

## Kelly on Massonnaud (2014)

Massonnaud, Dominique. *Faire vrai: Balzac et l'invention de l'œuvre-monde*. Geneva: Droz, 2014. Pp. 535. ISBN: 978-2-600-01719-0

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What exactly is *La Comédie humaine* and how did it come into being? This is, in a sense, the question asked in *Faire vrai: Balzac et l'invention de l'œuvre-monde*. The term “œuvre-monde,” awkwardly translatable into English as “a work that is a world,” designates nineteenth-century texts that try to capture entire swaths of reality and that become very long works. A concept explored in a 2007 issue of *Romantisme*, it is used by Massonnaud to examine *La Comédie humaine* not only from its official “start” in 1842, but also in the context of Honoré de Balzac’s earliest writings, a methodology she describes as macro-genetic. The merit of Massonnaud’s work lies in the great detail with which she explores these contexts and her depiction of the way Balzac adapts in response to them as he develops his own original path. Much of what she uses is already known, such as the influence of the physiologies on Balzac’s work; however, she delves deeply into these influences and constraints, and shows them in relation to each other in her very learned analysis (494 pages with over 1500 footnotes).

The first sections of the book explore the literary field at the time of Balzac’s early works, showing how Balzac positioned himself in it (and his keen understanding of it), and how his project is a product and transformation of that field. Foremost is the importance of historical writing of many kinds: historical novels, Walter Scott’s work in particular, histories of France, memoirs, and more. Massonnaud also pays close attention to Balzac’s early 1824 serial project, *Histoire de la France pittoresque*. A partial list of other significant contexts explored includes: France and French identity, market influence, documentary evidence, concrete detail, and the everyday. She also shows what Balzac learns not to do, such as make a well-known historical figure speak (he uses instead, for example, a nearly exact quotation by Napoleon). And she shows how Balzac learns what to do, as in *Le Dernier Chouan*: make the specific location important; center on women; show social forces at work; have an eyewitness; fill in the lacunae of history; make a character a decipherer of events; make the excluded of history speak; and write about recent history.

The second sections deal for the most part with the way in which Balzac envisions the organization of his massive work as he explores various possible models. The science of natural history anchors his thought and gives him a method of factual writing (a representation of truth), which includes taxonomies, observation, classification, codification, and, of course, Georges Cuvier’s notion of a detail (a fossil fragment) that can be “grown” into a whole creature. Other methods of writing include those of Jean de La Fontaine and Jean de La Bruyère for their moralist portraits, the physiologies, and the observer in the *Tableau de Paris* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier.

The main focus of her investigation here is the question of the unity and definition of *La Comédie humaine*: she reads it as a single work that creates its own category of literature. Even before the 1842 “Avant-propos,” Balzac exhibited a desire for totalization, a desire for coherent organization, as, for example, in his 1830 announcement of the collection of “Scènes de la vie privée.” Some models of unity for him include a kind of gallery of “tableaux,” a physiological system of characters; a topographical organization by regions; and simply the idea of the editor or supervisor arranging works in a kind of panoptic vision, a method influenced by the panoramas.

Resisting this trend toward totalization, however, is porosity, the tendency of one aspect of a Balzac text to appear in another text. Material that appears in an analytical text, such as *Physiologie du mariage*, appears also in a fictional text, *Le Contrat de mariage*. The analytical *Physiologie* itself contains mini-fictions. Then there are thematic porosities, such as the mixing of social spheres, and structural porosities, when a work migrates from one place in the organizational structure to another, when one book refers to others, or when characters return. According to Massonnaud, the model for this phenomenon is the science of transformism and its non-fixity of species, as well as the works of Stendhal and Henri de Saint Simon. The general model of Balzacian writing that emerges is one that is not fixed: writing takes place and changes over time; it changes and grows, such as when Balzac composes and changes his works on his page proofs; it occurs within a kind of frame, such as the “Scènes” and the “Études,” that slowly fills up like an organic growth, or like Cuvier’s fossil. Thus the “œuvre-monde” is a process, with no end but the death of the author, whose organized disorganization represents a true modernity.

**Volume:** 44.1-2

**Year:**

- 2015