



NOTES
TO
LITERATURE

Volume Two

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On an Imaginary Feuilleton

For Z.

The short text I have chosen as an occasion for naming some of the reasons with which to justify my liking for it is an autonomous piece of prose, and yet it is not. It is found in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. This is the title of the first of Balzac's two long novels depicting the rise and fall of the young Lucien Chardon, who later bears the name de Rubempré, novels that surge and roar like the large orchestras then becoming popular. The prose piece is a feuilleton written by Lucien and reproduced within the narrative; according to Balzac, it is Lucien's first article. He writes it after the premiere of the boulevard drama that gives him contact with journalism and a love affair with the leading lady. The description of the latter makes her so charming that Esther, the heroine of the second Lucien Chardon novel, *Splendors and Miseries of Courtesans*, whom Hofmannsthal called a fairy-tale character, has a hard time surpassing her entrancing image. The supper party Lucien leaves to write the feuilleton decides the course of his life. It sweeps him away, out of the strict liberal-progressive circle of intellectuals around the poet d'Arthez, a self-portrait of Balzac. Lucien giddily stumbles into betraying his ideals and soon, although unintentionally, his former friends as well. But the seduction itself is so plausible, and the world that opens to the young man, a world Balzac willed corrupt, is so phantasmagoric that the concept of betrayal dissolves in it, as great moral concepts often do in the infinitely fluid events of life. Even if against Balzac's express intention, Lucien is in the right to the extent that unconstrained sensuous fulfillment has priority over spirit. For there is always something dilatory and consoling in the latter, while human beings have a claim to

happiness—without which all reason is only unreason—in the anti-rational present: this moment speaks in Lucien's favor. The interweaving of his fate with a society to which he knows himself alien, his own splendor and his own misery—all that is gathered to a focus as in a burning glass in the feuilleton that Balzac writes, as it were, for Lucien, as though he shared the young writer's wish "to show all these remarkable personages what he could do." In the microcosm of that essay the heartbeat of both the novel and its hero can be felt pulsing.

Balzac distinguishes himself from lesser novelists by presenting the feuilleton rather than talking about it. Others would have been content with the assurance that Lucien was a talented journalist and might have made statements to the effect that ingenious ideas or witty sayings followed one another in Lucien's writing like sparkling ornaments. Balzac leaves such assurances to the journalists from Lucien's milieu; in their place, he demonstrates intellectual talents concretely, in the product. He is not what Kierkegaard calls a writer with a point to prove. He never exploits the things he attributes to his characters, their ostensible characteristics, without realizing them within the narrative. He has, in the highest degree, the decorum that constitutes the morality of significant works of art. Just as with the first measure of his work the composer signs a contract which he then fulfills through his consistency, so Balzac honors the epic contract: to say nothing that is not then chronicled. Spirit itself becomes narrative. Balzac does indeed announce that Lucien's feuilleton has set off a journalistic revolution through its new and original manner, but he himself makes good the claim to novelty and originality. And he does so in a way that does credit in turn to the aesthetic principle of the novel's composition. Nowhere, that is, does one discover the content of the play under discussion, neither in the description of the theater party nor later in the feuilleton. Instead, the existence of the Spanish comedy is simulated and the fiction is reflected again in Lucien's report of the play's effect on him. Private connections emerge in this refraction, Lucien's intention of being of use to the play and to his beloved. The venality and irrelevance of the archaic journalism the whole novel is protesting are not glossed over. But at the same time, Lucien's lack of objectivity represents a release from the coercion of the subject matter, the development of an autonomous play of the imagination. Even something that serves illegitimate advertising has its truth. Balzac knows that artistic experience is not pure, official aesthetics to the contrary; that it can hardly be pure if it is to be experience. No one who did not as a

young man fall in love with the coloratura soprano during the performance really knows what an opera is; it is in the intermediary realm between eros and disinterested contemplation of the work that the images whose essence is art crystallize. Lucien is still an adolescent waxing enthusiastic in this intermediary realm. It is for this reason, and not merely out of cunning, that he imputes his personal reactions to the aesthetic phenomenon instead of making a considered analysis of it. Whatever went by the name of impressionistic criticism in a later period was anticipated by Balzac in the early nineteenth century, in this article which is not an article, with a freshness and facility that were never surpassed. We experience the birth of the feuilleton as though it were the birth of the golden Aphrodite. And this "for the first time" quality gives that contemptible form a conciliatory charm. It becomes all the more enchanting because it is outlined against the foil of all the decay that was inherent as a potential in the feuilleton from its very first day, the decay that manifested itself during the next sixty or seventy years. It evokes the memory of Karl Kraus, who condemned journalism without ever saying a derogatory word about the glistening, death-consecrated world of *Lulu*, whose tragedy presupposes, in the two chief male figures, Schön and Alwa, the most cynical journalism.

It may be precisely the shamelessness of Lucien's essay, its complete lack of concern with moral rationalization, that rehabilitates him. In a true stroke of genius, Balzac made sure that he was absolved without being excused. The sentence where Lucien writes all the things one would be prepared to offer the irresistible Coralie at the sight of her, contains, after his heart and an income of thirty thousand pounds, the words "and his pen." He acknowledges his own corruption and revokes it by doing so, a cheat who lays his cards on the table—and explains them at the same time. When Lucien outwits the false compulsion to take a position and deliver a considered judgment with purified taste after a colorful evening at the theater, the feuilleton becomes free for his spontaneous impulses, and especially for his infatuation with the woman with whom he behaves "like a fifteen-year-old" at the same soirée at which he composes the feuilleton. The world, at his feet for a moment, treats his exhibitionism as though it were not part of the world but free. Lucien thereby proves himself the superior in nature, even in his shady ambiguity. In the feuilleton he mentions Coralie only desultorily, in parenthetical sentences, flickering highlights. He talks not so much about Coralie herself as about her feet and her beautiful legs. Balzac's genius

proves itself not least in the fact that his individual impulses correspond to collective responses that became widespread only at a time when he was already part of history; he was no doubt the first, and not only in that feuilleton, to discover legs for literature.

Lucien is dazzled but not blind. His affected indifference to the plot, language, and poetic quality of the play lets critique shine through. It is not worth his trouble to go into this trash; he attests to hardly anything in it but the *vis comica* of its effect; that one has to laugh at it. But at the same time the feuilleton unmistakably has the bad qualities of its genre, the insolent contempt for its object and for truth: the readiness to sell spirit out through atmosphere, wordplay, and juggled and varied repetition, in all of which, in return, spirit is manifested. But the feuilleton has the same kind of ambiguous position in the structure of the novel as well. While it elevates Lucien and relieves him of poverty for a few months—and poverty threatened artistic integrity then as it does now—it turns the friend who introduced him to the journalists and the actresses into someone who envies him and becomes a secret enemy. Through a casual conversation, the success he is granted but which is subject to revocation becomes the beginning of the first catastrophe of his life, which annihilates Coralie and from which none other than a felon rescues him.

Lucien's feuilleton is both delightful and disgusting. It gives form to things on which authors normally merely cash in preliminary plaudits; it grounds the downfall of the hero, justifies the verdict on him, and exonerates him, all in a few sentences put together with so little planning that only someone truly highly talented could have improvised them. The truly inexhaustible abundance of references unfolds without any constraint, without a trace of arbitrariness. The motifs in the feuilleton come to it from the material of the novel; not one sentence is the product of Balzac's intentions, everything is drawn from the material itself, from the hero's character and his situation, just as it is only in great works of art that what is apparently contingent and meaningless becomes symbolic without symbolizing anything. But even these merits do not fully account for the quality of these few pages. It is determined by the feuilleton's function within the composition. This fully executed work of art within a work of art, in the midst of a plot that rises and falls breathlessly, has its eyes open. It is the work of art's reflection on itself. The work becomes aware of itself as the illusion that the illusory world of journalism in which Lucien loses his illusions also is. Semblance is

thereby elevated above itself. Even before the unreflective naturalistic novel had really consolidated itself in literary history, Balzac, who is classed with the realists and who in many respects was in fact a realist, had already broken with the closed immanence of the novel through this feuilleton inserted into it. His heirs in the twentieth-century novel were Gide and Proust. They dissolved the apparent boundary between illusion and reality and made room for reflection, previously proscribed, by refusing to doggedly maintain the antithesis between reflection and an allegedly pure contemplation. In this regard the Balzacian piece constitutes an exemplary program of modernism. It foreshadows—and it is not the only such passage in the *Comédie humaine*—Thomas Mann's *Leverkühn*, whose nonexistent music is described in full detail, as though the scores existed. The technique reveals the meanings, both fragmentarily and as a whole, and concretizes them at the same time. Otherwise they would be mere *Weltanschauungen*, posited from the outside. But this kind of self-reflection and suspension is the signature of great epic works. Such work becomes what it is by being more than it is, just as the Homeric epics once became works of art by telling stories about material that cannot be fully accommodated within aesthetic form.

I do not know whether I have succeeded in saying clearly enough why I love these pages. Let me supplement what I have said by referring to an impression I have had. In reading the feuilleton and the parts of the novel that precede and follow it, I am reminded of a piece of music by Alban Berg, something he composed for Wedekind's *Lulu*, the variations for the Marquis Casti-Piani's salon, where everything is won and everything is lost, and from which the supremely beautiful Lulu runs off into the darkness, escaping the net of police and pimps. Balzac's novel has something of this darkness and something of this radiance.

The pages from *Lost Illusions* that form the center of the novel and in which it is encoded read as follows [in the English translation by Kathleen Raine (New York: Modern Library, 1967), pp. 307 and 316–18]:

Lucien could not help laughing, and looked at Coralie.

She was one of the most charming and fascinating actresses in Paris, rivalling Mme Perrin and Mlle Fleuriet, whom she resembled also in her fate. She was one of those women who exercise at will the power of attracting men. Coralie was the finest type of Jewess, her face a long oval, ivory-pale, her mouth as red as a pomegranate, her chin as finely formed as the rim of a porcelain cup. Her jet-black eyes burned under her eyelids with their long curved lashes, and their languishing or flashing fires

suggested the scorching suns of the desert. Those eyes of hers were underlined by dark shadows, and surmounted by arched eyebrows, heavily marked. Her olive brow, crowned by two bands of hair, black as ebony, in which lights shone as if from a polished surface, seemed the seat of lofty thought, of genius, one might have said. But like so many actresses, Coralie, in spite of her back-stage repartee, had no brains, and was utterly ignorant, for all her green-room experience. She possessed only the instinctive intelligence and the generosity of a woman born to love. And who, besides, could give a thought to qualities of mind when she dazzled the eyes with her round smooth arms, her tapering fingers, her golden shoulders, her legs so adorably elegant in her red silk stockings? Hers was the bosom, the flexible curved neck, praised in the *Song of Songs*.

These beauties of a truly oriental poetry were further set off by the Spanish costume favoured by our theatres. Coralie was the delight of the pit; all eyes were fastened on the outlines of her figure, so well set off in her basquina, and appraised the Andalusian contours of her hips, that swayed her skirts with such wanton motions. . . .

Lucien, eager to show all these remarkable personages what he could do, wrote his first article at a little round table in Florine's dressing-room by the light of rose-coloured candles lighted by Matifat:

The Panorama-Dramatique. First performance of *The Alcalde's Dilemma*, an imbroglia in three acts. First appearance of Mademoiselle Florine. Mademoiselle Coralie, Vignol.

"People come in, go out, talk, and stride up and down looking for something and finding nothing. Everything is in an uproar. The Alcalde has lost his daughter and found a cap, but the cap does not fit him—it must belong to the thief! Where is the thief? People come in, go out, talk, stride up and down, and search harder than ever. The Alcalde at last discovers a man without a daughter, and a daughter without a man, which is satisfactory for the magistrate, but not for the audience. Quiet is restored, and the Alcalde sets about questioning the man. This old Alcalde sits in a great Alcalde's armchair and arranges the sleeves of his Alcalde's gown. Spain is the only country where Alcaldes favour wide sleeves, and where you see round Alcaldes' necks those ruffles the wearing of which is in Paris theatres a good half of their function. This Alcalde who has done so much running to and fro with the tottering steps of asthmatic old age is Vignol—Vignol, a second Potier. This young actor plays old men well enough to make the oldest of the old laugh. He has a

future of a hundred old ages before him, with that bald forehead of his, that quavering voice, those thin shanks trembling under a decrepit frame. He is so old, this young actor, that it is quite alarming, one wonders whether his old age is contagious. And what an Alcalde! What a charming anxious smile! What inane dignity! What self-important folly! What judicial hesitancy! How well he knows that you can never believe anything that you hear! And yet, on the other hand, that nothing is too impossible to be true! How truly well fitted he is to be the Minister of a Constitutional monarch! . . .”

For there was the Alcalde's daughter, a real Andalusian, a Spaniard with Spanish eyes, Spanish complexion, a Spanish figure, Spanish gait, in fact a Spaniard from top to toe, with a dagger in her garter, love in her heart, and a cross on a ribbon tied round her neck. At the end of the first act someone asked me how the play was going, and I said: 'She has red stockings with green clocks, a foot no bigger than that, patent-leather slippers, and the most beautiful legs in Andalusia!' Ah! that Alcalde's daughter! You are on the point of declaring your love, she arouses fearful desires in you, you want to jump on to the stage and offer to her your humble cottage and your heart, or to place at her disposal your thirty thousand a year, or your pen. This Andalusian is the most beautiful actress in Paris. Coralie, since we must reveal her name, can be a countess or a *grisette*, and it would be hard to say under which disguise she is most enchanting. She can be whatever she likes, she is born to play all parts, and what more can one say of a boulevard actress?

“In the second act a Parisian Spaniard appears, with cameo features and deadly glances. I asked where she came from, and I was told that she had come in from the wings, and that her name was Mademoiselle Florine; but upon my word, I found it difficult to believe, there was so much passion in her movements, and frenzy in her love. This rival to the Alcalde's daughter is the wife of a lord, made from a cut from Almaviva's cloak, in which, to be sure, there is enough stuff for a hundred boulevard grandees. Florine has not red stockings with green clocks, or patent-leather shoes, but she has a mantilla, and a veil which she uses to good purpose, great lady that she is! She showed how well the tigress may play the pussycat. I began to realise, from the sharp words that these two Spanish damsels exchanged, that some drama of jealousy was in progress; and just as all was going well, the Alcalde's foolishness upset everything again. All the torchbearers, grandees, valets, Figaros, courtiers, ladies and ladies'-maids began again to search, come in, go out, and stride up

and down as before. The plot again thickened, and I will leave it to thicken; for the jealous Florine and the fortunate Coralie were once more entangled in the folds of basquina and mantilla, and my eyes were dazzled by the twinkling of their little feet.

“I managed to reach the third act without making a scene, or the police having to be called in, or scandalising the house, and I therefore begin to believe in the strength of your public and private morality, about which the Chamber has been so concerned lately that anyone might think that there were no morals left in France. I gathered that a man was in love with two women, neither of whom loved him; or that he was loved by both but did not love them in return; and that either he did not love Alcaldes or that Alcaldes did not love him; but that he was a fine fellow all the same, and certainly did love someone, himself, or even God as a last resort, because he was going off to be a monk. If you want to know any more, go to the Panorama-Dramatique. You have been warned already that you will have to go at once for the sake of those triumphant red stockings with green clocks, that little foot, so full of promise, those eyes with the sunlight shining through them; for the sake of that Parisian finesse disguised as an Andalusian, and the Andalusian disguised as a Parisian actress. You will have to go a second time to enjoy the play, to die with laughter personified as the old Alcalde, and melancholy in the shape of the love-sick lord. The play is an all-round success.”