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignoned, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood decreasing or deceased, shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners (considering the advantages enjoyed), probably the meanest to be seen in the world.”

Here are two diagnoses of modern society by men of vision and integrity. Both of them were vilified by the critics of the day; both of them waged an unholy struggle for recognition, Whitman even going so far as to peddle his book from door to door. Since their day the struggle of the creative individual has become increasingly difficult: it is a deadlock, between the man of genius and the mob. Practically all the governments of the world, since their time, have fallen; manners have not improved, nor art either, and as for faith and religiousness, it is even more absent than ever.

“Sooner or later,” says Whitman, “we come down to one single, solitary soul. . . . In the future of these States must arise poets immenser far, and make great poems of death. The poems of life are great, but there must be the poems of the purport of life, not only in itself, but beyond itself. . . . Surely this universal ennui, this coward fear, this shuddering

at death, these low, degrading views, are not always to rule the spirit pervading future society, as it has the past, and does the present. . . .” (Italics mine.)

And what is Balzac’s conclusion, as we receive it through the utterances of Louis Lambert? After asking himself why he had come to Paris, why he was given such vast faculties without being permitted to use them, asking what meaning to give his sufferings if he is to suffer unknown, he says: “Just as that blossom vainly sheds its fragrance to the solitude, so do I, here in a garret, give birth to ideas that no one can grasp. . . . My point is to ascertain the real relation that may exist between God and man. Is not this a need of the age? . . .

If man is bound up with everything, is there not something above him with which he again is bound up? If he is the end-all of the unexplained transmutations that lead up to him, must he not be also the link between the visible and invisible creations? The activity of the universe is not absurd; it must tend to an end, and that end is surely not a social body constituted as ours is! . . .

It seems to me that we are on the eve of a great human struggle; the forces are (here, only I do not see the General. . . . I feel in myself a life so luminous that it might enlighten a world, and yet I am shut up in a sort of mineral. . . .

I should need to embrace the whole world, to clasp and recreate it; but those who have done this, who have embraced and remoulded it, began—did they not?—by being a wheel in the machine. I can only be crushed.” (Italics mine.)

The core of Louis Lambert’s philosophy may be said to be the idea of unity in duality. Balzac’s whole life and work, as Curtius well says, represent a veritable “search for the absolute.”

The sustained antagonism in the very heart and core of life is the key-note; it is the same passionate quest, the same struggle to wrest from

life the secret of creation, which influenced D. H. Lawrence in writing *The Crown*.

“For Balzac,” to quote Curtius again, “unity is a mystic principle, the mark, the seal of the Absolute.” In the book called *The Search for the Absolute* this secret of the philosopher’s stone is discovered by the hero only when he is dying.

Louis Lambert’s views may be briefly summarized thus. . . . All life reflects the antagonism between inner and outer, will and thought, spirit and feeling. Man is a dual being expressing the rhythm of the universe in action and reaction. At the basis of all life is one etheric substance, manifestation of a primal energy, assuming infinite forms of manifestation and evidencing itself to our senses as matter.

In man this primordial substance is transformed into psychic energy, or will. The special attribute of this will is thought, whose organs are the five senses which, in reality, are but differentiations of one sense, vision. Vision expresses itself through the mysterious phenomenon of the Word. Everything in the universe is indicative of an hierarchical order. Over and above the three realms of nature is the world of ideas.

Ideas are living creatures, active and activating, like flowers. This world of ideas may be divided into three spheres: instinct, abstraction and specialism. The majority of men are prisoners of instinct; a small number attain to the level of abstraction, with the emergence of which society may be said to begin. It is from this level that laws, the arts and all social creations emerge.

Specialism is the gift of intuition which permits man to see the inner as well as the outer in all its ramifications. (The perfection of the inner eye gives rise to the gift of Specialism.) The human genius is a type functioning in a realm between abstraction and intuition. Intuition, consequently, is the most satisfactory and adequate form, the highest form of knowing. To know is to see.

There is at bottom only one science, and all the imperfect forms of knowledge are nothing but a confused vision! This “superior science,” which Louis Lambert proclaims, is what Balzac styles “le magisme,” a term not to be confused with magic or Magianism. (Already, in 1847, Balzac was dreaming of the establishment by the Sorbonne of a new school of “occult philosophy,” under the name of Anthropology. This dream was subsequently to be realized, under the name of Anthroposophy, by Rudolf Steiner.)

In the fragments of Louis Lambert’s “system,” recorded by his faithful companion, Mademoiselle de Villenoix, which come as a sort of appendix to the story, these ideas are put down in the form of aphoristic notes.

In apologizing for the cryptic, fragmentary quality of these speculations, Balzac says: “I ought perhaps to have made a separate book of these fragments of thought, intelligible only to certain spirits who have been accustomed to lean over the edge of abysses in the hope of seeing to the bottom.

The life of that mighty brain, which split up on every side, like a too vast empire, would have been set forth in the narrative of this man’s visions—a being incomplete for lack of force or of weakness; but I preferred to give an account of my own impressions rather than to compose a more or less poetical romance.”

As a matter of fact, earlier in the book, Balzac gives us the clue to the terminology employed in the Aphorisms. “New ideas,” he says, “require new words, or a new and expanded use of old words, extended and defined in their meaning.” Thus Lambert, to set forth the basis of his system, had adopted certain common words that answered to his notions.

The word Will he used to connote the medium in which the mind moves, or to use a less abstract expression, the mass of power by which man can reproduce, outside himself, the actions constituting his

external life. Volition—a word due to Locke—expressed the act by which a man exerts his will.

The word Mind, or Thought, which he regarded as the quintessential product of the Will, also represented the medium in which the ideas originate and to which thought gives substance. The Idea, a name common to every creation of the brain, constituted the act by which man uses his mind. Thus the Will and the Mind were two generating forces; the Volition and the Idea were the two products. . . .

According to him, the Mind and Ideas are the motion and the outcome of our inner organization, just as the Will and Volition are of our external activity. He gave the Will precedence over the Mind. You must will before you can think, he said.

To Louis Lambert, Will and Thought were living forces, as Balzac says. “The elements of Will and Mind,” says Louis Lambert, “may perhaps be found; but there will always remain beyond apprehension the x against which I once used to struggle. That x is the Word, the Logos. . . .

From your bed to the frontiers of the universe there are but two steps: Will and Faith. . . . Facts are nothing; they do not subsist; all that lives of us is the Idea.” He points out that Jesus possessed the gift of Specialism. “He saw each fact in its root and in its results, in the past whence it had its rise, and in the future where it would grow and spread. . . .”

According to Balzac, Louis Lambert had too much good sense to dwell among the clouds of theories. “He had sought for proofs of his theories in the history of great men, whose lives, as set forth by their biographers, supply very curious particulars as to the operation of the understanding.” The description of Louis which he gives at the time of their parting is altogether that of a man preparing to lead the life of an initiate.

“He ate little and drank water only; either by instinct or by choice he was averse to any exertion that made a demand on his strength; his



movements were few and simple, like those of Orientals or of savages, with whom gravity seems a condition of nature. Though naturally religious, Louis did not accept the minute practices of the Roman ritual; his ideas were more intimately in sympathy with Saint Theresa and Fénelon, and several Fathers and certain Saints who, in our day, would be regarded as heresiarchs or atheists. . . .

To him Jesus Christ was the most perfect type of his system. *Et Verbum caro factum est* seemed a sublime statement intended to express the traditional formula of the Will, the Word and the Act made visible.

Christ's consciousness of His Death—having so perfected His inner Being by divine works, that one day the invisible form of it appeared to His disciples—and the other Mysteries of the Gospels, the magnetic cures wrought by Christ, and the gift of tongues, all to him confirmed his doctrine. . . .

He discerned the strongest evidence of his theory in most of the martyrdoms endured during the first century of our era, which he spoke of as the great era of the Mind.”

There is one more passage, in this connection, which seems to me worthy of attention. After referring to Louis Lambert's study of the laws of Mind and Will, and their correlations, Balzac says: “Louis Lambert had accounted for a multitude of phenomena which, till then, had been regarded with reason as incomprehensible.

Thus wizards, men possessed, those gifted with second sight, and demoniacs of every degree—the victims of the Middle Ages— became the subject of explanations so natural, that their very simplicity often seemed to me the seal of their truth.

The marvellous gifts which the Church of Rome, jealous of all mysteries, punished with the stake, were, in Louis' opinion, the result of certain affinities between the constituent elements of matter and those of mind, which proceed from the same source.”

The triumph of energy, will and faith in man, the existence of magic and the evidences of the miraculous, the relation of God to man through Desire, the notion of hierarchies in every realm of life, as well as the belief in transmutation, all these manifestations of the spiritual attributes of man, Balzac has summed up in the story of his own life, or rather of the most important years of his life, the period of germination. The period, in other words, when the terrible powers of production were coming into being.

In the Rue Cassini, where he wrote so many of his great works, Balzac is reported to have said to George Sand: "Literature! but my dear lady, literature doesn't exist! There is life, of which politics and art are part. I am a man who's alive, that's all . . . a man living his life, nothing more."

Whereupon he proceeded to forfeit his life through the bondage of work. He wanted to be great ("man must be great or not be at all," are his words), and he was great, but he died a failure.

Perhaps the best justification of his failure is the one he makes himself somewhere. "The man of genius," he said, "is one who can invariably convert his thoughts into deeds. But the truly outstanding genius does not unremittingly allow this evolution to take place; if he did, he would be the equal of God."

At the best, it is a poor excuse. Balzac, like Beethoven, seemingly gave the maximum that a man can give, but it was not enough, not for a Balzac! I am not thinking of the forty books he is said to have left unfinished at his death, but of the life he left un-lived, of the vision he failed to live by.

His life, which is the very symbol of Work, epitomizes the futility of Western life, with its emphasis on doing rather than being; it epitomizes the sterility of even the highest efforts when characterized, as they are in our world, by the divorce between action and belief.

If Louis Lambert's life may be regarded as a typical example of the crucifixion of genius by the society in which he was born, Balzac's own

life may be regarded as a typical example of the immolation exacted of our superior types through a limited conception of, and a slavish devotion to, art.

The criticism of the social structure which Balzac makes, not only in this book but in all his books, is absolutely just. But it is only half the picture. There is a duty which devolves upon every individual, regardless of the state of society into which he is born.

Art is only the stepping-stone to another, larger way of life. If the artist himself is not converted by the Word, what hope can there be for the masses who read him? It is not enough to lead the life of an inspired drudge; will and faith, activated by desire, should carry a man beyond such mode of life.

I have no respect for Balzac's herculean labors, nor for his colossal output, nor for his genius, when I realize that his life sputtered out ingloriously. If a man cannot find salvation in himself all his words are futile. The real Balzac died in the mythical person of Louis Lambert whose very name he tells us he disliked.

If the foregoing seems like a contradiction to all that I have written hitherto in this essay I am willing to let it remain a contradiction, for it is this contradiction which must be resolved, and especially by the artist. I cannot conclude without expressing my deep appreciation of Ernst-Robert Curtius' book, Balzac, from which I have liberally drawn both inspiration and material.

This book, which is the most penetrating and comprehensive study of Balzac that I know of, has not enjoyed a great success in France. As in Balzac's own day, it seems probable that his greatest admirers continue to be foreigners. The canonization and immortalization of the dead, which seems to be the chief characteristic of French culture, has not, despite all the museum work, succeeded in revealing the full measure of Balzac's genius.

The qualities of his mind which were most important the French still pretend to ignore, if not to deprecate and depreciate. The dead are still more honored than the living, and even the dead sometimes fail to receive their due.

Nothing is changed since Louis Lambert's day. Perhaps no other people in the world, occupying the high cultural position which the French do, have mistreated and ignored their men of genius so persistently—unless it be the Greeks whom the French pretend to emulate.

The mummification of ideas goes on as before, the forward spirits are crushed, the people, when they have a leader, are delivered over to death. Realism has taken the place of reality, and the true leaders are only discovered after their death.

\* This is the most singular distortion, it is interesting to notice, which Balzac makes in recounting the story of his double's boyhood.

\* Later, when describing Louis' feverish anticipation of a union with the woman he loves, Balzac gives us another rupture with the world, this time the final one.

\* (Book of the Golden Precepts)

\* From "L'Ame Romantique et le Réve"—Albert Béguin.

\* "Le Mysticisme Français du 18e Siècle"—Adolphe Franck.

The End