

## Page on Neefs, ed. (2015)

Neefs, Jacques, ed. *Balzac, l'éternelle genèse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2015. Pp. 245. ISBN: 978-2-84292-421-8

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The purpose of *Balzac, l'éternelle genèse* is to clarify and to illuminate the essentially polymorphous genetic space represented by Honoré de Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*. This is an important task for *La Comédie humaine*, a veritable literary Proteus, which resists and challenges traditional critical interpretation. Approaching Balzac's oeuvre from both a prospective and a retrospective viewpoint is valuable, and the contributors to this book all subscribe to such a diachronic methodology of analysis.

*Balzac, l'éternelle genèse* is divided into three parts. In *Les Chantiers de l'oeuvre*, Roger Pierrot emphasizes the importance of Balzac's prolific correspondence in order to better understand the genesis of his works. Quite often in the course of this process of perpetual literary creation, the abundant correspondence with family members, friends, and editors clarifies Balzac's methodology of literary construction. Isabelle Tournier proposes a new look at the complex story of the inventory of Balzacian manuscripts, particularly in its relationship to the novelist's unique style of literary composition and development, which she describes as a continuously productive stream of genetic material derived from a variety of sources.

Following a sociocritical approach, Jacques Neefs focuses on the formal consequences of the novelist's transition to a global political and esthetic project, in order to create a literary ensemble which provides an extraordinary mimesis of contemporary French society. This critic notes a transition in Balzac's career from his early writings of an historical character to later novels whose perspectives have a marked sociological orientation. In Neefs's view, Balzac's principal objective in his novels is to chronicle the development of a more dynamic French society and a higher degree of social mobility resulting from the French Revolution. To this end, Balzac constructs *La Comédie humaine* as being part of a continuously evolving movement of amplified structural hypercomplexity, which corresponds to and mirrors the hypercomplexity of the new post-revolutionary capitalist world of nineteenth-century France.

In the second section of the book, entitled *Architectures*, Claire Barel-Moisan studies in detail how the various displacements of works in *La Comédie humaine* reveal the relative fragility of Balzacian literary architecture and lead to the idea of a "plural architecture," which can be mobilized by multiple variants, thus giving rise to the sensation of perpetual thematic regeneration. In yet another study, Michel Lichtlé demonstrates that Balzac's expert and meticulous generation of numerous and complex revisions provides a fabulously fertile method of literary invention. Finally, in this same section, Andrea Del Longo shows how the complex, and reversible strategies permeating the openings of Balzac's various novels contribute both to the description of his literary world and also to the creation of a dynamic style of writing which possesses its own unique type of energy.

*Balzac, l'éternelle genèse* concludes with three "Genèses singulières," whose purpose is to examine in depth the methodology of the spontaneous and inexhaustibly renewed literary invention which characterizes Balzac's style of writing. Éric Bordas presents the dramaturgy of Balzacian writing, as it is practiced in his theatrical works. In this critic's opinion, only the genetic critical approach can fully appreciate and understand the key to the true scenographical development of Balzacian dramatic representation: the conception and elaboration of his theatrical writing style.

Susi Pietri shows how the remarkable and enigmatic text of the *Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* exemplifies in its very plot the problematics of the genesis of a literary work. This short story is permeated, both in its concepts and in its development, by the opposition between Balzac's various styles of writing. Clearly, such structural juxtaposition vivifies the energetic dynamics of this work, which is symbolized by the fact that the unfinished composition of this literary masterpiece is mirrored in the unfinished composition of the imaginary painting presented in the opening episode.

Finally, Anne Herschberg Pierrot, by analyzing the genesis of the text of *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, illuminates the Balzacian art of amplification and demonstrates its sociological implications. One of the series of genetic transformations of this manuscript concerns a reference to Dante and his *Inferno*, giving the successive revisions increasing metaphorical density. From this critic's sociological perspective, however, there is an important difference between Dante's objectives and Balzac's aspirations as an observer of contemporary French society: whereas Dante proposes to the reader a descent into Hell, Balzac, on the contrary, presents to the reader protagonists who climb the social ladder to the Heaven of wealth, thereby escaping the hellish squalor of plebeian Paris and releasing themselves from the chains of poverty and its concomitant evils. For Balzac

there is the possibility of social improvement and earthly happiness, while for Dante beatitude can be achieved only in Paradise.

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