

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

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Balzac's Teeth

I was breathlessly walking along the parkway. The wine bottle under my arm was gurgling as I walked, and I tried to slow down because if I stumbled and fell, the bottle would break into pieces. But all for naught! The stomachache and excitement that clung to my throat with hard water knocked my knees together. When I saw the majestic garden's gate, I couldn't stand anymore and sat down on the pavement. Was I ready to see him? Could the feelings that I wined as a ball of yarn for years be scattered? I was scared of naming the haste which grasped my throat, collapsed me on Rue Raynouard's pavement, and kept me from doing anything but looking at his garden's gate. He was on my mind in the form of volumes which are blue, red, dark green, and black. I left the two bridgeless collars of his soul in peace when I passed through the volumes. I grasped the bottle's neck, stood up, hastened towards the gate, and rang the ornate bell. The door opened with a click. I went down the stairs one by one towards the house. I wore the arrogance of Eugénie Grandet and lifted my head. I rang the bell of the inner door this time.

In the garden of this small house which had green window shades, the tiny labyrinth and banks, well-kept and bright grass, and the black horses tethered on the edge were the lights of a beautiful painting. One of the window shades slightly rattled by the wind, and the dimness of the house could be seen from the window if looked carefully. Was he sleeping? Did I wake him up from his precious sleep? Who knows how exhausted he was! He would get angry and throw the things in his hands. I was scared. I thought of returning. The butler who opened the door smiled as if he understood. He took me into the hall. He told that Monsieur Balzac had just woken up – and that he had set his watch for me for that day – and then he left. I put the bottle on a shelf in the hall and slowly walked towards the living room. I sat down on the burgundy velvet sofa – God knows from which antiquarian you bought this, Honoré. I didn't know how much time passed. I fell asleep as a weird, uneasy cat. I woke up with the toughness of his hand on my face. I sprang to my feet.

The Man with a White Tabard

He looks like a snow-white ghost. He stands in front of me, legs open, with his tabard made of linen and cotton. I look at his curly hair popping out from his ankles. The three buttons of his collar are open to easily caress his chest when he cannot find the right words to say. Smoothly. Although he takes shower every day, his hair is so greasy that it shines lustrously under the dim light of the room. One can imagine that oil would drop from his shoulders. Even so, one still wants to touch the bright strands flowing backwards from his forehead. To rub hands and touch his nose. A strong scent would stay on your fingertips if you do so. Lots of people can be identified in that scent and they can be visualized in a minute. *Louis Lambert, Lucien de Rubempré, Séraphîta, Modeste Mignon, Pierrette...* I feel on top of the world because Honoré cuts his sleep short for me. Because his sleep is worth manuscripts, which are edited maybe ten times and which go and return from the printing press maybe twenty times. Honoré stands completely naked beneath his tabard "in a world

that wants you to give a hundred times more than you can." When all the shops are closed and people go home at eight o'clock, the writer who sits at his small desk – his desk is really small for his body, but he carries it everywhere although he frequently changes places – hears the sounds of people having fun on the street. When he sits, he moves his body in order to squeeze the tails of his tabard between his legs. He breathes out. One hour passes. Vaudevilles, shows, and concerts begin. Lovers' mumbles come from the woods. One more hour passes. The lights are turned off. As boring people fall into their boring sleeps, the crowd getting out of the theatres fills the streets at nearly eleven o'clock. He must wait a little while longer. At the same moment when the bell of the church two streets away is tolled at midnight, he takes his pen. Paris falls into silence. No one can knock on the door now. Who knows at which taverns the creditors sacrifice a few days of their lives or where the pressmen brag about whichever writers. A whole of eight hours. In this huge room, the great writer starts working after midnight, in the chillness of scratchy parquets. Perhaps he waits for such a long time to preserve the excitement of his dreams or, in this way, he can hear the outcries of nearly two thousand characters in his mind. "My thoughts must spurt from my mind, like the water of a fountain," he says. "This is completely an unconscious process." The divine night, in which the coffee mug bestowed by Madame de Berny – apart from his first and abiding love Madame Hańska – is filled and emptied many times, comes into existence in the deep howls of waterfalls. The ecstatic state reaches the moments by splitting up, and the moments become voice and flesh. People ooze out from the ink. Time passes, but Honoré doesn't mind, he doesn't even notice. Outside becomes a taboo for him. The rotating earth, from which he breaks away when he bends down the paper, stops in his mind. When working on a character, he gets close to the paper by tightening his back, and his pupils contract. He sacrifices his internal organs for what he creates. He won't even be upset at choking because of the poison of the black liquid he makes by mixing three different coffee types. He is sure, he knows. Black liquids will conquer the upcoming century.

While Dying on Your Knees

I tremble. I don't know the difference between me and a cat whose paw touches the water. I want to take refuge in the shadows within the crinkles on the tabard. The crinkles are caused by the pubic hair that is covered by the belly which looks like a watermelon and the body is layered in fat. It feels like I can get into his mind if I get in from a part of his body. Maybe from his ear, his armpit, his pubic hair, or his mouth. From his mouth with absent teeth, from his mouth that turns black with decayed teeth. Then, I understand that the parts of *The Human Comedy* that I cannot read hang on the absence of these teeth. I understand that the curved hollows on his flesh are equal to hundreds of characters, each root holds on to a city, and enamels shine with the lights of Paris... I understand. I take a step to hug his fat waist. I fall at the feet of my Honoré who promises with his pen to do what Napoleon did with his sword. It's obvious that I am ecstatic too. I am hooked on the deep infinity of humans too. He easily utters it, but I always hesitate. But it's *love*. *Love*. It's on par with the desire of dying by his knees.

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It is one o'clock, two, three, five, then eight. He starts sleeping at eight, he spends the time that people wake up to sleep. It's now eleven. He is awake with three hours of sleep for me. I break away from his knees and go towards the bust made by Rodin. I embrace the marble with green veins. The coldness of the marble makes me feel good. I hear that he walks towards the hall, hands the wine to the butler, and gives orders. He addresses me in a way that is different from the way he addresses the Stranger Lady. I get sober with his passion. We go to the dining table near the writing room. He disappears for a moment, and then he appears with the suit that Busson the Tailor sewed. I try to find the weight that gets lost in that suit, which was masterly designed with each millimeter. He takes the form of a thin silhouette now. I want to ask him, *Did you confront Madame Hańska like that in Vienna? Even so, she didn't like you, she dreamt of a different writer*, but I cannot. I hide all truth that would make him sad.

The table is filled with wine, chicken, liver, fondue, baguettes for us. I cannot even take a bite, because I follow the movements of his fingers. I ask whether there is some tobacco. He wags his finger at me and says, "Tobacco does harm to the body. It attacks the mind and stupefies all nations." Even so, he rolls a cigarette for me. I thank and put it between my lips. He puts one of his hands on his forehead. He raises the glass and says, "Everything is the same! Always a new book every night and every night! What I want to make is such a high and distant thing..." I must ask the question that preys on me when I read all these books. I gulp and ask, "Have you ever thought of death? Have you ever contemplated about when you will be defeated by death while wistfully creating all people, cities, events, and *The Human Comedy*?" In his portrait of Balzac, Zweig says, "The lunatic rage and the obsessive working style that is out of control can explain the miracle of finishing *The Human Comedy* in less than twenty years." I think Zweig is right when I see the entire collection of *The Human Comedy* in red hardcover in the library of Balzac, who cares about money as much as he cares about literature. He smiles. What a silly question! Of course he contemplates, of course he talks with death. How he has scrutinized before being defeated by his heart. He has not been in search of only words while writing about more than two thousand characters, lots of cities, love, jealousy, journey, and philosophy! He has contemplated everything in depth. First, the quality of the edition and paper. The print run. Then the publisher. The font size of the letters. The color and quality of the ribbon used as a bracket in the book. To whom he would dedicate the book, it is really important for Balzac. He has noted the money he would earn from each edition. The number of books per unit. He has carefully written which debt he would pay with the earned money – his writing has generally been blueish and not eye-straining.

He drinks a glass of wine and then another and another. His cheeks glow. He's fat. Healthy. I wish I could kiss him. Hańska wouldn't notice. He puts his hand on his forehead while looking up. "You know what? I cannot read and write anymore," he says. I saw these sentences in the letters he has written to Madame Hańska. How bad it hurts when I read them the first time. My soul is hurt when I hear that such a great writer cannot read and write anymore. I put myself into his shoes and I am aggrieved for days. It is like a dream that he tells this to me from the other side of the table. I try not to say something foolish by blinking my eyes

and utter, "*Lost Illusions* thoroughly depicts the literature atmosphere I'm in. From 1837 to 2015. Imagine. More than a century passes and things you have written define my experiences!"

He smiles. I know the war, how he has come here and where he stands so well that the things I've said seem foolish to me. He goes to the next room from the dining area. I hear rustlings. I listen to the noise he makes. He comes back with small drawings in his hands. He throws them before me. I look at the human figures drawn on butcher papers. I think I know some of them. "All of them are not here. But they are the people behind my rage, ambition, and the motive of growing," he says.

I see the huge tabard falls to pieces at that moment. He walks towards the next room, the writing room. He sits at his small desk in front of the wing chair with a high back. He rolls up the papers he has just thrown before me. He shows his palms. "Sometimes it feels like my brain is burning, and it is my destiny to die on the ruins of my mind," he says. I suddenly feel the familiar affection that we feel for the writers who feel small and broken into pieces in front of the things they write. I stand up with the glass of wine in my hand and walk towards him. He has spread his weariness over the circles under his eyes. I touch the circles with my other hand. My fingertips are painted purple. "Forget about the people you owe," I say, "you do not owe to the tailor, antiquarian, or publisher now. It's us. The ones who enviously read the things you write after 150 years. Let go of your worries now – I know you can do it if you want to – let them struggle with your debts. Let the marquises, viscounts, and Hańska pay the cost of your walking stick with a turquoise head. Think how you lean on your desk, how your hand moves on the paper. Let Madame de Berny pay the price of new brougham. Do you care? While we remember you with *The Black Sheep* and *Father Goriot*, is it important who pays the debt now? Eat your fill. You cannot write when you are hungry. A properly oven-roasted chicken. Swallow the beef neck. Write your sister if you are in trouble. She always helps. Her compassion can be spite for your mother's apathy. I know how your mother avoided hugging you when you were at boarding school. Do not stop. Never stop. Go on. Go deeper. There, take shelter in the cave in which we will explore *The Hated Son*, *Colonel Chabert*, *Ursule Mirouët*. The cave means that we take you out from the emptiness of secondhand booksellers' shelves which smell like books. It means that whatever our language is, we find your translated works... I love you in the name of each book that doesn't have a new edition!

The Rakish Existence of Us

"The rakish existence of me is hidden in my works," you say.

Your work. Your commitment that reaches ten hours a day. For whom? Have you ever imagined that we read you in a language – you would never want to learn – you don't know, in a country far from yours after many years? Have your limits only consisted of the limits of France? Have you ever believed that many academicians would write theses about you, and volumes about you would be published? You smile. You underestimate what I say. You look at the various things on the nightstand next to the desk, bestowed by Madame Hańska. I am possessed with the red perfume bottle's gleam. I suffocate under the weight of the questions I ask, because you have always known where to go even when you have

been writing nameless novels to earn money. Do not think that I do not understand you. There are multitudes of friends of us, under the name of shadow writer. Yes and still. I think about the francs you gave to a wagon with four horses, how nice. Is there any other writer that enjoys the moment more than you?

I hold your hand. It's nearly four o'clock in the afternoon. It's time to get lost in the labyrinthine streets of Marais. Let's get rid of the green romantic window shades. Let's drive the car through the streets that haven't spoken with their stones for years!

We lose ourselves in the enthusiastic streets of Marais. Shops, theatres, prostitutes surround the pavements. I gather the enthusiasm I see in his eyes possessed with lace. I pull his arm and turn his chin to me with my fingertips. Maybe he thinks about *A Harlot High and Low*. His despair becomes obvious when he breathlessly says, "The best inspiration comes in my time of deepest fears and despairs" by putting his hand on his heart. The laughs, kisses, hugs, and shouts get in his eyes, but they cannot go out from his mind. Each sense is stored in his mind, and this tires him. He actually works more than a coal miner – though we cannot convince anybody of this – and he is exhausted without ignoring the misery. Nobody sees how he decays. Only I and the bird settled on his hat.

I pull Honoré in front of the posters and say, *Let's watch this*. He doesn't pay attention. He says that he knows the leading actress, and she isn't worth a penny. *Then let's go to the coffeehouse across the street*. He justifies, *No Mademoiselle, we cannot, waiters spit in the rose wine*. We cannot go the mansion of Madame de Berny or Zulma Carraud either. I inwardly know that he wants to be alone with me. While he moves his huge body left and right, I find various pleasures in the movements of his flesh. I taste his mind. In the strong smell of solitude, it is sour and salty. In the rehearsal of ever repeating escape. Oh my peasant child who believes in the evil eye! When will the stones of the fortune ring on your left hand fall? I know, but do you know that your future will grow out of books?

I wring his arm in the middle of the street. We will go to vaudeville or we will go home, which is decorated by the caricatures on the walls. We will lay our nude bodies down on the meadows of the garden, we will lie down near the statue of a lady whose breasts stand erect. We either sit at the dining table, near the crumbs. I only wish for something to break our inertia. I only wish for him to smile joyfully.

He doesn't want to go to vaudeville. His old mistress plays the leading role. I patiently nod and keep on walking. My mood is not different from the disciple mood of Lucien in *Lost Illusions* in his early days in Paris. Also, I am the one who will stumble and fall if his walking stick is not there, near the writer who *tears himself to pieces* even when he is walking. However, his head "dangles like the head of a weak horse."

"As usual," he says, "let's go back home."

Getting Lost in the Rage of Time

We go back home. The dining table is set in honor of our return. It shines as *Seraphita's* wings have touched it. Instead of sitting at the dining

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table, he apologizes and goes to the writing room. I keep quiet. Knowing that a new human is created, will my tongue be innocent if it says what? Isn't it too much for me to be the conjunctions of content sentences? Honoré de Balzac does not care about neither Countess Visconti nor the others. He worriedly holds my hand and puts it on his nose. How moderate death is! It attracts us. We want to die by writing and writing. To be mentioned centuries after we die. To change roles. To unite with the era. He says that "we will change roles with the aforesaid people. They have power over our mortal bodies as long as we live, but they will begin to be forgotten when death comes." I nod. I know that people who are glorified now will not be there after fifty years. I know that walking around the streets with body and soul cannot be compared to appearing in the newspaper columns.

I lie down on the table with my arms. The great writer is my friend now. I do not shy away from him. My excitement transforms at the joining point of respect and envy. I look at Balzac in a new light. I look at the writer who has to pay 5,224 francs for the sake of editing his works. I wish someone would edit what we write and we owe them money.

I reach and hold his hands. "Wish we could see *The Human Comedy* finish," I say. He smiles and nods. He repeats Zweig's words: "If I could live long enough – which you've just asked – I would undoubtedly finish these works. Everything that has already been in my dreams could inevitably come true and take shape by means of imagination. But he has lacked only one thing, the thing which has always been missing in my constricted and overburdened life: time."

Time. Time, which is the thing we can never hold although we sacrifice our hands and sleep. Time, which is the thing we stare at while we are on an expensive horse cart centuries ago or when we are in the metro in Paris. Time, which is separated from a child's cry, from the fall of a fetus in a woman's belly, from the creditors at the door, the bookkeeping, and the paging of a hardcover novel. Hundred years that separated me from you. The age in which our minds that think similarly can never unite. Perhaps a fire of age. And Adagio. So dreary – because your heart couldn't resist until you came to me – that I touched your hands with my face while finding myself in your people. Have you felt it?

I see how unique your *stuff* is while wandering around your house. From one room to another. From one corridor to another. I tremble by the magnificence of the busts. I want to eat your letters, the ones you wrote to Hugo. I know to whom you had made compromises in order to own the heaviness of these papers or the wing chair. Oh my writer, getting whipped by the debts! What will happen to the debts of gratitude you have never paid? What will you say to the women? You have not thought about it.

There was death. Your cliff was death, in parallel to all things you fictionalized on the axis of *The Human Comedy*.

I am possessed with the dream that you would revive with the inheritance or the dowry after marrying a noble. I chase deeming myself worthy of you, by leaving myself. My purpose is to go to bed with you by leaving

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your house at Rue Raynouard, the rooms full of the characters' replicas. I know how big your hands are, how they grasp my head, and I know everything in them. Let all things I see be yours. Perhaps you would salute me at the end of the century.

To Die for Maison de Balzac

"At first, he lived at the modest house with his own desk in order to be on the safe side against creditors. For us, Maison de Balzac is not a house that is full of carpets, the ugly bronzes of Pavilion Beaujon and girandoles, but it is a house that is full of rough copies. It is the rule of life that people, even the most genius natures, do not invest their prides in their main talents, but instead, they want to show off, to be respected and admired by means of cheaper and easier things. Our Balzac the Collector is a typical example for that," Zweig said this and now I am touching the walls of Maison de Balzac. People will come and admiringly look at the desk at which he wrote. His bed, which I see now, will be nobody's. All these will go with auctions.

But I have seen. I have touched.

My hands have touched the walls of Maison de Balzac. The sofas, the portraits painted by his friends, the letters of the Stranger Lady. The coffee cup. I have heard him touching his stuff. I have seen him swaying in his white tabard. I have felt him turning his head. Curling his lips. His sighs.

I hold his hands. I want to defeat the illegitimate gods of literature together. I put his legs inside his tabard. At the wing chair with a high back. The small desk before us. We write the story that starts from Tours. Of the villagers. The words are cut. Verbs are degraded to one. Ink doesn't flow from the pen. Our breaths are stuck in our bellies. Hand in hand, we first write *An Old Maid* and then *Béatrix*. Our hands are always on our foreheads. We think. It may be a headache too. A person that snuggles into a story becomes the leading character in another story. He laughs at our comedy and I cry. I approach myself closer to his pubic hair, I frame his mouth and carry it on my neck.

I commune with Honoré in the small house with green window shades, in Maison de Balzac. He talks in his sleep, then I cup his chin and calm him. While blowing the things on my mind to the interlayers of his sleep by whispering, I shout at the end of the century, "The time you are in, the dressing gown you are in, expect two or three great works from you. You hope so. My friend, nothing will be as you expected! We will heartily read your rough copies that you cast away, and we will dignify them. We will come to your house, here, and we will admiringly watch the press edits. We will give you the reputation back you always desired after a hundred years. Now tell me, will you wait?"

I Cannot Read and Write Anymore

I wish I could take away the pain in your eyes. I wish I could sit on the bank in the garden and call to your great body. Let me bend once more with your weight. Let me creep in your long stories as I creep in your tabard. From *The Unknown Masterpiece* to *Colonel Chabert*. We will call you the greatest writer of the century. We will glorify you. We will keep on talking about your fascination with luxury. We will visit your museum by saying,

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“What a great writer he was” in front of these windows – your house will be a museum, but you don’t know that.

“You cannot read and write anymore.”

You will die at dawn. The dining table and your desk will stay like that, but your stuff will be sold in auctions. Even your favorite walking stick will be sold. We will be left only with what we ate, what we spoke, and what we touched. I will resuscitate when you die. I will stand as the woman whose stomach cramps up with the excitement of seeing you on Rue Raynouard’s pavement. Then I will pull the pen at the last corner of the labyrinth in your garden and write this. With my legs still touching yours, I will tell about the people of the comedy from the abyss of your mouth. I will not hesitate to blow your breath into other people’s mouths.