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Lessons for a Young Critic

Immersing Yourself in the Generosity of Henry James toward Balzac

by Richard Goodman

Henry James the novelist largely overshadows Henry James the literary critic. In many ways, though, the critic is more appealing, and certainly more accessible, than the novelist. The studied and careful perfection of James's novels gives way to a warm and casual humanity in his criticism that, while not forsaking a powerful intellect, is delightfully openhearted. James is dogmatic in his critical works, but he is also unreservedly generous. He is never reluctant to reveal faults, regardless of how great the writer, but he is equally ready to praise. James lived in a time and in a circle when there was never any doubt—certainly in his mind—that art is essential to our well-being. That art *matters*. This is the backbone of his criticism. I am speaking here mostly of his critical writings about French writers, and Balzac in particular, though, of course, he wrote extensively about British and American writers as well.

He reserved some of his most intense and effusive criticism for Honoré de Balzac. James was a near-contemporary of Flaubert, and knew him personally, and even reviewed one of his later books when it was published. But much as he admired Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*—and indeed he did—it was Balzac who James thought a truly great novelist. Balzac died when James was seven, so he never knew him, but he did know his work intimately and wrote about that work in great detail on six separate occasions. His first essay about Balzac was published in 1878, and his last, thirty-five years later, was in 1913, three years before he died. His overall admiration did not change. He is, quite simply, a fan. He writes with the same exuberance, in his own way, as a sportswriter might write about a favorite baseball player. He is pleased that Balzac is as good as he is.

James was fluent in French, perfectly so. In fact, he was so conversant in French and French literature he never felt the need to explain its singularities—or to translate excerpts from the books he reviews. He writes about French literature with the same naturalness as he does English literature, so we sense in him, perhaps more than anyone, that art is a community without borders, it is literature without frontiers. Frenchness matters only occasionally to James and is mentioned rarely.

James is writing in an era before the vocabulary of criticism became corrupted, and opaque, so we can actually understand him and absorb his critical writing. He writes mainly of technique, of how well the characters are drawn, of what are Balzac's themes, of his dialogue, of the scenes he paints, of his Parisian world. In Henry James, we have a mind and spirit large enough and strong enough to circumnavigate and map Balzac's enormous world. It's conceivable, because of his all-encompassing knowledge of Balzac's fictional world, that James had read most of Balzac's ninety or so novels, or close to it. Ninety novels! It is heartening to see James so taken with Balzac's work, because Balzac was a very different writer indeed than James. The fact is that James recognized the genius in Balzac, and that they lived in totally different artistic solar systems bothered him not a bit.

It is even more heartening when you learn that the book of Balzac's he thought the greatest was *Père Goriot*. This is a book of great emotion, of unrequited love—a father's for his daughters—set in a miserable, decaying boarding house in the Fifth Arrondissement. It's populated by men and women on their last legs in a place one half-step from the equivalent of the Bowery, and it is a far cry from the Paris of Henry James's fiction. So it is instructive for a writer who wishes to comment on literature that derives from a world alien to him or her to read James on Balzac and see how he does it.

He says some penetrating things about Balzac, beginning with money: "Each particular episode of the 'Comédie Humaine' has its own hero and heroine, but the great general protagonist is the twenty-franc piece."¹ Then he begins his litany of generosity, recognizing that Balzac has strong defects but that his virtues are uncommon, and must be codified. "You have only to turn the pages of a volume of Balzac to see that, whatever may be the purity of the current, it at least never runs thin."² He speaks of Balzac's "fantastic cohesiveness."³ He goes on to say that Balzac "had little belief in virtue and still less admiration for it."⁴ Instead, "he is so large and various that you will find all kinds of contradictory things in him; he has that sign of the few supreme geniuses that, if you look long enough he offers you a specimen of every possible mode of feeling."⁵

James certainly does not like some aspects of Balzac's writing. He thinks his dialogue is plain bad: "Of all the great novelists, he is the weakest in talk."⁶ He thinks, contrary to what other critics at the time said, that Balzac's female characters are not that well drawn: "He takes the old-fashioned view—he recognizes none but the old-fashioned categories. Woman is the female of man and in all respects subordinate."⁷ Then this enlightened comment: "There is not a line in him that would not be received with hisses at any convention for giving women the suffrage."⁸ And so on. But ultimately, James is in awe of Balzac. It is as simple as that, and what is most impressive and inspiring is that he is unafraid to say so. Unafraid to call Balzac, dead a mere twenty-seven years from the time he wrote those words, one of "the few supreme geniuses." That's a bold sweep to say of a writer dead only twenty-seven years. James also strays from a penchant many of our contemporary critics often have. He takes up very little room describing the plots and events of the novels he speaks of. He reserves his insights for the writing itself. This is the larger, the more challenging effort and in the end what the critic's readers have paid to hear.

Henry James is not someone to praise Balzac—or any other writer, for that matter—in a vaguely general way. That is, if he says of Balzac that he is a great writer, he has his reasons, and they are always illuminating and insightful. Here, he writes of Balzac's imaginative powers:

It is hard to imagine a writer less autobiographic. This is certainly a proof of the immense sweep of his genius—of the incomparable vividness of his imagination. The things he invented were as real to him as the things he knew, and his actual experience is overlaid with a thousand thicknesses, as it were, of imaginary experience. The person is irrecoverably lost in the artist. There is sufficient evidence, however, that the person led a rather hungry and predatory life during these early years, and that he was more familiar with what went on in the streets than with what occurred in the *salons*. Whatever he encountered, however, he observed.⁹

In other words, it doesn't matter that Balzac kicked around a bit. The genius of his imagination trumped his circumstance.

James has an observation about Balzac that could well apply to any novelist starting out today, some 175 years later: "Behind our contemporary civilization is an immense and complicated machinery—the machinery of government, of police, of the arts, the professions, the trades. Among these things Balzac moved easily and joyously."¹⁰ What contemporary writer hasn't been daunted by the sheer complexity of our civilization?

James is able, even in pointing out what he considers a fault of Balzac's, to couch it in such a way that we, the reader, feel that it's a noble fault, one resulting in a great reach:

Balzac has an opinion on everything in heaven and on earth.... We can think of no other mind that stood ready to deliver itself on quite so many subjects.... He is thus *par excellence* the philosophic novelist; his pages bristle with axioms, moral, political, ethical, aesthetic; his narrative groans beneath the weight of metaphysical and scientific digression.¹¹

Henry James manages that balance again when he writes about Balzac's style: "Balzac's style would demand a chapter apart. It is the least simple style, probably, that was ever written; it bristles, it cracks, it swells and swaggers; but it is a perfect expression of the man's genius."¹²

Story is character, and James recognizes in Balzac a novelist who literally gets inside the skin of the people who occupy his books:

He at all events robustly loved the sense of another explored, assumed, assimilated identity—enjoyed it as the hand enjoyed the glove when the glove ideally fits.... For what he liked was absolutely to get into the constituted consciousness, into all the clothes, gloves and whatever else, into the very skin and bones, of the habited, featured, colored, articulated form of life that he desired to present. How do we know given persons, for any purpose of demonstration, unless we know their situation for themselves, unless we see it from their point of vision, that is from their point of pressing consciousness or sensation?—without our allowing for which there is no appreciation.¹³

James reserves his most generous praise for an observation about Balzac I have never heard expressed about anyone else. In fact, I think only a supremely generous writer could even conceive of such an idea. After speaking of a multitude of Balzac's virtues and shortcomings, James writes,

But the greatest thing in Balzac cannot be exhibited by specimens. It is Balzac himself—it is the whole attempt—it is the method. This last is his unsurpassed, his incomparable merit. That huge, all-compassing, all-desiring, all-devouring love of reality which was the source of so many of his fallacies and stains, of so much dead-weight in his work, was also the foundation for his extraordinary power."¹⁴

In other words, it is the power of the artistic genius, the dynamo, the elemental, god-like creative force that is unparalleled. This is what James stands in awe of. The creative force.

He concludes those words by likening Balzac to that man whose name comes to mind with words like these: "It is very true that Balzac may, like Shakespeare, be treated as a final authority upon human nature."¹⁵ It takes a wide-ranging mind to explore the world of Balzac so thoroughly and intimately. But it takes something even rarer in a critic to write those words: generosity. And courage. I would submit these are indispensable to anyone who would want to write enduringly about literature.

James takes his generosity one step further and even has high praise for a fellow critic—Sainte-Beuve. While they were not exact contemporaries—Sainte-Beuve was older by some forty years—they were both alive at the same time, and James reviewed one of Sainte-Beuve's books while the critic was still working. But it is the idea of one critic—for this is the role James plays here—writing about another that seems to me most noteworthy. James appreciates "the exquisite humility of his

[Sainte-Beuve's] intellect."¹⁶ While in typical James fashion he enumerates Sainte-Beuve's faults, he concludes an assessment with these words: "You feel that there is another element of his mind which looks small from no point of view, but which remains immeasurable, original, and delightful. That is his passion for literature—in which we include both his insatiable curiosity and his eternal gift of expression—his style."¹⁷

And that is it: James's criticism is enduring precisely because it comes from that same source that he sees as responsible for Sainte-Beuve's shining style: a passion for, and deep understanding of, literature and a generosity to realize that passion in trenchant words. Without this, the critic is a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal.

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Notes

1. Henry James. *Literary Criticism, Volume Two: European Writers*. (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 35.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 666.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 668.